Vienna 1900

With particular reference to the Beethoven Frieze and the University Paintings, how do Klimt's paintings reflect or refute contemporary notions of gender as exemplified in the writings of Otto Weininger and Rosa Mayreder?

Works discussed

Paintings by Gustav Klimt

*Philosophy*, c.1900, displayed at 7th Secession exhibition, 8 March

*Medicine*, c.1901, displayed at 10th Secession exhibition, 15 March

*The Beethoven Frieze*, c.1902, displayed as part of the 14th Secession exhibition, 15 April

*Jurisprudence*, c.1903, displayed in 18th Secession exhibition dedicated to Klimt’s works, shown together with Philosophy and Medicine, November – December

Texts

*Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character)*, by Otto Weininger, published 1903

*Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit (To the Critics of Femininity)*, Rosa Mayreder, published 1905, translated and published in English in 1913 as *A Survey of the Woman Problem*
Illustrations

Fig. 1 Gustav Klimt, Beethoven Frieze; detail, Knight in Shining Armor, Floating Genii; Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, on loan to Secession (Vienna, Austria)

Fig. 2 Gustav Klimt, Beethoven Frieze; detail, The Hostile Forces: Titan Typhoeus, his daughters, the three Gorgons, Voluptuousness, Wantonness, Immoderation; Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, on loan to Secession (Vienna, Austria)

Fig. 3 Gustav Klimt, Beethoven Frieze; detail, Floating Genii, Poetry; Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, on loan to Secession (Vienna, Austria)
Fig. 4 Gustav Klimt, Beethoven Frieze; detail, The Arts, Choir of Angels, Embracing Couple, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, on loan to Secession (Vienna, Austria)

Fig. 5 Gustav Klimt, Idyll; oil on canvas, 50 x 74 cm; Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien
Fig. 6 Gustav Klimt, University Panel: Philosophy; c.1900; oil on canvas, 430x300cm; For Univ. of Vienna (destroyed)
Fig. 7 Gustav Klimt, University Panel: Medicine; c.1901; oil on canvas, 430x300cm; For Univ. of Vienna (burned 1945)
Fig. 8 Gustav Klimt, University Panel: Medicine; detail: Hygieia; c.1901; oil on canvas, 430x300cm; For Univ. of Vienna (burned 1945)
Fig. 9 Gustav Klimt, University Panel: Jurisprudence; 1903; Oil on canvas, 430x300cm; For Univ. of Vienna (burned 1945)
‘It is as if the feminine, with its power of images and imagination, mainly affected the status of writing and experience through its potential for otherness and transgression.’

A feature of gender politics across Europe at the turn of the century was the repeated attempts, largely by men, to ‘pin down’ the essential nature of ‘woman’. With hindsight, it is clear that this project – of distilling the attributes of one half of humanity into a single principle – was doomed to endless contradiction and failure. Otto Weininger’s thesis is one such attempt. Rosa Mayreder’s begins from the standpoint that this is an illogical task. But the failure to satisfactorily resolve ‘the woman question’ in all its complexity left ‘woman’ something of an unknown quantity, a proxy for ambiguity and ‘otherness’ within which artists and writers of the time found plenty of mileage. In Klimt’s case, the feminine figure became an integral part of his revolutionary mission.

J.P.Bouillon, in his analysis of Gustav Klimt’s *Beethoven Frieze*, outlines its contextual significance thus: Vienna, at the end of the 19th century, was the capital of a state in crisis. Increasingly disparate constituent nationalities, and increasingly right-wing politics following the failure in 1879 of the German Liberal party, meant the possibility of unifying action through the normal political channels was compromised. Greater responsibility was therefore partly displaced onto the realm of cultural policy. Just as the Beethoven Frieze represented the Secession’s attempt to invent a national identity through art, so too the commissions by the Minister for Culture and Education for the University ceiling panels were part of this bid to wield cultural expression as a political tool.

For Klimt, the use of the feminine as an allegorical vehicle was fundamental to his style: it represented renewal, opposition, a suggestion of otherness increasingly marginalised by absolutist politics. As Gottfried Fliedl has commented about *Philosophy*, but which is equally applicable to other works here discussed: ‘It is worth noting that the allegorical message in this painting is mainly personified by women.’ This was integral to Klimt’s rebellious, and modernising, vision; and no historical accident – the changes underway in gender politics meant that the nature of femininity and what it might represent was more ambiguous than ever. This essay will examine

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2 J.P. Bouillon, *Klimt: Beethoven, the Frieze for the 9th Symphony* (Rizzoli, 1991), p7
those prevailing conditions that allowed Klimt to play with the feminine as allegory, and the purpose it served in his work.

