

Jill Suzanne Smith. *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933.* Signale: Modern German Letters, Cultures, and Thought Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 236 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7834-5.



Reviewed by Tyler Carrington

Published on H-Urban (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

Toward the end of her excellent new book, *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933*, Jill Suzanne Smith sketches a scene that is at once quintessentially Berlin and the basic premise of her investigation into cultural and intellectual discourses about femininity, sexuality, and early twentieth-century gender politics. It is, as she tells us, a “crisp November evening in 1925,” and crowds have gathered outside a Berlin movie theater to take in the premier of the delightfully suggestive new film by Richard Oswald, *Halbseide* (Half-silk, 1925). Due to a ticketing blunder, the premier has been oversold by some one hundred tickets, and the crowds outside, who wrangle and jockey for a seat inside, themselves become something of a spectacle—a sight that Willy Haas, a film critic, cannot help but include in his review of the film. Haas is Smith’s source for this event (and, as she notes, sadly our only source for the film, which was lost at some point in time), and his commentary on the people milling about serves as a fascinating complement to his comments on the film. Smith’s ability to dis-

sect this scene and move between the many layers of complexity involved is impressive: there is the film, *Halbseide*, which is about two men’s efforts to, as a game, guess at whether the Berlin street-walkers they encounter are “silk” (high-society women) or “cotton” (petite bourgeois girls); there are the many women—some from well-to-do classes, many others Haas believes to be prostitutes—who have come to see the film; there are the male ticketholders observing these women (and, as Smith suggests, perhaps guessing at whether they are “silk” or “cotton”); and there is the critic, Haas, watching all of them (and classifying them as cotton or silk or somewhere in between). Smith, who herself bundles all of this together into her narrative about coquettes, does a masterful job highlighting the varied and ever-shifting, ever-elusive definitions of prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, her point about the film—that “it is about the creation of erotic confusion through the blurring of class boundaries and moral boundaries”—

might well serve as the best single-sentence explanation of this book's focus (p. 151).

If this blurring of class and moral lines is the primary plot of Smith's book, it is the coquette who plays the main character. Coquettes—whom Smith at times describes as “bourgeois whores”—presented a profound problem for Wilhelmine-era Berliners, who, as Smith argues, had a lot invested in “respectability's continued reign” (p. 62). They were both vexed and deeply troubled by women who were not easily classifiable as either respectable or depraved; women who appeared to be one thing but might be another; women who, in fact, moved seamlessly between the (not-so-under) world of vice and the middle-class parlors of “new Berlin”; and women, to use Smith's term, who were “self-conscious commodities” in the modern metropolis, “gaug[ing] men's desires and project[ing] an image that appeal[ed] to those desires in order to reap financial benefits” (p. 18). This sort of ambiguity and line blurring, Smith demonstrates, exposed the brittle façade of gender politics in Wilhelmine Berlin and prompted a reexamination and rearticulation of respectable femininity in the modern, urban setting. This “problem” of classifying women as respectable or depraved was naturally only made more complicated by World War I, which “dealt a devastating blow to the bourgeois family, its gendered division of labor, and its restrictive sexual standards,” Smith writes, and let loose a flood of women into public (as white-collar workers, for example) (p. 108). This “destabilized” accepted definitions of gender all the more, and Weimar Berlin, was filled with countervailing images of prostitution and the coquettes who became more prominent (and problematic) than ever (p. 130). Smith's approach in this book is to trace this figure of the coquette from the late nineteenth century through the early 1930s as a way of highlighting the fragility of bourgeois normativity and the discomfort of society, generally, with sexually emancipated women.

