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Representing Sexual Deviance in Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen*

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I. Introduction

But for decades now, we have found it difficult to speak [about sex] without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression.¹

Michel Foucault

Increased visibility has not been an unmitigated blessing.²

Gayle Rubin

Frank Wedekind's 1891 drama *Frühlings Erwachen* holds the distinction of being one of the most highly censored and enduring contributions to theatrical modernism. Wedekind composed the drama while living in Munich, which was a locus of experimental German theater in the 1890s, giving rise not only to *Frühlings Erwachen* but also Oskar Panizza's virulently anti-catholic *Der Liebeskonzil*. Responding to the suicide of his classmate in Lenzburg six years earlier, Wedekind's drama addressed issues of sexual morality and bourgeois hypocrisy that earned him the reputation as a dramatic radical. As with Panizza, this status was confirmed when Wedekind spent six months in prison in 1898 after an article he wrote was judged treasonous. Ever since *Frühlings Erwachen* surmounted a national censor that prevented it from being performed until 1906 in Berlin, the drama has been a regular fixture in the international theater circuit. Most recently, it has enjoyed a renaissance through the enormously popular 2006 Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*.

Frühlings Erwachen gave representation to issues of adolescence that carried a high social sensitivity in the late Wilhelmine period, like child abuse, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, abortion, sexual repression, sexual shame, and suicide. Alongside these

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1976), 7. Hereafter abbreviated as *HoS*.

² G. Rubin, "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990" (PhD diss., The University of Michigan, 1994), 5.

pitfalls of youth it visualized sex perversions – homosexuality and sadomasochism - that were being codified for the first time within the nascent field of sexual science. The drama was censored by the German police and neglected for a decade and a half by the reading public because of its scathing satire and “obscene” content.³ Mainstream media and the intelligentsia alike have tended to focus on its stylistic radicalism, which broke with the contemporaneous German conventions of tragedy, dramatic structure, and language. This has inappropriately contributed to the impression that the drama’s attitudes towards sexual deviance were - and remain - radical as well.

The dramatic structure of *Frühlings Erwachen* was pathbreaking insofar as Wedekind designed its “open” form to mirror the experience of the protagonists. In an open drama, each successive scene adds a new element that extends the central theme, often at the expense of dramatic coherence.⁴ Keeping this in mind, the pubescent characters have trouble relating to themselves and each other because of a lack of a vocabulary of critical inquiry with which to understand their sexual experience. Echoing this lacuna, four of the seven scenes of the second act are nearly autonomously functioning monologues. These exploit the open dramatic form in order to illustrate an insular adolescent social space in which characters, capable only of erratic communication, are trapped in a mostly conjectural world of their own thoughts and feelings.⁵

However modern its structure, the notion of the drama’s ostensible sexual radicalism deserves substantial qualification. *Frühlings Erwachen* is widely understood

³ Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance, 1890-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 84.

⁴ Volker Klotz, *Geschlossene und offene Form im Drama* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1960).

⁵ Gordon Birrell, “The Wollen-Sollen Equation in Wedekind’s *Frühlings Erwachen*,” *Germanic Review* 57(3), (Summer, 1982): 119.

as a critique of sexual repression. A journalist for *The New York Times* framed the drama as “a withering attack on a rigid, hypocritical society that cares only about outward appearances and refuses to deal openly with natural sexual urges.”⁶ But, as another *New York Times* critic put it, “The forces that assail the play’s young characters are not just those of repression and rectitude. More potent than those are the seductions that adolescents will always have to grapple with in their anxious souls, no matter how edified they may be on the subject of birds and bees: the alluring chant of nihilism, the animalistic impulses toward violence, the thought obliterating joys of sex.”⁷ These assessments maintain a focus on the liberatory character of the drama’s critique of repressive moral conventions that prohibit discussion about “natural” sexual urges. This has impeded more sensitive investigations into how *Frühlings Erwachen* represents deviant sexual expression in particular. It is important to hold sexual repression in focus, while placing it within a larger dynamic that observes how the drama produces particular ideas about sexuality above and beyond a simple call for liberation from silence. In this paper, I will argue that the “antirepressive” drama generates historically specific, morally coded images of homosexuality, sadomasochism, and child sexuality. These are inscribed within a larger sexological conversation at the turn of the twentieth century that privileged heterosexual expression as normal, healthy, and mature, on the one hand, while representing sex perversions as the byproducts of social prohibition and hereditary degeneration, on the other.

⁶ Patricia Cohen, “In Search of Sexual Healing, Circa 1891,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2006, Arts section, Midwest edition.

⁷ Charles Isherwood, “In ‘Spring Awakening,’ a Rock ‘n’ Roll Heartbeat for 19th-Century German Schoolboys,” *The New York Times*, Jun. 16, 2006, Arts section, Midwest edition.

Much can be learned about the drama's attitudes about sexual deviance from Michel Foucault's repressive hypothesis in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. For Foucault, too narrow a focus on the prohibition of a natural libido obstructs more productive examinations of the social organization and moral judgment of sex practices. While he does not refute the existence of sexual repression in society, Foucault chooses to emphasize that sex is spoken about all the time within modern generative discourses like psychiatry that have been codifying and distributing sexualities since at least the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ These are then alternately marginalized, legitimized, disciplined, or normalized.⁹

Although it is complicit in the process described by Foucault, *Frühlings Erwachen* does not explicitly stigmatize homosexuality or sadomasochism. This ambivalence has led to some confusion about the drama's way of thinking about sexual deviance. For example, in the penultimate scene, the characters Hänschen Rilow and Ernst Röbel share a kiss that is perhaps the play's most tender moment. Gordon Birrell goes so far as to argue that "...there is no evidence whatsoever that Wendla's and Melchior's sado-masochistic tendencies, or Hänschen's homosexual leanings, are the result of their parents' warped values. [...] Wedekind suggests on the contrary that sexual responses cannot be classified as normal or abnormal, acceptable or unacceptable, outside of the system of social norms."¹⁰ There is ample reason to qualify this statement. In the first place, one must question Wedekind's choice to juxtapose sadomasochism and homosexuality within the same drama, which in itself implies that the two sexual

⁸ *HoS*, 12.

⁹ Leo Bersani, "The Gay Daddy," *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 81.

¹⁰ Birrell, *op. cit.*, 120-21.

proclivities are somehow related to each other. This only makes sense if one considers both of these things to be deviations from a norm, i.e. heterosexuality.

Second of all, Hänschen and Ernst's kiss is preceded by a monologue in which Hänschen masturbates to (and expresses tortured longing for) reproductions of female classical nudes. Because of *Frühlings Erwachen*'s characteristic lack of dramatic coherence, it is difficult to state definitively what Wedekind is trying to communicate in this scene. At the very least, it is important to examine a character that both suffers from intense heterosexual repression and later shares tender homosexual intimacy with his schoolmate. While the drama does not assert explicitly that the latter event flows out of the former, neither does it draw a clear distinction between the two. The result is a profoundly ambivalent vision of homosexuality. On the one hand, Hänschen's homosexual proclivities, as I will examine more closely in the next chapter, may be understood as a "sentimental stage of development."¹¹ On the other hand, they may have arisen out of a social environment that represses heterosexual expression in children. Either way, homosexuality acquires a subaltern status compared to heterosexual maturity.

The story is similar with sadomasochism. Intrigued by her friend Martha's account of the beatings she receives from her parents, the masochistic Wendla elicits Melchior's sadistic tendencies by requesting him to flagellate her with a branch. In a subsequent scene, Wendla follows Melchior into a hayloft where he, incapable of harnessing his sexual impulses, rapes and impregnates her. Wendla subsequently dies from a botched back-alley abortion arranged for by her mother. Again, Wedekind does not causally link sadomasochism to Wendla's death. Still, a repressive social

¹¹ Laurence Senelick, "The Homosexual as Villain and Victim in Fin-de-Siecle Drama," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4(2), Special Issue, Part 1: Lesbian and Gay Histories (Oct., 1993): 218.

environment has failed to provide Wendla and Melchior with a language with which to understand their natural and sometimes dangerous sexual drives. In chapter four, I will explore the drama's lack of clear distinction between rape, lack of self-control, and death, on the one hand, with sadomasochism, on the other.

While *Frühlings Erwachen* represents sex perversions in an arguably non-stigmatizing way, it arranges diverse forms of sexual expression into a hierarchy of social value whose apex is heterosexuality. A similar incoherence characterizes the sexological literature contemporaneous with the drama. For example, in his later work, the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing understood homosexuality as a benign congenital anomaly, acknowledged homosexuals' right to pleasure, and refused outright to condemn homosexuality as degenerate.¹² And yet this was same thinker who in his earlier work codified numerous forms of sexual deviance and formed medical theories to explain their erosion from normal heterosexual intercourse. Like Wedekind, Krafft-Ebing's sexological discourse crystallized sex perversions as discrete psychosexual phenomena with some moral complexity. Simultaneously, he facilitated the stratification of these within a system of sexual value that relied on the assumption of a normal, corruptible libido.

Wedekind's representation of child sexuality in particular is similarly expressive of ideas about children and sex that were developing in the contemporaneous sexological literature. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Krafft-Ebing's zealous accumulation of case histories in *Psychopathia Sexualis* revealed how very commonly sex perversions occur in children. Relying on this material, Freud later argued in *Three*

¹² Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, biologist of the mind: beyond the psychoanalytic legend* (New York: BasicBooks, 1979), 296.

Essays on the Theory of Sexuality that the “normal” sexual constitution in adults is the final achievement in a series of developmental stages. With the arrival of puberty, Freud asserted, “changes set in which are destined to give infantile sexual life its final, normal shape. The sexual instinct has hitherto been predominantly auto-erotic; it now finds a sexual object.”¹³ Freud’s thinking relied on the assumption that children possess a sexual fluidity that diminishes in adulthood. While his text recognized the existence and diversity of childhood sexuality, it also consigned the perversions to a particular space of sexual development that anticipated the end goal of heterosexual normality.

Frühlings Erwachen relegates sexual variation to childhood in a similar way. In the first place, sex perversions are characteristic only of the adolescent protagonists in the drama, while the adults have exclusively heterosexual leanings. This is only coherent if one first understands “childhood” and “adulthood” to be distinct periods of life, which, as Phillipe Ariès made clear, is a historically new notion.¹⁴ In emphasizing the failure on the part of adults to educate adolescents about their erratic sexual drives, *Frühlings Erwachen* inadvertently promotes the impression that, given the proper tools, young people will mature into heterosexual adulthood. This teleological formation impedes the development of a concept of benign sexual variation.

Another feature worth noting is the antagonism with which the drama represents relations between children and adults. This is most salient in the case of the secondary character Martha, who is physically abused by her parents and possibly sexual abused by her father in particular. While the drama’s frank discussion about child abuse was

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: BasicBooks, 1962), 73. Hereafter abbreviated as *TE*.

