

Beyond the World of Men



Women's Fiction at the Czech Fin de Siècle

Edited and translated from the Czech
and German by Geoffrey Chew

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments and Sources /8

Introduction /12

HE KISSES YOUR HAND (1885)

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach /36

A KALEIDOSCOPE (1890)

Teréza Nováková /57

CONFIRMED BACHELORS (1891)

Božena Viková-Kunětická /66

LIFE'S SORROW (1891-5)

Růžena Svobodová /96

A VISIT TO HIS PARENTS (1894)

Tereza Svatová /107

THE PRÁŽE - A PRAGUE BASTARD (1894)

Tereza Svatová /112

TALE ABOUT NOTHING, NO. 5 (1903)

Vladimíra Jedličková /121

TALE ABOUT NOTHING, NO. 14 (1903)

Vladimíra Jedličková /124

DAILY LIFE (1904)

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach /126

A WIDOW (1905)

Anna Maria Tilschová /140

A ROSE FOR UNCLE: AN UNSERIOUS TALE

OF A VERY YOUNG COQUETTE, WITH A MORAL (1906)

Anna Maria Tilschová /181

THEORIES (1906)

Božena Benešová /187

A TALE FROM HELL (1907)

Marie Majerová /195

MARRIAGE (1907)

Marie Majerová /207

A LOYAL WIFE (1908)

Božena Benešová /210

SOLITUDE (1908)

Anna Lauermannová-Mikschová /234

THREE POINTS OF VIEW (1908)

Helena Malířová /259

. . . AND MUSIC WILL BE PLAYING OUTSIDE YOUR
WINDOWS EVERY DAY! (1908)

Růžena Svobodová /268

THE DEATH OF OPHELIA (1909)

Růžena Jesenská /299

A TRUTHFUL TALE OF A STONE STATUE (1909)

Růžena Jesenská /317

THE CHILD (1912)

Lila Bubelová /325

A THORNY QUESTION (1917)

Marie Majerová /328

A REMARKABLE INCIDENT (1924)

Anna Maria Tilschová /343

MARIE AND MARTA (1933)

Lída Merlíňová /357

Biographical Notes on Authors /361

*Dedicated to the memory of Edith Birkett (1879-1946),
a splendid and loving great-aunt for whom some
of these stories would have had painful resonance,
and in commemoration of the many successes achieved
by the women of her period, despite the difficulties
they had to overcome.*

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The sources of the texts from which these translations were made, listed in the order in which the stories are presented in this volume, are as follows:

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Teréza Nováková, 'A Kaleidoscope': 'Kaleidoskop', in her *Z měst i ze samot: povídky a črty* [From Cities and Lonely Places: Short Stories and Sketches], 2nd edition (Prague: Jos. R. Vilímek, 1890), 41–9

Božena Viková-Kunětická, 'Confirmed Bachelors': 'Staří mládenci', in her *Staří mládenci a jiné povídky* [Confirmed Bachelors, and Other Stories] (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1901), 7–38 (originally published in the journal *Lumír*, 1891)

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- Božena Benešová, 'Theories': 'Teorie', in her *Myšky: povídky z let 1909–1913* [Little Mice: Short Stories from 1909 to 1913] (Prague: Edice Sever a východ, 1926), 99–106 (but in manuscript, 1906, and originally published in the journal *Národní obzor*, 1906–7)
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- Božena Benešová, 'A Loyal Wife': 'Pýří', in her *Myšky: povídky z let 1909-1913* [Little Mice: Short Stories from 1909 to 1913] (Prague: Edice Sever a východ, 1926), 73-96 (but originally published in the journal *Zlatá Praha*, 1908)
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- Helena Malířová, 'Three Points of View': 'Tři kapitolky', in her *Ženy a děti: rozmarné příběhy z jejich světa* [Women and Children: Whimsical Stories from Their World] (Prague: F. Topič, 1908), 120-30
- Růžena Svobodová, '... And Music will be Playing Outside Your Windows Every Day!': '... a denně bude hrávat hudba pod vašimi okny!', in her *Černí myslivci: horské romány* [The Dark Huntsmen: Mountain Stories] (Prague: Jan Laichter, 1908), 245-86
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- Lila Bubelová, 'The Child': 'Dítě', from Lila B. Nováková, *Nad její drahou zachmuřenou...* [Over Her Dear Gloomy Path] (Prague: Antonín Reis, 1912), 30-33
- Marie Majerová, 'A Thorny Question': 'Těžká otázka', in the journal *Lumír*, 45/1 (1917): 29-38
- Anna Maria Tilschová, 'A Remarkable Incident': 'Podivuhodná příhoda', in her *Černá dáma a tři povídky* [The Black

