

originating the gibing label.<sup>15</sup> But it circulated because readers recognized in it the knowable essence of a woman and her story. Hardy was gratified to receive numbers of letters from husbands telling him that their story was not unlike Angel's and even more from wives "with a past like that of Tess, but who had not told their husbands, and asking for his counsel under the burden of their concealment."<sup>16</sup> Under the aching burden of his novel's modernistic stutterings and shufflings, its tense anxieties about the writing-out of modern plights, *Tess* was manifestly managing to get its "truth" across. And, of course, it still does.

<sup>15</sup> See discussion at note 15 to Hardy's preface to the 5th ed., Penguin Classics ed. (1998), 467.

<sup>16</sup> *Life*, 244.

PETER MADSEN

Elsie  
(*The Dangerous Age*, Karin Michaëlis, 1910)

On March 27, 1911, the readers of *Danziger Zeitung* would come across an announcement directed "To the Women of Danzig!" with the following content: "The advertised lecture by Karin Michaëlis on the dangerous age induces the subscribing associations to hereby point out that ladies and girls who adhere to female dignity should stay away from this lecture."<sup>1</sup> It was signed by all the women's organizations in Danzig. The next day the same newspaper could summarize a brochure by the author Therese Wallner-Thurm from Dresden in the form of an open letter to Karin Michaëlis provoked by her novel *The Dangerous Age*: "... if she had given the book the title 'Hysterical Women' or even more appropriately 'On Women Afflicted by Nymphomania' she would rather have hit the nail on the head and her book at least have had a certain *raison d'être*." Karin Michaëlis's lecture was scheduled for the following day. The protests had prompted the police authority to ask for the manuscript. After the person in charge had read it, however, according to *Danziger Zeitung*, he had not only given it clearance, but he had "as we have been informed also personally described it as 'highly interesting.'"<sup>2</sup>

*The Dangerous Age* was published in Danish in 1910.<sup>2</sup> It consists (as the subtitle indicates) of *Letters and Diary Notes* by the protagonist, the

<sup>1</sup> The account of events and debates in Danzig and elsewhere is based on newspaper clippings in the Karin Michaëlis archive at the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

<sup>2</sup> (Copenhagen: Gyldendal). The latest (third) Danish edition is from 1987 (with an afterword by the author Dorrit Willumsen). Recent years have witnessed a renewed international interest in the novel and in Karin Michaëlis's quite remarkable life: *The Dangerous Age: Letters and Fragments from a Woman's Diary*, with a foreword by Phyllis Lassner (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991) uses the English translation from 1911. See also *L'età pericolosa*, with critical notes by Donatella Ziliotto, Giunti Barbèra (Florence, 1989) (a new translation); and *Das gefährliche Alter. Intime Tagebuchaufzeichnungen*, (Freiburg: Kore, 1998). Karin Michaëlis wrote her memoirs in Danish in two versions, the first in the 1920s in a fictional form, the second, less fictional, in the late 1940s. A shorter English version was published in the United States with the title *Little Troll* (New York, 1946); a German translation was published in 1998 with the title *Der kleine Kobold: Lebenserinnerungen von Karin Michaëlis* (Freiburg: Kore). All quotations from the novel are taken from the new American edition (1991) and are cited parenthetically in the text.

forty-two-year-old Elsie Lindtner. After twenty-two years of marriage in the higher bourgeoisie in Copenhagen, she has decided to leave her husband and live alone in a villa on an island: "I must live alone. . . . Call it hysteria—which perhaps it is" (29). The villa has been designed by a young friend who turns out to be her great love. She realizes her feelings for him and invites him for a visit, but their meeting is a disappointment. He leaves. She then turns to her former husband for reconciliation, but he has married a much younger woman: "That he should have dared to replace me by a mere chit of nineteen!" (207). She decides to travel around the world together with her housemaid. This simple story line is the frame for a variety of reflections on her own life and the life of other women whom she addresses or writes about to other correspondents. "Do men and women ever tell each other the truth? . . . Between the sexes reigns an ineradicable hostility" (60–61). "Women's doctors may be as clever and sly as they please, but they will never learn any of the things that women confide to each other" (66). Some of these secrets are, as it were, revealed in the book, although not all: "I sit here and write for myself alone. I know that no one else will ever read my words; and yet I am not quite sincere, even with myself" (71). Once again in the history of the novel the fictional paradox—intimate writings made public—is used as a vehicle for confessions, in this case of an intricate complex of sensuality and fear of aging, as well as a variety of feelings that are not compatible with public morality. "If I had more sensibility, and a little imagination . . . I think I should turn my attention to literature. Women like to wade through their memories like one wades through dry leaves in autumn. I believe I should be very clever in opening a series of whited sepulchres, and without betraying any personalities, I should collect my exhumed mummies under the general title of 'Women at the Dangerous Age,'" Elsie Lindtner writes in her diary (130). This is, in a sense, what Karin Michaëlis has done. Her method is interestingly similar to the procedure of contemporary psychiatrists: demonstration of a more general theme through a series of "cases."