¹⁴ Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A social history of family life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1965).

groundbreaking at the time of its release, it does not provide a way to think about intergenerational contact without making reference to exploitation, abuse, and oppression. Because it understands relations between the old and young in a uniformly negative way, the drama fails to make concrete suggestions for how to best transmit sexual information to adolescents. As one critic complained, “Immer hören wir nur anklagend von dem Verderben, sehen mit groteskem Zynismus die Moral der Gesellschaft in den Straßenkot gezogen, ohne eine befriedigende Lösung zu erfahren.”¹⁵ In chapter five, I will argue that this conceptual lacuna arises out of Wedekind’s failure to develop a viewpoint about cross-generational intimacy that does not presume abuse.

¹⁵ Kurt Herbst, *Gedanken über Frank Wedekinds "Frühlings Erwachen", "Erdgeist" und "Die Büchse der Pandora"*. Eine literarische Plauderei von K.H. (Leipzig: Xenien-Verlag, 1919), 32.

II. Staging repression

In the decades following its publication, *Frühlings Erwachen* was received internationally with a divisive mix of praise and excoriation. These polarized reactions were elicited by the play's polemical critique of sexual repression and call for the destigmatization of child sexuality. Proponents lauded its emancipatory thrust, while antagonists supported its censorship on grounds of obscenity. This repression-liberation framework has frustrated more sophisticated and historically conscious readings of the drama's representation of sexual deviance.

This trend is reflected in newspaper articles that covered the various attempts to bring the drama to New York. Many editorials did not attempt to hide their disdain. In 1908, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* criticized the drama for obscenity and lack of artistic sophistication. "If arrangements now pending between the management of the Deutsche theater [sic] of Berlin and the Shuberts [sic] of New York terminate successfully, Gotham will have an opportunity to witness the raciest, boldest theatrical production ever attempted on a respectable American stage. [...] The piece, which is now in its second year's run in Berlin and other German theaters, leaves exceedingly little to the imagination."¹⁶ In 1917, *Frühlings Erwachen* enjoyed a single matinee, which had to be performed under the purview of the Medical Society of the State of New York to avoid a ban. It was foiled nevertheless when the New York Police Department declared the theater building a fire hazard.¹⁷

The indignation with which detractors received *Frühlings Erwachen* elicited an often uncritical enthusiasm from the sympathetic reviews. Neither of these polar opposite

¹⁶ "The Racist Play Promised New York," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1908. In ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1986), 10.

¹⁷ Georg Hensel, afterword to *Frühlings Erwachen*, by Frank Wedekind (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 108.

camps of response was sensitive to the values the drama produces attributes to sexual deviance. Reporting on an October 1908 production in Paris, which was performed before a full house, *The New York Times* acknowledged a useful social significance in the polemical drama and was concerned about the preservation of its artistic and theatrical integrity. “This play, which has been most successful on the German stage, discusses serious sex questions quite frankly and poignantly.”¹⁸ A favorable review of the 1917 New York production was similarly inclined to take a side in the debates over whether to characterize the drama as “obscene” or “enlightening.” “This was the first and most celebrated play by the brilliant Frank Wedekind, the tragedy which the eccentric German dramatist wrote more than twenty years ago. The play in its entirety is unrepresentable in the theatre, even in the land to which it was peculiarly addressed, and certainly there is no shadow of excuse for the present tasteless production of a badly translated version called ‘The Awakening of Spring.’”¹⁹

Although Wedekind completed the play in 1891, a national censure prevented its performance until its first, truncated production in 1906 in the Berliner Kammerspiele under the direction of Max Reinhardt.²⁰ German author and influential theater critic Siegfried Jacobsohn spoke out in support of the ban enacted after the drama’s Berlin premiere on the scenes involving masturbation, sadomasochism, and homosexuality. Jacobsohn’s critique revolved around what he determined to be Wedekind’s obscene depiction of “wie schon in den Kindern auch die Abarten der Geschlechtsliebe keimen und wuchern: Sadismus und Masochismus; Masturbation; Päderastie” (108). Jacobsohn

¹⁸ “Child Actors Seen in German Sex Play,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1908. In ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2005), 9.

¹⁹ “Wedekind Play Abused: Poor Translation and Performance of ‘Fruehlings Erwachen,’” *The New York Times*, Mar. 31, 1917. In ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2005), 9.

²⁰ Hensel, op. cit., 106.

called upon medical categories of sexual deviance to support the drama's partial censorship. For this reason, the lifting of the ban on these scenes in the 1960s tended to be viewed as a liberation of taboo sexual themes.

Since this time, *Frühlings Erwachen* has maintained a steady popularity and retained its function as a site of discussion about sexual repression. The drama is still heralded for its emancipatory critique of the prohibition of discussion about adolescent sexuality. I saw a performance of *Frühlings Erwachen* at the Stadttheater in Freiburg im Breisgau in May 2008. As one might expect, a review in the *Südkurier* frames the production as an exposé of the malignant clash between pubescent libidinal urges and sexually repressive moral conventions. Journalist Siegbert Kopp observes the alterations from the original drama director Felicitas Brucker employed to make the production reflect contemporary problems of adolescent sexuality.

Erfahrungshunger haben sie, wollen sich spüren bis an die Schmerzgrenze. Hier leiden keine pubertierenden 14-Jährigen aus der wilhelminischen Kaiserzeit an einer rigiden Sexualmoral, sondern junge Erwachsene von heute. Hier ist niemand in Vaternörder-Kragen oder Rüschenkleider eingezwängt, sondern Britpop-Frisuren und Schlabber-Klamotten sind angesagt. Viel Bewegungsfreiheit haben diese Schüler, für den Körper, für die Seele, dass sie den Boden nicht mehr unter den Füßen spüren. Die Krankheit der Jugend ist heute eine andere. Felicitas Brucker hat die "Wedekinder" ins Hier und Jetzt geführt und ihnen eine aktuelle Brisanz gegeben zwischen Gewaltexzessen, Liebessehnsucht, Leistungsdruck, Coolness und Autoaggression.²¹

²¹ Siegbert Kopp, "Feuchte Bubenträume," *suedkurier.de*, May 26, 2008.

For this critic, the director “updates” the original impetus of *Frühlings Erwachen* by representing more modern sexual pathologies. The notion that Brucker makes radical alterations to the original drama’s discourse on sex is not true in any significant way. Brucker’s adaptation and Wedekind’s original drama are unified in their belief in the existence of an acultural corruptible sexual drive. Wedekind’s representations of sadism, masochism, sexual shame and suicide, are in my estimation similar in character to the “Gewaltexzessen, Liebesehnsucht, Leistungsdruck, Coolness und Autoaggression” in the Brucker. A truly radical modernization would take Wedekind’s emphasis on sexual perversity and translate it into benign sexual diversity.

Similarly, the 2006 Broadway musical adaptation *Spring Awakening* maintains the hierarchy of sexual value in the original drama. The musical has enjoyed enormous popularity. It received 11 Tony nominations in 2007 and was awarded the distinction of best musical.²² Daytime television mogul Oprah has recommended it to her audience.²³ Although it makes critical alterations to the original drama, nineteenth-century presumptions of sexual pathology still shape the Broadway musical’s representation of sexual variation. It nearly abandons the original drama’s understanding of homosexuality as the byproduct of social prohibition. But in an era ostensibly more sexually “liberated” than the *Kaiserzeit*, the musical parades Wedekind’s lurid depiction of sadomasochism as relevant to our current historical moment. This represents one of the most dangerous moves the Broadway musical and its large fan base could make: the imposition of a heteronormative imperative in a drama that ostensibly calls for sexual emancipation

²² Campbell Robertson, “‘Spring Awakening’ Gets 11 Tony Nominations,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2007, Arts section, Midwest edition.

²³ A feature recommending the Broadway musical to its readership appeared in the August 2008 issue of *O Magazine*.

III. Representing male homosexualities

Frühlings Erwachen's understanding of male homosexuality is characterized by an ambivalence that has much in common with Krafft-Ebing and Freud. While there is little explicit evidence confirming Wedekind's connection to Krafft-Ebing, and while Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was first published nearly a decade and a half after *Frühlings Erwachen*, the three writers have features of thought in common that emerged from the same epistemological horizon. For some time now, historians of sexuality have been interested in the question of whether the work of a particular thinker had stigmatizing or emancipatory effects for sex deviates.²⁴ In the cases of Wedekind, Krafft-Ebing, and Freud, there is no simple answer. At some points, their bodies of work revealed the arbitrary character of the "normal" constitution of the sexual instinct. At others, they promoted the understanding of categories of sexual deviance as either temporary or pathological.

This ambiguity is accompanied by a complex set of effects. While Wedekind did not promote the development of a concept of homosexuality as one basic, legitimate form of human relations, his drama nevertheless contributed to the formation of an inchoate social consciousness about homosexuality. As Foucault argued, this led to a "reverse" discourse in which sex deviates became aware of their desires, learned to speak on their own behalves, and formed gay and lesbian subcultures that could agitate for civil equality.²⁵

²⁴ Harry Oosterhuis, "Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 'Step-Children of Nature': Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Homosexual Identity," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997).

²⁵ *HoS*, 101.

Although *Frühlings Erwachen* may have contributed in the long run to the formation of a gay identity, the drama itself tended to understand male homosexuality as a temporary behavior. This is similar to Krafft-Ebing's concept in *Psychopathia Sexualis* of homosexual "Perversität" as a deviant behavior caused by sexual repression and masturbation.

A comparison of the original drama to the Broadway musical is expressive of a larger cultural shift in the conceptualization of homosexuality from acts to identities. Whereas homosexuality is understood in the original drama as a temporary aberration of childhood, the Broadway musical adopts the now common notion of homosexuality as a durable trait constitutive of individual identity. Still, the Broadway musical's representation of male homosexuality remains heteronormative. Compared to the depiction of Melchior and Wendla in the throes of heterosexual orgasm, the restrained gay kiss maintains decorum for a mainstream audience that is uncomfortable with stigmatized sex practices.

In its penultimate scene, *Frühlings Erwachen* lends evidence to the understanding of male homosexuality as having been brought about by sexual repression in society. Peter Jelavich interprets Hänschen and Ernst's kiss as a parody of the social structures that give rise to homosexuality in the first place. "In typically Wedekindian fashion, the combination of idyllic atmosphere (vineyard, setting sun, ringing church bells) and homosexuality is intended both to shock the middle-class audience and to unmask its hypocrisy. After all, homosexuality is a rather logical outcome of a social system that segregates the sexes during youth."²⁶ If this kind of satire unmasks the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality, it also frames homosexuality as a derivative side effect of a particular

²⁶ Jelavich, op. cit., 94.

social order. Jelavich's impression is strengthened by Hänschen's cryptic remarks at the end of the scene.

Ernst: Uns schlottert sie noch um die Glieder. – Ich wäre nicht ruhig geworden, wenn ich dich nicht getroffen hätte. – Ich liebe dich, Hänschen, wie ich nie eine Seele geliebt habe...

