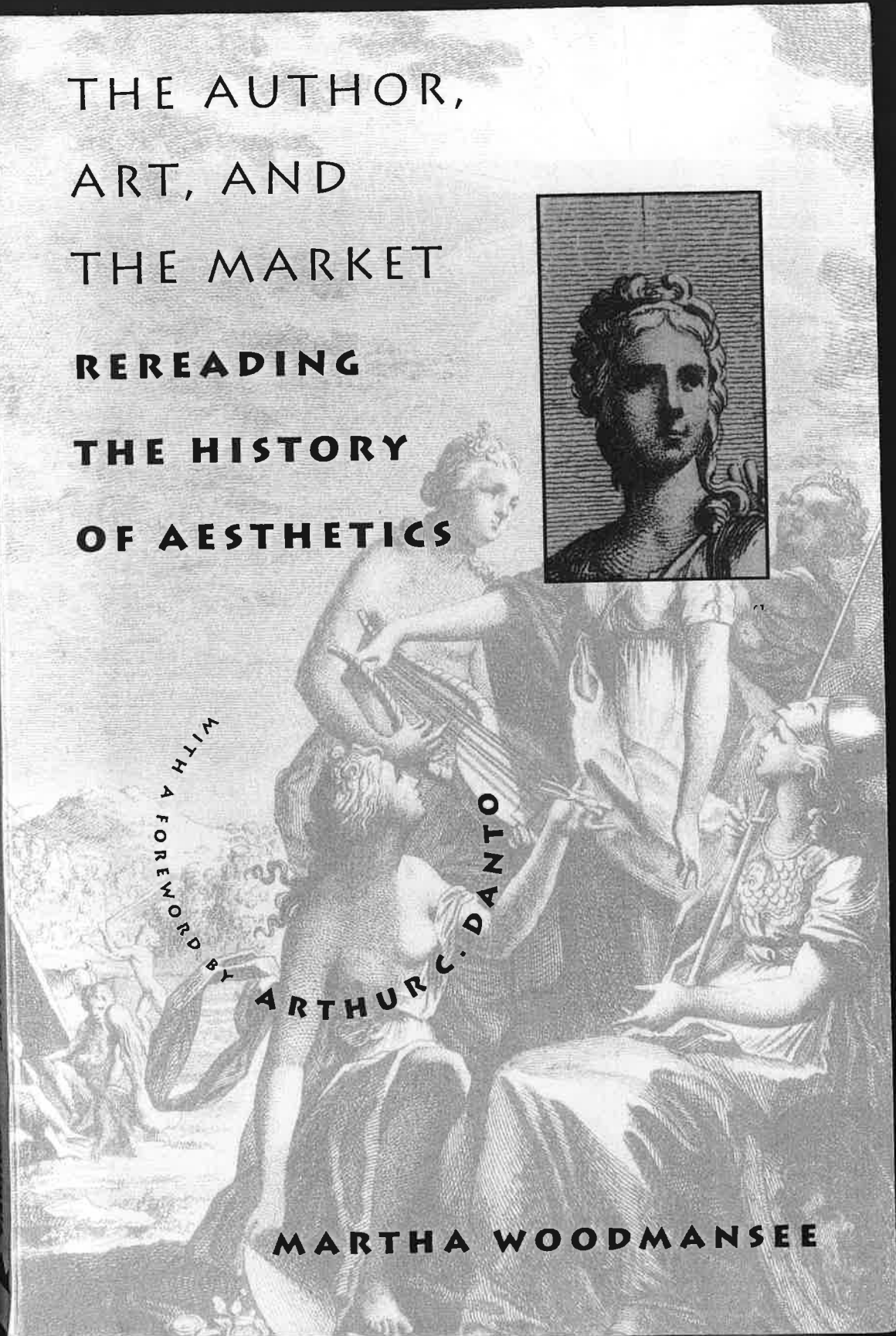


THE AUTHOR,
ART, AND
THE MARKET
REREADING
THE HISTORY
OF AESTHETICS



WITH A FOREWORD BY
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the arts. While such
played an important
reading debate calls
critical impulses that
aesthetics to carry the
reader both to reread
voices like Bergk's
in chapter 6 we will
find there.

