in the catastrophe which mutilates and destroys him who has failed to face the turmoil in his soul.

NINA PELIKAN STRAUS

Transforming Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”†

In 1977 there were already ten thousand works on Franz Kafka in print,¹ nearly all of them written by men. The reasons for scholars’ interest in Kafka, particularly his short masterpiece, “Metamorphosis,” reflect a recognition on the part of students of religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, political and social criticism, Marxism, and literature that Kafka’s work is inexhaustible. No single interpretation invalidates or finally delivers the story’s significance. Its quality of multivalency (Vieldeutigkeit) keeps us talking to each other, against each other, and to ourselves. For fifty years Kafka’s work has been seeding thought and precluding that closure of discourse that would imprison us in our old histories. Yet until 1980, gender-based theories and feminist criticisms were rarely articulated in discussions of Kafka’s stories.² “Metamorphosis” is an important source, therefore, for the recent addition to the traditional list of disciplines: feminist studies.

Kafka’s story of a family whose son, Gregor Samsa, wakes one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect is what Christian Goodden calls “a literary Rorschach test . . . Kafka critics have hitherto been looking into the mirror of his works to find reflected there the images of their own interpretative attitudes,” when they should be looking at the “more significant . . . phenomenon of the mirror.”³ If the mirror of “Metamorphosis” reflects a different image for a feminist, it is because the ambiguities of Kafka’s language effect a tension between culturally sanctioned attitudes toward women and his own exploration of those attitudes. Throughout the narration of his characters’ experiences, Kafka holds in suspension European, urban, and early twentieth-century masculine attitudes toward women and transforms these attitudes.

† From Nina Pelikan Straus, Signs 14.3 (Spring 1989): 651–67. © 1989 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the University of Chicago.


3. Goodden, 8.
by presenting Grete and mother Samsa in the roles of Gregor's caretakers and feeders and then revealing their rebellion against these roles. Kafka's refusal (or inability) to provide his readers with a clear message about his work or his attitudes toward women is not only characteristic but also useful and prophetic. By reserving judgment on his characters, Kafka puts traditional attitudes regarding gender on trial and deconstructs the reader's expectations as well. His story thus provides corrective to feminist as well as traditional readings that exacerbate through ideological fixations what they seek to remedy. "Metamorphosis" is about invalidation, our self-invalidations and our invalidations of others; and it does nothing—offers us nothing morally—but this vision of how we do it. The narration focuses on how Gregor invalidates his family, how his family invalidates and destroys Gregor, how his sister, Grete, learns to invalidate her brother. It also compels us, as readers of this fictive mirror, to seek out the perpetrator or the victim of this invalidation and in pointing at him, her, or it, establish our own validation at others' expense.

Traditionally, critics of "Metamorphosis" have underplayed the fact that the story is about not only Gregor's but also his family's and, especially, Grete's metamorphosis. Yet it is mainly Grete, woman, daughter, sister, on whom the social and psychoanalytic resonances of the text depend. It is she who will ironically "bloom" as her brother deteriorates; it is she whose mirror reflects women's present situation as we attempt to critique patriarchal dominance in order to create new lives that avoid the replication of invalidation. We cannot read "Metamorphosis" with the sense that we "emerge unscathed," and we write about Kafka with the suspicion that we are writing about "On Not Understanding Kafka." I write this article, therefore, to share my suspicion that I have not hitherto understood Kafka and with the "commandment" Walter Benjamin finds intrinsic to approaching Kafka's work: "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image." Thou shalt not make Woman (in texts and in life) an icon whose images can remain fixed or dominated.

Just as "Metamorphosis" is written in the kind of language that reflects upon what it is reflecting (or in deconstructionist terms, folds back upon itself), so the story of Gregor is a parabolic reflection of Kafka's own self-exposure and self-entombment. Kafka's articulation of self-exposure is ironically concomitant with self-dehumanization. For him exposure is both liberating, because writing releases the repressed, and dehumanizing, because language can describe the human as nonhuman. This pattern of simultaneous liberation and dehumanization is repeated when Grete is freed from her social role and liberated at the end of the story, and, like Gregor, she must pay a dehumanizing price for her liberation. If Grete is a symbol of anything, it is the indeterminacy of gender roles, the irony of self-liberation. Grete's role as a woman unfolds as Gregor's life as a man collapses into itself. It is no accident that this gender scrolling takes place in the literature of a writer who had curiosities to experience in his writing, experiences of his own weaknesses and of women's strengths.7