Hänschen: Lass uns nicht traurig sein! – Wenn wir in dreißig Jahren zurückdenken, spotten wir ja vielleicht! – Und jetzt ist alles so schön! Die Berge glühen; die Trauben hängen uns in den Mund und der Abendwind streicht an den Felsen hin wie ein spielendes Schmeichelkätzchen...²⁷

Although the scene elicits sympathy for Hänschen and Ernst's love, Hänschen's comment, "Wenn wir in dreißig Jahren zurückdenken, spotten wir ja vielleicht!" suggests it could be an ephemeral, adolescent inclination waiting to be outgrown.

The drama's representation of homosexuality is indebted to the contemporaneous sexological literature. The psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing facilitated a substantial discussion about homosexuality in his volume *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which enjoyed twelve subsequent editions after its first publication in 1886. The book was originally published in Latin in order to restrict access to doctors and lawyers. Krafft-Ebing's nomenclature refers to homosexuality as the "konträre Sexualempfindung," a coinage of psychiatrist Carl Westphal in 1870.

Psychopathia Sexualis was ambivalent about whether to conceive of male homoeroticism as temporary or durable. Therefore, it developed a language to describe both phenomena. Whereas the term the term "Perversität" described homosexuality as a

²⁷ Frank Wedekind, *Frühlings Erwachen: Eine Kindertragödie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 73. Hereafter abbreviated as *FE*.

behavior, “Perversion” or the “konträre Sexualempfindung” designated it as an identity. *Frühlings Erwachen*’s presentation of homosexuality takes after Krafft-Ebing’s description of homosexual “Perversität” in a section titled “Die homosexuale Empfindung als erworbene Erscheinung bei beiden Geschlechtern.”

Das Entscheidende ist hier der Nachweis der perversen Empfindung gegenüber dem eigenen Geschlechte, nicht die Konstatierung geschlechtlicher Akte an demselben. Diese zwei Phänomene dürfen nicht miteinander verwechselt, Perversität darf nicht für Perversionen gehalten werden.

Sehr oft kommen perverse sexuelle Akte zur Beobachtung, ohne dass ihnen Perversion zugrunde läge. Dies gilt ganz besonders für sexuelle Handlungen unter Personen desselben Geschlechtes, namentlich hinsichtlich Päderastie. Hier ist nicht notwendig Parasthesia Sexualis im Spiel, sondern oft Hyperästhesie, bei physisch oder psychisch unmöglicher naturgemäßer Geschlechtsbefriedigung.

So finden wir homosexuellen Verkehr bei impotent gewordenen Masturbanten oder Wollüstlingen oder, faute de mieux, bei sinnlichen Weibern und Männern in Gefängnissen, Schiffen, Kasernen, Bagnos, Pensionaten, u. s. w.²⁸

Krafft-Ebing’s assertion that masturbation could lead to sexual degeneracy is important for the interpretation of *Frühlings Erwachen*. This notion was not of Krafft-Ebing’s invention. In nineteenth-century Western Europe and America, the dominant sex ideology viewed semen as a precious life-giving substance that was central to the energy

²⁸ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der konträren Sexualempfindung. Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juristen*, ed. Dr. Alfred Fuchs. Dreizehnte, vermehrte Auflage (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1907), 221. Krafft-Ebing’s use of the term “Päderastie” does not refer to Hellenistic pederasty between adult men and pre-pubescent boys, but rather seems to be a synonym for male homoeroticism without regard to age difference. For example, on page 107 he writes, “Zwischen Masochismus und einfachem reflektorischem Flagellantismus besteht ein analoges Verhältnis wie etwa zwischen konträrer Sexualempfindung und erworbener Päderastie.”

and productivity of the man. As Ben Barker-Bensfield argues in his survey of early American and Western European sexology, it was generally believed that the discharge of sperm occurred at the expense of other nonsexual energies. In this way, masturbation came to be viewed as threat to the productivity of the nineteenth-century Western man, whose identity was measured increasingly by sex and money.²⁹ The "spermatic economy" was predicated upon the then-popular Lamarckian evolution theory of the heritability of acquired characteristics. This way of thinking causally linked behaviors like masturbation to the development of more permanent sex perversions like homosexuality, which could in turn be transmitted to offspring.

Krafft-Ebing's foundation in asylum psychiatry informed the connection he later posited between masturbation (or "onanism" in his vocabulary) and other forms of sexual degeneracy.³⁰ As Harry Oosterhuis notes, "[Krafft-Ebing's] interest in the broader aspects of sexual deviance emerged from experience in asylum psychiatry, which viewed disorders such as masturbation as symptoms of preexisting mental diseases, and he was even more influenced by the preoccupation of forensic medicine with criminal acts such as sodomy."³¹

Frühlings Erwachen reproduces the constellation formed by the asylum, masturbation, and homosexuality in order to challenge the understanding of sexual deviance as individual pathology. Having been sent to an asylum by his parents, Melchior argues that his fellow inmates are driven to commit obscene acts out of the desperation to which they have been condemned by their social environments.

²⁹ Ben Barker-Bensfield, "The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth-Century View of Sexuality," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 341.

³⁰ Barker-Bensfield, *op. cit.*, 340.

³¹ Oosterhuis, *op. cit.*, 70.

Ruprecht: Machst du nicht mit, Melchior?

Melchior: Nein, ich danke.

Helmut: Der Joseph!

Gaston: Er kann nicht mehr. Er ist zur Rekreation hier.

Melchior: (*für sich*). Es ist nicht klug, dass ich mich separiere. Alles hält mich im Auge. Ich muss mitmachen – oder die Kreatur geht zum Teufel. - - Die Gefangenschaft macht sie zu Selbstmördern.³²

In this scene, captivity and social leprosy create a sense of hopelessness that gives rise to the drastic act of mutual homoerotic masturbation. With this gesture, Wedekind unmasks the hypocrisy of a society that simultaneously creates this desperation and pathologizes youth for their resultant sexually degenerate behavior. Still, Wedekind's critique does not draw a clear distinction between stigma and despair, on the one hand, and masturbation, on the other. This impedes the development of an understanding of masturbation that does not make reference to pathology and repression.

Masturbation is also linked to sexual deviance in an earlier scene that shows Hänschen masturbating to a series of female classical nudes obtained from his father's study. The extended stream-of-consciousness monologue is intended to satirize a bourgeois middle class that simultaneously discourages sexual expression in children and reproduces classical images for erotic consumption.

Aber du saugst mir das Mark aus den Knochen, du krümmst mir den Rücken, du raubst meinen jungen Augen den letzten Glanz. – Du bist mir zu anspruchsvoll in deiner unmenschlichen Bescheidenheit, zu aufreibend mit deinen unbeweglichen Gliedmaßen! [...] Mädchen, Mädchen, warum presst du deine Knie zusammen? –

³² FE, 66.

warum auch jetzt noch? – angesichts der unerforschlichen Ewigkeit?? – Eine Zuckung, und ich gebe dich frei! – Eine weibliche Regung, ein Zeichen von Lüsternheit, von Sympathie, Mädchen! – ich will dich in Gold rahmen lassen, dich über meinem Bett aufhängen! – Ahnst du denn nicht, dass nur deine Keuschheit meine Ausschweifungen gebiert?³³

Wedekind's satire associates masturbation with loss of energy, despair, and lack of available sexual outlet. This capitulates to popular attitudes about masturbation in the contemporaneous sexological literature. In addition, Hänschen's plea for a "weibliche Regung, ein Zeichen von Lüsternheit, von Sympathie" evokes Krafft-Ebing's "impotent gewordener Masturbant" to whom heterosexual expression has been made unavailable. Arguably, this forecasts Hänschen's pursuit, "faute de mieux," of a more viable homosexual encounter ten scenes later.

In the two scenes involving masturbation, Wedekind tends to view sexual impulses as a dangerous force requiring the intervention of rational sexual information. In a similar vein, he condemns "obscene" theatrical productions as a devaluation of sexuality in a slim essay titled "Über Erotik," which functions as a kind of theoretical compliment to the pedagogical tendencies of *Frühlings Erwachen*.

Die Zote, die heute bei uns in Hoftheatern und Tingeltangeln, von keinem Staatsanwalt und keinem Zensor behindert, täglich ihre gellenden, dröhnenden Triumphe feiert. Was ist eine Zote? Zote ist eine Verächtlichmachung, eine Entwürdigung, eine Beschimpfung der Sexualität. Am beliebtesten ist sie bei denjenigen Menschen, die blinde Sklaven ihrer Triebe sind, denen, während sie

³³ FE, 38-9.

sich einer Umarmung überlassen, die Sinne schwinden oder deren Denkvermögen dabei aussetzt.³⁴

In criticizing the “Hoftheatern und Tingeltangeln” that reify hedonistic enslavement to sexual impulses, Wedekind by contrast attributes to his own discourse a praiseworthy pedagogical function. This simultaneously generates images of sexual deviance as irrational, dangerous, and devoid of moral complexity, on the one hand, and purports to edify its audience about these pernicious forces, on the other.

In this way, Wedekind’s brand of sexual pedagogy assumes the role of designating certain sex practices as healthy while marginalizing others as unhealthy. Because he tends to view heterosexuality as normal, Wedekind’s critique of gender inequality is more refined than his representation of deviant sexual expression. For example, patriarchal hegemony is the subject under consideration in the heated argument between Herr and Frau Gabor about the fate of Melchior. Their son stands accused of raping and impregnating Wendla as well as furnishing Moritz, who later commits suicide as a result of sexual shame, with a document illustrating sexual intercourse. Herr Gabor asserts his dominance by saying, “Ich mache dir keinen Vorwurf, Fanny. Aber vertritt mir den Weg nicht, wenn ich dein und mein Unrecht am dem Jungen gutzumachen suche!”³⁵ Frau Gabor responds with a well-articulated feminist critique of hegemonic masculinity. “Hilf mir Gott, wie lässt sich dagegen aufkommen! – Man muss ein *Mann* sein, um so sprechen zu können! Man muss ein *Mann* sein, um sich so vom toten Buchstaben verblenden lassen zu können! Man muss ein *Mann* sein, um so blind das in die Augen Springende nicht zu sehn!”

³⁴ Frank Wedekind, “Über Erotik,” in *Erläuterungen und Dokumente: Frank Wedekind Frühlings Erwachen*, ed. Hans Wagner (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980), 199.

³⁵ *FE*, 63.

Wedekind acknowledged elsewhere the existence of female sexual pleasure, which, as George Chauncey notes, medical practitioners were loath to make visible in the nineteenth century. “The major current in Victorian sexual ideology declared that women were passionless and asexual, the passive objects of male sexual desire. In the 1880s and nineties, as Havelock Ellis noted in 1903, this belief was so deeply rooted a tendency in medical thought that many sexologists considered a woman’s expression of sexual desire even in her romantic life to be pathological.”³⁶ In a radical break with this convention, Wedekind argues in “Über Erotik” that the shame associated with sex obstructs productive discussions about issues of heterosexual experience. “Als solche Empfindungsgebiete erwähne ich nur ganz beispielsweise: Die körperlichen Reize des Weibes. Die körperliche Gesundheit des Mannes.”³⁷ It is to Wedekind’s credit that he makes visible repressed female heterosexual experience, but he does not accord the same legitimate status to other stigmatized sex practices.