I shall begin with a brief overview of the shared context in which the three protagonists – Klimt, Weininger, Mayreder – were working.

‘Klimt’s Beethoven Frieze must – after the destruction of his University paintings in 1945 – be considered as his masterpiece’.  

Produced in the middle period of Klimt’s life, the three University paintings and the Frieze represent the pinnacle of his allegorical works: ambitious, progressive, and aligned with the reforming and revolutionary mission of the Secession. Bouillon characterises the Secession’s work as ‘an attempt to save the health of the nation by the creation of a typically Austrian Art Nouveau’, an attempt to locate an identity and unifying vision for a society fast losing its sense of self.

They are also unlike much of what followed. ‘After 1901 his painting manifested two diametrically opposed emotional responses, both symptomatic of a wounded, weakened ego: rage and withdrawal’. ‘Rage and withdrawal’ because Klimt’s vision was ultimately rejected. This series of highly allegorical works simultaneously garnered admiration (‘a work in which the whole weight of thought, the whole colouristic nervosity of our times, are embodied’) and caused unprecedented consternation, referred to as ugly, obscene, mad, barbaric. The University Paintings were even formally objected to in the Austrian Parliament.

The principal reason for the uproar, Peter Vergo suggests, was ‘Klimt’s preoccupation with the whole subject of female sexuality’. Contemporary critics recognised the same feature: ‘The nude plays quite a special part in his work... Yes, his sensuality knows absolutely no bounds.’

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4 Nebehay C., Gustav Klimt: From drawing to painting, p97  
5 J.P. Bouillon, p8  
6 C. E. Schorske Fin-de-siècle Vienna (London, 1979), p246  
Yet scholarly speculation, whilst recognising the centrality of his exploration of female sexuality, has typically been more interested in debating the symbolism of other notions. Writing on the Beethoven Frieze (Figs 1 - 4) has traced the sources of his narrative ideas amongst the philosophical and artistic heavyweights of Germanic culture, whether drawn directly from Schiller or mediated by Beethoven, from Goethe and Nietzsche, or from Wagner’s commentaries on Beethoven. The interlacing of ideas becomes highly complex, as Willsdon writes: ‘Templekunst, in fact, involves a Goethean reconciliation of the classical and Christian worlds, and a synthesis of Nietzschean influences with Wagner’s concept of Beethoven as a Christ-like redeemer.’

As the symbolism is both literary and idiosyncratic (‘personal themes imprinted on iconographic tissue’), in the absence of any detailed explanation from Klimt, it can apparently withstand endless scrutiny. In the same article Willsdon acknowledges that ‘any assessment... clearly needs to take account of the complex ferment of ideas which would have surrounded its genesis and shaped the attitudes of its viewers’. Stating the obvious perhaps, and yet the complex ‘ferment of ideas’ about gender could withstand closer analysis.

The University paintings – now destroyed – are somewhat harder to analyse. In terms of allegory and symbolism, they appear to be as rich as the Frieze, and similarly compositionally groundbreaking. Contemporary descriptions, such as Ludwig Hevesi’s, suggest that they were colouristically adventurous. Karl Kraus’s critical eye targets Klimt as ‘this man, drunk with colour, reeling through our modern lives’. And in spite of his dismissal of this ‘unphilosophical artist’, these are deeply thoughtful works. A Schopenhauerian reading of Philosophy (Fig 6) and Medicine (Fig 7) can be very fruitful. The seething masses of life and death seem to suggest that academic intervention is ultimately futile, rational man is an ‘impotent puppet, dangling from the cords of illusion and jerked and pulled about by the universal will in conformity with its own ends.’

It was precisely this challenge to rationality, science and the progressive forces of civilisation that grated so with the men of the university. But neither did the unabashed use of nudity go

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11 C.Willsdon
12 J. P. Bouillon
14 ibid.
15 R. Mayreder, A Survey of the Woman Problem, (New York, 1913)
unremarked. *Medicine* was described as an ‘offense against public morals’.\(^{16}\) Compared to previous public commissions, the University Paintings evidenced a transition from idealised ‘poesie’ (see Fig 5) to something much more challenging – because real – to the fin-de-siècle viewer, in terms of the human body as allegory.