5. ENGENDERING ART

*Nothing is more certain
than that I never would
have become a poet had fate
not brought us together as it
did in 1750.*

—Wieland, *Letter to
Sophie von La Roche,*
December 1805

*He alone deserves the name
of artist who can draw on
an inborn productive power
to create an aesthetically
beautiful form in a
given art.*

—Karl Heinrich Ludwig
Pöhlitz, *Die Aesthetik für
gebildete Leser* (1807)

• Thus far women have made only a casual appearance—as a chief target of the array of efforts to regulate reading practices that gave the modern philosophy of art so many of its key concepts. This accurately reflects the position women occupy in this formation, for it is strictly as (more and less “competent”) recipients of work by men—unless as muses—that they entered it. But it ignores the real historical acts of exclusion by which they ended up in this supporting position, and accordingly also a defining feature of the modern concept of art. For it is not as if women were not painting, writing, and composing during the eighteenth century. Growing recognition over the past two decades of the extent of their productive involvement in, and subsequent effacement from, the arts has put “art” and its subconcepts back into the center of de-

bates every bit as heated as the culture wars we have been examining. A look at one of the primal acts of exclusion, that of Germany's first acclaimed woman novelist, Sophie von La Roche (1730–1807), underscores the relevance of these first, German culture wars to our current situation.

Best remembered until recently as the “muse” of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), one of the giants of the German literary canon to whom she was briefly engaged and became a lifelong friend, La Roche began her career at the age of forty with the publication of *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771), Germany's first epistolary novel.¹ Although it appeared anonymously under the “editorship” of Wieland, who advised and encouraged La Roche during its composition and assisted her in getting it published, the identity of its author did not remain a secret for long, for the novel was an instant best-seller. In addition to requiring three printings in its first year (and four more within the next fifteen years), it was translated into Dutch, French, and Russian, as well as English, and evidently also pirated, making La Roche famous throughout Europe.²

Inspired especially by La Roche's reading in Richardson, Sterne, and Rousseau, *Fräulein von Sternheim* recounts the story of a sentimental heroine who survives seduction and betrayal and struggles successfully to vindicate herself not just in marriage but in the kind of charitable activity Clarissa had envisioned. What most struck contemporary readers was the psychological complexity of its title character. Its epistolary form enables the heroine Sophie to tell her own story, offering the reader an unprecedented glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of a sensitive, or “beautiful soul” in an attractive body—a Werther *avant la lettre*.

Germany's first sentimental heroine earned her creator the admiration, even adulation, of the younger generation especially—aspiring writers of Germany's Sturm und Drang such as Herder, Lenz, and Goethe, the Stolbergs, and the Jacobis, as well as a host of women whose names are just beginning to be recovered—making her the center of a succession of literary salons and the source of a rich tradition in sentimental romance.³ In her thirty-six-year career as a writer, pursued all the more earnestly beginning in the eighties when the collapse of her husband's diplomatic career and then his death caused real financial need, La Roche produced four more novels, many more stories and essays, and an anthology. She founded a journal, *Pomona für Teutschlands Töchter* (1783–84), the first such by a

woman in Germany, with other women writers. In well as art, literature, and column, “Letters to Li through Germany and which she infused with by men, opening this g

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woman in Germany, which she used in part to promote the work of other women writers. It covered such topics as women's education as well as art, literature, music, and travel, and contained a regular advice column, "Letters to Lina." She also published accounts of her travels through Germany and to England, Switzerland, Holland, and France, which she infused with domestic detail uncommon in travel literature by men, opening this genre up to other women writers.⁴

In the light of such achievements, one might expect to find La Roche in the pantheon of authors included in the textbooks and handbooks in aesthetics that began appearing in abundance in the 1770s. But we search for her in vain—even in progressive works like Bergk's *Art of Reading* that devote considerable attention to the still relatively new genre of the novel. In a chapter entitled "Observations on a Few Novelists" Bergk discusses at varying length some thirty German writers, but La Roche is not among them. We find only male writers like Kotzebue and Lafontaine whom she inspired.⁵ She is also absent from the list of thirty-three in Karl Heinrich Pölitiz's *Aesthetik für gebildete Leser* [*Aesthetics for Educated Readers*]⁶—conspicuously so because his readership, much as Bergk's, is likely to have been predominantly female.