The social hierarchy of sexual value in Wedekind and Krafft-Ebing is expressive of an entire nascent conceptual space that developed in sexological discourse in the nineteenth century. Arnold Davidson powerfully argues that around 1870 a new psychiatric “style of reasoning” about diseases emerged that made a particular set of “statements,” in the Foucauldian sense, possible in discussions about sexuality. This historically new discursive practice was organized around a particular set of rules about what could and could not be said about sexuality and deviance.

³⁶ George Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female ‘Deviance,’” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 89.

³⁷ Wedekind, “Über Erotik,” op. cit., 194.

In order for the concept of “deviance” to be coherent, the many sex perversions codified in the nineteenth century became unified according to the organizing principle of the “normal” sexual instinct. “Without knowing the normal function of the instinct, everything and nothing could count as a functional disturbance. There would be no principled criterion to include or exclude any behavior from the disease category of perversion. So one must first believe that there is a natural function of the sexual instinct and then believe that this function is quite determinate.”³⁸ This unifying principle was accepted with a remarkably uncontested unanimity at this time within sexual science, including Krafft-Ebing, the Berlin physician Albert Moll, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, and, I submit, Frank Wedekind.

The unifying principle of the normal sexual instinct remained virtually uncontested until Freud challenged it in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Throughout his text, Freud subjects the valuations attributed to sex practices, previously conceived of as “natural,” to rigorous processes of denaturalization. Even sexual use of the mucous membrane of the lips and mouths of two persons (kissing) was, for Freud, strictly speaking a perversion, since, “the parts of the body involved do not form part of the sexual apparatus but constitute the entrance to the digestive tract.”³⁹ In revealing the designations “normal” and “abnormal” to be arbitrary in character, Freud dealt a conceptually devastating blow to nineteenth-century psychopathology.

Despite its denormalizing tendencies, the *Three Essays* maintains elsewhere a focus on the “normal constitution” of the sexual instinct. For example, in the third essay titled “The Transformations of Puberty,” Freud includes a small section titled “Prevention

³⁸ Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 74.

³⁹ *TE*, 17.

of Inversion,” in which he states, “One of the tasks implicit in object-choice is that it should find its way to the opposite sex. This, as we know, is not accomplished without a certain amount of fumbling. Often enough the first impulses after puberty go astray, though without any permanent harm resulting.”⁴⁰ Reading the *Three Essays* is like reading the Bible – because incoherent, it entertains a range of ideological viewpoints. This has enabled thinkers in the wake of Freud to interpret his work in terms of the popular psychopathological categories “normality” and “abnormality.”

The profound ambivalence towards sexual deviance that marks Freud’s text is symptomatic of Krafft-Ebing and Wedekind as well. Just as Freud cannot be classified squarely as emancipatory for sex perverts, neither does Krafft-Ebing simply fall under the rubric of stigmatizing. In a recent study that radically alters conventional understandings of Krafft-Ebing’s body of work, Harry Oosterhuis argues that sex perverts were able to recognize themselves in the case histories contained in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, alerting them to the fact that they were not isolated in their aberrant desires. This in turn laid the groundwork for the subsequent formation of gay and lesbian communities, particularly in large cities like Berlin.⁴¹

The emphasis on medical labeling in the creation of ‘deviants,’ such as homosexuals, presents a social-deterministic model in which individuals are pawns of social forces with no will of their own. To explain how sexual ‘perversion’ in general and homosexuality in particular were constructed, it is necessary to enter the subjective world of individuals who read Krafft-Ebing’s work and responded to

⁴⁰ *TE*, 95.

⁴¹ Early sexologist and gay rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld vividly describes community life in nascent gay and lesbian communities in fin-de-siècle Berlin. See Magnus Hirschfeld, “Community Life and Meeting Places of Homosexual Men and Women,” in *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 776-803.

it, and to take their intentions, purposes, and meanings seriously on their own terms.⁴²

Oosterhuis' project engages with previously neglected letters and diary entries addressed to Krafft-Ebing from sex perverts familiar with his work, which were obtained from the Krafft-Ebing *Nachlass*. These provide clear evidence suggesting some individuals, in reading *Psychopathia Sexualis*, were relieved of their sense of isolation in their aberrant desires.⁴³

These interactions led Krafft-Ebing to retract his theory of degeneration towards the end of his life. Frank Sulloway contextualizes this change in Krafft-Ebing's thinking in terms of the many other sexologists who similarly shifted away from the presumption sexual pathology. "As long as sexuality had been looked upon as a homogenous impulse, a congenital conception of sexual pathology had remained synonymous with hereditary degeneration to an atavistic condition. But when the theories of Clevenger, Kiernan, Chevalier, and others began to separate the healthy sexual instinct into bisexual and other evolutionary components, it finally became possible to recognize sexual perversion as arising from *developmental* disturbances in these normal, component impulses."⁴⁴

⁴² Oosterhuis, op. cit., 70.

⁴³ Incidentally, fiction contemporaneous with Krafft-Ebing corroborates Oosterhuis' thesis. In his novel *Fenny Skaller: Ein Leben der namenlosen Liebe* (1905), Scottish-German poet John Henry Mackay, who published under the alias Sagitta, gives a semiautobiographical account of a forty-something year-old poet whose sexual desires rest exclusively with 14-17 year-old boys. At one point in the story, Fenny Skaller visits a bookstore and purchases an unnamed gold-bound book. Upon reading the text, Skaller experiences the following epiphany:

Er *beginnt* zu begreifen.
Er weiß noch Nichts.
Aber er weiß jetzt Eines:
Es gibt Andere gleich ihm!

In an endnote to this passage, the editor identifies the book as Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

⁴⁴ Sulloway, op. cit., 295-96.

Revising his older degeneration theory, Krafft-Ebing adopted the view of the “konträre Sexualempfindung” as a benign congenital anomaly.

This shift in Krafft-Ebing’s thought is one instance of a larger sea change in which homosexuality has come to be seen as constitutive of individual identity. In an essay that examines the formation of homosexuality as an identity in the late nineteenth century, George Chauncey asserts that a “complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness” began to produce durable gay identities based on sexual behavior.⁴⁵ “...the turn of the century witnessed the development not only of a new explanation of homosexual behavior but also – and more centrally – of the very concept of homosexual desire as a discrete sexual phenomenon.” “The nineteenth-century homosexual,” Foucault agrees in this famous passage, “became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.”⁴⁶

Today, the notion of a gay identity is firmly embedded in Western cultures. A significant liberal constituency in America has come to view homosexuality as “one basic way of relating to people.”⁴⁷ This accounts for the Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*’s subtle but important alteration to the original drama’s representation of male homosexuality. The musical diminishes the original Wedekindian juxtaposition of homosexuality as an aberrant childhood proclivity, on the one hand, with heterosexuality as a desirable end goal for sexual maturity, on the other. On multiple occasions it makes proud reference to male same-sex desire. In the song “The Bitch of Living,” Hänchen

⁴⁵ Chauncey, op. cit., 88.

⁴⁶ *HoS*, 43.

⁴⁷ Revolutionary Union, “On Homosexuality: A Stalino-Leninist Guide to Love and Sex” (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Revolutionary Union, 1975), 1. This satirical pamphlet was issued during Gay Liberation to counter the impression that socialist political ideologies are more conducive to sexual equality than capitalism.

and Ernst sing, “See, there’s showering in gym class/Bobby Maler he’s the best/Looks so nasty in those khakis/God, my whole life’s like some test.”⁴⁸ Then in the kiss the characters later share, the suggestion that their homoerotic inclinations might fade in adulthood is omitted.

The shift from acts to identities in the Broadway musical does not manage to completely shake homosexuality’s status as deviant. Queer theorists like David Halperin and Michael Warner have criticized popular images of homosexuality for their normalizing and sterilizing effects.⁴⁹ Warner argues that the modern gay rights movement has encouraged the erasure from public consciousness the sexual ethics developed in queer subcultures during Gay Liberation. Queer thought at the time of the Stonewall riots of 1969 rested on principles of the diversity of sexual and intimate relations, the identification of “respectability” and “decorum” as a mechanism that controls sex, and distrust of the State as an unwanted regulating force.⁵⁰ In contrast, gay rights organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and television programs like *Will & Grace* present images of gay subjectivity that ingratiate themselves with the comfort level of the general public, glossing over the realities of queer sex and unconventional character of queer family systems.

The Broadway musical’s representation of homosexuality is similarly normative. In comparison to Melchior and Wendla, who are depicted in almost full nudity in the

⁴⁸ These lyrics were composed by novelist and lyricist Steven Sater and were obtained from the liner notes to the soundtrack of the Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*, released on the Decca Broadway label in December 2006.

⁴⁹ Halperin 2007 makes a call for open and reflective dialogue on stigmatized gay male sex practices in spite of the all-too-real need to cater to the decorum of the national gay rights debate. In order to nurture a culture of safer sex practices, he argues, gay men must be able to talk about their desires without running the risk of being stigmatized or psychologized. See David Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: an essay on sex, risk, and subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 88-89.

throes of pubescent heterosexual ecstasy, Hänschen and Ernst's kiss is passionate but distinctly restrained. Anal sex, of course, is unpalatable to mainstream decorum and makes no appearance at all. In this way, gay male sex practices acquire an abject, subaltern status. While *Spring Awakening* is certainly preferable to the more pernicious images of homosexuality proliferating in popular culture, it nevertheless maintains a hierarchy of sexual expression regulated according to a perceived set of extant norms.

Frühlings Erwachen is expressive of popular assumptions about male homosexuality in the contemporaneous sexological literature. Elements of both Krafft-Ebing and Freud's thinking help to explain Wedekind's. Like early Krafft-Ebing's concept of *Perversität*, Hänschen's homosexual leanings are figured as having been compounded by masturbation or a lack of outlet for heterosexual expression. Similar to Freud, Wedekind destigmatizes homosexuality and depicts it as a potentially temporary adolescent stage. This relies on the teleological assumption that adolescents, given the opportunity, may later mature into heterosexual adults. Despite these limitations, the drama contributed to an incipient social consciousness about homosexual subjectivity. Like *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the drama could have facilitated early gay and lesbian subculture formation in cities like Berlin at the turn of the twentieth century. Expressive of a sea change in popular attitudes about homosexuality, more than a century later the Broadway musical *Spring Awakening* omits the original drama's understanding of homosexuality as a temporary stage and replaces it with the concept of a durable trait constitutive of individual identity.

IV. Representing sadomasochisms

Some males with Sexual Masochism also have Fetishism, Transvestic Fetishism, or Sexual Sadism. Masochistic sexual fantasies are likely to have been present in childhood. The age at which masochistic activities with partners first begins [*sic*] is variable, but is commonly by early adulthood. Sexual Masochism is usually chronic, and the person tends to repeat the same masochistic act. Some individuals with Sexual Masochism may engage in masochistic acts for many years without increasing the potential injuriousness of their acts. Others, however, increase the severity of the masochistic acts over time or during periods of stress, which may eventually result in injury or even death.⁵¹

American Psychiatric Association

The valuations attributed to sadomasochism in *Frühlings Erwachen* are similarly inscribed within a system of social stratification based on sexual behavior.⁵² Similar to Krafft-Ebing's original codifications in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the drama understands masochism as a magnified version of natural female submissiveness, counterpart to sadism as intensified male aggression. The reverberation of Krafft-Ebing's concept in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* has contributed to the development of the popular stereotype of SM as one of psychotic abusers and sick individuals seeking their own destruction. The Broadway musical and otherwise perspicacious secondary literature reiterate the original drama's association of sadomasochism with lack of self-control, exploitation, and death. Because this impression is hegemonic, I will argue, more sophisticated understandings of sadomasochism from thinkers like Havelock Ellis have been unfairly ignored.