Of course it was not uncommon within the artistic canon for allegorical concepts to be embodied by (nude) women. Klimt’s Viennese predecessor Hans Makart was a typical example. Indeed the history of European art is characterised by the inscribing of tales for the male gaze into the bodies of women.

But in this place, at this time, the bodies of women had become increasingly contested, fraught, territory – swaddled in innocence within the bourgeois home, roaming as unleashed sexuality on the streets – the hypocrisy of Viennese society on sexual matters has been noted.\(^ {17}\) It rendered the activity of looking at women a conflicted one. Le Rider observes that ‘it was this attraction-repulsion that inspired a large part of the literature, art and Kulturkritik of the turn of the century.’\(^ {18}\)

Feminism had also become a destabilising force within nineteenth century society. Women were beginning to challenge their economic position, to encroach on the male sphere of work, intellectualism, culture. In short, ‘modernisation inevitably overturned sexual identity and this had profound cultural consequences.’\(^ {19}\)

All of these provocations were bundled together and termed ‘the woman question’. Tackling ‘the woman question’ – with its implications for almost every sphere of life – was unavoidable for anyone with intellectual pretensions, revolutionary aims, or a vested interest in preserving the segregated status quo. Theorising thus drew on biological, psychological, psychoanalytical, philosophical, economic, historical, cultural, literary and artistic evidence, and often in a confused manner.

\(^{16}\) C. E. Schorske *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (London, 1979), quoting Hermann Bahr, p242  
\(^{17}\) S. Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (London, 1943)  
\(^{18}\) J. Le Rider, Modernity and the Crisis of Identity: Culture and Society in fin-de-siècle Vienna (Cambridge, 1993), p89  
\(^{19}\) J. Le Rider, p112
Rosa Mayreder’s book, *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit* presents a catalogue of contradictory contemporary pronouncements on the nature of ‘woman’. Compare Schopenhauer’s ‘unjustness is a fundamental trait of female character’ with Kingsley’s adulation for woman as ‘the only true missionary of civilisation, of fraternity, of tender, self-sacrificing love’. Part of her project reads as a psychological dissection of those who sought to preserve the integrity of the male sphere. Observing the faltering nature of masculine identity, she comments, ‘all is not right with masculinity.’ She refrains from defining femininity herself, asking at the outset, ‘Is woman condemned by her sex to a definitely circumscribed mentality?’

Her essay pays special attention to Otto Weininger, a young scholar who attempted, with his doctoral thesis, ‘to refer to a single principle the whole contrast between man and woman’, thereby settling the matter. Published in 1903, *Geschlecht und Charackter* is probably the most misogynistic text of the last century: witness his ultimate conclusion that ‘coitus is immoral’ and ‘women have no existence and no essence, they are not – they are nothing.’ Whilst rarely unconditionally accepted by his peers, neither were his ideas wholly condemned, as evidenced by the usually sharp-tongued Karl Kraus: ‘An admirer of woman assents with enthusiasm to your arguments for despising women.’ Freud recognised Weininger’s ‘genius’, despite objecting to his theories. And the influence of *Geschlecht und Charackter*’s central ideas on some of the great literary works of the early 20th century – Joyce, Lawrence – has also been proven.

Klimt, Mayreder, Weininger: all three addressed the question of femininity, all three also had a reforming mission. Klimt, for his part, was explicitly attempting to ‘save’ Austrian society through art. The Beethoven Frieze is nothing if not a utopian vision. Chandak Sengoopta, in his survey of Weininger’s work, suggests that ‘his initial aim in writing what became Geschlecht und Charakter was to help in reforming society by disseminating the scientific truth about sexuality and gender.’ Unfortunately Weininger’s utopia is an impractically sexless one. Mayreder, as described by Harriet

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21 ibid, p91
22 ibid, p1
23 O. Weininger, *Sex and Character* (N.Y. 1975), ‘Author’s Preface’
24 ibid, p336
25 ibid.
Anderson, was concerned with establishing some philosophical underpinnings to the feminist movement. Her utopia is one of greater synthesis in society.²⁸

Given their shared social and intellectual context, it is not surprising that gender, and particularly the question of femininity, is a recurrent theme for all of them. This fin-de-siecle debate around ‘woman’ was a symptom of a crisis in masculine identity, of the burgeoning feminist movement, and of the nature of modernity itself.

In looking at these three in greater detail, I shall begin with a summary of those ideas of Weininger’s which could be particularly legible in Klimt.

