

**Original citation:**

Stone, Katherine (2018) *Writing rape, troping history : story, plot, and ethical reading in Julia Franck's 'Die Mittagsfrau' (2007)*. *German Quarterly*, 91 (2). pp. 153-169. doi:[10.1111/gequ.12065](https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12065)

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The prologue of Julia Franck's *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007) apposes social and historical taboos: a German woman is raped by Red Army soldiers and then abandons her infant son. This prologue exists in a metonymical relationship to the main narrative, which unflinchingly relates the degradations to which the woman is subjected from infancy: sexual exploitation by her older sister; psychological abuse at the hands of her mentally-ill mother; sexual harassment by a family friend; the death of her father and first love; physical and emotional abuse by her eventual husband; and marginalization as a "Mischling" in the Third Reich. By means of the prologue, these events are causally related to the plot of maternal abandonment, which has been the focus of much scholarship. For Heffernan, *Die Mittagsfrau* is above all concerned to examine the personal and historical contours of maternal experience. Franck presents a "historia matris" (or maternal microhistory) of the long-twentieth century, showing how women's lives are "shattered by the harsh realities of war" (151). In the process, Franck highlights the destructiveness of patriarchal gender relations, which fracture family relationships and obscure women's stories of trauma (see Eidukevičienė 42). In her research, Merley Hill foregrounds the feminist impulses of Franck's writing, which presents "all identities as mutable, as they are dependent upon and undermined by the spaces in which they are performed" (*Playing House* 11). The female protagonists in *Die Mittagsfrau* in fact struggle to maintain equilibrium in a culture that denies them personal recognition as women and negates their humanity as "racially unpure" beings.

In this article, I concentrate on Helene's multiple experiences of sexual violence. This topic is frequently an afterthought in criticism, despite its recurrence throughout Franck's *oeuvre*.<sup>1</sup> Only Krimmer examines the depiction of wartime rape in *Die Mittagsfrau* in any depth. She discusses this aspect of the novel in relation to a post-Unification literary tendency to frame the past in intimate terms that risk obfuscating ethical distinctions between victims and perpetrators. I would add that Franck's representation of sexual violence raises broader

ethical questions, since it serves to elucidate a woman's shocking decision to abandon her child. The chronological story opens with an indication of the main protagonist's sexual exploitation by her older sister and ends shortly after her gang rape by Soviet soldiers. What is more, Franck extensively and graphically describes individual episodes of harassment and exploitation within chapters that span several years. This narrative excess warrants what Bal calls a "hysterical reading" of sexual violence that does not "read for the main line or the proposition, it reads for the detail" (63). Such details operate as a "major sign" for wider patterns of structural and symbolic violence, Bal argues. She writes that, "for a culture that is struggling with acute problems such as frequent rape, [a hysterical reading of sexual violence] is significant, even if the details used are not," for it acknowledges that representation and interpretation are integral aspects of the problem of violence and how society responds to it (74).

Narrative theorists Phelan and Rabinowitz incorporate such extradiegetic concerns into their reconceptualization of plot as "progression." This concept emphasizes both "textual dynamics," that is, the trajectory of the story, and "readerly dynamics," the course of the ideal audience's response ("Time, Plot, Progression" 58). If stories are those incidents in which characters are involved, progression refers to the way those stories are configured to have an effect on the imagined reader. Accordingly, Phelan and Rabinowitz understand narrative as a form of rhetoric that operates through the intersecting affective, structural, tropological, and hermeneutic levels of a text ("Narrative as Rhetoric" 3). The ethical dimensions of this rhetorical exchange are my concern in this article. I explore how the representation of sexual violence in *Die Mittagsfrau* operates on the following levels: the mimetic, that is, how it reflects the world as we think to know it; the thematic, in other words how it represents broader ideas; and the synthetic, which refers to how the narrative is constructed and made (im)plausible (Phelan and Rabinowitz "Narrative as Rhetoric" 7). The gaps and tensions that emerge as the

narrative shifts between these dimensions provide the basis for a broader exploration of the ethics of reading and the ethics of representing sexual violence more generally.

## I.

*Die Mittagsfrau* has three constituent parts. The narrative time of the prologue covers one day in April 1945 when a young woman, referred to as Alice, and her infant son, Peter, prepare to leave Stettin (now Szczecin) on a refugee train to western Germany. Soon after they board, Alice leaves to buy tickets. She never returns. The main body of the novel comprises an extended flashback that charts the increasing alienation of a young girl called Helene, whom we soon realize is identical with Alice. The brief epilogue recounts what happened after Helene abandoned Peter, now a teenager. While the middle section is focalized through the eyes of Helene, the prologue and epilogue foreground her child's perspective. The action of the prologue is interspersed with associative reminiscences that map the formative period of Peter's life against the backdrop of war. Franck powerfully describes Peter's fear during the air raids, which he endures alone because of his mother's work as a nurse. He also witnesses her gang rape by Red Army soldiers:

Er sah drei Männer um den Küchentisch, darauf seine Mutter, sie saß halb, halb lag sie. Der nackte Po eines Mannes bewegte sich auf Peters Augenhöhe vor und zurück, dabei wackelte das Fleisch so heftig, dass Peter lachen wollte. Doch die Soldaten hielten seine Mutter fest. Ihr Rock war zerrissen, ihre Augen weit geöffnet, Peter wusste nicht, ob sie ihn sah oder durch ihn hindurch blickte. Aufgesperrt war ihr Mund — aber sie blieb stumm (24).

