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Sabine Kebir: Ein akzeptabler Mann? Streit um Bertolt Brechts Partnerbeziehungen

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Schlimm, daß sich ein Steinberg für Broderick
hergeben muß: aber dann doch bitte unter Pseudonym!

Claudia Schaab
Universität Hamburg/
Washington University

Kebir, Sabine. Ein akzeptabler Mann? Streit um Bertolt Brechts Partnerbeziehungen. Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1987. 194 pp.

After the flurry of articles and books from West Germany and the USA dealing with Brecht and women, this study is a welcome addition from a GDR point of view. Kebir gives away the answer to her title question in the introduction in which she states the basic motif of Brecht's love poetry as "die Suche nach der Ebenbürtigkeit der Liebenden, der Grundbedingung der Emanzipation überhaupt" (15). This is, then, essentially an apologia for Brecht's inconsiderate treatment of the numerous women in his life.

Kebir devotes chapters to individual women, with illustrations from Brecht's poetry: Marie Rose Aman, Paula Banholzer and Marianne Zoff, Marieluise Fleißer and Elisabeth Hauptmann, Helene Weigel, Margarete Steffin, and Ruth Berlau. The considerable value of the contributions of almost all of these women to Brecht's work as collaborators of one kind or another has been well documented, and Kebir does not spend much time reiterating it. Particularly interesting is Kebir's rebuttal of a significant segment of North American feminist Brecht criticism (Laureen Nussbaum, Sara Lennox), whom she summarily condemns: "Oft erscheint mir jedoch auch der feministische Zorn auf Brecht als bloße Entsprechung zum kleinbürgerlichen Neid, dem seine polygame Lebensweise ausgesetzt ist" (74).

Kebir makes a superficially persuasive case for her argument that Brecht respected the individuality and autonomy, the intellectual and artistic equality of his female partners--after all, no woman was forced to stay with him if she did not like the way he treated her. But Kebir tends to undermine her own position with contradictory assertions: "...zumal Brecht dieselben

Freiheiten, die er für sich in Anspruch nahm, nicht ohne weiteres zuzugestehen bereit war--in dieser Hinsicht war er ein ziemlich traditioneller Mann" (84). There is, in fact, an indecisive back-and-forth in Kebir's study between Brecht as partner and as exploiter which probably comes fairly close to corresponding to the reality of Brecht's complex and contradictory attitudes towards and relationships with women all his life.

Kebir addresses the "pornographic" Gedichte über die Liebe which caused a minor furor not long ago; she finds the bourgeois shock reaction to have been overwrought but expectable as the logical response of a conservative value system which Brecht opposed. One chapter is devoted to Brecht's attitudes towards women's clothing, and one is almost disappointed to learn that "für kokette, knapp gehaltene Reizwäsche hatte Brecht auch weiterhin nichts übrig" (177); on the contrary, according to Kebir, "der wesentlichste Zug Brechtscher Bekleidungstheorie hat darin bestanden, daß Kleider vor allem den Körper schützen und reichlich bedecken sollten" (176). And we learn that Brecht was a coat freak; he had a tailor who was commissioned to make "lange, schwarze Marengo-Mäntel" for most of his women friends (178).

Kebir concludes what ultimately sounds more like an editorial than a scholarly study with the following: "Ich kann mir nicht helfen, nach allem Für und Wider--durch die Frühnebel dieser neuartig tastenden Dichtung sehe ich doch immer wieder die Silhouette eines akzeptablen Mannes schimmern!" (190). She is unlikely to have changed many readers' minds with this book, but it bears reading, despite the absence of an index and somewhat more careless typographical and factual errors than one might have wished for.

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