The possible synergies between the two lie in the fact that Weininger’s argument, seemingly radical, was in fact closely aligned to prevailing feelings about the ‘truth’ of gender types. Sengoopta paraphrases a sympathetic passage in Die Fackel:

‘Culture had been created by males. Women had advanced or impeded cultural development solely by stimulating or inhibiting male efforts; their role in society was exclusively erotic and aesthetic.’²⁹

Weininger’s thesis, an extended discussion of the fundamental differences between male and female, began with the biology of masculinity and femininity, basing his argument on the proven principle of bisexuality, or sexual intermediacy. This stated that gender was not binary; rather, all individuals, and all cells for that matter, possess some male and some female in varying proportions. There were however, ‘Ideal’ types (as in Physics). Each individual was a mixture of the two polarities. But as he is unable to state categorically the essence of the Ideal Types, he relies for evidence on what he perceives to be instances of sexual intermediacy. For example, ‘a woman’s demand for emancipation and her qualification for it are in direct proportion to the amount of maleness in her.’³⁰

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²⁸ H. Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women’s Movements in Fin-de-siecle Vienna* (Yale, 1992), particularly chapter 9 ‘The Synthetic Ideal: Rosa Mayreder’
²⁹ C. Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science and Self in Imperial Vienna* (Chicago, 2000), chapter 8, ‘Responses to Weininger’
³⁰ O. Weininger, *Sex and Character* (N.Y. 1975), p64
His argument falters on the discrepancy between the two parts of the book. In Part 2, in extrapolating his organic principles to ‘charactero-logical conclusions’, he contradicts his own notion of intermediacy within individuals by speaking in general terms of ‘women’ and ‘men’, saying ‘there is a deep truth underlying the old empirical sexual duality’.\(^{31}\)

As Mayreder comments, ‘he finds himself compelled, since no criterion can be obtained from his hypothesis, to make use of the general type in order to give the first application of gradation theory. Indeed in the second part he completely annuls the suppositions of the first.’\(^{32}\)

Part 2 reads as a disappointing reversion to prejudice – ‘the fantasies and fears of middle class men living in a changing world’\(^{33}\) – especially since the driving ideas are so typical of the time:

‘The male has the same psychical data as the female, but in a more articulated form; whereas she thinks more or less in henids (his word for undeveloped thought), he thinks in more or less clear and detailed presentations in which the elements are distinct from the tones of feeling.’\(^{34}\)

‘The woman is wholly devoted to sexual matters, that is to say, to the spheres of begetting and of reproduction. Her relations to her husband and children complete her life, whereas the male is something more than sexual.’\(^{35}\)

‘There is greater differentiation in man, as in him the sexual and the unsexual parts of his nature are sharply separated.’\(^{36}\)

He discusses a number of lofty themes – ethics, logic, aesthetics, talent, genius – in each case justifying his assertion that the male principle is the only one capable of these higher forms of consciousness. Thus, contrary to popular belief, women have the stronger sexual drive and are responsible for the debasement of men; and, lacking in memory, logical thought, morality, so true intellectuality, creativity, and by implication, genius, are denied to the female.

\(^{31}\) ibid, p80
\(^{32}\) R. Mayreder, A Survey of the Woman Problem, (New York, 1913)
\(^{34}\) O. Weininger, Sex and Character (N.Y. 1975), p100
\(^{35}\) O. Weininger, Sex and Character (N.Y. 1975), p88
\(^{36}\) O. Weininger, Sex and Character (N.Y. 1975), p92
Le Rider summarises neatly: *According to Weininger, a woman, to fulfil her destiny, simply has to abandon herself to the calls of nature, of the flesh, of instincts; to passivity, forgetfulness, the slumber of the mind, the will of the world, procreation. Whereas the destiny of man can be fulfilled only with a mighty and agonizing effort to realize the one command: ‘Become a genius!’*

There is something in this last comment, and the reduction of the feminine principle to unconscious instinct and sexuality, that is reminiscent of Klimt. Whether it is the slumbering ‘genii’ that float above trouble in the Beethoven frieze; the Gates of Hell-esque column of anonymous writhing bodies, gloriously naked, wholly caught up in the sensuality of being; the deviant Gorgons, distracting man from his higher artistic calling with corrupting sexual temptation; or the final collapse of the artist into a full-body embrace – there are real-life suspicions about women and their mysterious, protean nature that break through the allegorical form.

