ANXIOUS MASCULINITY IN FRANK WEDEKIND’S \textit{SPRING AWAKENING}

\textbf{Abstract} Late-nineteenth-century Europe saw an unprecedented crisis in masculinity that resulted in an intensified fear of the feminine and of feminization. Triggered in part by the women’s movement, sexologists’ investigations into sexual pathologies, and the increasingly visible homosexual, this crisis was also exacerbated by a cult of masculinity that promoted a hypermasculinity unattainable by most. Using this crisis as the backdrop for his first critically acclaimed work \textit{Spring Awakening} (1891), Frank Wedekind chronicles the lives of several adolescents, and in particular several young boys, as they begin their journeys into puberty. Looking in particular at the various forms of masculinity Wedekind projects onto the young boys in \textit{Spring Awakening}, this article presents the marginalization of the ordinary male through characters who either express, reject, or combat the feminine dangers they perceive threatening their already precarious manhood.

\textbf{Keywords} \textit{Spring Awakening} (Frank Wedekind), Masculinity

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
~Henry David Thoreau~

Late-nineteenth-century Europe saw an unprecedented crisis of masculinity which resulted in an intensified fear of the feminine and of feminization. The impetus for this crisis came from many quarters. In part, it was triggered by the women’s movement which was speaking out with increasing enmity against patriarchal power structures.\textsuperscript{1} The rise of sexologists and their investigations into sex-

\textsuperscript{1} While there is plenty of evidence of men’s fear of women’s emancipation in the works of philosophers such as Otto Weininger, physicians such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and even phrenologists such as Cesar Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, Gerald Izenberg (2000) notes that the terror this movement evoked in many men was disproportionately large relative to the realistic threat the movement posed to male prerogatives.

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ual pathologies was another contributing factor in that they brought ever more to the fore men’s concerns with their own sexualities. The introduction of the term “homosexual” into the vernacular further added to this insecurity as it drew attention to individuals who appeared to express the ultimate transgression of the feminine into the masculine. Lastly, the rise of nation-states with their militaristic imperialism, their emphasis on social Darwinism and Nietzschean power worship also played critical roles as they prompted a cult of masculinity and an idealized masculinity unattainable by most men. It is in this setting of anxious masculinity, where the ordinary male felt his manhood placed into question by the feminists who were emulating him, the homosexuals he did not want to emulate and the alpha males he could not emulate that Frank Wedekind stages his first critically acclaimed work, *Spring Awakening* (1891).

Best known for plays that exposed the sexual hypocrisies of his day and specifically for his focus on the most taboo of sexual behaviors, Wedekind was a highly controversial figure in late-nineteenth-century theatrical circles. Provoking extreme reactions from critics and public alike, Wedekind was lauded by many as an *avant garde* artist but decried by just as many as a peddler of pornography. Even today one sees divergent responses in the scholarly community with some researchers reading Wedekind as a champion of women because his works acknowledge female sexuality and others construing him as a misogynist because he confines his female figures solely to their sexualities. While Wedekind’s male characters have not been excluded from these analyses, invariably scholarly investigations have examined them *vis-à-vis* their interactions with Wedekind’s female characters. Where Wedekind’s constructs of masculinity are concerned, and specifically, where the fears and anxieties of his male characters relative to their own masculinities are concerned, there has been a lacuna in Wedekind research. Addressing this gap in Wedekind scholarship, this investigation analyzes the various images of masculinity Wedekind presents in *Spring Awakening* and specifically the anxious masculinity he depicts as being triggered by a fear of the feminine and of feminization.

Set in the sexually repressive world of Wilhelmine Germany, *Spring Awakening* chronicles the lives of several adolescents as they begin their journeys into puberty. Lacking adult guidance, these teenagers struggle on their own to come to grips with the pubescent changes they are undergoing. Curious about the new urges

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2 In Germany, as Michael Kane (1999) notes, the nation itself was envisioned as a male body and the ideal German male as an expression and extension of that body.

3 Due to the sexually explicit nature of his works, most of Wedekind’s plays were not performed uncensored during his lifetime, except before private audiences. Indeed, for most of his professional life, Wedekind found himself battling censorship and even imprisoned once for *Majestätsbeleidigung* [insulting the majesty of the emperor]. For his part, however, Wedekind was proud of this reputation and even bragged to a friend: “at the moment there is no writer in Berlin with a more disreputable name than mine” (1924, pp. 280-281).

4 For those viewing Wedekind’s depictions of his female characters or his supposed denunciation of patriarchy in a more positive light see, among others, Völker (1965) and Lorenz (1976). For a counter-argument see, among others, Bovenschen (1979) and Diethe (1988).
they are feeling but simultaneously suffering from fear, guilt and shame, they fumble their ways through sexual exploration. Caught up in their own sexual anxieties, the adults in *Spring Awakening* try vainly to shield these youngsters from their emerging drives. In their misguided efforts, however, they unwittingly victimize their children further as they minimize, scrutinize, and even demonize their nascent sexualities. In their attempts to shelter their offspring, the adults reveal to what extent they themselves have been sheltered and thus ignorant where sex and sexuality are concerned. Their misconceptions are portrayed particularly well in their reactions to Wedekind’s two male protagonists, Moritz Stiefel and Melchior Gabor, whom Wedekind presents as masculine antipodes to one another.

The first time we meet Moritz and Melchior (Act One, Scene Two), they are discussing masturbation and nocturnal emissions. In this dialogue, Wedekind presents not only the fears and anxieties of adolescents kept in ignorance about their sexuality, but in the boys’ reactions to this topic, two very different images of masculinity as well. The one boy, Moritz, admits to a great deal of guilt and shame where his urges are concerned. Confused and tormented by his pubescent transformations, he wallows in anxious misery as he believes himself to be “suffering from an internal defect” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 18). In contrast to Moritz, Melchior seeks to learn as much as possible about puberty “partly from books,” as he tells Moritz, “partly from illustrations, partly from looking at nature” (Wedekind, 1903, pp. 20-21). Whereas Moritz gives in to his fears and emotions Melchior controls his by distancing himself from them intellectually. Depicting these boys as diametrical opposites, Wedekind portrays Moritz as nervous, emotional, and fanciful and thus suffering from a morbid masculinity. Melchior, however, Wedekind presents as a strong, robust young man who not only attempts to control of his own life whenever possible but who takes life’s unexpected twists in stride as well.

Juxtaposing Moritz to Melchior, Wedekind underscores the former’s frailness by depicting him as physically weak and a poor student, in fact, the worst in his class. He cannot handle the pressures society puts on its male members and consequently is often given over to crying spells. Additionally, rather than being athletic and outgoing like Melchior, Moritz spends his time with unusual musings. Portrayed as weepy, nervous and plagued by a fanciful imagination, Moritz expresses many of the symptoms nineteenth-century physicians attributed to degenerative illnesses and deviant practices. Several times throughout the work Moritz talks of fancying himself the headless queen of his grandmother’s fairy tales. While the queen-image associates Moritz with the feminine and Melchior even tells him he’s “like a girl” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 22), the fact that this is a headless queen relegates Moritz yet further outside the masculine domain as it indicates a lack of rationality. Indeed, as we see throughout this work, headlessness is a leitmotif that is continually correlated with Moritz.

Moritz’ lack of vigor and vitality is stressed further in Act One, Scene Four when he imagines that sex would be so much sweeter if one could assume the supine po-

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5 As George L. Mosse (1996) notes, high among these deviant practices was masturbation, which physicians believed could also cause headaches, voluptuous dreams, timidity, loss of appetite, hysteria and even homosexuality.

6 Translations mine unless otherwise noted.
position like women and again later when his female classmates refuse the candy he offers them because it has become soft and warm lying in his pocket. While the softness of the candy suggests the flaccidity of a penis, his lack of firmness and fortitude is also psychological, as we learn when Moritz commits suicide. Although his classmates believe him too “yellow-bellied” to kill himself (Wedekind, 1908, p. 38), for Moritz the torment of life is much worse than the terror of death and so he does indeed take his own life in order to escape the burden of living. While his suicide stigmatizes him as a weakling who lacks the resilience and courage to endure the harsher aspects of existence, the fact that Moritz shoots himself in the head underscores his unmanly nature even further as this destruction of his cerebral sphere once again situates himself outside the masculine realm of intelligence, logic and willpower.

In contrast to Moritz, we learn that Melchior is one of the best students in school and could even be first in his class if he so chose (Wedekind, 1908, p. 31). He is physically strong, as attested to by the girls who admire his swimming abilities and refer to him as a young Alexander. Whereas the girls describe Moritz as a “sleepyhead,” and make fun of him for his daydreams and his whimsical nature, Melchior is described as having “a wonderful head” and “a beautiful brow” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 31), a physical as well as intellectual accolade. When his female classmate, Wendla, gets lost in the woods, Melchior easily leads her back to town. It is not that he necessarily knows the way but that like a true trailblazer he will forge his own path as he makes clear when he tells Wendla “we will hack our way through the bushes” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 41). With this statement, Melchior illustrates not only his determination to find a way out of the woods, but his intent to slash a way by force if necessary. Whereas Moritz worries about whether he will be promoted to the next grade in school, Melchior’s thoughts are occupied with existential issues, as the discussion about Wendla’s motivations for helping the poor reveals. Unlike Moritz, who is overly emotional and allows his anxieties to consume him, Melchior remains aloof and distant from his feelings. Moreover, in stark contrast to the sweetness of Moritz, in Melchior one notices a detached coldness that is exemplified when he dismisses the suffering of Gretchen in Goethe’s Faust: “This scandal cannot be the epitome of this artwork,” he says to Moritz. “Had Faust promised to marry the girl and then left her he wouldn’t have been any less to blame in my eyes. Gretchen could have died of a broken heart for all I care” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 55). Beyond this lack of compassion and empathy, Melchior’s character is also defined by a potential for brutality which is first portrayed when he dreams of beating the family dog (Act One, Scene Two) and again later when he rapes Wendla (Act Two, Scene Four).

In presenting Moritz as an effeminate male who is frail, excessively emotional, hypersensitive, and prone to fantasies that relegate him to feminine roles, Wedekind epitomizes one of the many threats the feminine was thought to pose to masculinity in late-nineteenth-century Europe—the feminizing of men. While

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7 The reference here is to Alexander the Great and to the fact that nineteenth-century European society believed the proper virtue of a man was reflected in his physical beauty, which they in turn saw exemplified in the ancient Greeks (Mosse, 1996).
physicians such as Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing hypothesized that this effeminization, as Krafft-Ebing labeled it, was inherent in the individual from birth or brought on by deviant practices such as masturbation, still others such as the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer asserted that it was caused by mothers whose overly doting natures infected their male offspring with their own feminine characteristics. While Wedekind does not suggest how or why Moritz is effeminized in this work, Wedekind was well versed in the numerous theories of physicians and philosophers who attributed the feminine traits displayed in this character to masculine pathologies.

It is not just the feminizing of men that Wedekind depicts as dangerous, however, but female sexuality itself, as the following episodes convey. In Act One, Scene Three, Wedekind depicts the girl Martha describing how she is torn out of bed by her mother, stripped and beaten by her father, and then forced to spend the night tied up in a sack. While no specific reasons are given for this abuse, the unspoken reproach is that Martha has reached the age of sexual maturity and that she has or soon will become sexually active lest the desire be beaten out of her. While Wedekind does not explicitly portray female masturbation until his later works, masturbation is a prevalent topic in this play and the allusion to it here cannot be overlooked especially in light of the reactions of Martha’s parents. As Richard Dellamora (1990), observes, it was a commonly-held belief in the late nineteenth century that masturbation was a vice all children indulged in or were prone to indulge in. In attempting to prevent this practice, nineteenth century parenting manuals emphasized increased surveillance of children and even suggested physical and psychological coercion in order to prompt confessions of sexual wrongdoings (Cleverly & Phillips, 1986). Beyond the suggestion of masturbation, however, Elizabeth Boa (1987) notes that Wedekind insinuates something much more nefarious in this scene—an incestuous desire on the part of the father. “In Martha’s father the desires aroused by his child lie close to the surface and emerge as sadism” (Boa, 1986, p. 40). Thus, Wedekind not only presents the daughter’s masturbation as a danger to both parents, as it reflects, according to Daniel Beckman (1997), “an index of the parents own lack of virtue” (p. 56), but more importantly, he presents her sex-

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8 Von Krafft-Ebing (1939) hypothesized that this “inverted sexuality,” which he categorized under Antipathic Sexuality, was either a congenital anomaly resulting from an inherited degeneracy or it was an acquired anomaly, an injury to the child’s psychosexual constitution, brought on by an external cause.

9 Schopenhauer (1913) held that while woman was well suited to raising young children since she herself was a middle stage between the child and the man, she should be precluded from raising older boys given the lascivious nature of her sexuality and the fact that too much contact between the mother and older male offspring could lead to effeminacy in the sons.

10 Not only did Wedekind have friends and family in the medical profession, he was well versed in the writings of physicians such as Krafft-Ebing and Jean-Martin Charcot. Likewise he was well versed in the writings of philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, and Friedrich Nietzsche and familiar with the writings of feminists such as Irma von Troll-Borostyani, a leading feminist writer of her day.
ality as a danger specific to the father as it triggers illicit sexual responses in him which he attempts to deflect by blaming and then brutalizing his daughter.

This projection of male sin onto the female is picked up again in the next episode (Act Two, Scene Three) where Wedekind portrays the boy Hänschen locking himself in the bathroom in order to masturbate. Although Hänschen uses an image of Venus to arouse himself, once he climaxes, he vilifies this object of his lust: “You suck the marrow from my bones, bend my back, rob the last gleam from my young eyes. Your inhuman modesty is too demanding, your motionless limbs too exhausting” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 67). Seeing Venus as a threat to both his physical and mental well-being, Hänschen describes his interaction with her in terms of battle. “It’s you or me and I have carried off the victory” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 67). He then thinks of all the other pictures of women he has brought into the bathroom and all the other wars against these images he has had to fight. The conflicts Hänschen imagines are not just a matter of controlling the female but also of gaining power, since he envisions himself becoming mentally and physically stronger with each conquest. That Hänschen is struggling to come to terms with his sexuality and that he believes masturbation to be a transgression is evident when he blames Venus for this act: “You won’t die for the sake of your sins but for mine….my conscience will become quieter, my body will become invigorated once again, when you, you she-devil, no longer reside on the red silk cushion of my jewel box” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 68). It is important to note not only the battle of the sexes that Wedekind portrays in this scene but the strength that is to be gained by the male in conquering female sexuality, for this is a theme that will resound louder and louder in Wedekind’s subsequent works.

In Act Three, Scene Six Wedekind portrays Hänschen once again experimenting with sex, this time in a homoerotic encounter with his classmate Ernst. Unlike the previous episode in the bathroom, in this scene there is no interaction with females or female images and hence no threat to the male. Quite to the contrary, in this scene Wedekind paints a very romantic art-nouveau type of image: “Vintners in the vineyard. In the west the sun is sinking behind the mountain peaks. A clear

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11 Known for interjecting episodes from his own life into his works and having indicated in his diaries that almost every scene in Spring Awakening was compiled from his own personal experiences or the experiences of his friends and classmates (Hay, 1990), this scene clearly harkens back to an exchange of letters Wedekind had with a friend and former classmate, Oscar Schibler, in the winter of 1882. In this exchange, Wedekind tries to convince Oskar to break off a relationship he is having with an older woman of questionable reputation. He warns his friend that this relationship will cost him his youth and his health and that he will become a pale, spiritless machine devoid of life if he does not tear himself away from this woman. In a follow-up letter Oscar concedes the veracity of this warning as he admits this woman wanted nothing more than carnal pleasure and that he, not having the fortitude to withstand her animal nature, carelessly squandered the “poetry of his youth” (as cited in Kieser, 1989, p. 331).

12 In having Hänschen project his own guilt onto the object of his desires, Wedekind espouses an idea Weininger (1980) would soon popularize throughout Europe—that woman was not so much sinning as sin itself, and more specifically, the reflection of man’s sin projected onto woman.
sound of bells rises from the valley below. Under overhanging rocks, Hänschen Rilow and Ernst Röbel loll in the withering grasses at the top of the vineyard” (Wedekind, 1908, p. 128). There is a nostalgic quality to the moment as the boys talk of a future time when they will look back longingly to the beauty of this day. The boys kiss each other gently and confess their love. Romantic and sweet, this scene is in stark contrast to the masturbation scenes involving females or female images and, as we will see, to those centering on female sexuality. Furthermore, despite the homoerotic nature of this interlude, Wedekind depicts neither boy as feminized. Unlike the weak effeminate nature displayed by Moritz, these boys acknowledge their masculine identities as they speak of their futures as husbands and fathers. Moreover, unlike the feminine softness that bespeaks a weakness in Moritz, the interaction between Hänschen and Ernst harkens back to the contemporary youth movement’s emphasis on nudity in nature as a form of bonding meant to lay the foundation for brotherhood, manhood, and nationhood.

While Wedekind portrays the single masturbatory girl and seductive female images as dangerous, the most prominent threat of female sexuality Wedekind presents in Spring Awakening is exemplified by the interactions between Wendla and Melchior. In the first scene where they are alone together in the woods (Act One, Scene Five), Wendla tells Melchior of the abuse Martha suffers at the hands of her parents. Speculating on how it would feel to be beaten, Wendla begs Melchior to whip her. While he initially rebuffs this request, Wendla persists until he acquiesces. Momentarily aroused by the beating, Melchior is quickly repulsed once he realizes he is in control of neither his actions nor his emotions. Appalled by his initial excitement, he reacts first with aggression, then with tears, and finally by fleeing the source of his distress. Although Melchior understands the concept of sexual arousal on an intellectual level, he is ill prepared for the intense physical response or the accompanying loss of reason that this first erotic encounter triggers in him.

While Wedekind clearly expresses Melchior’s sexual naïveté in his initial shock and subsequent distress, he does not attribute the same innocence to Wendla. Rather than representing her request for a beating as simply curiosity or experimentation such as one sees with Hänschen and Ernst, Wedekind portrays Wendla intentionally goading Melchior, as the following exchange makes clear:

WENDLA: Wouldn’t you beat me [with this switch] just once?
MELCHIOR: Are you out of your mind?
WENDLA: I’ve never been beaten in my whole life.

13 While Wedekind remained in agreement with the discourses of the day that defined the dangers of the feminine and of feminization, he did not see the sex act itself or the homosexual male, per se, as a threat to masculinity. Instead, by the very nature of their “feminine” qualities, it was the masochistic act or the weak, effeminate male that conveyed this danger. That Wedekind did not necessarily see a homosexual interlude as threatening is not only seen in the latitude he gives Ernst and Hänschen in Spring Awakening but likewise in his own life where he contemplates in the diary entry for July 9, 1889 whether he should have pursued this avenue of pleasure himself on that day instead of waiting until he had “feathered his nest” (Hay, 1990, p. 54).

MELCHIOR: As if you could ask for something like that...

WENDLA: Please, please!

MELCHIOR: I’ll teach you to ask! (He hits her.)

WENDLA: I don’t feel anything at all...

MELCHIOR: I believe it—through all your skirts!

WENDLA: Then beat my legs!

MELCHIOR: Wendla! (He hits her harder.)

WENDLA: You’re only stroking me! You’re stroking me!

MELCHIOR: You wait, you witch; I’ll drive the devil out of you!

(Wedekind, 1908, pp. 46-47)

Unlike the sexual inexperience Wedekind portrays in Melchior, his depiction of Wendla already suggests the sexual voracity that will become a trademark of Wedekind’s female characters. Moreover, like the image of Venus to which Hänschen masturbates, Wendla too is linked to the devil and thus to sin.

In their next encounter, Wendla happens upon Melchior lying by himself in a hayloft. No longer willing to trust himself alone with her, Melchior demands that she leave. While Melchior is unable to make Wendla obey him, his subsequent rape of her allows him to exert himself as one whose words should not be taken lightly. In sharp contrast to their first meeting, in this scene Melchior no longer runs away from the sexual threat of Wendla. Instead, as he now confronts and conquers her, we see a resolve to master sexuality, his own as well as Wendla’s, emerging in Melchior. In these two scenes, as well as the one in which Martha describes being beaten, and, indeed, even the bathroom episode where Hänschen struggles against the female images to which he masturbates, Wedekind repeatedly illustrates the late-nineteenth-century fear that female sexuality had become a feral element man had to control lest it control him.15

Throughout this play Wedekind presents the dangers of female sexuality as well as the males’ fears thereof. In the bedroom episode, Martha’s sexuality is a lure and hence a danger to her father. In the bathroom scene, woman is the menace Hänschen perceives emanating from the pictures to which he masturbates. It is in the two encounters between Melchior and Wendla, however, where Wedekind most clearly delineates the female hazard to the male, since he portrays Melchior both times as unable to control his own sexual responses let alone those of Wendla. In addition to the warnings contained in each of these scenes, however, what we also see in them is the means for the males to master sexuality—their own as well as the females’. The father attempts to suppress his own desires by trying to dominate and crush those in his daughter. Hänschen fights to get a grip on his yearnings by envisioning sexual battles that make him stronger with each female image he kills off. Even Melchior, who is portrayed both times as losing control, is already learn-

15 For centuries the general consensus had been that men were born with a limited amount of semen. Believing this fluid to be a vitalizing and strength-giving source of energy, Krafft-Ebing and his contemporaries warned that the more semen a man lost the weaker he became. For this reason, Krafft-Ebing cautioned men against too much sex and in particular warned them to avoid women “suffering from chronic nymphomania” as contact with them would inevitably lead to “heavy neurasthenia and impotence” in the male (1939, p. 486).
ing how to wield the whip, a leitmotif of male mastery and domination Wedekind uses throughout his works.

In addition to the danger of female sexuality, the threat of the female is also attested to by the way Wedekind portrays the interactions between the adolescents and their parents. Echoing concerns common in fin-de-siècle Europe that industrialization had removed the father and consequently the paternal influence from the family home (Tosh, 1999), Wedekind shows these adolescents having little to no contact with their fathers. Wendla’s interactions are mostly with her prudish mother whose reticence to talk about sex misleads the girl into believing pregnancy can only occur in marriage. The other adults with whom she has contact outside of school are a married sister and the midwife who carries out the abortion that subsequently kills her. In Hänscchen’s case, neither parent is present; indeed, the only reference to a parent is when Hänscchen mentions filching an erotic picture from his father’s desk. Likewise with Moritz, there is little mention of parents and it is only at his funeral that we encounter the father who, mortified by his son’s weakness, disclaims paternity as he states that Moritz was always a weakling and could not possibly have come from him.16 Even Melchior, whose home-life Wedekind depicts as liberal and enlightened, has his mother to thank for his upbringing as his father’s influence is nonexistent until the end of the play. With the exception of Martha, whose tyrannical father works in conjunction with her mother to control her through corporal punishment, none of the other fathers takes an active role in the raising of their children. While this paternal absence itself may have negative consequences for the children, in each case where the mother is shown as actively involved Wedekind depicts consequences that are far more dire. To be sure, the adolescent who suffers the least is Hänscchen, whom Wedekind depicts as having the least parental influence of all the teenagers.

Wedekind portrays the father’s authority over his children as not just superseded by the mother’s, but countermanded by the State as well. By moving the patriarchal privilege from the home to the school and thus from the paterfamilias to the professors, Wedekind remains in step with the shift in control Foucault (1977) identifies when noting that supervision and surveillance of children’s sexuality had now fallen under the purview of public institutions (as cited in Luke, 1989). In Spring Awakening, Wedekind stresses this transfer of power when he has Moritz’ father deliver the treatise on propagation Melchior had written for Moritz not to Melchior’s father but instead to Melchior’s teachers. Having received what they deem to be evidence of immorality, the professors expel Melchior from school and recommend his detention in a home for juvenile delinquents.

In the subsequent dialogue between Melchior’s parents, Wedekind portrays the contemporary belief that women were incapable of raising male children without doing them irreparable harm.17 Battling to save her child from incarceration, Mrs. Gabor tries to explain Melchior’s expulsion as a misunderstanding and his treatise

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16 In Mr. Stiefel’s rejection of Moritz, we see Wedekind expressing those evolutionary theories that suggested deviance as a hereditary taint transmitted from one generation to the next. In denying his paternity, Mr. Stiefel attempts to protect his own masculinity from the stigma of disease and degeneration he sees expressed in his son.

17 See footnote 8 supra.
on propagation not as an act of deviance that the professors claim prompted Moritz’ suicide but rather as a sign of an inquisitive mind (Act Three, Scene Three). It is at this point that her husband intervenes for the first time to voice his own opinions. In stating that he allowed her to raise their child as she saw fit rather than exerting the paternal influence he knew was necessary, he concedes that he is equally to blame for the downfall of their son:

For fourteen years I’ve silently observed your imaginative methods of rearing children. They contradicted my own convictions.... But I told myself, if spirit and grace can replace serious principles, then they might be preferable to serious principles. I’m not blaming you, Fanny. But don’t stand in my way when I try to make amends for the wrong you and I have done the boy. (Wedekind, 1908, p. 108)

Now, as he finally asserts his authority as head-of-the-household, he tries to explain to his wife that the essay on copulation written by Melchior is proof of his corrupt nature and reason enough why their son must be sent to a reformatory.

You see minor peccadilloes when we are faced with fundamental defects of character.... Whoever can write what Melchior wrote must be contaminated in his innermost core.... None of us are saints; we all stray from the path. But his document ... [shows] a natural propensity for the immoral. It shows that rare spiritual corruption we lawyers call ‘moral insanity.’ (Wedekind, 1908, p. 110)

While these arguments do not persuade Mrs. Gabor that their son is immoral, her husband’s subsequent revelation that Melchior has also impregnated Wendla does. With this disclosure, it is now she who insists Melchior be sent to the reformatory and she, as Paul Fechter (1920) observes, who now drops her facade of liberalism and becomes even more bourgeois and narrow than her husband.

Of all the adolescents depicted in this work, it is the girls and Moritz, the effeminate male, who suffer the most. Hänschen, as we have seen, comes away completely unscathed despite his masturbatory tendencies and homoerotic interlude. To be sure, Melchior also suffers severe hardships, but where the girls and Moritz are debilitated or destroyed by theirs, Melchior triumphs over his. To understand why this is so one must recognize the special role Wedekind assigns to Melchior as well as the types of hurdles he creates for Melchior to overcome. Reflecting the discourse of the day and the theories of philosophers such as Hartmann and Weininger who postulated sexuality as a continuum with the most feminine form of the female at one end and the most masculine form of the male at the other, Wedekind creates a continuum of masculinity, positioning Moritz, as the most effeminate male, at the one extreme and Melchior, as the most masculine, at the other. Expressing neither the weakness of Moritz nor the tenderness of Ernst and Hänschen but instead a strength of will and an accompanying cerebral aloofness reminiscent of Nietzsche’s superman, as Wedekind understood him, Melchior epitomizes the type of masculinity idealized in the cult of masculinity—cold, hard, and indomitable. The fact

18 Noting that Wedekind seemed to focus solely on the pessimistic aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy when writing Spring’s Awakening, Stefan Riedlinger (2005) questions
that Melchior has been incarcerated and is thus criminalized in the eyes of society only serves to underscore his exceptional nature further, since it harkens back to Nietzsche’s premise that in following the dictates of his own will the extraordinary individual would by necessity be deemed a criminal in modern society.

In examining Melchior’s ordeals, one is immediately struck by their similarity to a rite of passage. In keeping with traditional rites of passage that take place at puberty with a physical, often brutal separation from the mother and familiar surroundings (Mahdi, 1996 & Oldfield, 1996), Melchior’s first test on his path to manhood is his expulsion from school and subsequent imprisonment. Unlike traditional rites that take place in group settings meant to reinforce solidarity among the initiates, however, the boys in the detention center do not forge friendships. To the contrary, they instead jockey for power such as when they partake in a circle-jerk that Peter Murphy (2001) states pits boy against boy in a sport where there is only one winner, he who ejaculates first. Far from being a homoerotic moment, Murphy (2001) notes that this competitive masturbation is an effort to prove heterosexual dominance in order to establish masculine authority in the group. Therefore, unlike traditional rites of passage where initiates bond with one another in camaraderie and common hardships, the young men in this scene vie with one another to see who is the manliest and, by default, the least manly.

In another test, Melchior displays his skill and ingenuity when he overcomes the safeguards designed to prevent escape from the reformatory. Breaking out he makes his way to the graveyard to confirm Wendla’s demise. It is here that he undergoes his last test the confrontation with death that marks the ultimate break with childhood and the end of most rites of passage (Badinter, 1992). For Melchior, this final trial comes in a surrealistic manner as the spirit of Moritz tries to convince him to join the afterlife. To tempt his former friend, Moritz portrays death as a wondrous experience that is beyond good and evil, beyond human emotions, and beyond the trivialities of ordinary life. In describing the dead he states:

> We know that it’s all inane, the things men do and strive after, and we laugh at it.... We stand high above earthly things—each for himself alone.... We are infinitely above all despair and rejoicing. We are content with ourselves and that is all. We despise the living so much we can hardly pity them. They amuse us with their histrionics.... We smile at their tragedies ... and watch. (Wedekind, 1908, p. 136)

how fully Wedekind understood the more life-affirming aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy at the time.

19 In reading through this article, my colleague Richard M. Berrong suggests that hierarchical dominance is attained not, as Murphy proposes, by the one who ejaculates first, but rather by the one who maintains control of his erection the longest before ejaculating. In _Spring Awakening_ the test is to see which boy can come closest to hitting a coin and thus which can best control the direction of his ejaculate.

20 In an ironically macabre twist on the fantasies Moritz had in life of being the headless queen of his grandmother’s fairy tales, Wedekind depicts him headless in death as he wanders through the cemetery carrying his head under his arm.

21 In “Vorfrühling [Early spring],” Rolf Kieser (1989) indicates that Nietzsche’s writings played an important role already in Wedekind’s earliest works. He contends furthering
In this very Nietzschean description of the superman’s ethos, Moritz foreshadows the existence Melchior will lead. That his existence will take place in life rather than in death, however, becomes clear when a Masked Man enters the scene. Disguised as he is, this character reminds one of the tribal elders who obscure their identities in order to bring a sense of otherworldliness to the initiation rites. Unlike these elders, however, this individual is dressed in top hat and frock coat and thus is not just a Masked Man, as Wedekind labels him, but in fact a Masked Gentleman. As such, he represents what Manfred Hahn calls the “real life ... the bourgeois life” (1969, p. 16), and moreover, the upper echelons of this life. That he is a man of strong willpower, an attribute widely admired as a mark of true manhood in late-nineteenth-century Europe, is attested to when he forces Moritz to recant his fabrications of the afterlife and convinces Melchior to turn away from Moritz, thus choosing life over death. His commanding presence and cold calculating manner, which project what Artur Kutscher calls a “Herrenmoral” (1922–31, p. 349)—a morality of the masters, marks him as a self-made man, a leader in the world of men. As such, the mask that he wears suggests the anonymity of the nineteenth-century powerbrokers who, operating behind the scenes, controlled and manipulated the economy and by extension the lives of ordinary men. Additionally, this disguise also references Nietzsche’s superman who wears a mask in order to underscore his superior detachment from those Nietzsche labels as “the herd” (1909-13, p. 367). As the Masked Man guides Melchior out of the cemetery and back into the community of men at the end of the play, it is clear he will become Melchior’s surrogate father and mentor as he tells him: “I will take care of your future success.... I will open the world to you.... I will take you out among men” (Wedekind, 1910, pp. 154-155). That Melchior will indeed follow this man and his
reason for doing so is clearly stated when he takes his leave of Moritz: “Farewell, dear Moritz. I don’t know where the man is taking me. But he is a man—” (Wedekind, 1910, p. 159). In this final scene where these masculine antipodes come face to face one last time, Wedekind depicts Melchior rejecting all that is feminine as he opts neither to return to the home of his mother nor to choose the death Moritz offers but instead to follow the Masked Man, the figure to whom Wedekind dedicates *Spring Awakening*. Moritz, for his part, surrenders one last time to his feminine self and consequently to death as he returns to the grave and lays down in the supine position he had so longed for while still alive.

Writing during a period in which longstanding laws governing sexual behavior and sexual identity were breaking down, Frank Wedekind addresses the marginalization of the middle-class male forced to live in a world that had been turned topsy-turvy by the New Woman, the homosexual, and the sexologists all of whom were redefining and consequently undermining traditional concepts of masculinity. Recognizing that the crisis of masculinity was not just the result of women’s sexual and economic liberation, the homosexual’s blurring of gender, or the sexologists’ pathologizing of sex, but also due to a patriarchy that was now valorizing a hypermasculinity as a counter-balance to the threat of the feminine and feminization, Wedekind portrays the ordinary male simultaneously caught between a crisis of masculinity and a cult of masculinity. Suffering from an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and disempowerment, Wedekind’s masculine characters lash out against all that is feminine in an effort to prove their legitimacy and supremacy as men. It is this expression of anxious masculinity in the form of violence against and rejection of the feminine that Frank Wedekind portrays so succinctly in *Spring Awakening*—in the frightened male who tries to beat the female into submission, literally or in masturbatory fantasies, in the weakened male who himself must die because he is too feminine, in the subservient male who has conceded his paternal and patriarchal privileges to the female, and in the exalted male who must cut all ties with the feminine in order to survive in a man’s world as a real man, a man’s man.

**CONCLUSION**

Where the crisis of masculinity in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was prompted by rapid industrialization, the women’s movement, and the medicalization of sexuality, this was not the first crisis of masculinity nor would it be the last. With every new war, every new economic disruption or financial insecurity,
every new social movement that hopes to advance marginalized groups such as women, homosexuals, or people of color, the dominant constructs of masculinity and femininity are destabilized. This destabilization, in turn, prompts anxieties and backlashes from those who have vested interests in maintaining the traditional norms. Despite the advent of ever more social movements that draw attention to disparities in human rights, despite the rise of new disciplines such as Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Gay & Lesbian Studies, and Men’s Studies that have revealed gender constructs not as essential, immutable entities but rather as ideologies of dominance, there are still numerous elements in our society and others that are resistance to change. Where these elements are the most entrenched is in those traditional bastions of male power—the military, the government, and the courts. The tensions that ensue between those who want access to these enclaves of power and those who want to retain their exclusive natures are invariably fought out in a battle of the sexes, where the “masculine” does not include all men but rather only the “elite” men and where the “feminine” is not associated solely with women but instead with any marginalized group that expresses defiance, disruption, and danger. While the struggles for power have remained, for the most part, defensive and confrontational, I would argue, that this is due not only to an entrenched ideal that those in power resist modifying, but likewise that those vying for power also perceive as monolithic and hegemonic. If we are to negotiate our differences in the future, it will be necessary to acknowledge that there is no universal masculine or feminine model valid in every time and place, but instead hegemonic models (in the plural), that are not only contingent upon but to some extent constrained by the time, place, and culture that constructs them.

REFERENCES


become a threat to all forms of property and established power” (p. 296) as a second crisis of masculinity in France. Elaine Showalter (1990) observes that the economic depression that hit England and Western Europe in the 1870s prompted yet another crisis. While the crises of the 1880s and 1890s encompassed England, Western Europe and the United States, crises of masculinity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would encompass even more countries and affect even more men. For discussions on these later crises see, among others, Faludi (2000), Hearn and Pringle (Eds., 2006), Robinson (2000), and Savran (1998).


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