In this goal, Smith succeeds rather brilliantly. Based on a selection of more or less prominent voices in Wilhelmine-era Berlin (chapters 1 and 2) and Weimar-era Berlin (chapters 3 and 4), she demonstrates the variety of ways in which “discourses surrounding prostitution, its causes, and its possible alternatives led to frank, productive discussions about sexuality, ones that defied the double standard in order to contemplate potential nonmarital outlets for women's desire.” These debates and discussions, she shows throughout the book, “allowed reformers and writers to envision new social and sexual identities for women, such as the flirtatious single woman, the unwed mother, the divorcee, the widow, and the lesbian.” Prostitution, in other words, “played a central role in the renegotiation of erotic life” (p. 21). Smith puts on a whole host of evidence for this claim, and her analysis of the way influential thinkers like August Bebel, Georg Simmel, and Erich Hartleben criticized bourgeois marriage and morals and imagined more women-friendly alternatives is compelling, if sometimes a bit forgetful about tying these admittedly insightful men into the broader reality of turn-of-the-century Berlin (chapter 1, especially, reads more like an intellectual history or primary source study of Bebel, Simmel, and Hartleben, respectively, than a cultural study of fin de siècle Berlin). Smith undoubtedly makes a great many extremely insightful observations along the way (e.g., her excellent point that middle-class feminist reformers—the subject of chapter 2—like Helene Stöcker, in asserting their own position vis-à-vis prostitutes and claiming that they needed to speak for them, essentially limited their prospects for social or moral capital), but she certainly does seem more at home in the novels and tracts under study than in the urban realities to which they were responding. This somewhat narrow focus leads her to perhaps overstate the importance of her subject—prostitution—in turn-of-the-century Berlin, when it was, in fact, only one of several fleeting relationships that were not only booming but also increasingly

under attack. Most notable in this regard is the so-called *Verhältnis*, or casual dating relationship, which appears everywhere in turn-of-the-century newspapers and penny novels but is curiously absent in this book. Smith does mention mistresses at one or two points, but the *Verhältnis* was quite a bit more nuanced (and less one-sided) than mistress relationships, and it was arguably more important than prostitution in supporting the complicated world of middle-class respectability at the turn of the century.

Smith does, however, hit her stride when she reaches the 1920s and the explosion of cabaret, film, and inflation/Depression-era literature. Chapters 3 and 4 showcase her quite enviable ability to dissect the often-tangled meanings of the characters of Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Tucholsky, Siegfried Kracauer, Vicki Baum, and Irmgard von Keun. Her analysis of Curt Moreck's "Naughty" guide to Berlin is especially clever, for she proves here the ways in which prostitutes became so prominent that they even became a product of bourgeois fascination—indeed, a sort of bourgeois fad. Moreck's travel guide, which, Smith concludes, was directed at the young and avant-garde, cautioned those looking for "real" vice that much of "old Berlin's" naughtiness (e.g., the iconic Friedrichstrasse) was simply a tourist trap, something designed to "attract fashionable crowds interested in following a trend"—something, in other words, that was "actually quite bourgeois" (p. 142). Smith, in fact, speaks of prostitution's "mainstream status in Weimar Berlin" (p. 140), and this alone is a profoundly important takeaway (and something that adds desperately needed complexity to the all-too-common narrative of interwar Berlin as a sort of "anything goes" sexual utopia). For that matter, her analyses of Baum's *Flämmchen* (from *Menschen im Hotel* [Grand Hotel, 1929]) and Irmgard von Keun's *Doris* (from *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* [*The Artificial Silk Girl*, 1932]) are both brilliant and very readable. Smith is certainly not the first to focus on these two well-known protagonists and novels (though her dis-