Peter's lack of awareness counteracts any possible bathos, a narrative choice that reflects Franck's self-consciously clinical approach to sexual and emotional themes (sometimes jarring given her feminist credentials). In an interview with Merley Hill, Franck discusses her sense that female authors have to walk a fine line between "Beiläufigkeit und Nüchternheit" in order

to preclude gendered accusations of sentimentality and sensationalism (“The Wonder (of) Woman” 234). This sober style has ethical implications in the present context. Peter’s perception of his mother’s assault markedly contrasts with the language used to convey the adults’ fear of the Red Army in descriptions such as, “der Brückenkopf war gesprengt, vor der Stadt lauerte die Rote Armee, die Wut der Ausgehungerten, als erstes drängen die Geschichten ein, wie sie Blut geleckert hatten, wie sie sich vorwärtsschlügen, dass man sich fürchten sollte” (581).<sup>2</sup> Such ideologically resonant passages signal Franck’s manipulation of an established “rhetoric of rape.” Sielke coined this term to emphasize the history of representations and interpretations that shapes any narrative about sexual violence and that therefore risks obscuring the personal reality of sexual violence in the very act of representing it (10). In post-1945 Germany, discourse surrounding wartime rape has been particularly fraught. Revisionists readily exploited its individualized character (and the situational demarcation of victim and perpetrator) to overwrite German crimes with accounts of Allied brutality on German soil.<sup>3</sup> From a historical and politico-ethical perspective, however, it is necessary to note that many German civilians supported the Third Reich and enabled the atrocities perpetrated in its name. Emphasizing a causal connection between civilian complicity in Nazi crimes and their suffering at the end of the war is nonetheless ethically dubious. It may obfuscate such human rights abuses and their very real physical and psychological consequences.

As Krimmer details, Franck devises skillful aesthetic solutions for these potential ethical pitfalls (37). Helene is a “Mischling” of the first degree. She only escapes social marginalization due to her relationship with Wilhelm, who tolerates Helene’s murky family history and procures false identity papers for her. She is thus able to escape the terrible fates of her relatives: Martha, her older sister, and Fanny, her aunt, are deported, while her mentally-ill mother, Selma, is euthanized. As a nurse, however, Helene assists during sterilization operations on eugenically “undesirable” women like herself. Franck thus complicates

stereotypical and ideological narratives that conflate victimhood with innocence. As a matter of fact, after Helene's attack, Peter finds one of the assailants curled up by the door, crying. Such images are left to speak for themselves. The lack of explanatory narrative typifies the "surface realism" of Franck's writing, which "magnifies details microscopically and only hints at the protagonists' inner depths" (Biendarra 214).

This "surface realism" risks turning the violated female body into a spectacle. After all, the rape scene is structured around Peter's desire to see and know what is happening to his mother behind the closed door of their home ("durch den Spalt, den das herausgebrochene Schloss hinterlassen hatte, wollte Peter etwas erkennen," 26). His confusion — and his infantile desperation to be close to his mother — compel him to continue looking. Reflecting on his longing to see, the narrative accentuates the epistemic desire that propels our reading and consumption of traumatic (hi)stories. The theatrical image of cigarette smoke blocking Peter's view, not to mention the two other soldiers standing around the table, further emphasizes the voyeuristic stance of the reader. Franck self-consciously draws attention to the illicit nature of the stories she tells at several points. When the sisters kiss in the garden after their father's funeral, for instance, Martha reminds Helene, "wir sind im Freien, alle können uns sehen" (188).<sup>4</sup> Through such comments, Franck confronts the reader with his or her own complicity in a cultural system that converts scandal and trauma into objects of passive consumption, potentially subduing the active ethical impulses associated with witnessing.

The use of the child narrator reinforces the ethical double bind of the reader in such moments. Peter's age creates a tension between his status as witness to his mother's trauma and his position as voyeur. As Walklate, McGarry, and Mythen note, bearing witness involves "seeing beyond what we see" (265). Peter seems unable to recognize the violence of the scene, however, which is conveyed synecdochically through the mention of Helene's torn skirt. His amusement at the clumsiness of the human body indicates his failure to understand the horror

of what he is witnessing, which prefigures his inability to integrate his mother's wider history of trauma into his own life story. His ignorance pushes the reader into what Rodosthenous calls "complicit voyeurism," whereby he or she must witness a violent act and grapple with the dehumanizing force of the voyeuristic gaze (6). When Peter asks himself whether his mother "ihn sah oder durch ihn hinsah," Helene appears transfixed, statue-like (24). For Tanner, the challenge when representing sexual violence is therefore to find a way to translate violence and pain into narrative form without producing "a choreography of bodily positions and angles of assault that serves as a transcription of the violator's story" (29). Franck risks falling into this trap, since only the perpetrators appear as agents, directing the scene, so to speak, as they remove Peter from the apartment.