Many of Klimt’s women do indeed appear to be wholly sensual, and in certain cases, amoral. *Jurisprudence* (Fig 9) could be read as a particularly pessimistic view of femininity. Here the women hover between inhumane power and tormenting critics, the ‘defendant… an emaciated, naked old man… is a shadow tormented by three wraiths’, abandoned to the mercy of three vulgar sirens. And if not cruel themselves, they represent an uncaring universe. Witness the leering face at the bottom of *Philosophy*, or the distant goddesses of Truth, Justice and the Law.

Eyes closed, the towering masses do not communicate directly with the viewer. These women (and the occasional, faceless, man) are thus denied language, that fundamental element of culture. They have no identity or personality beyond what they represent. They are narcissistic, passive beings: the eye-catching figure of the lone girl in Medicine, thrust forward from the sea of humanity, is totally absorbed in her own body.

The only suggestion of ‘genius’ is expressed in masculinity in the Beethoven Frieze: the striving protagonist-artist is (almost) the only male, his world populated by barely conscious females.

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37 J. Le Rider, p92
It is often speculated that this figure of the artist, and perhaps the mistreated male in *Jurisprudence*, represent Klimt’s own person. Likewise with the women, his personal preoccupation with the nature of female sexuality, and the idea of female auto-eroticism (a master of the erotic line drawing, he famously pronounced, ‘*I am more interested in other people, above all, women*’), may partly explain the predominance of women:

‘The allegorical woman belongs to the imaginary world; she is a metaphorical figure, but also interwoven with actual reality.’

However beyond the obvious fact of Klimt’s unfettered heterosexual drives, it must be remembered that these are ultimately allegorical figures, not real women, or indeed necessarily depictions of femininity. His innovation of hyper-real naked bodies distracts from the fact that these paintings are still highly symbolic. Woman is the vehicle, not the meaning. Any attempt to read Weininger’s espoused ideas directly into the works will always remain superficial, for whereas Weininger is commenting on the nature of femininity, Klimt is using the feminine to comment on other matters – such as the nature of being and the importance of art.

Whether an expression of overt sexuality, as in Weininger, or not, there was clearly something in the idea of femininity that made it a useful allegorical vehicle. Before tackling this question, it will be as well to look in more detail at elements of Mayreder’s philosophy, which suggest that Klimt’s use of the feminine could be a response to a specifically male identity crisis.

*Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit* is a fascinating read – insightful and prescient – not least for Mayreder’s devastating critique of the muddle-headed thinking that prevailed in contemporary theorising on the psychology of the sexes. This she attributes to a mistaken assumption that psyche and gender are linked (arguing that ‘*the psychic character of single individuals… does not correspond with their sexual type*’), good old-fashioned prejudice (‘*it is only arbitrary supposition to call all positive qualities masculine and all negative qualities feminine*…’), and a looming conflict in masculine identity.

Instead of a contrast between male and female, she analyses the contrast between Intellect and Sex, asserting that ‘...the human brain exhibits merely individual and not sexual differences.’

She does allow that certain basic qualities are derived from sex. The ‘teleological’ natures of masculinity and femininity are those qualities deriving from primitive necessity:

‘This teleological differentiation in man would thus be found in all those qualities which favour sexual conquest – in the aggressive temperament which predisposes him to a warlike, enterprising and violent existence, and the case of the woman, in the weak-willed, patient, unenterprising nature which favours passivity and makes her fitter for the conception, bearing and rearing of offspring.’

But she places intellect on a higher evolutionary level, its ‘domination of sex-teleology’ a function of civilisation and development. Using a Darwinian principle, she argues that evolution must result in greater individuality, a differentiated masculinity and femininity: Weininger’s ‘womanish men’ and ‘emancipated women’.

She diagnoses ‘a state of incurable discord’ that has been allowed to develop in masculine identity, between highly intellectualised (feminised) pursuits and professions, the store set by traditional manliness which very few have opportunity to exhibit (war, soldiery, ‘barbaric values’) and the unnatural relationship of most men with the sexual side of their natures.

‘The primitive, teleological sex type (has been) handed on from generation to generation, without having been put to the test of the actual conditions of life.’

Unfortunately modern government has obviated the need for ‘the strong hand’, and the qualities required for modern life fall uncomfortably into the feminine sphere.

‘The present time is absolutely characterised by the differentiated masculinity which has been described... Its nature is technically intellectual and aesthetically contemplative.’