The play's action lends evidence to suggest Wendla's masochism and Melchior's sadism are natural tendencies for self-destructiveness exacerbated by their social environments. This impression emerges at least three times. The first instance occurs in a conversation between Wendla and her schoolmates Martha and Thea, in which Wendla takes an interest in Martha's description of the physical abuse she endures from her

⁵¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 573.

⁵² Rubin, "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990," op. cit., 494.

parents. Wendla expresses empathy and the desire to martyr herself for Martha on multiple occasions, for example when she says, “Ich möchte ganz gern mal für dich in deinem Sack schlafen.”⁵³ Later in a conversation with Melchior, what first appeared to be altruism is revealed as an encryption for the desire to experience masochistic sexual pleasure.

Wendla: Ich würde erst recht hingehen. – Es würde mir noch viel mehr Freude bereiten, ihnen helfen zu können.

Melchior: Du gehst also um deiner Freude willen zu den armen Leuten?

Wendla: Ich gehe zu ihnen, weil sie arm sind.

Melchior: Aber wenn es dir keine Freude wäre, würdest du nicht gehen?

Wendla: Kann ich denn dafür, dass es mir Freude macht?⁵⁴

The interpretation of this dialogue as a code for masochistic sexual pleasure reveals Wendla’s desire to be, like charity, essentially a bourgeois empathy for the less fortunate. Elsewhere, her masochistic tendencies are portrayed as having arisen out of brutal images and folk ideas that proliferate in culture. After Wendla describes a dream that resembles Martha’s description of the beatings she receives from her parents, Melchior responds, “Das hast du den albernen Kindergeschichten zu danken. Glaub’ mir so brutale Menschen existieren nicht mehr.”⁵⁵ The hypocrisy of Melchior’s statement is subsequently revealed when he submits to Wendla’s request to be beaten herself, then, horrified by his own actions, runs off into the woods.

Melchior and Wendla’s interaction reflects the characters’ lack of a language of critical inquiry with which to grapple with their sexual desires, condemning them to a

⁵³ *FE*, 17.

⁵⁴ *FE*, 24.

⁵⁵ *FE*, 25.

loss of control over their sex. In “Über Erotik,” Wedekind ascribes destructive sexual aberrance in children to lack of mental freedom. Superimposing a Kantian Enlightenment framework onto the realm of sex and sexuality, he says,

Das Haus, die Familie [...] hat die heranwachsende Jugend vor allem darüber aufzuklären, dass es in der Natur überhaupt gar keine unanständigen Vorgänge gibt, sondern nur nützliche und schädliche, vernünftige und unvernünftige. Dass es in der Natur aber unanständige Menschen gibt, die über diese Vorgänge nicht anständig reden, oder die sich bei diesen Vorgängen nicht anständig benehmen können. Warum? Weil es ihnen an Bildung, an geistiger Freiheit fehlt.⁵⁶

Wendla’s lack of mental freedom arises out of her mother’s inability to furnish her with a vocabulary with which to talk about sex. Frau Bergmann, who inherited this insufficient vocabulary from *her* mother, consigns all mention of sexual matters, like the treatment of homosexuality in Hitchcock’s *Rope*, “exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied.”⁵⁷

For example, Frau Bergmann circumvents explaining the “facts of life” underpinning the pregnancy of Wendla’s sister Ina by telling her, “Denk dir, Wendla, diese Nacht war der Storch bei ihr und hat ihr einen kleinen Jungen gebracht.”⁵⁸ Because the stork myth is insufficiently expressive of the physical realities of sex, Wendla is unaware of the possibility of pregnancy when Melchior later rapes her in a hayloft, which in turn condemns her to die at the hands of the back-alley abortion arranged for by her mother. Because Wendla was made to believe that, “man nur küsst, wenn man sich liebt,” she remains unaware of the potential reproductive consequences of intercourse (40). It is

⁵⁶ Wedekind, “Über Erotik,” op. cit., 194.

⁵⁷ D.A. Miller, “Anal *Rope*,” *Representations* 32, (Autumn, 1990): 119.

⁵⁸ *FE*, 34.

therefore highly ironic that subsequently, suddenly, Frau Bergmann ascribes sexual agency to her daughter: “Großer, gewaltiger Gott -, das ist’s ja, dass du nicht verheiratet bist! Das ist ja das Fürchterliche! – Wendla, Wendla, Wendla, was hast du getan!!” (70) Censure of Wendla’s sexual maladaptation even remains intact after her death: her gravestone reads, “gestorben an der Bleichsucht” (75). No clear distinction is drawn between sadomasochism, on the one hand, and this horrific series of events, on the other.

The codification of “sadism” and “masochism” as discrete sexual proclivities is attributed to Krafft-Ebing. “Krafft-Ebing coined the terms ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). The word ‘sadism’ was derived from the work of the French writer Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) and ‘masochism’ from the Austrian novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), both of whom wrote about the role of pain in their own sexual practices and fantasies. Prior to Krafft-Ebing, sadomasochistic activity was seen as a medical curiosity by physicians, but one which did not require their attention. As a result of Krafft-Ebing’s influence, the categories ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ became available as diagnoses of sexual pathology.”⁵⁹

As with homosexuality, Wedekind’s characterization of sadomasochism draws on features Krafft-Ebing’s thought. Krafft-Ebing’s clinical description in *Psychopathia Sexualis* bears quoting at some length.

Das Gegenstück des Sadismus ist der Masochismus. Während jener Schmerzen zufügen und Gewalt anwenden will, geht dieser darauf aus, Schmerzen zu leiden und sich der Gewalt unterworfen zu fühlen.

⁵⁹ Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser, “The Social Constituents of Sadomasochism,” *Social Problems* 31(4) (1984): 379.

Unter Masochismus verstehe ich eine eigentümliche Perversion der psychischen Vita sexualis, welche darin besteht, dass das von derselben ergriffene Individuum in seinem geschlechtlichen Fühlen und denken von der Vorstellung beherrscht wird, dem Willen einer Person des anderen Geschlechtes vollkommen und unbedingt unterworfen zu sein, von dieser Person herrisch behandelt, gedemütigt und selbst misshandelt zu werden. Diese Vorstellung wird mit Wollust betont; der davon Ergriffene schwelgt in Phantasien, in welchen er sich Situationen dieser Art ausmalt; er trachtet oft nach einer Verwirklichung derselben und wird durch diese Perversion seines Geschlechtstriebes nicht selten für die normalen Reize des anderen Geschlechtes mehr oder weniger unempfindlich, zu einer normalen Vita sexualis unfähig – psychisch impotent.⁶⁰

In the first case history contained in a section titled “Aufsuchen von Misshandlungen und Demütigungen zum Zweck sexueller Befriedigung,” Krafft-Ebing offers both hereditary and psychological explanations for the patient’s degeneracy, a reiteration of the Lamarckian evolutionist viewpoint that characterizes his discussion of homosexual perversity as well. “Vater war nervös und stark tabisch, Vaters Schwester war irrsinnig. Mehrere Verwandte sind hochgradig nervös und sonderbare Leute. Pat erweist sich bei näherer Untersuchung als sexual, spinal, und zerebral asthenisch. [...] Die naheliegende Frage nach Missbrauch der Genitalorgane wird im Sinne der seit der Jugend geübten Masturbation beantwortet.”⁶¹ Krafft-Ebing understands sadomasochism to be exclusively heteroerotic and as a corruption of an ostensibly normal sexual drive. This frustrates

⁶⁰ Krafft-Ebing, op. cit., 99-100.

⁶¹ Krafft-Ebing, op. cit., 102.

alternative ways of thinking about sadomasochism without making reference to illness, evolutionary degeneration, social abnormality, or physical and emotional trauma.

In the above case history, Krafft-Ebing made reference to the then popular theory of a neurological illness known as neurasthenia, which is tantamount to nervous exhaustion, to support his claims. The American neurologist George Miller Beard developed an extensive literature dedicated to the theorization of sexual neurasthenia. In an essay first published in 1884, he outlined extremely imprecise symptoms of the illness. “Neurasthenia is a chronic, functional disease of the nervous system, the basis of which is impoverishment of nervous force; deficiency of reserve, with liability to quick exhaustion, and a necessity for frequent supplies of force; hence the lack of inhibitory or controlling powers, physical and mental...”⁶² Neurasthenia played a substantial role in explaining sexual degeneracy in Krafft-Ebing’s discourse. Indeed, in the 1907 edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, he employed the medical category at least thirty times.

The association of sexual degeneracy with neurasthenia is palpable in *Frühlings Erwachen*’s characterization of sadomasochism. Wendla and Melchior’s lack of control over their sexual behavior is expressive of the “lack of inhibitory or controlling powers” characteristic of the illness. The scene in which Melchior rapes Wendla draws on the understanding of sadomasochism as a magnified manifestation of natural male aggressiveness and female submissiveness. Wedekind frames the rape as a social pathological problem of a missing vocabulary with which to harness sexual urges.

Melchior: Das Heu duftet so herrlich. - Der Himmel draußen muss schwarz wie ein

Bahrtuch sein. - Ich sehe nur noch den leuchtenden Mohn an deiner Brust - und

⁶² George M. Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia [Nervous Exhaustion]: Its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms and Treatment: with a chapter on diet for the nervous*, ed. A.D. Rockwell (New York: E.B. Treat & Company, 1905), 36.

dein Herz hör' ich schlagen -

Wendla: - - Nicht küssen, Melchior! - Nicht küssen!

Melchior: - Dein Herz - hör' ich schlagen -

Wendla: - Man liebt sich - wenn man küsst - - - - - Nicht, nicht! - - -

Melchior: O glaub mir, es gibt keine Liebe! Alles Eigennutz, alles Egoismus! - Ich
 liebe dich so wenig, wie du mich liebst.

Wendla: - Nicht! - - - Nicht, Melchior! - -

Melchior: - - - Wendla!

Wendla: O Melchior! - - - - - nicht - - nicht - -⁶³

Here emerges an ambivalence about sadomasochism that is similar to Wedekind's discussion of homosexuality. As Gordon Birrell argues, the scene does not overtly stigmatize sadomasochistic sex. "Taken out of context, Melchior's assault on Wendla may seem deplorable, but Wendla herself apparently has no real objection to the 'rape,' beyond her confusion as to whether it represents the kind of love that can result in a baby. Wedekind suggests on the contrary that sexual responses cannot be classified as normal or abnormal, acceptable or unacceptable, outside of the system of social norms."⁶⁴ While Birrell's analysis is technically accurate, neither does this scene draw a clear distinction between sadomasochism, on the one hand, and rape, loss of self-control, and in Wendla's case, death, on the other. As will soon become clear, this ambivalence has impeded the development of a concept of benign sexual variation in both the Broadway musical and the secondary literature to *Frühlings Erwachen*.