In the prologue of *Die Mittagsfrau*, we do not gain unmediated access to Helene's perspective. We must infer her traumatization from her growing emotional distance from Peter, as well as her obsessive cleaning (see Krimmer 42). When a colleague talks about the brutality of the Red Army, Helene is silent about her personal experience. She implores her colleague to be quiet: "Um Himmels willen. Schweigen" (32). Such statements articulate the struggle to tell violent stories in which Franck engages. When later sections of the novel explore Helene's perspective, there is no mention of the rape as such. We merely read Helene reminding herself to tell Peter to buy a new lock (582). From the prologue, we know that the soldiers had forced out the lock when they first attacked her (27). By this point of the chronological story, however, Helene is mentally and physically exhausted. Marginalized and alone, "she is denied the possibility of sharing her own experiences with others by telling her own story, and she therefore cannot bear witness to her own experiences. As a result, her whole sense of self begins to collapse" (Meretoja 22).

The emotions explicitly associated with Helene's rape are confusion and guilt, both experienced by Peter. He chastises himself for forgetting to replace the lock and implicitly

blames himself for the return of the soldiers. The rape is a primal scene of sorts, whereby a child witnesses a parental sex act but is too young to understand anything apart from its apparent violence. According to Freud, as an enigma, this scene nonetheless triggers arousal in the child (158). The ability to tie witnessing to arousal is, of course, central to the Phallic Stage of development and there are several references in the novel to Peter's sexual desire for his mother. At the age of five, for example, he gets an erection when they lie in bed together (561). In the epilogue, Helene's reappearance reactivates Peter's position in the violent primal scene, which Freud believed to lie at the heart of childhood neurosis. When Helene visits on Peter's birthday, he escapes by fleeing to his favourite refuge, the hayloft, from which he is used to watching others, especially his uncle and classmate, Bärbel, whom he also observes at the beach. Peter becomes aroused and masturbates as he remembers the smell of his mother, imagines the reactions to his non-appearance, and senses his power over those who search for him but to whom he remains invisible (595). This mirroring effect suggests the life-long consequences of Peter's childhood traumas.

The psychological consequences of the gang assault are suggested primarily through Helene's decision to abandon Peter. The novel indeed implies that Helene's fear and revulsion in the face of male sexuality is one cause for her growing alienation from her son. References to her growing "Abscheu auf sein Geschlecht" (11) saturate the book and suggest how intimately the trauma of abandonment experienced by Peter is linked to the trauma of sex experienced by his mother. In the analeptic main narrative, moreover, the greatest hint that Helene is floundering in her maternal role comes when she and Peter inadvertently encounter a transport carrying forced laborers. When Helene comes face-to-face with a terrified, escaped victim, she is overcome by a vision of her sister and own alternative fate. She regresses into a primal state, fleeing desperately until Peter can no longer keep pace. Both ends of the novel



thus present Peter's abandonment as a form of necessity owing to Helene's traumatization as gendered and Jewish subject.

## II.

*Die Mittagsfrau* has an erotetic structure, a term Carroll uses to describe works that proceed by "generating questions that the narration then goes on to answer" (211). The prologue of *Die Mittagsfrau* begins a dialogue with the reader, formulating a series of questions: Why did Peter's father leave? What does his estrangement of from "Alice" have to do with her "Herkunft" — a term euphemistically evoked in the correspondence between the couple (18)? Why did "Alice" abandon her son? Julia Franck claims that "die Frage nach diesem absoluten Auslöschen eines Kindes ... war die Frage, der ich mich in meinem Buch nähern wollte" (Heidemann). In the remainder of this article, I demonstrate that sexual violence underpins the thematic and synthetic levels of *Die Mittagsfrau* and makes plausible its progression. In their trailblazing study *Rape and Representation* (1991), Higgins and Silver draw attention to the fact that "the simultaneous presence and disappearance of rape as constantly deferred origin of both plot and social relations is repeated so often as to suggest a basic conceptual principle in the articulation of both social and artistic representations" (3). They query the extent to which the narrative implications of sexual violence comes to take precedence over its mimetic consequences, thereby obscuring the victim and the downplaying the implications of sexual violence. In *Die Mittagsfrau*, the tension between the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic levels of the plot impels a complex ethical response to Helene as a character. Franck in fact intends the structure of her novel to subdue the emotional and moral impact of Helene's decision to abandon Peter, in particular: "Es war ja gerade wichtig, darüber auch Beteiligung, die Empathie des Leser (*sic*) zu wecken, weil ich als Autorin natürlich auch in gewisser Weise empathisch diese Geschichte erzählen muss, um überhaupt dieser Helene nahe zu kommen" (Opitz). Authorial intention is, of course, no guarantee of reader response.

