

Paula and Burghard von Reznicek, *The Consummate Adam* (1928)

Abstract

Born Paula Heimann in 1895 to a Breslau banking family with Jewish ancestry, Paula von Reznicek had grown up in the Catholic faith, served as a nurse during the First World War, and married Burghard von Reznicek in the early 1920s, likely attracted to both his interest in tennis and his aristocratic pedigree. Burghard, born in 1896 and later adopted by his mother's second husband, the Viennese composer and baron Emil Nikolaus von Reznicek, went on to work as a tennis journalist and author of books about the sport. Paula and Burghard von Reznicek published the book *Der vollendete Adam* [The Consummate Adam] in 1928 as a lighthearted commentary on how society's rapidly changing gender roles had given rise to new expectations of social interaction and self-presentation for men as well as for women. It appeared in the same year as Paula von Reznicek's solo work on the modern woman, *Auferstehung der Dame* [Resurrection of the Lady], and the two books explored similar themes (see the excerpts from *Auferstehung der Dame*, also in this GHD section).

Der vollendete Adam opened on a conversation between a theatergoing couple in which the woman bemoaned the present state of manhood. Her male partner responded that the drama they were about to watch would present an emerging new male ideal, "the perfected Adam," and the remainder of the book played out in a series of "scenes" from that drama, concluding with another brief conversation between the couple as they left the theater. This framing conceit—a staged drama about the relationship between the genders within a book on the same topic—encouraged readers from the start to consider gender as a performance that one could critique and change. At the same time, though, the text often presented a more complicated picture. Calls for equality and "comradeship" between men and women juttred up against passages that implied a "natural" division of roles between the two, a division implicit in the metaphorical uses of Adam, Eve, and the biblical Eden. The authors deployed a number of military metaphors, too, when describing the shifting relationship between the genders, with references to battles, balances of power, outflanking maneuvers, and counterattacks sprinkled throughout the chapters, and concluding with the couple's announcing a peace treaty on the final page. The provisions of that "treaty," the book suggested, reasserted an appreciation of the ostensible differences between men and women as well an acknowledgment of their equality. It called as well for a sort of re-enchantment of romantic courting—a return to illusion and certain traditional rituals—in opposition to the mechanistic "Sachlichkeit" [sober rationality] that had purportedly come to dictate amorous pursuits in recent years.

The book presented a caricature of the shifting gender order in Weimar Germany, and the excerpts below expose some of the prominent stereotypes that surrounded that shift and some of the anxieties that it had created. The excerpts reveal, too, the book's clear class assumptions about its readers—this work spoke to an upper-middle-class audience that had read widely and felt comfortable with the occasional French or Italian phrase. It also took for granted that couplehood, and specifically heterosexual couplehood, remained the central goal of that audience, notwithstanding the emergence of a visible LGBTQ subculture and a prominent discourse of singlehood, particularly with respect to independent women. Paula and Burghard von Reznicek divorced shortly after the book's publication, and Paula, the more talented and ambitious of the two, went on to author a number of books, write widely for various periodicals, and win several national and international tennis titles.

Source

“Lord of Creation!”

(Before the curtain rises. Final controversies in the orchestra seats.)

She: ... No, my dear, there is no such thing as a “consummate Adam.” Just compare: Paris, Petronius, Ovid, Tristan, Romeo, Walter von der Vogelweide, Don Juan Casanova have metamorphosed into dandies, snobs, gents, lady killers, in short, into *vauriens*. What a retreat, what a sad prospect!

He: Don’t get so vehement and accusatory! Critique demands watertight arguments. Eve as a prosecutor—the all-too-strict judge of our weaknesses—an arbitrary ruler...

She: Absolutely unwanted, not at all arbitrary. Since “he” didn’t want to go on, “she” simply grasped the scepter.

He: Where is your proof?

She: A glance at the world suffices!

He: Perhaps the former glory went to the devil, I’ll concede. But we are already approaching new limits. Disregarded culture threatens to bankrupt us. Rest assured, we will make up for what we have neglected. You women forged ahead, to be sure, light-footed and successful—we follow cautiously, but consciously, converts firmly determined to outstrip you, who have come alarmingly close to the goal...

She (interrupting him): Our most fervent wish is to go back to the “lord of creation” as nature demands. But I fear all that has been said are mere words, concepts, expectations—why don’t you just admit defeat!

(A bell rings, the lights are dimmed.)

He (quickly): Patience, my lovely, the tale begins, “the consummate Adam” in modern form unrolls before you—placed into your hands—there, judge for yourself!

(The curtain rises.)

Tyrant and Henpecked Husband.

The eternal lament of the oppression of the sexes—a matter of temperament or habit, and ultimately a question of money—our daily bread!

Now, where “she” no longer wears the trousers— even if “the trousers” are frequently renounced, and as a voluntary sacrifice, the long hair as well, without relinquishing its mysterious Samson-like power, Mr. Adam has suddenly been forced onto the defensive, which he can avoid only by vehement counter-attack.

Dialogue of the Times

Max (on the telephone): ... I bought a ticket for you too, we can take a little trip [English in the original] afterwards.

Moritz: Absolutely not! My wife returned yesterday—

Max: If that’s the case, surely you can go once without her ...

Moritz: I’m enough of an egotist to spare myself the dreadful scenes.

Max: Poor slave, why don’t you show for once who’s boss at home!

Moritz: Don’t pretend that you, it is not as if you are—*tempi passati* ... An utterly misplaced morality! As in the parliamentary world, only a balance of power can win. On the home front: the woman, in the battle for existence: the man. That is why he bears responsibility as captain and has the damned duty to steer the right course to the very end.

Quintessence:

Let’s leave the fisticuffs and verbal duels to the robber barons. A menu can never be the focus of debate, a silk frock only if it imperils your finances. In exchange, a midnight “*drink* at the nightclub” is permissible even if your wife is not there, unless it conceals ostentatious neglect. As a perfect gentleman, he will voluntarily slip the purple leather slipper over the little foot peeping out of the bathroom door...

Handsome or ugly?

Douglas Fairbanks and Harry Liedtke, Valentino or Menjou have nothing in common with the ideal figures of a Hellenistic era who could fall into trance-like raptures over the Apollonian perfection of man. Film has completely robbed the term “handsome man” of any *raison d’être* and, with the devil’s work of technology, provided a cliché for the ideal figures of the masses.

Taste has become individual. “Any woman” can choose “her man.” “Handsome” alone is not enough—as popular parlance has it, “he must have that something,” then he is the right one!

What a privilege of our time, what convenience and relief! Even with a slightly hooked nose, a crooked mouth, wide upper lip, uneven shoulders, a less than perfect figure, one can nevertheless advance to an idol of “today,” and, in concert with the body, comportment and attitude, be held up as a desirable prototype of the stronger sex.

The dazzling mask is outmoded. Even if it can’t always be “the mind” that “builds its own body,” the temperament and nature of the individual can lend his outward appearance a special character, which goes beyond “handsome” or “ugly.”

Women have a harder time! Great demands are placed on their bodies—the “ugly duckling” cannot become a “golden pheasant” overnight, but with minimal retouching, a self-aware man is capable of rising like a “phoenix from the ashes”!

Where Art Thou, Casanova?

Let’s admit it: The man of today is less attractive than he once was! If we wish to speak of men, we must begin with women. Woman has surpassed man. Without a doubt. Whether a drone or a worker bee, the outer shell is incredibly appealing and on average vastly improved. A glance at restaurants, theaters, cinemas, playing fields and resort promenades confirms this universally known fact. Sables and checkbooks are not the sole deciding factors in the female realm—the little shopgirl and the graceful typist also conform to the elegant image and could even become role models.