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40 R. Mayreder, A Survey of the Woman Problem, (New York, 1913), p26
41 R. Mayreder, A Survey of the Woman Problem, (New York, 1913), ‘On Masculinity’
She gives short shrift to bourgeios squeamishness in dealing with sexual matters:

‘No words are strong enough to condemn the attitudes of the middle classes towards their growing boys... left to make their first sexual experiences in the arms of a prostitute.’

Emasculated by the actual demands of modern city life (‘it would be difficult for anyone to say what there is so specifically manly in the work of a teacher, a doctor, an official, or a lawyer’), and denied a natural relationship to sex, she diagnoses ‘the masculine temperament’ as split into ‘a spiritual being ...of lofty intellectualism’ and an ‘animal being, degraded to the lowest level of sexual existence’.

Women, on the other hand, for all that they have suffered under the name of progress, yet display a much greater synthesis of their dual nature: ‘The heroism of self-mastery which women display in thus insisting upon the sexual integrity of the personality is a form of superiority’. Motherhood also ensures a greater natural synthesis of the two parts.

This notion of synthesis – between intellect and sex, and between male and female – is key to her project. As Anderson summarises:

‘The female synthetic person is the herald of the new woman who transcends the norms of average femininity without adopting the negative aspects of masculinity... Only when modern man can combine intellect with a refined sexuality will he again become a harmonious and imposing figure.’

Mayreder develops this idea in later writings, asserting – in contrast to Weininger – that the genius is necessarily androgynous:

‘The genius is not to be understood as an intensification of masculine nature, but as an extension across the boundaries of one-sided sex differentiation, as a synthesis of masculine and feminine

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42 R. Mayreder, A Survey of the Woman Problem, (New York, 1913), p122
43 H. Anderson, p168
So, according to Mayreder, the male psyche (and remembering that the majority of cultural producers were male) was increasingly narrowly defined and ultimately flawed. By contrast with this narrow definition of the masculine, there was an ambiguity attendant on femininity that made it particularly useful for artistic expression.

"As always in western culture – from the Dionysian through the Baroque to nineteenth century utopianism – ambiguity entered into an alloy with the feminine."  

Weininger’s thesis can be read as an attempt to set some unencroachable boundaries between the sexes, to build reinforcements around the shrinking jurisdiction of the male sphere. But this detailed circumscription of the male, and the identification of masculinity with reason and progress, means that only in the female is there room for synthesis and ambiguity, mysticism and irrationality, for ‘otherness’, all of which are essential qualities for an allegorical vehicle, allowing the notion of femininity to stand in for ‘the miraculous, the utopian, the dangerous and the androgynous’.

Unlike masculinity – an ideal which every man thought he understood – the lack of agreement on femininity paradoxically left the field wide open, meaning that in reality, the only definitive conception of femininity was ‘as a form of being, not as a kind of being’.

This mystification of the feminine served artists and writers of the time well – an endless source of artistic tropes. In his Tale of the 672nd Night, Hoffmansthal describes the female body as ‘the language of a wonderful, sealed world.’ More disparagingly, Mayreder comments, ‘From the literature on the theme of ‘woman’ one obtains the odd impression that the character of one half of mankind is strangely unknown, impenetrable, enigmatic.’

Indeed this was not only the case in art. As Freud himself noted, the erotic life of woman was,
partly owing to their conventional secretiveness and insincerity, still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity.’ So in art as in science, ‘woman’ confounded definition and understanding, a fact that was assumed to be inherent in the nature of women, rather than in the nature of the attempts to define.

Klimt used this inherited state of ambiguity to great effect, developing his own language of the female form. He went far beyond traditional representations of vice and virtue, articulating a more highly differentiated symbolism to personify both what is most terrifying and terrible about the world, and – in the Beethoven Frieze at least – hope, art, salvation and love.

Willsdon’s interpretation of the Frieze refers back to those female archetypes in Faust who offer both temptation – drawing the link between the Faustian ‘Graiae’ and their sisters, the Gorgons – and salvation – the eternal womanly, Helen, Gretchen – likening the triumphant ‘kiss’ to a soul saved by the ‘highest form of love’.

But there are other abstract ideas here given expression through the female form. They are the weak-willed and imploring masses, the fortifying and encouraging (of man), they represent dreaming, and the hopes and wishes of mankind, they embody treachery, temptation, and vice, violence, sickness and death, poetry and art (again the Athena figure appears in classical posture), and finally they are the choirs of heavenly angels surrounding a womb-like bower where the hero, now relieved of his armour, finds salvation turning inwards into the arms of a woman.