As Eco reminds us, “closed texts” (despite their imagined teleology of reading) are “open to every pragmatic accident” (7). I nonetheless take Franck’s comments as a prompt for considering how the synthetic components of *Die Mittagsfrau* advance its purported ethical project.

The break between the prologue and the first chapter, which ostensibly treats a new character, Helene, is another mechanism that distances the reader from the drastic conclusion of the prologue. Such narrative instabilities invite the reader to arrange the two stories into a meaningful plot (“Time, Plot, Progression,” 59). The embedded narrative expands on the prologue, which suggests in condensed form the personal and historical factors that could lead a woman to abandon her child. In the subsequent narrative, we learn more about Helene’s multifaceted experiences of otherness, marginalization, and degradation. As a child, she is repudiated by her mother, whose sense of reality has been warped by grief at the loss of several male infants, as well as a lack of recognition by a small-minded local community that refers to her as “die Fremde” (70). As a girl, Helene additionally lacks worth in the eyes of her parents, who are dismissive of her intellect. The first section of the main narrative (“Die Welt steht uns offen”) establishes a pattern of being-looked-at that circumscribes feminine existence at the time. When Martha walks through the town, “dann sahen ihr nicht nur die jungen Männer nach und piffen fröhlich .... Auch die alten Männer übten Laute, die wie Ächzen und Grunzen klangen. ... Die Männer schnalzten und schmatzten, als schmeckten sie Sirup auf der Zunge” (73). This language dehumanizes the lecherous older men as they objectify Martha. When the girls move to Berlin, they are exposed to an institutionalized version of the male gaze through a leisure industry that turns the female body into a spectacle. While Fanny’s friend, Lucinde, dances naked at the revue, the outdoor swimming pool at Luna Park, where men gather to watch girls cavorting in their swimwear, is nicknamed the “Nymphenbecken” and “Nuttenaquarium” (270). As Bal argues, such a self-reflexive “visual poetics” enable audiences

to recognize the intrinsic relationship between women's cultural representation and sexual violence (91). As *Die Mittagsfrau* progresses, the narrative aesthetics indeed emphasize the traumatic potential of woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 11). In the final section of the main narrative ("Nachtfalle"), Franck describes the gaze of a family friend using visceral language: "Erich nagelte seinen Blick in Helene... Seine Augen stachen in Helenes Gesicht, bohrten sich in ihre Augen, in ihre Wangen, in ihren Mund" (434). The mechanical diction used to describe the force of his gaze prefigures the language used to describe the later marital rape. This mirroring effect creates a conceptual link between violence and the possessive male gaze.

At times, Franck hints at radical possibilities for female desire by showing how Helene seizes the gaze, particularly to admire Leontine. Furthermore, Helene feels empowered when she begins to work as a nude model for the Baron, "in dessen Gegenwart sie sich doch zum ersten Mal als Frau fühlte" (275). She longs for the Baron to seduce her but soon realizes that his infatuation is more cerebral than physical. As a result, "der Frühling flog vorbei; ohne Erwecken und Erwachen" (281). This line refers back to the girls' arrival in Berlin, when Martha had exclaimed, "das hier ist Frühlings Erwachen" (252). Embedded within the story of female sexual awakening, this allusion to Wedekind's play evokes the violence of human sexuality, initially embodied in Erich, who harasses Helene not long after she arrives in Berlin:

Einmal hatte er Helene gefragt, ob sie ihn begleiten wolle. Dafür hatte er einen Augenblick abgepasst, in dem Fanny nicht zugegen war, und er hatte dabei Helene so plötzlich und ungestüm seine Hand in den Nacken gelegt, dass Helene seither Begegnungen mit Erich fürchtete. Zwar beachtete er sie in Fanny's Beisein nicht im Geringsten, umso jäh aber fielen seine Blicke über Helene her, kaum dass Fanny ihnen den Rücken zukehrte (261).

Hereafter the narrative shifts to a trivial description of the temperature in Fanny's townhouse. There is something gratuitous about the way Franck seeks to involve the reader in such scenes before abruptly switching focus and encouraging the reader to direct his or her attention elsewhere. Franck's strategy of suggestion and deferral (repeated across sexual descriptions in the section "Kein schönerer Augenblick als dieser") heightens suspense and the complicity of the reader, who is encouraged to imagine the potential violence. He or she surely expects Erich to pounce again. The resulting tension mirrors (in distorted manner) the impatience felt by the dastardly protagonist as he stalks the object of his desire. Several pages later, Franck describes an interrupted assault by Erich, "der nun kaum noch eine ungestörte Gelegenheit fand, Helene in eine dunkle Ecke zu schubsen und ihr, während Fanny nur kurz in die Küche gegangen war, um nach Otta zu schauen, und Martha im Krankenhaus arbeitete und lediglich Cleo mit ihren aufmerksamen Augen und zuversichtlich wedelnden Schwanz Zeugin wurde, eine Hand auf die Brust zu legen" (273). Discussing Franck's short-story "Für sie und für ihn" (2000), Biendarra eloquently describes a similar use of hypotatic sentences as a form of "expositional foreplay" that mimicks the pleasure of the sexual encounter (219). Here, as Fanny's return interrupts Erich, a prolepsis disrupts the narrative, withholding resolution for another six chapters. The conventional readerly pleasures associated with closure are thus tied to, and complicated by, the degradation of the central protagonist.