La Roche's disappearance from the pantheon of authors and enshrinement instead as Wieland's muse occurred during her own lifetime—indeed, seems to have been prepared in her first appearance on the literary scene with *Fräulein von Sternheim*. I noted that the work appeared anonymously, in keeping with prevailing norms of feminine modesty. In fact, its title page effaces its author completely, shifting credit for the work's appearance to the already well-established and much-admired Wieland. It reads: "*The Story of Fräulein von Sternheim. As Extrapolated by a Lady Friend from Original Papers and Other Reliable Sources. Edited by C. M. Wieland.*"

The implication conveyed by the title that La Roche does not lay claim to the mantle of "authorship" in the modern sense is confirmed in Wieland's preface. Wieland casts his remarks as an open apology to the lady friend of the title for taking the liberty of seeing her manuscript into print without her permission. He realizes she never intended it to be published, he writes, and then quotes at length her description of the manuscript's origins. She began it, we learn, as a form of "recreation" [*Gemüts-Erholung*] in the "idle hours that were left to [her] after discharging essential duties" (p. 9). She was sharing the results with him now, she explains, only because she was inter-

ested in his opinion of her "sensibility, the particular angle from which [she] has become accustomed to judge human experience, the reflections which tend to well up in [her] soul when moved [*gerührt*]."

You know that the ideas I've attempted to realize in the character and actions of Fräulein von Sternheim and her parents have always been dear to my heart. And what is more satisfying than working on something one loves? There were times when it became almost a spiritual necessity. . . . And thus originated unnoticed this little work, which I began and continued without knowing whether I would be able to complete it. (p. 9)

Hence the work's "imperfections" [*Unvollkommenheiten*], she explains, but they should not matter, for it will never be seen by anyone but herself and him—and, if he approves of "the thoughts and deeds of this daughter of [her] mind," perhaps their respective children. If they were to be "strengthened in virtuous convictions, in true, impartial, active goodness and uprightness" by the work, she would be overjoyed (pp. 9–10).

In its amateur origins and rather narrowly defined utilitarian purpose the novel would seem to lack the earmarks of literary "art." The product of idle hours, it is intended not for sale to a reading public, but strictly for domestic use: the author's own and that of her close acquaintances. It is ascribed the therapeutic utility of other women's "pastimes," from needlework to the keeping of a journal, the communicative utility of a correspondence designed to bring her closer to Wieland, and the pedagogic utility of reinforcing the moral lessons being taught to their children.

It is noteworthy that Wieland does not contest the modesty of this description of his friend's ambitions, but instead expands upon it in such a way as to drive home the narrowness of her achievement. Whether he does this in the interest of promoting the novel with a reading audience already deeply prejudiced against scribbling women, as Bovenschen and Becker-Cantarino have suggested, or rather with an eye to extending and deepening such prejudice has still to be determined.⁶ Certainly he does nothing to dispel this kind of prejudice. The cumulative effect of the preface is to minimize La Roche's accomplishment.

As noted above, Wieland himself assumes responsibility for the novel's publication. Since she was not averse to sharing the work with the children, he trusts she will forgive him for it. He could not "resist

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the urge to present to all the virtuous mothers and charming young daughters of our nation" a work that seemed to him so well designed to foster wisdom and virtue "among [their] sex, and even among [his] own" (p. 10). Wieland conspicuously delimits the work's audience—it will chiefly be of interest to women readers, he suggests. And by emphasizing its pedagogical value to them, he assimilates the work to the already large, and growing body of nonfiction that was appearing on the market to instruct women in all aspects of running a household and rearing children. The work's great utility is certain to make up for its shortcomings, Wieland writes—for "dear as she is, considered as a work of intellect, as a literary composition, indeed, even as just an ordinary German composition, your Sternheim has defects which will not go unnoticed by detractors" (13).

