

Rosa Mayreder. *Gender and Culture*. Translated by Pamela S. Saur. Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture and Thought. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2009. 266 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-57241-162-3.



Reviewed by Agatha Schwartz

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Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan (University of Nottingham)

Rosa Mayreder's collection of essays *Geschlecht und Kultur* (*Gender and Culture*) was published in 1923 by Eugen Diederichs in Jena, Germany. It was a sequel to her collection of essays *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit* published nearly two decades earlier, in 1905. Yet unlike *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit*, which, soon after its publication in German, was translated into English as *A Survey of the Woman Problem* (published by Hyperion Press in 1913), *Geschlecht und Kultur* has remained unknown to a wider English-speaking readership until recently. In 2009, Ariadne Press brought out Pamela S. Saur's translation of this important feminist work from Austria.

Mayreder was one of the pioneers of Austrian feminism. Born Rosa Obermayer in 1858 in Vienna, she became a brilliant, though mostly self-taught, writer, poet, social critic, cofounder of the General Austrian Women's Association (*Allgemeiner Österreichischer Frauenverein*) and its vice president in 1894, and, for a period, coeditor of the association's journal, *Dokumente der Frauen* (*Women's documents*). She was also a

painter. In addition to fiction and an autobiography (published only posthumously in 1948), she published numerous important essays on gender relations, the cultural construction of gender, marriage, love, and sexuality. She was a heavy critic of the sexual double standard and of prostitution, which she considered one of its consequences. On her seventieth birthday, in 1928, Mayreder was made honorary citizen of Vienna in recognition of her accomplishments. She died in her native city in 1938, shortly before the Nazi takeover. Her life and work fell into oblivion for several decades after that, only to celebrate a comeback since the mid-1980s. Besides the scholarly attention given to her life and work, a fair number of her texts have been reedited in German (including *Der letzte Gott* [The last God], in 2008 by Tatjana Popovic; and a Mayreder reader under the title *Zivilisation und Geschlecht* [Civilization and gender] in 2010, edited by Eva Geber von Mandelbaum). Her diaries were brought out for the first time in 1988 by Harriet Anderson (*Tagebücher 1873-1937*). However, *Gender and*

Culture is the only work by Mayreder to be published in English after her death. The importance of this translation cannot be stressed enough as it will introduce a wider readership to a major Austrian feminist and to her ideas which still resonate today.

As stated by Mayreder in the foreword, she had already written most chapters of *Gender and Culture* by the beginning of World War One and she had even chosen the title for this collection of essays. But the outbreak of the war and personal challenges (her husband's depression of which not even Dr. Sigmund Freud was capable of curing him) prevented her from bringing this important book to completion and publishing it. The thoughts and concepts expressed in this book thus very much reflect the debates in which they were born and developed, namely, the Viennese fin de siècle. Mayreder offers the reader informed and carefully thought-out reflections on culture and civilization and the importance of gender in their construction, the moral double standard, the shattering of patriarchal concepts of masculinity and fatherhood, eroticism, marriage, and love. As Susanne Hochreiter points out in her afterword, Mayreder's use of the term "woman's nature" may sound problematic to our current understanding of gender construction. However, upon careful reading, it becomes clear that Mayreder's position was not what one may classify as essentialist (that is, determined by human biology and therefore unchangeable). Quite the contrary, Mayreder defined "nature" as something determined by external circumstances and historical development and thus "capable of being changed as external forces change" (p. 27). With this position, she challenged the very strong misogynist discourse of her time, a discourse present in numerous contemporaneous authors among whom the most notorious was probably Otto Weininger. Indeed, Mayreder's title alone reads as a challenge to Weininger's extremely essentialist and woman-hating bestseller *Geschlecht und Character* (1903), a title rendered as *Sex and Character* in English

but that should really be translated as *Gender and Character*. Mayreder took a position against Weininger in her earlier *A Survey of the Woman Problem* as well, a position she developed further in *Gender and Culture* to explain misogyny in Western culture as a historical phenomenon which she based on an abhorrence of the body and sexuality that had grown out of Christianity. Mayreder's reflections carry relevance today given the resurgence of misogyny and its open and more disguised manifestations in many parts of the world.