At one of Fanny's parties, Helene feels wary, "weil Erich sie über den ganzen Abend mit seinen gierigen Augen verfolgte" (369). When she goes in search of Martha and Carl, he follows her and the narrative describes over a paragraph the cat and mouse game that ensues as a panicked Helene attempts to evade him (371). She is successful and the narrative focus again switches from Erich to Helene's discovery that her fiancé Carl has been indulging in recreational drugs with Martha and Leontine. These digressions offer limited narrative space for the reader to continue to reflect on Erich's torment and Helene's ongoing psychological

response to it. This cynical form of narration sometimes appears more concerned with unfolding the story of Helene's abuse than actually telling the story of its consequences. It generates a form of narrative "counterpleasure," a term that MacKendrick uses to describe narratives that are "unproductive" in conventional terms, withholding answers and refusing easy ethical fixes, thereby shaking readers out of moral complacency (114). An ethical response to the narrative problem of sexual violence thus depends on the reader being able to "see through the manipulative strategies to which they have been exposed, and thereby to acknowledge their propensity to succumb to such textual mechanisms" (Tancke 128).

The first chapter in "Nachtfalle" contains the most extensive description of Erich's abuse. Franck draws out the narrative striptease to absurd lengths by again focusing on the cat, Cleo, who "eher flehend als fröhlich mit dem Schwanz wedelte" (422). The coincidence of the German words for tail and penis playfully evokes Erich's arousal. The verb "wedeln" is indeed used in a colloquial expression for masturbation ("sich einen von der Palme wedeln"). These allusions emphasize the self-directed nature of Erich's desire. Such digressions and word play are, moreover, the locus of a narrative pleasure disturbingly related to the abuse of a fictional other. The seductive excess of Franck's description at these moments points to "the way in which narrative can be made to serve such a mastering movement" (Jonsson 265). Even as abjecting descriptions of Erich discredit the possessive, coercive nature of his desire, it is thus reinscribed in the narrative — as its impetus.

Literary language disintegrates as Erich prepares to launch his assault: "Er machte von Zeit zu Zeit unbestimmte Geräusche, mhm, so als sage sie etwas, mhm und mhm, stimme er ihr zu, mhmhm, mhmhm, vielleicht war es eher ein ablehnendes mhm, ein erwartungvolles mhm, mhmhm, mhm" (423). Franck mimics pornographic language here, recording Erich's bodily movements and sounds as he seeks gratification from Helene. This aesthetic involves the reader in an intimate manner with the psyche of the perpetrator, who imagines that Helene's

desire matches his own, an idea that is crucial to pornography (Bracher 108). Likewise, the descriptions of Erich's assaults are episodic in nature, tending to emerge out of the narrative. The repetitive subplot involving Erich ultimately "ends nowhere," another standard trope of pornographic writing (Sontag 39). He has little role in the plot apart from as abuser and eventually disappears from the novel. When Fanny interrupts the above encounter, she misinterprets it as reciprocal and fails to respond to Helene as a victim. Although Fanny and Erich spend the night arguing, we are told that "das war nichts Ungewöhnliches," a cynical comment on the extent to which sexual and other violence is normalized by the society depicted (425).

The mimesis of pornographic conventions in this scene is ultimately disruptive, begging the question whether we should take it seriously or as parody. In this regard, there are parallels between *Die Mittagsfrau* and the approach to violent sexuality in Elfriede Jelinek's *Lust* (1989). Borrowing the term from Deleuze, Hanssen describes Jelinek's appropriation of pornographic structures as "pornological," for they do not serve the purposes of obscenity nor the illicit but rather a higher function (96). For Deleuze, this higher function is the rhetorical formation of "a 'glorious body' for pure minds ... the act by which language transcends itself as it reflects a body" (281). I would argue that the feminist-inclined writing of Franck and Jelinek is poronological in a different way (anti-pornological, perhaps) because it does not produce the "glorious body" but ultimately the body in pain as the locus of desubjectification. Later in the aforementioned scene, Helene's thoughts briefly undercut the description of Erich's physical movements and fetishized perspective on her body. As a means of dissociation, her mind processes the assault from the scientific point of view of anatomy: "Torso, ging es Helene durch den Kopf, und sie musste an die anatomischen Modelle denken, anhand deren ihnen in der Ausbildung der menschliche Körper gezeigt worden war, wo das Herz schlug ohne Kopf und Denken. Gliedmaßen hatten mit ihrer Funktion ihre Bedeutung