Wieland's ostensible motive in calling attention to the work's "defects"—its violations of standard usage, its stylistic infelicities, etc.—is to preempt these detractors, but he so warms to the task that even some contemporary male readers became suspicious.⁷ Critics with objections to the work's form or style should direct their objections to him, he writes, for you, its author,

never intended to write for the world or to create a work of art. In all of your reading in the best writers in diverse languages which one can read without an education, it was always your wont to pay less attention to the beauty of form than the value of the content. (p. 13)

Her lack of any professional, "artistic" ambition along with her keen concern for "moral utility" excuse the amateurishness of her execution. In short, while the novel contains the material for a work of art, to aspire to such status, it would need to be invested with aesthetic form—that is, severed from the nexus of everyday means and ends in which it is embedded, shaped, and, as Schiller will later put it, "refined." But it is not as if Wieland were urging the author to undertake such revisions. Indeed, he does not appear to consider her capable of it. Rather, he urges critics to keep an open mind: on reflection, he writes, they may find that the author's deviations from good usage, her little stylistic quirks, and the like actually enhance the work, for are they not in some measure responsible for the "extraordinary individuation of the character of our heroine," which constitutes one of the novel's chief strengths? She is "something that art never could have achieved as effectively as here where nature was at work" (p. 15).

In short, even as he absolves the work's author of responsibility for its defects, Wieland denies her credit for its excellencies.

By thus minimizing La Roche's accomplishment in the preface of her first novel, Wieland may have smoothed its acceptance by readers resistant to the idea of women writing professionally, but he simultaneously removed it from the class of texts worthy of the particular kind of reading and rereading we have identified with the then just evolving category of literary art. Wieland's considerations here played a critical part in giving definition to this new category, even as they authorized an *other*, entirely separate and inferior one—a second, “women's” literature.⁸

The prediction of her friend Julie Bondeli (to whom Wieland was also engaged briefly), proved doubly correct, then. Pondering the likely response to *Fräulein von Sternheim*, Bondeli wrote La Roche early in 1772:

Perhaps they will say: *that* is no genius because—because you are a woman, and a woman—with your permission—could not have genius. . . . Let them talk. Let us just preserve our tact, our sensibility, our keen perceptiveness, and let them be. The one who runs fastest often overshoots the goal, and the point is but to attain it. There can be little doubt that you have a woman's genius: a sad composite of tact, sensibility, truth, perceptiveness, finesse, and accuracy in our views and observations. There can be no doubt that your style has a feminine elegance, and only God knows why it is so beautiful, so moving. . . . Sophie, Sophie, let them talk, and just keep writing.⁹

Bondeli not only predicts that La Roche will be denied the essential ingredient of modern “authorship,” she urges her to make a virtue of necessity and go her separate way. La Roche did just that, too, although not necessarily by choice. For once it had been appropriated by male writers such as Goethe, whose *Werther* (1774) draws heavily from that sphere of “feminine” genius that Bondeli identifies, La Roche's pioneering work in it could be relegated to “women's literature.”¹⁰ Indeed, toward the end of their lives Wieland, as if announcing the success of the program of containment he had initiated in the preface to *Fräulein von Sternheim*, describes La Roche as “the oldest and most venerable of Germany's women writers . . . who for thirty-five years has been doing so much good among our German women, mothers, and daughters, through the beautiful effusions of her mind, heart, and example.”¹¹

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It is not surprising, then, that we do not find La Roche in Bergk's pantheon of novelists. Her work and that of the many women writers she inspired served by negation to give content to the notion of literary "art" that his handbook was designed to disseminate. In a chapter entitled "How Must Novels Be Constructed to Count as Models of Taste" Bergk writes that

any novel which expects to satisfy all of the requirements we place on a beautiful work of art must be a product both of genius and of taste. But what do we mean by this? It must not only be rich in new ideas and contain a wealth of experiences and ingenious reflections, but its way of presenting the ideas and their connection with one another must be beautiful and characteristic. . . . What do we mean by a beautiful presentation? . . . Everywhere cohesion, nowhere a gap, everywhere completeness, nowhere deficiencies and defects. (pp. 234-36)

Bergk concludes with the observation, quoted in chapter 4, that while novels "that wear the stamp of genius and taste are rare," German literature nevertheless "possesses enough of them to enable us to cultivate our taste and employ our minds pleasantly and instructively" (p. 236). In support of the proposition he takes the reader through passages from Goethe's *Werther* and Wieland's *Agathon*.