Lady, and Three Stories] (Prague: Šolc a Šimáček, 1924),
130–40

Lída Merlíňová, 'Marie and Marta': 'Marie a Marta', in the
journal *Nový hlas*, 4/2 (1933): 59–61

INTRODUCTION

The selection of shorter fiction by Czech women writers presented here centres on texts dating from the two decades between 1890 and 1910, with a few earlier and later outliers chosen for their interest or rarity. They are presented in chronological order of writing, so far as I have been able to establish this. I make no claim that all these stories are of equal literary merit (some are primarily of historical interest), and I have not restricted the choice to stories with a feminist ideological slant, while including many that do display such a slant. Nor have I made any attempt to provide comparative material from regions of the Habsburg empire beyond the Bohemian lands, as has been impressively done in recent years for both Cisleithania and Transleithania, particularly by the Hungarian-Canadian academic Agatha Schwartz.¹ I have, however, included two stories originally in German by the aristocrat Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach – who was born Dubská, from an ancient Bohemian noble family, at Zdislavice near Kroměříž in Moravia, was competent in Czech, and is increasingly celebrated as an important Austrian writer of her period. The stories of hers translated here are relevant to themes treated by writers in Czech, quite apart from their considerable merit as literature. In the following paragraphs, I attempt to identify some representative themes in this body of writing; the titles of stories that are included in the present collection are distinguished in **bold type**.

CZECH WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY: PERMISSIBLE GENRES

To readers familiar with the European modernism of the same period, comparisons might seem best in order with

1 See the items listed under her name in the Bibliography below.

fiction reflecting themes and styles commonly associated with *fin-de-siècle* 'Jung-Wien', such as Decadence, alienation, sexual anxiety and the fragmentation of identity, and more specifically the new developments in psychology and psychiatry associated with Freud among others.² And such themes are not absent in the writing of the women represented in the present collection; indeed the ironizing narrative technique of Ebner-Eschenbach in **'He Kisses Your Hand'** has been directly compared with a similar technique employed by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his dramatic writing, though she avoids Hofmannsthal's echoes of French Symbolism, and the comparison, even if justified, may mask some of her originality.³ As for Decadence, Růžena Jesenská boldly orients it towards women, especially in her collection *Beyond the World* (*Mimo svět*, 1909); her **'The Death of Ophelia'**, from that collection, explores psychological breakdown. The title story of the same collection, replete with Decadent imagery, skirts around the themes of lesbian love and necrophilia, though without endorsing them.⁴ (Positive accounts of lesbian relationships seem absent in women writers until some years later, as in Lída Merlínová's **'Marie and Marta'** (1933), included in this collection on account of its rarity. It tells of the breakup of the relationship between two women, with two alternative en-

2 Especially those discussed in Carl E. Schorske's influential *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

3 See Lore Muerdel Dormer, "Tribunal der Ironie: Marie von Ebner-Eschenbachs Erzählung "Er lässt die Hand küssen", *Modern Austrian Literature* 9/2 (1976): 86–97.

4 This story, with its title translated 'A World Apart', is not included in the present collection but is available in translation in Kathleen Hayes, ed. and trans., *A World Apart, and Other Stories: Czech Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (2nd edn., Prague: Karolinum, 2022), 51–64, and Hayes's translation is reprinted in Agatha Schwartz and Helga H. Thorson, *Shaking the Empire, Shaking Patriarchy: The Growth of a Feminist Consciousness across the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 2014), 198–209.

dings, of which only one is of conventional tragic despair.⁵) Vladimíra Jedličková's collection of fourteen brief prose poems published under the male pseudonym Edvard Klas as '**Tales about Nothing**' (1903; two are represented here) also develop a Decadent mood in their celebration of Nature; she was praised by the leading Czech Decadent writer and critic Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic as the 'poet of longing *par excellence*',⁶ though praise may have been two-edged from as explicit a misogynist as Karásek.