Beyond this versatility-through-ambiguity, there were some very specific associations that the feminine permitted.

For example, the suspicion that the female state was somehow the more natural – which finds an expression in both Weininger and Mayreder – is evident everywhere in Klimt’s paintings. If woman becomes a proxy for an enviable state of oneness with nature, it is not a surprise that the whole world – according to Klimt – is female. In rejecting the civilising image of the university men, Klimt’s use of women reinforces the man/ woman – culture/nature divide. Thus in Philosophy we have The Sphinx, that threatening, female creature renowned for eating those who couldn’t solve
her riddle. A primal figure of ambiguous status – God or monster? – expressed as a constellation of stars rather than solid material form, here the identification of femininity with nature is almost complete.

The use of classical and mythological figures supports this nostalgic interpretation: Hygieia, the Sphinx, the Gorgons are all selected from a pre-christian, ‘pure’ culture. Ancient forms and ideas untainted by 19th century moral decay, ‘they represent a natural development of Klimt’s interest in an alternative, violent and instinctual antiquity.’

It is noteworthy in studying Klimt’s women that androgyny was both a modern and an ancient notion. The ‘androgynous protectrix type’ in warrior-like pose, watching in judgement, is a Klimt favourite. Impenetrable Athena reappears in many guises. But there is in some of his slender figures another form of androgyny – that presexual woman to whom Viennese men seemed so drawn. It is here that the limit of masculinity is most clearly revealed – for presumably androgyny is a concept that, theoretically at least, could be embodied by a male or a female. Yet in Klimt it never was.

Le Rider reads Klimt as a vision of a return to matriarchal primacy à la Bachofen, noting that in his paintings, ‘Bachofen’s prophecy that the sceptre of Apollo might fall into the hands of Dionysos, and that the sensual chaos and primitive barbarism of matriarchy might resume their ascendancy, sweeping away the cultural gains of masculine, patriarchal civilisation, seems to come true’.

In Medicine, Hygieia, Greek goddess of health and healing, does indeed seem an ‘austere and distant archetypal mother’. Traditionally associated with Athena (and all the masculinity-in-femininity that entails), her eyes are open, addressing the viewer, yet her posture somewhat unapproachable. She appears to be offering both salvation and judgement. In Philosophy, the corresponding mediating figure is the (female) personification of Knowledge: ‘From below a great living head emerges... it heralds a creative power equal to the chaos above. The apparition is Knowledge or Philosophy.’ This woman represents a glimmer of consciousness or intellect,
channelling the cosmos through her intense gaze to the viewer.

Synthetic, androgynous, omniscient: these figures contradict Weininger’s notion that femininity is thoughtlessly sexual. Hygieia and Knowledge here represent in female form the presence of intellect.

An increasingly ‘feminised world’ is something that both Weininger and Mayreder considered to be a feature of modernity.

The loss of the warrior’s arms and armour as he proceeds through the Beethoven Frieze has a parallel in Mayreder’s observation that ‘...the warlike...masculine tendencies are receding into the background.’ She sees that as the ‘teleological’ idea of masculinity retreats, the world does indeed become increasingly feminine. The fundamental underpinning of masculinity in certain activities or ways of living had all but disappeared. Even war has lost its masculine honour through mechanisation.

‘Civilisation and culture bring man nearer to woman; they render him effeminate; they are anti-virile.’

Similarly, Weininger is very aware of the increasing feminisation of Viennese society and culture, which he takes to be a sign of decay. ‘The enormous recent increase in a kind of dandified homosexuality may be due to the increasing effeminacy of the age’. Greater sexual differentiation naturally means fewer ‘Ideally’ masculine men.

In Klimt, what may initially appear to be an embodiment of Weininger’s theories of the consuming sexuality of women, is in fact a representation of the very state that terrified him – the feminisation of the world, where women ‘represent the revolving movement of cyclical growth... pregnancy... motherhood... embryonic childlikeness... old age and ugliness...’ And death, of course. ‘Here the viewer is given reference points in the various stages of feminine metamorphosis.’

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54 R. Mayreder, ‘On Masculinity’
55 O. Weininger, p73
56 G. Fliedl, p81
But does feminisation also mean total sexualisation? Bouillon comments that in the Beethoven Frieze, sexuality is revealed ‘in its frightening dimension as the driving force of the world’, and ‘the unveiled woman is the frightening revelation of a completely feminised universe’. It is certainly this disappearance of boundaries and pervasive feminine ambiguity that troubled Weininger and drove his project.