verloren" (424-34). After Fanny interrupts Erich, we are told that "Helene verfluchte ihr Dasein, sie schämte sich für ein Leben, das sie ohne großes Dazutun atmen, arbeiten und mit der Zeit wieder Flüssigkeit zu sich nehmen und schlafen ließ. Sie schämte sich, weil sie etwas dafür konnte, sie wusste, wie der Tod herbeizuführen war" (425-6). These reflections echo du Toit's description of sexual violence as a form of "spirit injury" that reduces a woman's sense of self to the experience of a body "with its pain and humiliation" (85). The combination of Helene's thoughts with Erich's lusty words represents the central ethical tension of Franck's novels, in which the perspective of the victim risks displacement by the erotic pull of violence.

The combination of objective and pornographic diction pushes the reader into a deeper confrontation with the inner workings of the text and its intertextual relation to social discourses about sex and violence. The fault lines between antipathetic codes (the pornographic speech recorded from the perspective of the violated woman, on the one hand, and the objective language of science applied to the subjective experience of abuse, on the other) characterize what Roland Barthes calls the "text of bliss," into which the reader dissolves (14). This bliss can be double-edged, for instabilities in the narrative (namely, the switch back to Helene's perspective) may make the reader aware of how far he or she has been carried away by the text and to what ends. According to Barthes, the text of bliss "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories" (14). Franck's darkly compelling narrative, which locates the fulfilment of narrative desire in the representation of violence, also challenges the reader's relation to ethics. As the regard of the (literary) witness becomes complicit in the eroticizing and subjugating gaze of the sexual perpetrator, he or she is exposed. The distinctive "surface realism" of Franck's novel increases the risk of such exposure, for it restricts access to the narrative depth in which the reader might hope to seek refuge from the textual and ethical onslaught.

### III.

Franck utilizes several structural devices to signal the centrality of sexual violence to her narrative and ethical project. Sexual violence frames Helene's biography. The very first pages of the embedded narrative indicate the incestuous character of the relationship between Martha (sixteen) and Helene (seven), describing their entangled bodies and the placement of Helene's hands "auf Marthas nackten Bauch, Marthas Hüfte, Marthas Schenkel" (44). As in the descriptions of Erich's harassment, Franck employs the pornographic logic of fetishization to compel the reader to adopt an uncomfortable voyeuristic position that potentially subdues his or her ethical response to the inappropriate relationship and its mode of representation. Discussing the short-story "Bäuchlings" from Franck's collection *Bauchlandung* (2000), Biendarra avers the subversive potential of the incest theme, which disrupts the male economy of desire (216-17). The paedophilic twist on this theme in *Die Mittagsfrau* surely compels a different reading. The sibling relationship hardly reimagines the coercive and possessive structures conventionally associated with male desire. In fact, Martha exploits Helene's curiosity and desire for knowledge in order to advance her own gratification. Towards the end of this long first chapter, when Martha first kisses her sister, Helene's associative reminiscences imply the violence inherent in her actions. Helene remembers a trip to the river with Martha and her then boyfriend, Arthur. Both treat her like a plaything, forcing her to eat strawberries. The feeling of Martha's tongue in her mouth in the narrative present makes Helene think back to when she had bitten Arthur's finger as he tried to push the fruit past her lips. She considers biting down on Martha's tongue, "aber sie konnte nicht, etwas gefiel ihr an Marthas Zunge und zugleich schämte sich Helene" (89). The incestuous relationship contributes to Franck's efforts to deconstruct gender binaries in her depiction of violence, which culminates in Helene perpetuating the sort of maternal violence to which Selma had subjected her as a child.

The enigmatic structure of *Die Mittagsfrau*, which presents the moment of abandonment as the logical consequence of all that has come before, encourages a figurative reading of other



narrative events and their contexts. Each instance of sexual violence described in the novel is contiguous, gradually building on Helene's degradation and building up a powerful and disturbing impression of ethical relations within the society depicted. The "surface realism" of *Die Mittagsfrau* does not lend itself to extended philosophical or political reflections on the structural forces that underpin Helene's victimization as gendered and Jewish subject. In an interview with Stacey Knecht, however, Franck acknowledges that her approach to historical subject matter is shaped by the concept of microhistory developed by Carlo Ginzburg. Her writing aims to demonstrate "how history becomes history. And how the history of a society can be mirrored in a very private, personal history" (cited in Heffernan 250). In *Die Mittagsfrau*, Franck illuminates structural violence at the collective level through the metaphorical lens of exploitative intimate relationships.

