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"Like a Stone Thrown into Water": The Testimony of Magnus Hirschfeld

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Introduction ↑

It was in 1896 that Magnus Hirschfeld, a Jewish medical doctor in Magdeburg, published the pamphlet *Sappho und Sokrates* under a pseudonym. In the preface to a later work, Hirschfeld explains to the reader that he ". . . was moved to write [*Sappho und Sokrates*] by the suicide of a young officer, one of my patients, who shot himself on the night he married, and left me his confession" (*Sex* xii). Hirschfeld describes *Sappho und Sokrates* as ". . . a stone thrown into water which, falling, sets up waves that go on spreading" (*Sex* xii). Hirschfeld's intention was to move homosexuality from the arena of illness to a natural condition. The work also serves a sociological function as an attempt by Hirschfeld to legitimize homosexuality to the bourgeois society at large. In this paper I wish to analyze one) what Hirschfeld meant to achieve via his writings, two) how he presents his theories, and three) to what extent his arguments were successful. To this end I will examine the writings of some of Hirschfeld's contemporaries.

Redefining the "Uranian" ↑

Hirschfeld founded his research largely on the works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer. Like Hirschfeld, Ulrichs was homosexual, and the prejudice that he encountered led him to analyze himself, others like him, and their position in society. In the 1860s, Ulrichs published his twelve-volume *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mann männlichen Liebe*. Ulrichs' theory, in brief, calls for the recognition of a "Third Sex", a term which Hirschfeld would also use. According to Ulrichs, homosexuals, or "Uranians" (*Urninge*), represent an intermediate, and therefore, third gender between the male and the female. Ulrichs felt that one's sexual orientation was innate, and therefore natural. This would become the basis for Hirschfeld's theory of sexuality. Through his works, Ulrichs hoped to emancipate homosexuals and win them the same societal respect enjoyed by heterosexuals. With the onset of Prussian rule in Hannover in 1866 and the subsequent introduction of

anti-homosexual laws, Ulrichs fled to Bavaria. Homosexuality was tolerated there until 1872, when the Prussian statutes were extended to all parts of Germany. Most notable of these was the infamous *Paragraph 175*, a law that made male-male sex acts criminal acts (Kennedy 109).

Such were the legal parameters in Germany about twenty years later when Magnus Hirschfeld published *Sappho und Sokrates*. It is therefore no surprise that he published under a pseudonym. Indeed, Hirschfeld never publicly came out regarding his homosexuality. As historian George Mosse notes, Hirschfeld's ". . . putative homosexuality made Sigmund Freud call him 'flabby and unappetizing'" (141). Hirschfeld revived Ulrich's ideas and published them with his friend Max Spohr in 1898. As historian James Jones states, the main impetus behind Hirschfeld's research is that which prompted him to publish *Sappho und Sokrates*--to remove the "tragic effects" of the link between homosexuality and mental disease (60). In her study *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology*, historian Charlotte Wolff calls Hirschfeld "the Humanitarian Physician" (33). She writes that he

. . . devoted himself to a revolutionary work plan which would combine the study of biology and psychology with reference to the many variations of human love. He decided to write about his findings in a form which would be understood by all. (33)

Unlike Ulrichs, Hirschfeld was a trained physician. He is best known for his work as the leader of the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* in Berlin, which he headed from 1919-1930. The Institute put into practice Hirschfeld's creed of *per scientiam ad justitiam*--through science to justice (Oosterhuis VI. 246). Through his Institute, his writings, and his many public speeches, Hirschfeld strove to make homosexuals appear "highly respectable" to society at large (Mosse 187).

Respectability and Homosexuality ↑

The notion of respectability was of paramount importance for Hirschfeld in order to fully realize emancipation and acceptance of the homosexual within bourgeois Wilhelmine German society. A person's respectability was two-tiered: respectability not only in the sense of being a good citizen, but also in the sense of one's sexual morality. Hirschfeld's portrayal of homosexuals is by no means flattering according to today's standards. Yet in all of his works, Hirschfeld interweaves conceptions of sexual morality, patriotism and images of ideal citizens. An ideal citizen in Wilhelmine Germany was of course someone who understood his or her place in society and who did not deviate from it. These were--and in some sense still remain--key traits of a respectable person. Hirschfeld hoped that if he could win a respectable image for homosexuals, he could ensure a first step toward their inclusion into heterosexual society.