In the lecture she presented during her tour in Germany and elsewhere she stressed a distance from her protagonist: "A lot of what is written in the diary by this lady . . . is hysterical and overwrought tommyrot. But why is it so? Because Mrs. Elsie Lindtner is at an age at which most women really are at the mercy of their moods and whims." The lecture has in a sense the same structure as the novel: general statements are interspersed with examples

from her own life or from the lives of women she knows. In fact, the book itself is based on such examples, among them her own experiences.

*The Dangerous Age* was published in Germany at about the same time. It immediately became a huge success not only there, but also in France, the United States, and elsewhere. The first German printing was sold out in one day after a very positive review that occupied the entire front page of *Berliner Tageszeitung*. In July 1911, the *New York Times* introduced an article with this summary of the success: "When a novel goes through its hundredth German edition within six months, when Marcel Prévost goes to the exertion of putting a Danish work into French dress, when there are translations of that work into eleven different languages, the English and American public is perhaps justified in trying to find out something about the author."<sup>4</sup>

In his introduction to the French edition, Marcel Prévost, a then very famous writer of novels about women, remarked that "in all the countries of Central Europe, the most widely read novel at the present moment is *The Dangerous Age*."<sup>5</sup> To Prévost, Michaëlis's book was "one of those rare novels by a woman in which the writer has not troubled to think from a man's point of view." It was a "sure diagnosis of the vital conditions under which woman exists, and an acute observation of her complicated soul," the "most sincere and complete, the humblest and most moving of feminine confessions." The memories of the protagonist seems like "a revel in which the modern demons of Neurasthenia and Hysteria sport and sneer."<sup>6</sup> "The nearer she gets to the crisis, the more painfully and lucidly she perceives the antinomy between two feminine desires: the desire of moral dignity and the desire of physical enjoyment."

"Hysteria," then, seems to be at stake everywhere in the reception of *The Dangerous Age*. But was the protagonist, Elsie Lindtner, an extreme case, or was the depiction as realistic as Marcel Prévost perceived it to be? The influential Viennese writer Karl Kraus introduced his commentary on the debate

<sup>4</sup> July 30, 1911.

<sup>5</sup> *The Dangerous Age: Letters and Fragments from a Woman's Diary*, translated from the Danish of Karin Michaëlis with an introduction by Marcel Prévost (London: John Lane, Bodley Head; New York: John Lane, 1912), 8.

<sup>6</sup> In *Journal des Débat's* "feuilleton," Maurice Muret agrees: "Ces mots ne sont pas trop énergiques," but in a more skeptical mood, October 6, 1911.

<sup>1</sup> The manuscript is in the Royal Library.

sparked by the novel in a characteristic fashion: "The decent society subsists on Elsie Lindtner's being an exceptional case. The furies of the pen and the masochists of the feuilleton soon answered the question if the dangerous age really is that dangerous affirmatively and insisted that women who were still driven by some sense of honor rather than sexuality should go to their grave in the end with the sunny memories of the measure of joie de vivre doled out by the marriage broker."<sup>7</sup> Kraus could not agree that "sensuality is a disease or immoral" and scorned "the ladies' doctors": "They support under all circumstances public decency and cannot but declare that Elsie Lindtner is a scum of humanity."

Karin Michaëlis *did* give her lecture in Danzig, where the protest had engendered a wide interest. An anonymous commentator in *Danziger Allgemeine Zeitung* found it beyond "our plain German notion" that she can bring herself to talk about "the most intimate sexual matters in women's lives" in front of a public that to a considerable extent consists of men. Her remarks about equal distribution of obligations in the home between wife and husband are judged horrendous: "We have, thank God, in general not yet gone that far in Germany, just as we do not allow women to give speeches in the parliament." The writer firmly underlines that "self-control works even better against hysteria than against nervousity. It is not accidental that the less firm husbands most often suffer from wives who are capricious and eccentric beyond endurance."

A few days later a presentation takes place in Leipzig. *Leipziger Tageblatt* finds the speaker "wise, appealing," but has no sympathy for her opinions; "Mrs. Michaëlis speaks and writes only about sickly, hysterical, *decadent* women and all her examples are still more stories of disease, yet she has no eye for the healthy. . . Mrs. Michaëlis *overestimates* the corporeal and *underestimates* human life's moral imponderables." *Thüringer Morgenzeitung* reacts to a presentation two days later in Weimar in a positive manner: "The most interesting work . . . may become a warning sign, directing many toward cautiousness and moderation." *Neues Tageblatt* in Stuttgart was even more positive after her talk there a few days before the events in Danzig: "She has with a sorrowful heart realized that it is natural processes that the

<sup>7</sup> *Die Fackel*, no. 319/320, 31 (March 1911): 6.

woman cannot avoid, just as natural as the regularly returning disturbances in the female organism."