Perhaps partly under the influence of Decadence, women writers sometimes adopted an extreme Naturalism in sexual matters, which to some degree foreshadows twentieth-century psychological realism. It appeared sensationally in popular German-language novels of the period published in Berlin or Vienna, such as Grete Meisel-Hess's *Fanny Roth: Eine Jung-Frauengeschichte* (1903), with its description of marital rape, Margaret Böhme's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (1905), a fictional diary of a prostitute, and Else Jerusalem's *Der heilige Skarabäus* (1909), set in a brothel.⁷ The explicitness of such novels is echoed in the blazing rage of '**The Child**', from Lila Bubelová's collection *Over Her Dear Gloomy Path about masculine brutality (Nad její drahou zachmuřenou . . . , 1912)*.⁸

5 My thanks are due to Mark Cornwall for supplying me with a copy of this short story. It is not an excerpt from Merlínová's later 'Marie a Marta' novels, in which the women of the titles are sporty, emancipated sisters, rather than lesbian lovers.

6 Preface to Edvard Klas (Vladimíra Jedličková), *Povídky o ničem* (Prague: Moderní revue, 1903), 6.

7 An extract from Meisel-Hess's *Fanny Roth* (the notorious rape scene) is included in translation in Schwartz and Thorson, *Shaking the Empire* (n. 4 above), 166-73.

8 Bubelová wrote at this period under the pseudonym Lila B. Nováková. In the afterword to her drama *The Maidservant (Služka, 1933)* she apologizes, needlessly, for her writing of this earlier period: 'As a young girl I used to write poetry [...] I am enormously glad that these books (there were five of them, but

However, most Czech women writers worked out another kind of modernism under the shadow of the celebrated and canonic *Grandmother* (*Babička*, 1855) by Božena Němcová, whose themes were arguably drawn on by many of them. (Němcová is usually regarded as the greatest nineteenth-century Czech woman writer, and a founding figure of the National Revival in Czech literature. In a comparable way, male Czech writers returned constantly to the language and imagery of the nihilistic poem *May* (*Máj*, 1836) by K. H. Mácha, another foundational text of Czech Romanticism.) And the genre choices open to Czech women writers were usually strongly limited by the expectations of their patriarchal society, and followed Němcová in being 'concentrated primarily in the realm of the domestic idyll, in didactic writing, and [. . .] autobiography'.⁹ This was the case even with the novelist Karolina Světlá (1830–99), a spokeswoman in her fiction for the underdog, who, inspired by the example of George Sand, in her turn inspired some of the authors represented in this collection.¹⁰ Women writers could accordingly adopt a kind of 'ethical realism', often ironic, 'an engagement with the problems of contemporary society, aimed at altering the reader's outlook and moral values';¹¹ some, such as Jedličková and Lauermannová-Mikschová in

very slim volumes!) have disappeared; I am very embarrassed when any of my old friends remind me about them.'

9 'Das weibliche Repertoire war vor allem auf den Bereich des Häuslich-Idyllischen, des Pädagogischen und [...] des Autobiographischen konzentriert': Gudrun Langer, 'Babička contra Ahnfrau: Božena Němcová's "Babička" als nationalkulturelle Immatrikulation', *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie*, 57/1 (1998): 133–69 (this quotation at p. 139).

10 Karolina Světlá was the pseudonym of Johanna Mužáková née Rottová; she was a leading member of the so-called *májovci*, contributors to the *Máj* almanac founded in 1858 and so named in honour of the poem *Máj* by K. H. Mácha, whose aesthetic the almanac hoped to revive.

11 Charlotte Woodford, 'Suffering and Domesticity: The Subversion of Sentimentalism in Three Stories by Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach', *German Life and Letters* 59/1 (2006): 47–61 (this quotation at pp. 48–9).