The Respectability of Berlin's "Drittes Geschlecht" ↑

A prime example of Hirschfeld's literary strategy was his book *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht*, which was published in 1904. A colleague had urged him to produce a study that would be understood by the public at large. What followed is a highly enjoyable account of homosexual Berlin at the turn of the century. Hirschfeld uses a style akin to that of a tour book, accompanying heterosexual bourgeois Wilhelmine

society to the must-sees of homosexual Berlin. Hirschfeld explains to the reader that the *UranierIn* is so by nature, and that most lay a high value on keeping their nature a secret (*Berlin* 15). In doing so, a certain split-personality develops along the lines of *Berufsmensch* by day and *Geschlechtsmensch* by night. This could then manifest itself through same-sex love or transvestism.

Berlins Drittes Geschlecht offers many colorful accounts of the homosexual subculture. Yet it is how Hirschfeld integrates the life stories of individuals from this subculture that makes *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* such a significant book. Hirschfeld's descriptions of the meeting places and parties of the homosexual subculture engage the reader's attention. These narratives introduce the reader to Berlin's Third Sex. Hirschfeld presents the story of a love-struck eighteen-year-old boy (*Berlin* 34), takes the reader into the homes of committed same-sex relationships (*Berlin* 38-39), and tells of mothers of homosexuals,

die oft in überschwenglicher Weise das Glück preisen, daß ihr Sohn einen so großartigen Freund, ihre Tochter eine so ausgezeichnete Freundin gefunden; diese Freundschaft sei ihnen viel lieber, als wenn sich ihr Sohn mit Mädchen herumtriebe, ihre Tochter sich von Männern den Hof machen ließe. (*Berlin* 43-44)

There are many tales, most notable of which are the tearful ones. Hirschfeld invokes empathy from the reader by drawing on the foremost heterosexual family holiday: Christmas. Christmas is an event with which everyone can identify. By recounting tragic stories of Christmas, Hirschfeld depicts the dark side of the exclusion of homosexuals caused by § 175. It is precisely at Christmas, at a time for family, for belonging, that the homosexual feels the most alone. "Mehr als an jedem anderen Tage fühlt an diesem Feste der urnische Junggeselle sein einsames Los" (*Berlin* 50). The homosexual is fated to stand apart from society, apart from his/her family. Hirschfeld then narrates two different Christmas scenes. The first is that of two well-to-do homosexual partners, their friends and their servants. The second portrays a drunken student brought to the brink of suicide after his father learns of the student's sexual orientation (*Berlin* 57-61). These glaringly different depictions of the homosexual at Christmas function on different levels. Not only do they underscore the diversity of circumstance within the homosexual subculture, but they also underscore the need for societal compassion for homosexuals.

Hirschfeld ends *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* by quoting Jesus: "Wer unter Euch frei von Schuld ist, der werfe den ersten Stein auf sie" (139). Here, "sie" is no longer the adulteress from Jesus' parable, but homosexuals. This is clearly a response to the sexual transgression of adultery all too common within heterosexual bourgeois society. The reader is to ask him/herself if, after reading these cases, persecution of these individuals should be allowed to continue. More directly stated, the reader should ask him/herself if § 175 should be repealed. The homosexuals that Hirschfeld portrayed were good citizens, kept to themselves (not necessarily by choice), showed good personal taste, and personal control. According to the very bourgeois norms of the day, these were respectable men and women.

***Die Transvestiten: The "Third Sex" and the Law* ↑**

In 1910 Hirschfeld published *Die Transvestiten (Transvestites)*, a work based on