Are such feelings pathologic or "natural," that is, a common phenomenon under the reigning circumstances? The interaction between medical literature and fiction in nineteenth-century France has been stressed in recent research in the cultural history of hysteria: "In short, the doctrine of the hysterical character, as it emerged in French psychiatric thought during the 1860s, reads remarkably as a codification into diagnostic theory of the fictional character of Emma Bovary."<sup>8</sup> Flaubert himself was interested in medical literature. Seen in this light, the impact of *The Dangerous Age* takes on a larger signification, since hysteria once again was at stake. This time, however, the concept—or rather the subject matter it referred to—was so to speak taken out of the hands of the professionals and brought into *the public sphere of exchange of experience*. Karin Michaëlis's novel and lectures represented furthermore a *normalization* in the sense that some of the symptoms classified as hysterical were interpreted as reactions to a normal life experience at a certain age and thus not necessarily a matter for special institutions and professional knowledge, but rather a matter for husband and wife, perhaps with some help from the family doctor.

The predominant psychiatric approach to hysteria was that it was a matter for specialists and that separation from the family was an important precondition for treatment.<sup>9</sup> In these respects the approach the book and the ensuing debate helped to promote was different. One Danish critic neatly demonstrates this contrast: "The public outside Denmark was astonished to realize that Danish ladies' literature was concerned with phenomena that would rather belong in an institution for hysterical female diseases."<sup>10</sup> In the end, professional psychiatry welcomed the novel, however, and in the 1920s

<sup>8</sup> Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 233.

<sup>9</sup> The most relevant example in Denmark was the prominent psychiatrist Knud Pontoppidan (the author Henrik Pontoppidan's brother). To summarize very briefly, he was a proponent of "a firm iron hand" that should be experienced as covered by "a deep and sincere empathy's soft glove" (quoted in Vagn Lyhne, *Eksperimentere som en gal: Psykiatriens sidste krise* [Århus: Modtryk, 1981], 67).

<sup>10</sup> Svend Leopold, *Tres Talenter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1918), 120.

Karin Michaëlis was even invited to give a lecture at an international medical congress.

This development assumes an even wider perspective, because it is a symptom of a change in the cultural construction of one of the central thematic clusters in interpretations of modern European culture. The late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was an age of sweeping "philosophies" concerning the "spirit of the age." Nietzsche was *en vogue*, and two of the most influential books were Max Nordau's *Entartung (Degeneration)* in 1892 and Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)* in 1903. Both were about the characteristic features of the age. Nordau's diagnosis was formulated in terms that were close to psychiatric concepts; Weininger's diagnosis was based on the dichotomy between male and female traits of character.

*Hysteria* as a word did not have any stable relation to a clearly delineated and defined phenomenon in the real world, neither in the older tradition, nor during the period of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when it became a central concept in psychiatric debate and research: "It was during the nineteenth century that hysteria moved center stage. . . . Hysteria came to be seen as the open sesame to impenetrable riddles of existence: religious experience, sexual deviation, and, above all, that mystery of mysteries, woman."<sup>11</sup> The word also functioned as a clue to the problems of the age: "We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria," Nordau wrote.<sup>12</sup> Among the symptoms enumerated in his extremely influential book were "a brain incapable of normal working, thence feebleness of will, inattention, predominance of emotion, lack of knowledge, absence of sympathy or interest in the world and humanity, atrophy of the notion of duty and morality." It is easy to see how a similar characterization could be applied to ideas about the difference between male and female. This is even more plausible when Nordau's remedy is taken into consideration: "The hysteria of the present day will not last. People (die Völker) will recover from their present fatigue. The

<sup>11</sup> Roy Porter, "The Body and the Mind, the Doctor and the Patient: Negotiating Hysteria," in Sander L. Gilman, et al., eds., *Hysteria beyond Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 227.

<sup>12</sup> Max Nordau, *Entartung*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Verlag von Carl Ducker, 1893), 2:523. *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

feeble, the degenerate, will perish. . . . Such is the treatment of the disease of the age that I hold to be efficacious: Characterization of the leading degenerates as mentally diseased; unmasking and stigmatization of their imitators as enemies to society; cautioning the public against the lies of these parasites."<sup>13</sup>

Otto Weininger's wild, yet no less influential *Geschlecht und Charakter* concentrated on the opposition between male and female, and took the female as destructive for contemporary culture.<sup>14</sup> Hysteria was the effect of the attempts to dominate the female character and impose male ideals: "One cannot artificially suppress and supplant one's real nature, the physical as well as the other side, without something happening. The hygienic penalty that must be paid for woman's denial of her real nature is hysteria" (357). The remedy, according to Weininger, is to realize that female nature is fundamentally determined by the obsession with "Koitus" (coitus) and "Kuppelei" (procurer). His diagnosis of hysteria is simultaneously a diagnosis of an age that is too influenced by the female principle and should stick to male principles.