⁶³ *FE*, 40-41.

⁶⁴ Birrell, *op. cit.*, 121.

Freud drew extensively on Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* for his discussion about sadomasochism in the *Three Essays*. Freud's codification has had a substantial influence on the popular understanding of SM ever since. Sometimes he referred to sadomasochism by the alias "algolagnia," a coinage of nineteenth-century German doctor Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. "As regards active algolagnia, sadism, the roots are easy to detect in the normal. The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of *aggressiveness* – a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing."⁶⁵ Because he considered the contrast between activity and passivity to be among the universal characteristics of sexual life, Freud conceptualized sadism and masochism as simply accentuated versions of the normal heterosexual instinct. "The history of human civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct; but nothing has been done towards explaining the connection, apart from laying emphasis on the aggressive factor in the libido" (25).

The understanding of sadomasochism developed by Krafft-Ebing and Freud was not the only image available to readers at the turn of the twentieth century. Other fin-de-siècle sexual scientists represented the sexual aberration in a far less monolithic fashion. British sexologist and social reformer Havelock Ellis was one of these. In his treatise on *Love and Pain*, he concluded that, "We have thus to recognize that sadism by no means involves any love of inflicting pain outside the sphere of sexual emotion, and is even compatible with a high degree of general tender-heartedness. We have also to recognize that even within the sexual sphere the sadist by no means wishes to exclude the victim's

⁶⁵ *TE*, 24.

pleasure, and may even regard that pleasure as essential to his own satisfaction.”⁶⁶

Remarkably, he asserts that sadomasochism is one way of attempting to access a subconscious universe of lucid feeling. “In algolagnia, as in music, it is not cruelty that is sought; it is the joy of being plunged along the waves of that great primitive ocean of emotions which underlies the variegated world of our everyday lives, and pain [...] is merely the channel by which that ocean is reached.”⁶⁷

Gayle Rubin has noted that more than most sexologists of his era, Havelock Ellis let his subjects speak for themselves. His careful, almost ethnographic attention to real erotic communities and their practices provided data that frequently contrasted with Krafft-Ebing’s and Freud’s. “If the pioneering work of Ellis and his other colleagues in sexology (such as Hirschfeld, Moll, and others) have been neglected, this is largely due to the long shadow cast by Freud and psychoanalysis. [...] Freud’s comments on sexual aberration were an intervention into a much larger sexological discussion. But while most of the scholars with whom Freud was in dialogue have been unfairly ignored, Freud’s pronouncements on issues of sexual variation became part of the hegemonic psychoanalytic canon.”⁶⁸ Similarly, the enormous popularity *Frühlings Erwachen* has enjoyed for over a century has promoted the dominant understanding of sadomasochism, while marginalizing the findings of sexologists like Ellis.

The Broadway musical *Spring Awakening* reiterates the Freudian conceptualization of sadism as a magnified manifestation of male aggression and masochism as the female desire to submit. In contrast to the original drama, the musical

⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume III: Analysis of the Sexual Impulse; Love and Pain; The Sexual Impulse in Women* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, [1903] 1920), 166.

⁶⁷ Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, op. cit., 185.

⁶⁸ Rubin, “The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990,” op. cit., 448-49.

emphasizes the pleasures associated with Wendla and Melchior's sadomasochistic tendencies. After she pursues him in the hayloft, Wendla begs Melchior to stop as he strips off her clothing and attempts to have intercourse. Gradually Wendla's plea for him to cease transforms into an urgent request to continue as she is overwhelmed by teenage sexual pleasure. "No" becomes "yes" and the first act ends with a spotlight highlighting the moment of penetration. In the process, sadism and masochism are employed as vectors of intensity that, toeing the line between pleasure and danger, fuel Wendla and Melchior's consensual heterosexual exhilaration.

The musical's representation of Wendla and Melchior's encounter as dangerously pleasurable still associates sadomasochism with ignorance, lack of self-control, and sexual repression. Wendla still becomes pregnant and dies from a back-alley abortion; Melchior is still exiled to an asylum. In failing to clearly disentangle sadomasochism from these events, the musical simultaneously stigmatizes SM as destructive and exploits its mechanisms to titillate the audience.

The dominant characterization of sadomasochism continues to frustrate productive discussion about the humanity and legitimate claims of stigmatized sex practices. Even the most clear-thinking contemporary critics reflect sexually essentialist features of thought when speaking about sadomasochism. For example, in the introduction to his new translation of *Frühlings Erwachen*, Jonathan Franzen indicts the Broadway musical for being a voyeuristic adult fantasy of teen sex. For Franzen, the musical's focus on innocent teen pleasure masks the original drama's carnivalesque satire of a society in which both old and young people are capable of committing violence against others. And yet Franzen's trenchant critique reinstatiates the original drama's

association of violence and cruelty with sadism, on the one hand, and the desire for self-destruction with masochism, on the other.

The only intelligible ways to judge the characters in *Spring Awakening* are comic and aesthetic, not moral. And so we're thrown back on Wedekind's insistence that his children's tragedy is, in fact, a comedy. Moritz, on the verge of blowing his brains out, resolves to think of whipped cream when he pulls the trigger. ("It's filling and it leaves behind a pleasant aftertaste.") Ilse tells Martha that she knows why Moritz shot himself ("Parallelepiped!") and refuses to give Martha the suicide gun ("I'm saving it as a souvenir"). [...] And just as the adult principles could not be unredeemably bad and still be funny, so the child principals [*sic*] could not be purely good. Moritz's self-pity and his obsession with suicide, Melchior's sadism and amorality, Wendla's masochism and almost vindictively willful ignorance, Hansy's cynical carnality: the cruelest blow that *Spring Awakening* delivers to contemporary pieties, the deep embarrassment that the Broadway musical seeks to camouflage with raunchier shames, is that Wedekind treats his child characters like fascinating little animals – flawed, adorable, dangerous, silly.⁶⁹

Franzen refers to the terms "sadism" and "masochism" in the singular form, as if these possessed a homogenous set of characteristics with a unified aim. He is correct in asserting, "how casually and thoroughly amoral the play's action is."⁷⁰ But to equate amorality and "cynical carnality," on the one hand, with sadism and masochism, on the

⁶⁹ Jonathan Franzen, "Authentic but Horrible: An Introduction to *Spring Awakening*," introduction to *Spring Awakening*, by Frank Wedekind, trans. Jonathan Franzen (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007), xiv-xvi.

⁷⁰ Franzen, *op. cit.*, xiii.

other, is to rely on a homogenized image of SM that has been processed and reprocessed within psychiatry for more than a century.

Many theorists uncritically homogenize sadomasochism. Rubin 1994 identifies an academic trend that analyzes sexual variance by combining a few privileged “theoretical” texts with literary or film criticism to produce statements about either the thing (e.g. “masochism”) or the population (e.g. “masochists”). For example, Gilles Deleuze’s 1971 essay on “masochism,” which calls upon precious few primary sources, refers to “sadism” and “masochism” as unitary entities, and was widely embraced as an authority on the phenomena.⁷¹ A more recent force of queer theorists has developed the unfortunate tendency of examining sadism and masochism in a similar way. For instance, consider the following passage taken from Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which was the feature of an MLA panel discussion following its release. Interpreting the character Scrooge in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* within a psychoanalytic framework, Edelman writes,

Scrooge, the self-denying miser – living alone, and in darkness, on gruel – extends to his neighbors, however unneighborly it no doubt makes him appear, the same self denying enjoyment to which he readily submits as well. In this he enacts the negativity both Freud and Lacan discerned in the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself; he unleashes, that is, *as the love of his neighbor*, the force of a primal masochism like that of the superego asserting its singular imperative,

⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and cruelty,” in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

‘Enjoy!’ [...] It expresses, that is, the will-to-enjoyment perversely obedient to the superego’s insatiable and masochistic demands.⁷²

Edelman is very intelligent and it is clear from his body of work that he is acquainted with practicing perverts. His book is very interesting. But his use of high “Theory” to discuss masochism is anecdotal at best.

The characterization of “algolagnia” developed by Krafft-Ebing and Freud has maintained a hegemonic status while the observations of thinkers like Havelock Ellis have been marginalized. In 1977 John Gagnon published a textbook called *Human Sexualities*, whose title undermined the notion of sexuality as a single entity with a unitary aim.⁷³ The plural form is now common in scholarly works like Vernon Rosario’s well-crafted anthology *Science and Homosexualities*.⁷⁴ But as Franzen and Edelman’s remarks make clear, the existence of heterogeneous sadomasochisms remains widely unregistered in academic and popular settings alike. The pernicious character of sadomasochism in Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Wedekind’s *Frühlings Erwachen* still carries purchase in contemporary productions like Broadway’s *Spring Awakening*. At the time of the publication of the original drama, an entire literature developed medical categories of pathology such as “neurasthenia” to substantiate its claims about sexual deviance. More than a century later, these assumptions have yet to be dismantled. SM and leather imagery have been used in the service of right-wing attacks on civil equality for homosexuals, the struggles over the National Endowment for the Arts and public arts funding, and the vilification of Michel Foucault, who was active in

⁷² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 46.

⁷³ John H. Gagnon, *Human Sexualities* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1977).

⁷⁴ *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997).

the burgeoning SM community of San Francisco in the 1970s.⁷⁵ We ignore sexual diversity at the peril of descriptive accuracy as well as real erotic communities.

V. Representing child sexualities

⁷⁵ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Halperin 1995 makes a trenchant critique of Miller's biography. One of the many delectable moments in his insightful, thorough, and scathing review takes place in response to Miller's misrepresentation of an SM scene. "Despite the frenetic orgy of citations – from de Sade, Deleuze, Foucault, and others – designed to absolve Miller of responsibility for the vividness of the images he conjures up, the nature of his own desire, of his own drive to representation, is all too obvious: he do the perverts in different voices. And what dopey perverts at that; after all, was there ever such a session at any S/M club in the world? Not very likely – and for good reason: however much of a philosophical turn-on the foregoing description may be to Miller, it is perhaps the most singularly *unsexy* dungeon scene ever written." See David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 143-185, esp. 181.

The situation was similar in the case of children's sex. It is often said that the classical period consigned it to an obscurity from which it scarcely emerged before the *Three Essays* or the beneficent anxieties of Little Hans. It is true that a longstanding 'freedom' of language between children and adults, or pupils and teachers, may have disappeared. No seventeenth-century pedagogue would have publicly advised his disciple, as did Erasmus in his *Dialogues*, on the choice of a good prostitute. And the boisterous laughter that had accompanied the precocious sexuality of children for so long – and in all social classes, it seems – was gradually stifled. But this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence.⁷⁶

Michel Foucault

Frühlings Erwachen produces ideas about child sexuality above and beyond a simple call for liberation from silence. In the first place, its call for the destigmatization of a sexual instinct in children seems to forecast that this will facilitate young people's maturation into heterosexuality, a way of thinking that is common to both Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Freud's essay on infantile sexuality.