cussion of Ernst—in *The Artificial Silk Girl*—as the modern Weimar male is groundbreaking), but she does an excellent job finding, as she puts it, "moments and avenues of emancipation in what is generally viewed as failed emancipation" (p. 184). Indeed, she demonstrates a wide variety of (quite interesting) ways in which these authors did not always mean to portray prostitution as a dead end, as scholars have heretofore believed. In these otherwise excellent parts, she is guilty of casting the prewar city as a foil to interwar Berlin, however, and she overlooks the extent to which "The New Woman"—who, she argues, further blurred the lines between prostitution and respectability in Weimar-era Berlin—was actually already exceedingly present and frequently thematized at the turn of the century. Berlin around 1900 was nothing if not filled with very public and very real discussions of "The New Woman," who was already prompting widespread debate about what constituted respectable femininity. Smith writes, for example, that "the city streets that Walter Benjamin describes as clearly marked by the 'sign of prostitution' during his childhood in Wilhelmine Berlin were also traversed, during the Weimar era, by other women on their way to work or to urban entertainment venues such as the café or cinema" (p. 112). But what Smith misses here is the fact that the turn-of-the-century street was already recognized as the domain of women—upstanding women, even—whose respectability remained intact (even if it was questioned) when they walked to and from work. Indeed, she seems too ready to believe Benjamin's and Moreck's recollections of prewar Berlin, which naturally suffer from postwar nostalgia for a simpler, less chaotic, one thinks less women-friendly world and say more about the realities of the 1920s than the turn of the century. Such is the nature of nostalgia, after all.

In the end, these criticisms revolve around a more fundamental problem that plagues the book, or, better, limits its potential. The aforementioned scene of the crowds at the premier of *Halb-*

seide—which Smith treats in just two pages—again typifies the central shortcoming of the book, namely, the disappointing absence of real people throughout these roughly two hundred pages, which are filled mostly with Smith’s (nevertheless excellent) analyses of intellectuals’ and artists’ takes on these fascinatingly complex Half-silk Berlin women. Of course, this might in large part be because Smith is first and foremost a Germanist, not a historian; but this topic is so utterly historical, so intrinsically tied to the actual women all of this prostitution discourse is about that readers may find themselves intrigued but a bit disappointed after reading *Berlin Coquette*. We see plenty of examples of coquettes being commented on, painted, sketched, and written into plays and cabaret texts; but all too often we are left wishing Smith would look past the artists (in the case of *Halbseide*, past the critic Haas, past the screenwriter Oswald, even) and focus on the men and women (indeed, the moviegoers) whose lives, we are told (but not really shown), were so boundary bending. This is admittedly quite difficult archival work, but Smith seems too ready to engage only with the artists and intellectuals and take for granted the real women they so loved to thematize. Their stories are ultimately much more interesting than the well-worn pages of Simmel or Kracauer, and this book lacks such stories.

These issues notwithstanding, Smith’s thesis is nevertheless extremely compelling, and her concluding statement—“In no other German city did such a robust pluralism surrounding prostitution and sexuality thrive as it did in late Wilhelmine and Weimar Berlin”—rings true by the end of the book (p. 189). Smith employs an impressive array of theoretical approaches to show us precisely how robust this pluralism was, drawing as she does on theater studies, feminist theory, space theory, and some first-rate textual analysis. Her passages about Jeanne Mammen’s paintings of coquettes (and her analyses of Mammen’s female subjects as coquettes) are outstanding, as is her treatment of Margarete Böhme’s *Tagebuch*

einer Verlorenen (Diary of a lost girl, 1905). Some chapters certainly pop more than others (at the very least, chapters 3 and 4 should be required reading for both scholars and students of the interwar period), but the book as a whole is well written—an ever-rarer feature of academic writing, it seems—and well researched (Smith’s footnotes are especially impressive). This combination allows her to engage with the book’s central theme—respectability—in an instructive, thought-provoking, and richly detailed way, and she ultimately succeeds, like her artist and intellectual subjects one hundred years ago, in “captur[ing] the rebellious and irreverent spirit of the capital city” (p. 9). This is an important contribution to a variety of fields (German studies, gender studies, history, urban studies, and theater/film studies come immediately to mind) and certainly one that will change the way we understand prostitution. After all, this book is not just about prostitution; it is also about the difficulty of defining respectability in an urban environment filled with blurred lines and Half-Silks.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Tyler Carrington. Review of Smith, Jill Suzanne. *Berlin Coquette: Prostitution and the New German Woman, 1890-1933*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42041>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.