Cultural disorder could thus be interpreted as a female disorder or a disorder brought about by too much influence of female characteristics. Hysteria was—at least in the popular mind—a quintessentially female disease. Any attempt to normalize what was interpreted as symptoms of hysteria—and *The Dangerous Age* was such an attempt—would thus by implication contribute to a reworking of both the idea of "the female" and the idea of the "spirit of the age."

The broader issue was mythical: it belonged to the realm of popular philosophies of the spirit of the age, yet it was simultaneously very concrete. It was the age of agitation for female voting rights as well as a period of increasing female participation in the working market. Two years *before* the publication of *The Dangerous Age* the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage was founded in England, and two years *after*, the English example inspired the foundation of Deutsche Bund zur Bekämpfung der

<sup>13</sup> Similar formulations are among the roots of twentieth-century reactions against "degeneration"—*decadence* in the communist tradition and *Entartung* in the Nazi tradition; in Nordau's case the issue was reason, empathy, social consciousness, and the feeling of duty, cf. 561–62.

<sup>14</sup> *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (Munich: Matthis and Seitz Verlag, 1997). *Sex and Character* (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906).

Frauenemanzipation (German League for Combating Women's Emancipation) in the aftermath of the Deutsche Frauenkongress (German Women's Congress) early in 1912. The manifesto of this organization provides a view of this mixture of crazy mythology and direct politics: "Even if all the European people (*Völker*) should decay by [the influence of] woman, the German people (*Volk*), the most masculine people of the Earth, whose essence yet will cure the World, must be protected against this destiny in the most holy interest of Humanity."<sup>15</sup>

Karin Michaëlis's novel and her lectures thus hit several nerves: first, a feminist propagandistic interest in a denial of the problems she stressed; second, the interest of the psychiatric establishment in keeping the issues as a matter of professional institutional treatment; third, the general debate about gender nature or character; and fourth, the broader "philosophies" concerning problems and diseases in contemporary society—the "spirit of the age."

These last issues, however, were not Karin Michaëlis's concern, although they were important parts of the background for the reactions and probably contributed quite considerably to the novel's extraordinary success. *Her* interest was women's real lives. Two retrospective evaluations formulated several decades later provide glimpses of the lasting importance of her work. In a review of her memoirs, *Little Troll*, the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* wrote in 1947 about the impact of Karin Michaëlis's work: "It is plain that hundreds of women have escaped from convention into living and fighting for themselves and others, and have been willing to document their own experience that others might not feel singular or shameful, because of the Danish author. . . . Many of her books will be read in Europe at least for a long time yet, and the phrase, 'the dangerous age,' will be used a million times to explain twists and turnings of human behavior."

In a portrait of Karin Michaëlis from 1948 in a German monthly, *Sie und Er*, what the book had meant to its audience is summarized: "Women who had so far been passive and resigned or embittered and self-destructive endured their changed state; men who no longer understood their formerly 'normal' wives were aroused from their torpor. The wise and sensitive authoress showed women the way to get older with dignity; she opened the

eyes of the men to their lack of instinct and their coldness; and she tried with tact and ingenuity to bridge the gulf between the sexes."

Finally, we should also compare Karin Michaëlis's version of making the private public with the renewed focus on female experience from the 1960s and onward—and the various responses to this cultural change.<sup>16</sup> In 1918, a Danish critic summarized a widespread negative reaction: "Mrs. Michaëlis revealed to the entire world in what direction taste and trends went in our country where erotic hysteria became still more widespread in our literature."<sup>17</sup> The young and already prominent critic Tom Kristensen may have had this or similar formulations in his mind when he wrote in 1925: "The resentment against private literature that has been dominating in our country since the turn of the century has first and foremost been directed against our female writers. . . . Under cover of this resentment a moralistic and narrow-minded reaction has tried to make them suspect. This has been a real danger for the freedom of Danish literature."<sup>18</sup>

The readers of *The Dangerous Age* in general seem to have been more grateful than the majority of the critics.

<sup>16</sup> Thus Phyllis Lassner in her introduction to the new American edition.

<sup>17</sup> Leopold, *Tres Talenter*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> *Politiken*, October 20, 1925, reprinted in *Mellem Krigen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1946), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Ursula Baumann, *Protestantismus und Frauenemanzipation in Deutschland 1850–1920* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1992), 206.

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VOLUME 2

FORMS AND THEMES

THE

# Novel

VOLUME 2

FORMS AND THEMES

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Franco Moretti

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