Second of all, the drama's representation of child abuse generates an extremely narrow vision of relations between children and adults that tends to refer to exploitation and oppression. This has served to obstruct the development of a more sophisticated concept of intergenerational contact in general and intergenerational intimacy in particular that does not presume abuse.

Thinkers like Freud and Wedekind that were interested in issues of children and sex at the turn of the twentieth century tended to emphasize the pioneering character of their work. For example, in the introduction to his essay on infantile sexuality, Freud asserted, "So far as I know, not a single author has clearly recognized the regular existence of a sexual instinct in childhood; and in the writings that have become so numerous on the development of children, the chapter on 'Sexual Development' is as a rule omitted."⁷⁷ Similarly, in satirizing a society that refused to deal openly with adolescent sexual urges, Wedekind seems to have regarded his discourse as one that

⁷⁶ *HoS*, 27.

⁷⁷ *TE*, 39.

“broke the silence.” Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this created the impression that Wedekind and Freud were uncovering “the truth” about child sexuality. This way of thinking discourages examinations of how the ideas they produced were historically specific and inflected with popular biases of the time.

Historians of sexuality in the wake of Foucault have located extensive pre-Freudian literatures that concerned themselves with children and their sex. Stephen Kern lists over a dozen publications between 1867 and 1905 that clearly presaged Freud’s views.⁷⁸ In his history mapping Freud onto the sexology that preceded him, Frank Sulloway extends Kern’s list even further. Among these were Henry Maudsley, S. Linder, and Iwan Bloch. A few others, prominent among them Albert Moll and Havelock Ellis, even argued that the normal human libido “develops in sequential, prepubertal stages – attaching itself to different ‘love’ objects in the process.”⁷⁹ This body of thought challenged the understanding of children’s sex as aberrant. Sulloway cites the conclusions of Havelock Ellis, who was particularly conscious of wider historical trends in the scientific study of sex.

It was during the second half of the nineteenth century, when a new biological conception, under the inspiration of Darwin, was slowly permeating medicine, that the idea of infantile and youthful ‘perversion’ began to be undermined; on the one hand the new scientific study of sex, started by the pioneering work of Krafft-Ebing at the end of the third quarter of the century, showed how common are such so-called ‘perversions’ in early life while, on the other hand, the conception of evolution began to make it clear that we must not apply developed adult standards

⁷⁸ Stephen Kern, *Anatomy and Destiny: A Cultural History of the Human Body* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1975).

⁷⁹ Sulloway, *op. cit.*, 278.

to underdeveloped creatures, what is natural at one stage not necessarily being natural at the previous stage.⁸⁰

Krafft-Ebing's work made it possible for Freud to develop a theory that recognized the existence of a wide range of childhood sexual feelings and experiences that are not identical to adult ones. Although Freud identified the existence and diversity of child sexual experience, his work was inflected by ideology insofar as he emphasized that this variance diminishes into adulthood. In his essay on infantile sexuality, Freud asserts, "The final outcome of sexual development lies in what is known as the normal sexual life of the adult, in which the pursuit of pleasure comes under the sway of the reproductive function and in which the component instincts, under the primacy of a single erotogenic zone, form a firm organization directed towards a sexual aim attached to some extraneous sexual object."⁸¹ Wedekind was not immune to this ideological formations. Similar to Freud, the drama asserts the existence of a wide range of sexual experience in adolescents. However the scenes involving masturbation, sadomasochism, and homosexuality consign these experiences to a particular stage of adolescent development distinct from adulthood.

The drama also thematizes children's pedagogical, physical, and more subtly, sexual relation to adults. Its discussion of child abuse in particular generates a dark vision of intergenerational power dynamics. For example, Wendla's friend Martha describes her parents' reaction to the forbidden blue ribbon she has sewn on her nightgown. "Mama riss mich am Zopf zum Bett heraus. [...] Da habe man's, worauf ich ausgehe! – Da habe man's ja! [...] Ich lag auf der Erde und schrie und heulte. Da kommt Papa. Ritsch – das

⁸⁰ Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex* (Alcester: Read Books, [1933] 2006), 105.

⁸¹ *TE*, 63.

Hemd herunter. Ich zur Türe hinaus. Da habe man's. Ich wolle nun wohl so auf die Straße hinunter..."⁸² Martha's account tells explicitly of the physical abuse she endures from her parents, but sexual undertones are implied in her father's behavior. At the very least, ripping the nightgown off his pubescent daughter is a rather strange way to express anger at her attempts to make herself attractive. Physical and possibly sexual abuse is but one among many representations in the drama of antagonism between children and adults: Wendla and her conservative, reticent mother; Moritz and his punishing schoolteachers and unforgiving parents; Melchior and his parents, who ultimately commit him to an asylum. Moments like these emphasize the abusive way in which adults impose rigid standards onto children while failing to provide them with an adequate sexual vocabulary. This impedes ways of thinking about relationships between children and adults without resorting to assumptions of oppression and exploitation.

Wedekind's emphasis on child abuse is inscribed within a historical context that largely refused to deal openly with this issue. Larry Wolff has argued that a powerful Victorian sentimental idea of the loving family made it difficult for the world of 1899 to recognize the concept of child abuse. For this reason, the trials involving exploited youth that Wolff examines were "unfathomable, uncategorizable, unassimilable, for there were no references or precedents to help make any sense out of such horror."⁸³ In the introduction to his book, Wolff emphasizes the urgency to make visible historical instances of child abuse in a contemporary society that remains all too reticent about the issue. To uncover child abuse as a social problem, it would seem, was Wedekind's intention as well in *Frühlings Erwachen*. The focus on abuse frustrates the development

⁸² *FE*, 17.

⁸³ Larry Wolff, *Postcards from the End of the World: Child Abuse in Freud's Vienna* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 4.

of alternative perspectives on intergenerational contact – particularly where sex is involved - that do not make reference to exploitation and pathology. It is important to hold oppressive intergenerational dynamics in focus, while situating them within a more refined terminology that does not presume abuse.

The Broadway musical *Spring Awakening* is situated within a culture that is obsessed with the issue of child abuse in general and child sexual abuse in particular. Representative of this trend was Anita Bryant's 1982 anti-homosexual campaign that began as a crusade to "Save Our Children."⁸⁴ More recently, one need only turn on CNN to experience Nancy Grace's unwavering focus on children kidnapped by strangers or abused by pernicious adult caretakers. In 1998, a psychological study called for the development of a more sophisticated nomenclature with which to describe child sexuality and intergenerational intimacy that does not automatically presume pathology. In an unprecedented move, the US House of Representatives issued an official condemnation of this scientific study.⁸⁵ Anita Bryant, Nancy Grace, and the Rind et al. controversy are examples of a culture that maintains a consistent moral panic about children, sex, and abuse. Arguably, this issue is frequently overemphasized at the expense of other prevalent social concerns.

The disproportionately large amount of public attention to which child abuse is subjected is symptomatic of a culture that is fascinated with the child sexualities it simultaneously forbids. Mainstream representations of child sexual abuse use a system of

⁸⁴ Gay Left Collective, "Happy Families? Pedophilia Examined," in *The Age Taboo: Gay male sexuality, power and consent*, ed. Daniel Tsang (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), 53.

⁸⁵ The Rind et al. controversy was sparked by a paper on child sexual abuse that appeared in an APA journal. In an analysis of assumed properties of child sexual abuse, Bruce Rind, Philip Tromovitch and Robert Bauserman argued that the degree of psychological damage related to child sexual abuse is dependent on whether or not the child described the encounter as consensual. See Rind, B., Tromovitch, P. & Bauserman, R., "A Meta-analytic Examination of Assumed Properties of Child Sexual Abuse Using College Samples," *Psychological Bulletin* 124(1) (1998): 22-53.

sexual judgment that accords intergenerational intimacy no moral complexity. As Gayle Rubin makes clear, “heterosexual encounters may be sublime or disgusting, free or forced, healing or destructive, romantic or mercenary. As long as it does not violate other rules, heterosexuality is acknowledged to exhibit the full range of human experience. In contrast, all sex acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance. The further from the line a sex act is, the more it is depicted as a uniformly bad experience.”⁸⁶

Spring Awakening makes explicit the original drama’s implication of the sexual abuse of Martha. In a highly suggestive song titled, “The Dark I Know Well,” she sings, “You say all you want is just a kiss goodnight/And then you hold me and you whisper, ‘Child, the Lord won’t mind’ [...] God, it’s good the lovin’, ain’t it good tonight?/You ain’t seen nothing yet, gonna teach you right/It’s just you and me/Child you’re a beauty.”⁸⁷ Martha’s anthem is but one more entry to the larger cultural spectacular about child sexual abuse. Jonathan Franzen goes so far as to describe it as a scopophilic adult fantasy of teen sex.

A team of grown-ups creates a musical whose main selling point is teen sex (the first Broadway posters showed the male lead mounting the female lead) and whose female teen characters, shortly after wailing to their largely grown-up audience that they are bad-girl love-junkies, come forward to sing of how terribly, unfairly painful it is to possess a teen sexuality that fascinates grown-ups.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *American Feminist Thought at Century’s End*, ed. Linda S. Kauffman (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 17-18.

⁸⁷ Sater, op. cit.

⁸⁸ Franzen, op. cit., xi.

While Franzen correctly indicts the Broadway musical for voyeurism, his analysis does not question the lack of complexity with which child abuse is represented. Nor is he entirely correct when he contends that the musical is distinctly more scopophilic than the original drama. Both productions, in their own ways, offer explicit representations of child sexual experience and legitimize these by purporting to educate the public. At the same time, Franzen, the musical, and the original drama all consign intergenerational intimacy to the outer limits of sexual experience.

The pernicious character of intergenerational contact in both the original drama and the Broadway musical leaves one wondering how best to achieve the sexual enlightenment called for by these productions. The closest *Frühlings Erwachen* comes to addressing this issue occurs in a conversation between Melchior and the mysterious Masked Man in its final scene. Pulling him away from the brink of suicide, the Masked Man explains to Melchior that his trespasses – the rape of Wendla, the production of document that spurred Moritz’s suicide – are not reflective of a flaw intrinsic to Melchior’s character. Rather, Melchior’s behavior is shaped by the primary institutions of socialization – family, school, and church – that condemn him.

Der verummte Herr: - Dein Herr Vater sucht Trost zur Stunde in den kräftigen Armen deiner Mutter. – Ich erschließe dir die Welt. Deine momentane Fassungslosigkeit entspringt deiner miserablen Lage. Mit einem warmen Abendessen im Leib spottest du ihrer.

Melchior: (*für sich*) Es kann nur einer der Teufel sein! – (*Laut.*) Nach dem, was ich verschuldet, kann mir ein warmes Abendessen meine Ruhe nicht wiedergeben!