The metonymic drift from the personal to the historical in Franck's treatment of sexual violence is perhaps most obvious in Helene's relationship with her eventual husband. Readers have emphasized the symbolic effect of secondary characters like Wilhelm. Writing for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Blutge recognizes that "die Geschichten der Figuren stehen bei alldem nicht für sich, sondern sind in Raum und Zeit eingebunden." In particular, Wilhelm's "Aryan" appearance and work as an engineer for the state mark him out as the token Nazi of the novel, and therefore as a synecdoche for the regime. Since explicit historical references are rare in *Die Mittagsfrau*, it is therefore telling that Franck interweaves a brief enumeration of the events marking the coming to power of the Nazi party with a description of Wilhelm's persistent courtship. The fact that the enthusiastic Nazi Wilhelm turns a blind eye to the racial background of his sweetheart suggests that he is driven not by political ideals but self-interest. Helene's actual family history is immaterial to him. He has fallen in love with a specter, an ideal of femininity to which Helene, in her introversion, corresponds. He imposes an identity on Helene, re-naming her Alice in a move that cements the fragmentation of her subjectivity,

especially since this identity belonged to a murdered childhood acquaintance. This renaming is a distorted reflection of Selma's refusal to name Helene when she was born, on the one hand, and the 1938 executive order forcing all Jewish citizens to adopt a Jewish name.

The graphic depiction of the wedding night emphasizes the extent to which Helene is raw material upon which Wilhelm wishes to build: "Wie ein Hammer einen Nagel in die Wand trieb er sein Geschlecht Schlag und Schlag gleichförmig in sie. Kein weiteres Geräusch, nur sein Hammer, die Decke und die Matratze" (481). The use of metaphor distinguishes this scene from previous sexual descriptions narrated in plain, referential language. This linguistic shift occurs mid-way through the narration of the wedding night and once Wilhelm realizes that Helene is not a virgin. At this point, his fantasy of her dissolves. The metaphors of the hammer and nail emphasize the extent to which Wilhelm has reduced Helene to sign status, thus illuminating what is at stake in the trafficking between the "figurative" and the "real" (see Bal 80). The glimpses of Helene's perspective in these passages reveal her inertia; they are laconic reflections on the comparison between a previous lover who had undressed her and Wilhelm, who merely lifts up her skirt. Afterwards, Helene merely goes through the motions, apathetic. The one-sidedness of the description seeks to plunge the reader into the same torpor experienced by Helene.

The figurative language used in this passage suggests a direction for reading Wilhelm's relationship to Helene within the rhetorical framework of the novel. Wilhelm, who as an engineer also represents an instrumental technological rationality, is the most extreme embodiment of the exploitative impulses that permeate *Die Mittagsfrau*. He reduces Helene to a body, henceforth referring to her with derogatory terms such as "Fötzlein" (501) and "Tier" (500). Helene experiences her dehumanization within the home as a reflection of her socio-political position: "Die Juden als Gewurm, der Parasit bin ich, Helene dachte es nur, sie sagte es nicht. Körper und Völkskörper hielten keinem Vergleich stand" (504). As du Toit argues,

the “spirit injury” caused by sexual assault, the unmaking of the self, is facilitated by a prehistory of dehumanization, in other words, “the victim’s prior knowledge and recognition (remembrance) of herself as subhuman and instrumental — a prior knowledge contained within the dominant symbolic order” (86). Despite Helene’s sense that her fate is insignificant, readers have in fact read the abusive marriage metaphorically. In *Die Welt*, for instance, Wulf concludes his discussion of Wilhelm with the assertion that “die NS-Zeit wird für [Helene] zu einer nicht enden wollenden Demütigung.” The unremitting nature of the assaults on Helene paints a claustrophobic picture of a society lacking in moral coherence and from which the characters are unable to extricate themselves. The metonymic structure of the novel makes each successive experience of violence appear inevitable within the toxic narrative universe, a point to which numerous reviews testify. Writing for the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Neubert states that “man glaubt [Franck], dass sich Selma Würsich vor ihrer neugeborenen Tochter ekelt und dass diese Tochter dreißig Jahre später ihren kleinen Sohn auf einem Bahnsteig zurücklässt, weil sie weder ihn noch sich selbst ertragen kann” (see also Spoerri, Korsmeier, Blutge, Schröder). Under this reading, the eventual abandonment of Peter becomes “acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story” (Ricoeur 67).

For Franck, however, it was nonetheless important to counterbalance Helene’s story with Peter’s perspective, especially given the autobiographical roots of the novel: “Der Junge entscheidet sich am Ende gegen seine Mutter, sicher auch aus Gründen der Würde. Und das ist etwas, was mir sehr wichtig war, weil ich auch von meinem Vater weiß, dass er sie nie wieder sehen wollte, dass sich in ihm alles gegen sie gewendet hat, weil er diese Entscheidung unter keinen Umständen unter keinem Preis, nachvollziehen wollte.” The reader who follows this invitation is left in an awkward position, for a novel that uses the main narrative to elucidate the victimization of its protagonist ends by showing figures withdrawing empathy from her. In the epilogue, neither Peter nor his guardians are willing nor able to consider the reasons behind

Helene's actions. The structural prominence of Peter's trauma threatens to overwrite Helene's story.