scientific method which featured case studies, analyses of these studies, and a discussion of the phenomenon of the transvestite. Hirschfeld coined the term "transvestite": "For the sake of brevity we will label this drive as transvestism (from "trans" = over or opposite, and "vesti" = clothing)" (*Transvestites* 124). He documents seventeen cases which range from: Mr. A, the typical "Uranian"; Mr. B., who was married; and Helen N., who said of herself: "I cannot report anything of much importance from my childhood, only that I had the one burning desire that I was really a boy" (cited in *Transvestites* 95). Hirschfeld links the urge to crossdress to the individual's childhood, noted that there was a sense of shame in each case, and connected these feelings of shame with one's sexual drive. In the chapter "Transvestism and Homosexuality," Hirschfeld analyses the case of Fräulein T., whose body is "thoroughly feminine," but whose mind "stands in glaring contradiction to her body" (*Transvestites* 153). As he had written in *Sappho und Sokrates*, Hirschfeld points out that "sexually abnormal persons who are forced into a lifestyle that stands opposed to their nature often thereby fall into depressed mental states that at times lead to suicide" (*Transvestites* 154). In this statement, Hirschfeld invokes empathy from the reader for Fräulein T., yet underscores the belief that Fräulein T. is indeed sexually abnormal. The point of Hirschfeld's argument is to defend Fräulein T.'s right to wear men's clothing: to deny her this right would lead an otherwise irreproachable individual to the brink of suicide (*Transvestites* 154). This is certainly an ambivalent portrayal of the transvestite, yet one that the bourgeois society of the day might accept. As in *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht*, Hirschfeld brings stories of suffering and suicide to the foreground to emphasize the tragic effects that societal exclusion and persecution have on homosexuals and transvestites.

After presenting case studies and scientific analysis, Hirschfeld applies his findings in a legal context. He discusses the issue of transvestism in the Bible and associates its condemnation to misinterpretation of Deuteronomy, the book of laws from the Old Testament (*Transvestites* 242). In the chapter "Transvestism and the Law," Hirschfeld cites cases from all over the world including cases in the United States, and concludes that:

Crossdressing in "free" England and America, too, even if it does not disturb the peace, is considered disturbing the peace. There, in general, of course, only men who are found out are punished, while women appearing as men come away with a reprimand or a warning.
(*Transvestites* 277)

While Hirschfeld trivializes the plight of the woman transvestite, he makes it clear that respectable men and women are unjustly persecuted, because they certainly do not "disturb the peace".

"Per Scientiam ad Justitiam" ↑

Hirschfeld's books and theories were read with great interest, but to what extent was Hirschfeld successful in normalizing homosexuality? Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the noted sexologist and author of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, had voiced approval of Hirschfeld's theories, which led him to rescind his own theory of homosexuality as a mental illness. One year before his death in 1901, Krafft-Ebing published an article in Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, stating that he now believed

homosexuality to be a natural occurrence (Jones 63). Freud was also a supporter of Hirschfeld's work, although he held Hirschfeld's theory to be incomplete (Wolff 65). Nonetheless, Hirschfeld's writings had influenced two of his most prominent contemporaries and were key in sparking the project of homosexual emancipation in Germany.

After World War I, homosexuality became very visible due to the more liberal spirit of the Weimar Republic. The number of homosexual bars in Berlin doubled from forty in 1914 to eighty in 1929. Some Germans saw this Weimar tolerance as a sign of decadence and decline (Mosse 131). Many homosexuals felt at ease in this more tolerant environment, where they could avoid the social schizophrenia of personal and private life. However, homosexuals remained outsiders of bourgeois society. Although the medical community (specifically Hirschfeld) now largely maintained that homosexuals were so by nature, the homosexual remained " . . . of no consequence for the human species or its culture" (Mosse 187). It is significant that Hirschfeld confines male homosexuals to a largely effeminate role. In one section of *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht*, Hirschfeld describes male homosexuals as a means for presumably heterosexual soldiers to remain true to their wives (96). He also lists the favorite women's names often taken on by male homosexuals as nicknames. In the case of the male homosexual, "manliness" was still largely denied to him. By depicting homosexual men as effeminate, heterosexual bourgeois society and the virile image of the heterosexual male would not be threatened. Hirschfeld would settle for separate lives for homosexuals from heterosexual society, but demanded an equal position for the homosexuals before the law.