But Bouillon’s characterisation of ‘frightening’, and the conflation of femininity with sexuality, is too narrow. Certainly, the Gorgons are not particularly charming, but Klimt’s picturing of a feminised world is also aspirational, and exploratory: ‘these pictures do not document man’s surrender to the power of Eros or indeed his attempt to come to terms with an alien femininity. Rather, they are projections of a ‘male femininity’’.57 In other words, this is an expression of the male psyche seeking something not to be found in its own prescribed territory: an instance of Mayreder’s synthetic masculinity.

The concept of sexual intermediacy, of differentiated forms, and its correlate in art – the figure of the androgyne – was fundamental to the nature of modernity, a feature of that disintegration of identity that superceded the world of Kantian clarity. In these paintings, femininity – and the ‘everything else’ that it entails – presides in judgement over rational man, increasingly alone. Klimt was picturing in art a state that Weininger feared, and Mayreder predicted.

Finally, in serving the revolt and renewal inherent in Klimt’s project, the feminine presented itself as a useful vehicle for expressing rebellion, and synthesis.

‘The dominant theme of Judaeo-Christian culture has been that of the supremacy of the male and subordination of the female... the idea of the feminine other (is) inevitably a feature of opposition to this patriarchal hegemonic culture.’58

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57 G. Fliedl, quoting S. Eiblmayr, p202
58 B. S. Turner’s Introduction to C. Buci-Glucksmann, Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity, (Sage, 1994)
In Weininger, if the masculine element is characterised by reason, and the female by unreason, this leads to an association between the dominant, patriarchal world order, and rationality. Therefore the feminine necessarily represents the threat of irrationality.

But a turn to the feminine can equally be read as a vote of no-confidence in the faltering masculine over-intellectualised world that Mayreder describes. In a culture where progress was bound up with the notions of intellectualism, political order, scientific, technical rationality – all considered masculine-led phenomena – disillusion with the results of modernisation would naturally provoke a turn to femininity as revolt. To return to Schorske’s Oedipal interpretation, in challenging the rule of the father, the invoking of the feminine was almost inevitable.

‘Not only are Klimt’s paintings shot through with the antagonism between rationalism and irrational nature, between liberal culture and the aesthetic rebellion of its ‘sons’, but Klimt was also fascinated by the tension between patriarchal culture and chaos, for which he used femininity as an allegorical vehicle. It was both a rebellious world view, opposed to the things of the past, and a vision of the future, with a totally different, feminine culture.’

One of the overarching ideas of Mayreder’s work is that of synthesis – between Intellect and Sex, Male and Female. In her 1923 book, *Gender and Culture*, she pledges allegiance to the ‘synthetic God’. For her, as already noted, this synthesis is within closer reach for women.

‘Motherhood furnishes a guaranty that the intellectualism of women will never plunge them into that ill-balanced relationship with the natural and elemental things of life so frequently to be observed among men of intellect.’

Weininger is a perfect example of the unbalanced, over-intellectualised masculinity Mayreder has in mind when she says ‘The modern man suffers through his intellectuality as from an illness.’ His academic arguments lead him to places that his psyche cannot handle – as evidenced by his suicide shortly after publication. His disillusion was channelled into an accusation of encroaching femininity. But where Weininger diagnoses an affliction, Klimt sees a future.

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59 G. Fliedl, p81
60 R. Mayreder, ‘Motherhood and Culture’
In these four paintings, and elsewhere, Klimt depicts a somewhat happier and more natural synthesis of sexual life and personality, of male and female. Nowhere is this clearer than in the pervasive use of ornamentation, the highly developed and gendered symbology that is a signature of his work. ‘Femininity corresponds to a state of fusion symbolised by ornamentation.’\textsuperscript{61} This can be seen in the fabric that courses through Medicine and decorates Hygieia’s dress, in the ever present whorls of hair, in the womb-like octopus of Jurisprudence and woven throughout the Beethoven Frieze.

Whilst the University paintings represent an awe-inspiring, if not terrifying, vision of the universe and humanity, and the Beethoven Frieze the monumental struggle of the artist through life, these themes are communicated through a fused presentation of intellect and sex – representation and will – male and female.

Rebellion and synthesis. Klimt’s women were fundamental to the rejection of the dominant masculine culture of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and creating a vision for the 20\textsuperscript{th}: a synthetic utopia.

\footnote{J. Le Rider,}
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