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Paula von Reznicek, “The Hand on the Wheel” (1928)

Paula von Reznicek (1895-1976) was an internationally-ranked tennis player, journalist, and writer. In 1928, she published *Resurrection of the Lady* [*Auferstehung der Dame*], an illustrated book that served as a kind of compendium of contemporary views on feminine identity. In it, she encouraged the “resurrected lady” to take a more active role in social and public life, since male leaders had let women down. In this passage, her demand for female emancipation focuses on a specific example: the woman at the wheel, a sight rarely seen in Germany at the time. Reznicek’s text also reminds us that the “New Woman” mostly belonged to the upper-middle class or the nobility. Only affluent women could afford this sort of lifestyle and take the attendant liberties.

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She has to have a hand in everything, so why not on the wheel? She didn’t ask for long; she grabbed it and now wields it like a small scepter. Without batting an eyelid, she grips the vibrating Volant with her steely fingers; it yields to the slightest pressure, and she handles it masterfully, forcefully, as though it were a thoroughbred or a bulldog.

We meet her on the highway, the boulevards, on the canals, the lake, the sea, and in the air. First warily, with misgivings, scrutinizing: does she have the nerves, a clear enough view, might she lose her head as easily as her heart; does she possess the necessary physical powers and psychic energy? How sweet that she’s giving it a try, how brave that she’s not on the sidelines, but will she really become – good – reliable?

Our qualms fall by the wayside – praxis proves it! She has prevailed. There is no denying it. Her will conquers the miles; her pleasure in speed gives her prospects. In flying she speeds toward her goals, determined, proud in the knowledge that she is replacing a man without being like him.

The naysayers used to groan: “If she only handled the gear shift as gently as she does her friends and were as careful on the curves as she is with her morals” – today one can plead for the opposite: “If only she were as gentle with her friends as she is with the clutch and as generous in her morals as she is on the curves. . .”

Source: Paula von Reznicek, *Auferstehung der Dame*. Stuttgart: Dieck & Co Verlag: 1928, p. 126.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap