

Reading Elizabeth von Arnim Today

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Elizabeth von Arnim is usually remembered as a novelist whose comic writing immortalised a leisurely life of privilege among flowers. Her first book, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898) and *The Enchanted April* (1922) are probably still her best known works. But to know only this is to belie the complexity of her writing and of her place as an author during the first forty years of the twentieth century.

Born Mary Annette Beauchamp in Sydney, Australia, on 31 August 1866, she was the youngest of six children. In 1870, when she was three years old, the family left Sydney and went to live in London. Here she developed keen interests in history, literature, art and music. Her musical gifts were nourished at the Royal College of Music, where her principal study was the organ. Soon she was considering a career as a professional musician.

At the age of twenty-two, however, while staying in Rome with her parents, she met the newly widowed Graf Henning von Arnim-Schlagenthin, a member of the Prussian aristocracy and a friend of the Wagner family. They became engaged and the Count took her to Bayreuth where she was introduced to the heart of German high society, performing organ works by Liszt for his daughter, Cosima Wagner.

In February 1891, she and the Count von Arnim were married in London. By now fluent in German as well as French, she began a new life as a member of the Prussian aristocracy in Berlin. Three daughters were born in quick succession, leaving their mother with little time for music or books until, in the spring of 1896, she visited her husband's country estate at Nassenheide (now Rzedziny, Poland) near the Baltic Sea. She immediately fell in love with it and decided to live there, far from Berlin and the demands of Prussian society. She had arrived in her 'German Garden'.

Inspired by the beauty of this place, her best-selling novel, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, was published anonymously by Macmillan two years later.

The true identity of the author was, for some time, a closely guarded secret but 'Elizabeth' became famous. While living at Nassenheide, seven further highly successful novels were written and published as being 'By the Author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*'.

Following the death of the Count von Arnim in 1910, she and her five children left Prussia. Dividing her time now between London and her Chalet Soleil near Crans Montana, Switzerland, von Arnim hosted many famous literary and intellectual figures of the day, including Earl Francis Russell (older brother of Bertrand Russell) whom she married in February 1916. The marriage was a disaster and they separated three years later, though never divorced. The war years saw the deaths of several close friends and family members, including her youngest daughter, Felicitas, who died in Germany aged sixteen.

In the 1920s, von Arnim (now known as the Countess Russell) was able to return to her Chalet where she formed a deep friendship with her young cousin Katherine Mansfield, who was staying at the resort for health reasons. She also embarked on a romantic relationship with a young man, Alexander Stuart Frere-Reeves (later president of Heinemann). During these years, she wrote two of her best novels: *Vera* (1921), and *The Enchanted April* (1922).

During the 1930s, she made her home at the Mas des Roses in Mougins on the French Riviera. Once again, she created a garden, enjoyed her many dogs, and wrote several more works, including the semi-autobiographical *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936). The threat of war in 1939 forced her to flee to the United States of America, where two of her daughters and her son were living. While there, her last novel, *Mr Skeffington* (1940), was a great success with her American readers. However, living away from home and staying in hotels and inns without a library was not easy and her health suffered. Elizabeth von Arnim died of the complications of influenza in a hospital in South Carolina, early in 1941.

Her ashes, at her request, were returned to England after the war where they were mingled with those of her brother, Sydney, in the churchyard of St Margaret's, Tylers Green, Penn, in Buckinghamshire. Inscribed on her commemorative plaque in the churchyard are the words 'Parva sed apta' (small but suitable). The words had, as ever, been chosen by von Arnim herself,

though those who remembered her were rather less low key in their estimations: as Bronwyn Stern wrote to Hugh Walpole, 'What a devil she was, but *what* good company' (Stern 24 Feb 1941: Maddison, xxii).

This is borne out by von Arnim's connections and wide association with a loose group of influential artists and thinkers in the early twentieth century. Elizabeth von Arnim was a valued member of the English literary and intellectual life of her time. Her crowd included George Bernard Shaw, Maud Ritchie, H.G. Wells (who is believed to have been her lover), Augustine Birrell, George Santayana, Bertrand Russell, George Moore, Dame Ethel Smyth, John Middleton Murry, Frank Swinnerton, James Cobden-Sanderson, Max Beerbohm and Vernon Lee. In the early 1900s both E.M. Forster and Hugh Walpole were tutors to von Arnim's children at Nassenheide. In her heyday von Arnim was a literary celebrity, widely read and admired for her wit. L.P. Hartley, for instance, argued in 1934 that she was 'among the most important novelists of to-day' (*Sketch*: 72). Von Arnim was reviewed positively alongside Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair. Among her reviewers was also Katherine Mansfield, whose early writing was undoubtedly influenced by von Arnim's work. By re-inserting Elizabeth von Arnim into the cultural *milieu* of which she was a significant part, recent critics have been able to re-evaluate her writing and rescue her from the posthumous neglect she has suffered until recent times.

Her writing has, of course, always been regarded as women's writing: a female author writing primarily for women readers and, as in other cases, this is likely to have contributed to her increasing neglect. As early as 1929, however, J.B. Priestley was speaking of von Arnim as an author of 'feminine fiction' (*Evening News*: 11), while Vernon Fane, a reviewer of her final novel, *Mr Skeffington*, was arguing in 1940 that 'feminists galore' might be writing fiction, but 'Elizabeth's strongest characteristic is her femininity' (*Sphere*: 152), albeit in the first half of the twentieth century the terms 'feminist' and 'feminine' were not necessarily contradictory. Frequently the critical diction attached to von Arnim's work in the 1920s and 30s tips over from 'feminine' through 'feminist' to 'feline' (*Daily Telegraph*: 6) as a way of capturing von Arnim's use of satire in a lexis increasingly stained with pejorative gendered associations. Von Arnim's work was largely forgotten until Virago republished several of her novels as

'classics' in the 1980s, and today scholars are interested in her writing precisely because of its complicated oscillation between 'feminine' and 'feminist'.¹

Understandably, all critical responses struggle to identify an appropriate and fixed classification for von Arnim's hybrid writing, which moves deftly between outright social satire, the diary form, the country house novel, the (uneasy) romance and, occasionally, the Gothic genre. In an acknowledgment of this complexity, recent critics have re-contextualised von Arnim's writing amidst the shifting classification of 'the middlebrow', which has provided a welcome platform to engage with her work within an increasingly 'legitimate' academic framework.² This is not to define von Arnim's work as middlebrow, but to regard it as caught within a series of shifting discourses that helped shape its reception, and which contributed to its increasing critical neglect. Her writing is being given a new, and welcome, lease of critical life and a fresh airing.³

So what kind of writer emerges from this collection of essays?

While recent research on von Arnim in the context of the middlebrow has done much to raise her academic profile, the authors in the first part of this issue break new ground by offering fresh perspectives on von Arnim's use of genre and her loose engagement with Modernist styles. Jennifer Shepherd's essay resituates the garden novel as a form of imperial romance. While von Arnim's nationalism and Elizabeth's complex femininity has been examined before, Shepherd reads them together under a new paradigm, thereby offering a different angle on genre and gender. Next, Rachel O'Connell takes earlier research into Elizabeth's hyperfemininity to a new level by exploring the nexus between Elizabeth's gendering and form in her discussion on how the auto-eroticism of von Arnim's protagonist is facilitated by the introspective genre of the garden diary.

The next two essays by Jennifer Walker and Nick Turner offer detailed analyses of von Arnim's unique style as a response to the modern condition. Walker discusses the musicality and stylistic proximity to Modernist fiction of *In the*

¹ See, for example, Juliane Römhild, *Femininity and Authorship in the Novels of Elizabeth von Arnim: At Her Most Radiant Moment*, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2014.

² See: Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013, and Isobel Maddison, *Elizabeth von Arnim: Beyond the German Garden*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.

³ See: Jennifer Walker, *Elizabeth of the German Garden: A Literary Journey*, Brighton: Book Guild, 2013.

Mountains (1920). Turner explores von Arnim's modern blend of Naturalism and Realism in *The Pastor's Wife* (1914). Both authors offer a welcome new direction in von Arnim studies in exploring von Arnim's Modernist affinities beyond her relationship with Katherine Mansfield.

The essays in the second part of this issue discuss the pronounced intertextuality of von Arnim's novels. While her talent for friendship has been well explored by her biographers, less has been written on von Arnim's literary affiliations, the intertexts and influences in her work. The contributors to this journal break new ground in exploring von Arnim's connections with writers such as Dickens, George Eliot, Daphne du Maurier, Henry David Thoreau, Max Beerbohm, Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw and others. They broaden our understanding of her wide range of inspirations beyond the tradition of women's writing in which her novels have mostly been discussed so far. Rachel Galvin opens this section with an exploration of the garden as a space of female autonomy and notes the connections between Elizabeth and Jennifer Dodge, the heroine of von Arnim's later novel *Father* (1931), which so far has escaped critical attention almost entirely. Her essay shows that the garden motif remained central to von Arnim's thinking even in later years. The exhilarating aspect of horticultural self-liberation is picked up by Juliane Römheld, who demonstrates how von Arnim draws on Henry David Thoreau and William Wordsworth to write about joy in *The Solitary Summer* (1899).

Fiona Tomkinson's essay on 'The Pious Pilgrimage' (1900), an additional chapter to *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, demonstrates that the ghost Elizabeth encounters in a visit to her childhood garden has spectral ancestors in Dickens's *Great Expectations* and other authors. While von Arnim's affinities with Austen and the kinship between *Vera* (1921) and *Rebecca* (1938) have been discussed, Ann Herndon Marshall shows how the concept of a 'natural' femininity intersects with power in Austen, George Eliot and Daphne du Maurier, thereby adding historical depth to von Arnim's critique of femininity. The issue closes with Isobel Maddison's analysis of the satirical and broadly political cross-currents between von Arnim's *Introduction to Sally* (1926), a novel previously unexplored, and texts by two of her friends: G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1914) and Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson: Or an Oxford Love Story* (1911). Her essay reveals the interplay of von Arnim's wide ranging personal and literary affiliations beyond the tradition of female satirists.

As the authors of this issue show, much remains to be done. The factors that led to Elizabeth von Arnim's critical neglect may now be re-evaluated as precisely the qualities that make the scholarly exploration of her work so rewarding. Defying easy categorisation, we can now read von Arnim as a feminist satirist of complex personal and artistic affiliations, whose distinctive voice was inspired by both contemporary stylistic experiments and the literary traditions of the Nineteenth century. Her writings continue to inspire readers and intrigue scholars. Elizabeth von Arnim's status as a central literary figure of early Twentieth century British fiction will continue to grow.

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