The man, in contrast! ... Where has the progressive spirit of the “most splendid of all” gone? Despite sports and enlightenment, fashion and aesthetics, disharmony dominates, with prominent bellies, unshaven faces, dirty cuffs and rumpled suits in the foreground.

Your argument of a lack of time and money does not stand up to scrutiny — the same is true of working women, the majority of whom are tidy, clean, properly dressed and take time to cultivate their appearance.

Believe me, you, too, cannot afford not to do so, whether you call yourself breadwinner, boyfriend, husband or father!

The famous “We have no need for it” is a sad commentary on men and ignores the facts. It cannot be a pleasant feeling to be accepted solely because of an American six-cylinder, a luxury apartment or good connections! Your counterattack: “Those are the times, women want it this way, they make fun of our days of pining and courtship. That is why our only option is: it works or it doesn’t—one can always find others who are only too happy to let things work out!”

Oh, misunderstood objectivity! Even the most progressive woman of today needs illusions, she wants to be courted and valued as an individual. She doesn’t say so, perhaps in order not to suffer material losses or to lose her heart in a situation that the other side regarded as mere amusement. But you can rest assured that a woman treated matter-of-factly, however well she may be doing, easily ignores the warning “Thou shalt have no other gods before me ...”

I won't even hold the genuine overwork and (in comparison to past times) nerve-wracking exertions of an agitated epoch against you, but give you full credit for them, understanding that men frequently no longer have the energy to "play Othello" and write love poetry. Just ask the women around you, though, which they prefer—men who, despite a lack of wealth, muster true comradeship, loving attention, genuine respect and sensitive taste, and who, within their limits, are always aware of their appearance—or the possibility of enjoying the creature comforts with occasionally alternating, matter-of-fact gentlemen of means.

Ask all of them, the sophisticated Eves, whose saucy conversation sometimes attempts to conceal bourgeois yearnings—they want a man who woos them first to gain their ear, a "*chevalier, sans peur et sans reproche*," who is also interested in their mind and doesn't simply go to a florist to buy "any old blooms" for five marks. They gladly allow him more liberties, even forgiving a little flirtation on the side. What does this mean? In short: the *up to date* [English in the original] Casanova, who remains a master of illusions, beyond faithfulness or unfaithfulness, and deploys all emotional and physical means to amiable perfection.

[...]

"Lord of Creation" After All?

(On their way home.)

She: ... Alright, I'll stop dwelling on the past, making comparisons with a Paris, Tristan or Casanova; I declare my solidarity with the man of the twentieth century, my acceptance of his mentality.

He: You understand, splendid.

She: But you too! A glimpse behind the scenes sufficed, you disliked your own mirror image. Without telling tales out of school, your weaknesses were all too obvious.

He: We are finally turning them into strengths.

She: Which we are all too happy to bow to. Despite comradeship and honest coexistence, we once again have butterflies and cold hands when you carelessly set aside the bouquet of carnations and take us in your arms! Despite overcultivation and "100 mph," despite intellectual attitudes and undeniable decadence we are once again wholly Eve, but in modern dress, absolutely woman, mother and lover, on the way "back to nature"!

He: The pact is sealed, the peace treaty of the "Garden of Eden" signed, we have lost each other often, but found each other anew, and now we walk together, the complement to woman, her support and her protection, her future, past and present—all in one person, the so-called consummate Adam!

Source of original German text: Paula von Reznicek and Burghard von Reznicek, *Der vollendete Adam. Das Herrenbrevier*. Stuttgart: Dieck & Co., 1928, pp. 9-18, 174. Available online: <http://www.zeno.org/Kulturgeschichte/M/Reznicek,+Paula+und+Burghard+von/Der+vollendete+Adam.+Das+Herrenbrevier>

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Recommended Citation: Paula and Burghard von Reznicek, *The Consummate Adam* (1928), published in: *German History in Documents and Images*, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-5429>> [March 16, 2026].