Mayreder's feminist position can be classified as cultural feminism. Her criticism of a patriarchal construction of civilization offers a reevaluation of women's work and their contribution to the development of civilization and a rewriting of history from a feminist point of view with her statement that "civilization, in its technological aspect, would seem to be in its origins a feminine achievement because women everywhere were the first farmers, potters, weavers, tentmakers, in short, the first technicians" (p. 21). Moreover, Mayreder offered suggestions as to how to move beyond what was generally considered a fin-de-siècle crisis of culture. Only by repositioning the feminine and reevaluating women's roles and participation in cultural work will a "harmony between culture and civilization" become possible (p. 27). Mayreder saw the establishment of gender equality as a necessary condition in that direction, an equality that would not deny some differences between women and men (such as their different roles in procreation) but that would allow women to participate equally in the public domain and, thus, bring about a woman-centered society in which women and men would be each other's true and loving partners.

Mayreder's idealistic and romantic views of gender relations were somewhat shattered following World War One and the crisis of her own marriage. Her foreword to the 1923 German edition expressed in part a cultural pessimism but

she managed to end it on a hopeful and optimistic tone regarding future developments. Fortunately, she did not live to see her optimism completely destroyed by Nazi barbarism. Overall, her ideas in many ways foreshadowed future developments regarding women's emancipation, the reevaluation of gender roles, motherhood and fatherhood, and the idea of partnership as a basis of marriage. They also remind us how much more needs to be done to achieve true gender equality.

Saur's translation of the German original reads smoothly and is adapted to a contemporary English-speaking audience. Occasionally, she slides over difficult terms in the original, when, for instance, she avoids translating "Lebensbedingungen der Kulturvölker" and we can, instead, read the somewhat incorrect English equivalent as "culturally determined living conditions" (p. 27). As a matter of fact, "Kulturvölker" (roughly: cultured, or civilized, peoples) is a word difficult to translate without an explanatory note that would put it and its connotations into an appropriate historical context elaborating on what to today's readers may carry some racial, not to say racist, overtones. Such explanatory notes would have been perhaps somewhat cumbersome to add to the present translation, but would have given it more scholarly weight and helped a reader who is less versed in fin-de-siècle topics and authors. There are other examples of less than correct renderings of the German original. Most of the time, the leaving out of particles or adverbial phrases that add a stylistic touch to the text do not hurt the overall meaning and make the English text run more smoothly. However, at times such interventions alter the meaning that can be misleading for the reader.

Hochreiter's afterword is a welcome complement to the volume, particularly given the lack of accompanying explanatory notes. It offers an introduction to Mayreder's biography, her work, and the book itself and puts it into its historical context. A list of Mayreder's publications and sec-

ondary literature on her life and work complete the volume. Her published as well as unpublished letters and manuscripts are also referred to, which can offer an incentive for future research. It is unfortunate that the bibliography does not list any translations of Mayreder's works. The list of secondary literature also has some lacunae; for instance, it does not mention Harriet Anderson's essay on Mayreder's diaries.[1] Finally, an index to the volume would have been a desideratum.

Note

[1]. Harriet Anderson, "Gepreßte Blumen: Die Tagebücher Rosa Mayreders," in *Österreichische Tagebuchschriftsteller*, ed. Donald G. Daviau (Vienna: Edition Atelier, 1994), 237-264.

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(“Gepreßte Blumen: Die Tagebücher Rosa Mayreders.” In Donald G. Daviau, ed. *Österreichische Tagebuchschriftsteller*. Vienna: Edition Atelier, 1994, pp.237-264).

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