A number of mainstream reviews indeed display frustration with Franck's approach to Helene. Neubert laments that, "just in den Momenten, in denen ihre Bilder am stärksten zu wirken beginnen, ... dort lässt die Autorin ihre Heldin im Zwischenraum des Schweigens allein stehen." Meanwhile Schröder describes the novel as "ein irritierendes, unsinnliches Leseerlebnis. .... Das Leidenspotential, das hinter diesen Geschehnissen steckt, erscheint als bloße Behauptung und nicht als literarisch ausgearbeitete Gefühlslage." Magenau is similarly disappointed with the novel's lack of psychological intimacy: "Nach dem Prolog, in dem Helene ihren Sohn verlässt, hat ihre Lebensgeschichte zwangsläufig die Funktion, Erklärungsansätze für diese Tat zu liefern. Doch eben das gelingt nicht." These frustrations result in part from the tension between the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic elements of the plot. The muting of Helene's subjectivity is arguably a by-product of the enigmatic structure of the novel, which presents individual and historical trauma as explanations for the privileged narrative problem of Peter's abandonment. The subordination of character to plot is of course prescribed in neo-Aristotelian theories of mimesis, which Ricoeur maintains is "directed more at the coherence of the muthos than at its particular story" (41). What is more, in an aside he notes in an aside that the question of causal connection in narrative is rather "embarrassing" (42). The desire to conceive a causal connection between narrative actions and events reveals the connection between mimetic activity and ethical and political reality, for to understand the logical requirement of a narrative's conclusion is to draw on ethical qualifications that "come from the real world" (47). Events like violence that exceed their textuality, and their resultant affective force, are perhaps more likely than most to breach the boundary between the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds. Our own ethical anxieties are revealed when a text causes us to perceive characterization not as part of the neutral activity of emplotment but instead as a

relation of power. Parra compellingly argues that works that defamiliarize the structural relation of character and plot make possible questions about the conditions of subjectivity and intelligibility (348). For, if imagination is necessary for any act of empathy, then a text's failure to provoke this feeling confronts us with the potential limits of our ethical being. In these moments, our imagination may fail "to produce the real" in response to the representation of violence (352). Thus, the reader may be confronted with his or her own unstable, complicated, and ultimately awkward ethical positioning. By placing the reader in a position where sympathy might fail, Franck implicates him or her in a symbolic network that enables violence.

On the surface, ending on this awkward note is somewhat unsatisfactory. After all, it is entirely possible that the feeling of awkwardness will close down the rhetorical exchange generated through the interplay of textual and readerly dynamics. Do we not prefer to turn away from that which is uncomfortable, embarrassing, or difficult? Rather than let such awkwardness just *be*, Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle have suggested that *theorizing* the awkward in relation to literature can be useful and perhaps even generative because it troubles the "failure/success" paradigm for measuring the political or ethical effectiveness of a work: "Awkwardness draws attention to normative representations of sexuality, gender, and race, and to the power of prescriptive regimes of representation, while also representing the collapse of standard discursive frameworks that might easily describe these representations" — and their effects on a reader (133). They thus urge critics to devise hermeneutical approaches that do not attempt to smooth over the contradictions and circularity of such works in the unfulfilled search for "meaning or evaluation." Rather we should examine narrative awkwardness as productive, as constituting a form of political intervention, since "the only position left for readers leaves them implicated" (144).

The discomfort or embarrassment that may remain after reading *Die Mittagsfrau* brings us back to the very real and very difficult issues raised by the representation of violence.

Reflecting on the awkwardness of our own roles as readers enables an ethical and indeed political response to texts that might at first glance resist such modes of reading. As Tanner argues, representations of sexual violence “may be read oppositionally if the *reader* is self-conscious about his or her own role in the construction of textual meaning” (15). To draw such a conclusion is not to resist or suppress the workings of a given text, but to acknowledge that its aesthetic and ethical value resides in the way that it may work on the reader, emotionally and intellectually.

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## Notes

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1 In *Der neue Koch* (1997), the narrator remembers being sexually harassed by the son of the local undertaker. In *Liebediener* (1999), Beyla accuses her father as sexual abuse. Albert later tells her erotic stories based on fantasies of non-consensual sex. In *Rücken an Rücken* (2011), Ella is abused by her step-father as a child and raped by a lodger as a teenager.

2 As Garraio notes, "after the October Revolution, Russia (and, eventually, the Soviet Union) emerged as a catalyst for fears, the Eastern "monster" incarnate, as anticommunism gradually took on orientalist connotations" (50).

3 Grossmann states that "in the post-war period, women's stories were combined with men's more openly validated tribulations on the eastern front and as prisoners of war to construct a new national community of suffering that served not only to avoid confrontation with Nazi crimes, but also, of course, as a strategy for reauthorizing and reestablishing the unity of the *Volk*" (62).

4 On voyeurism as a theme in Franck's works, see Norman.