Resisting the "Uranian Petticoat" ↑

Not all shared Hirschfeld's vision for homosexuals in society. Adolf Brand, an anarchistic gay activist, disagreed with the theories of Magnus Hirschfeld. Brand's theories reflect the masculine/nationalistic symbiosis prevalent in pre-Nazi and Nazi German society. As George Mosse explains in his work *Nationalism and Sexuality*, the image of a powerful nude male--as a warrior, for example--symbolizes a nation's vigor and aspirations. Masculinity and nationalism are therefore undeniably intertwined. However, such images carry homoerotic overtones, and German nationalists were quick to safeguard this ideal from any "feminine enfeeblement" (Mosse 18).

Hirschfeld and Brand worked in cooperation until 1903, when Brand was charged with distribution of "lascivious writings" and Hirschfeld would not testify on Brand's behalf (Oosterhuis I. 3). These writings were none other than *Der Eigene*, a journal which Brand published from 1896 to 1931. As a homosexual and a Jew, Hirschfeld was a double-outsider in society. As a Jew he was persecuted by heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. In response to Hirschfeld's refusal to testify, Brand published the poem "Der Übermensch," which " . . . praised manliness, condemned femininity, and toyed with anti-Semitism" (Mosse 42). The title and contents of the poem reveal the group's fascist leanings, proving that not all homosexuals were politically left of center. Ewald Tscheck, a regular contributor to *Der Eigene*, not only wrote in 1925 that Hirschfeld's Scientific Humanitarian Committee was a danger to the German people, but he also caricatured Hirschfeld as "Dr. Feldhirsch" in *Der Eigene* and ridiculed Hirschfeld in Brand's magazine *Die Tante (The Fairy)* (Oosterhuis I. 6). Contributors to *Der Eigene* made up the

Gemeinschaft der Eigenen, a homosexual elite that abhorred contemporary medical theories. No stranger to their attack was Magnus Hirschfeld and his theory of the effeminate Uranian. The *Gemeinschaft* did not describe themselves or others as "Uranian" or "homosexual," as these words had a strongly medical and feminine connotation. For the *Gemeinschaft*, their relations reflected the German traditions of *Lieblingminne* (chivalric love), and *Freundesliebe* (love of friends) (Oosterhuis II 30). Edwin Bab, an intellectual of Hirschfeld's niveau, wrote many articles for *Der Eigene*. Bab stresses the difference between the goals of the *Gemeinschaft* and those of Hirschfeld, whose Committee ". . . unjustly assigned 'uranian petticoats to profound minds and heroes'" (Oosterhuis II 31). However, Bab does recognize Hirschfeld's efforts toward the repeal of § 175. As to Hirschfeld's theory on homosexuality, Bab correctly points out that:

According to Dr. Hirschfeld, the homosexual is no longer mentally ill, but is indeed deformed, just like the owner of a harelip. . . . Dr. Hirschfeld has drawn the Urning from the prison and the madhouse and brought him into the offices of the medical doctor and philanthropist: truly a great step, but not yet the last. I have dared something further: out into fresh, thriving nature and into strong, pulsing, flourishing life. (66)

One recognizes Bab's appreciation for Hirschfeld's efforts, yet for Bab and the *Gemeinschaft*, the medical community had only taken the first of many necessary steps toward homosexual emancipation. Following Bab's argument, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* represents a complete response to the question of emancipation. The homosexual should not be considered to be an impaired individual, but rather a form of "strong, pulsing, flourishing life" (66). These words invoke a sense of urgency, a battle cry that charges homosexuals to be strong, virile, and full of life. Bab's writings, intended for homosexual readers, purposely lack the delicacy of Hirschfeld's works, which were intended for the heterosexual bourgeoisie.

Conclusion ↑

Although his theories are no longer scientifically valid, Magnus Hirschfeld represents the beginnings of the homosexual emancipation not only in Germany but also throughout the world. His writings come at a time when sexuality was widely discussed within medical circles (e.g. Krafft-Ebing and Freud) as well as in literary circles (e.g. Wedekind, Salome, and Schnitzler) in Germany and Austria. These works are more than scholarly works. They are an appeal to the heterosexual society for acceptance of the homosexual in society. The closing lines of *Die Transvestiten* reflect this sentiment: "The more we delve into the essence of personality, the more we learn that in this world . . . nothing is more attractive and worthier of knowing and experiencing than people" (424). From an age that questioned the exclusion of a sexual minority, Hirschfeld's testimony to the worthiness of all people still resonates today.

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