Der verummte Herr: Es kommt auf das Abendessen an! – So viel kann ich dir

sagen, dass die Kleine vorzüglich geboren hätte. Sie war musterhaft gebaut. Sie ist lediglich den Abortivmitteln der Mutter Schmidtin erlegen. [...] Unter Moral verstehe ich das reelle Produkt zweier imaginärer Größen. Die imaginären Größen sind Sollen und Wollen. Das Produkt heißt Moral und lässt sich in seiner Realität nicht leugnen.⁸⁹

In this passage, the Masked Man asserts the need for individuals to learn to navigate between individual wishes and desires (“Wollen”), on the one hand, with social and ideological sanctions (“Sollen”), on the other.⁹⁰ Because of this focus on the individual as the locus of change, the drama’s message is a conservative one insofar as it does not make concrete suggestions for changes to the social organization of sex.

A radical critique of the social regulation of sexual initiation requires a more careful consideration of stigmatized sex practices than *Frühlings Erwachen* entertains. At the time of the drama’s publication, a substantial body of literature was accumulating that made visible the legitimate claims of sex deviates. This literature has by and large been consigned to the annals, while *Frühlings Erwachen* has enjoyed a renaissance through productions like the Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*. Among the systematically marginalized texts are the writings of Scottish-German poet John Henry Mackay. A cursory examination of Mackay’s project *Die Bücher der namenlosen Liebe*, published under the pseudonym “Sagitta,” throws the conceptual lacunae in Wedekind’s drama in sharp relief.

A man in his forties whose sexual attractions rested exclusively with boys between the ages fourteen and seventeen, Mackay sought to organize similarly oriented

⁸⁹ *FE*, 79-80.

⁹⁰ Birrell, *op. cit.*, 166.

men into a constituency that could agitate for full civil and sexual rights.⁹¹ Working towards this political end, the semiautobiographical book *Der Puppenjunge* describes in great detail a man's tender affection for a castaway adolescent street hustler. Like *Frühlings Erwachen*, *Puppenjunge* identifies social problems like child abuse and the inadequacy of social institutions to educate and provide for its youth. Mackay's novel is populated by tales of the narrator's tireless efforts to rescue his beloved from physical harm, legal entanglement, and resigned indifference to a world that has made him a pariah. The realistic if sometimes melodramatic account lays emphasis on the "menschenfreundlichen und menschenfördernden, pädagogischen und produktiven Charakter" of the relationship (352).⁹²

Although Mackay struggled to demonstrate the humanity of his stigmatized love within his own historical moment, intergenerational intimacy has not been stripped of moral complexity and social value in all societies. For example, Foucault tracks the cultural shift in the Roman world by which pederasty was stripped of the legitimacy it enjoyed in the classical period. This practice was replaced at the beginning of our era by a new rational justification that privileged the conjugal relationship, more than any other, of being capable of accommodating the force of love.⁹³ Whereas the erotic system in the

⁹¹ Hubert Kennedy, afterword to *Der Puppenjunge*, by John Henry Mackay (Sagitta) (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1999), 343.

⁹² Although his *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* diverged from Mackay on the question of age, Magnus Hirschfeld frequently entertained discourse from proponents of male intergenerational intimacy in the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*. See, for example, a 1903 treatise on pederasty published by man using the alias "Reifegg." Reifegg, "Die Bedeutung der Jünglingsliebe für unsere Zeit," in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität*, ed. Magnus Hirschfeld (Leipzig: Verlag von Max Spohr, 1903), 1012-13. "Ein guter Lehrer könne nur der sein, der seine Schüler liebe. Wer aus Begeisterung und Liebe für den Jüngling als solchen das schwere Amt übernommen habe, könne die segensreichste Wirkung auf die Bildung des Geistes und des Charakters der geliebten Zöglinge ausüben. Aber auch das Verhältnis der Zöglinge untereinander könne die in die richtigen Bahnen geleitete Jünglingsliebe aufs günstigste beeinflussen und so erzieherisch wirken."

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986), 198.

Hellenistic period was inclusive of an institutionalized erotics between men and boys, Foucault argues, from the beginning of our era onward this practice was less and less viable as a new erotics organized itself around the “symmetrical and reciprocal union of a man and a woman.” Foucault’s inquiry demonstrates that the conditions of possibility for conceptualizing love are grounded in the dominant episteme of a particular epoch.

Because he purported to be liberating discussion about child sexuality from silence, Wedekind, like Freud, gave off the impression he was uncovering the “truth” about the nature of the child sexual instinct. This obstructed examinations of how the ideas he generated were imbued with popular biases of the time. Prior to Wedekind and Freud, a burgeoning discussion was taking place within German sexual science that recognized the existence and diversity of child sexual feelings and experiences, and laid emphasis on the need not to impose adult standards onto “underdeveloped” individuals. This way of thinking relied on the assumption that sexual variance in children would ultimately develop into mature adult heterosexuality.

At the same time, Wedekind’s satire of oppressive bourgeois moral conventions produced historically specific ideas about child abuse. The secondary character Martha’s description of the physical and possibly sexual abuse she endures from her parents contributed to the hegemonic image of cross-generational contact that presumes exploitation. In the twentieth century, a series of moral panics about child sexual abuse have maintained a blanket stigma on intimacy between adults and underage individuals. In order to achieve their political and ideological goals, campaigns like Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” have exploited the popular impression of intergenerational encounters as “unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice,

kindness, or transcendence.”⁹⁴ The Broadway musical *Spring Awakening*, although its call for sexual enlightenment is aligned with a politically liberal constituency, exploits this stigma in a similar way. Because it caters to the pleasures and fears of a popular audience, the musical has afforded *Frühlings Erwachen* a renaissance while more knowledgeable artistic material from the same period has been unfairly ignored. Although it claims to be a spur to social awareness, the musical obstructs the development of alternative ways of thinking about sexual initiation and prevents the audience from acknowledging the pleasures it derives from the spectacle of pathos and adolescent sex.

⁹⁴ Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” op. cit., 18.

VI. Conclusion

Stylistic experimentalism, frank discussion about taboo sexual themes, and long-standing censorship have all contributed to *Frühlings Erwachen*'s reputation as a radical drama. This status has failed to acknowledge the drama's capitulation to the presumption of sexual pathology characteristic of the incipient discursive field of nineteenth-century sexual science. At the time in which the drama was written, a dominant "style of reasoning" organized the writings of many sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing around the principle of the "normal constitution" of the sexual instinct. This sexual hierarchy shaped the representations of stigmatized sex practices in *Frühlings Erwachen* as well. It is no wonder that a mainstream liberal constituency, similarly uncomfortable and unfamiliar with "deviant" sexuality, continues to reify the drama's specious call for sexual "enlightenment."

Because the issue of sex was so polarizing in the late Wilhelmine period, *Frühlings Erwachen* encouraged the idea that an enlightening sexual politics lies somewhere in the "middle" between sexual repression and "anything goes" sexual liberation. Supposedly, the traditional bias is that all discussion about sexuality is obscene and the liberal bias is that all sex is good and must be released from constraint. The unbiased view is that the truth lies somewhere in between and can be uncovered through rational sexual information used to harness dangerous sexual impulses. This is a false characterization of the poles of debate. Regardless of whether one falls in the conservative or progressive camp, both positions presume sexual deviance to be extreme, destructive, ephemeral, aberrant, irrational, or pathological.

In his theoretical text “Über Erotik,” Wedekind promoted this dichotomy by criticizing “obscene” theatrical productions that catered to “blinde Sklaven ihrer Triebe [...] denen, während sie sich einer Umarmung überlassen, die Sinne schwinden oder deren Denkvermögen dabei aussetzt.”⁹⁵ This way of thinking did not draw a clear distinction between irrational sexual oblivion, on the one hand, with homosexuality, sadomasochism, and cross-generational intimacy, on the other. In this way, Wedekind generated an image of irrational sexual impulses that could be ameliorated by enlightening sexual discourses such as his own.

This fallacious middle ground has been maintained by journalism ever since the time of the release of *Frühlings Erwachen*. Because its detractors were so vocal, sympathetic reviews uncritically accepted the drama’s claim to enlighten its audience about sexual matters. Today, this trend continues to obstruct even the most liberal constituencies from examining the drama’s representation of sexual deviance as social pathology.

Frühlings Erwachen is indebted to theories of homosexuality within nineteenth-century sexual science. Krafft-Ebing’s concept of homosexual “Perversität” in *Psychopathia Sexualis* is strikingly similar to the drama’s representation of male homosexuality as a behavior linked to masturbation, the repression of heterosexual expression, and the segregation of the sexes in schools and asylums. The depiction of Hänschen and Ernst’s love in the drama’s penultimate scene as a sentimental stage of development is evocative of Freud’s concept of sexual variation in children as a series of component stages that develop towards heterosexuality in adulthood. Despite these limitations, *Frühlings Erwachen* contributed to the formation of an inchoate social

⁹⁵ Wedekind, “Über Erotik,” op. cit., 199.

consciousness about homosexuality at the turn of the twentieth century. This could have in turn facilitated a “reverse” discourse in which homosexuals learned to speak on their own behalves, formed gay and lesbian subcultures, and agitated for civil equality.

The drama also bears the mark of Krafft-Ebing’s association of sadomasochism with cruelty, rape, loss of self-control, and the desire for death and destruction. Because it has been retransmitted by generators of knowledge like Freud and the American Psychiatric Association, this characterization of SM remains branded in public consciousness while the insights of thinkers like Havelock Ellis have been unfairly ignored.

Just as *Frühlings Erwachen* is reflective of nineteenth-century attitudes about sexual deviance, so too is the Broadway musical expressive of contemporary ones. Whereas Wedekind’s original drama tended to conceive of homosexuality as a temporary adolescent stage, an epistemological shift from acts to identities underpins the musical’s representation of homosexuality as a legitimate and enduring form of social relations. Sadomasochism has not enjoyed the benefits of a similar conceptual sea change. The association of sadomasochism in Krafft-Ebing and Wedekind with pathology and the “death drive” remains the popular understanding of SM upon which *Spring Awakening* relies.

Similarly, the musical adopts the original drama’s concept of child sexual abuse. The original drama maintains a strict focus on child abuse, oppression, and exploitation without placing this within a larger dynamic that accords cross-generational encounters the possibility of humanity, kindness, and love. More than a century later, the Broadway musical serves as but one more entry to a larger sex panic about child sexual abuse.

While the musical has afforded *Frühlings Erwachen* a renewed popularity, the acute observations about cross-generational contact from writers like John Henry Mackay remain all but invisible.

Frühlings Erwachen is a story of great sexual and emotional suffering that is reflective of the repressive moral climate from which the drama emerged. Its satire of bourgeois hypocrisy inadvertently marginalizes deviant sex practices and discourages the development of an erotic creativity that would help assuage the social problems about which the drama complains. While the drama's way of thinking about sexual deviance make sense in terms of the sexological literature in which it is couched, the reiteration of this in our current historical moment should give cause for alarm to those who consider themselves to be progressive. It is imperative that we consider how the ideas about sexuality expressed in cultural productions like *Spring Awakening* are historically specific, imbued with popular biases, and situated within a hierarchy of sexual value.

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