One of the most dominating and accessible registers of meaning in "Metamorphosis" is the psychoanalytic. Traditionally, the text has been read not as revealing brother-sister or gender-based relationships but as revealing a father-son conflict or Oedipus complex. It has been understood by Hellmuth Kaiser, for example, as the merciless attack of the elder Samsa upon his insect son, through three chapters which climax consecutively in Gregor's maiming, starvation, and death. "Metamorphosis" has also been read by Marxist critics as a fable of alienation from patriarchal culture, with its tyrannical bureaucracy, its class warfare between appropriators and expropriators, its conversion of workers (like the salesman Gregor Samsa) into dehumanized things whose labor is exploited. Feminist critics, such as Evelyn Torton Beck, make use of the Marxist-Engelian approach to stress Kafka's patriarchal treatment of women, pointing out that he refers to Gregor as "Samsa," but to Grete as "Grete." and implying that what Kafka describes, he sanctions. Only recently have critics expressed interest in the idea that Grete's experience is crucial to the meaning of Kafka's tale and that Kafka's attitude toward women needs further interpretation.8

Although it is clear that Grete's labor, like her brother's, is exploited, and that she rises, as it were, from the ashes of Gregor's grave, few readers have been struck with surprise or horror at this transposition. Because the mirror of "Metamorphosis" has usually reflected masculinist attitudes and orientations, Grete's plight and role have been subsumed by the paradigm of male alienation.

7. These experiences and their impact on Kafka's writing have remained unexplored until the publication of Kafka's letters to Milena Jesenka (see Hartmut Böhme, "Mother Milena: On Kafka's "Narcissism" (1962), in Flores, ed., 87) and, especially, to Felix Bauer (see Erich Heller and Jurgen Born, eds., Letters to Felix, trans. James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth [New York: Schocken, 1973]).

6. Quoted in Benmála, 39.
Gregor and Grete. The brother's and sister's interchange of male and female roles and powers, the hourglass-shaped progression of the plot as they switch positions, suggests the idea that "Metamorphosis" is Kafka's fantasy of a gender role change. The transformation of Gregor's body is a "trying out [of] some unreal fate or meaning life might have." Its deepest resonances involve the relations of men and women, of the man's wish to be a woman, the woman's wish to be a man.

Yet the emphasis on the exchange of daughter for son, of male supremacy for the blooming of a female daughter, like the financial exchanges that dominate the Samsas' world and Gregor's bodily changes, suggests for the feminist reader neither political prophesy nor transcendent resolution. A feminist reading enlists no parable of recovery or resurrection at the story's end in the service of its interpretation, but it shares with Jungian analyses of "Metamorphosis" such as Peter Dow Webster's, the idea of "the substitution of the reanimated and completely changed Grete (as anima) for the ego of the hero." The ambiguities of Kafka's language do not suggest that Gregor becomes more spiritual or that Grete gets anywhere once she replaces her brother. As Günter Anders notes, Kafka's language allows "two or more possibilities to stand side by side without being able to say himself which he really means." In the labyrinth of exchanges that dominates the text, exchange of powers may replicate exchange of identity and exchange of gender but not imply, in the exchange of sister for brother, the spiritual transformation of either.

The multivalency of Kafka's language, discussed by the most notable of Kafka critics, situates Kafka's attitude toward women in an interpretable space that eludes easy feminist formulation. Although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that texts written by men about women symbolize Woman either as angel in the house or madwoman/bitch, Kafka's language undermines such fixedly sexist habits of thought. Kafka's use of imagery in place of concepts, so that "rhetorical figures... enable him to verbalize his mental operations without ever freezing fluid processes into solid conclusions," serves

1. Ibid., 111.

7. This group includes Günter Anders, Walter Benjamin, Hartmut Binder, Elias Canetti, Stanley Corngold, Gilles Deleuze, Ronald Gray, Felix Guattari, Eric Heller, Kenneth Hughes, George Lukács, Karel Kosič, Walter Sokel, and Joseph Peter Stern.
not only to deconstruct political and philosophical certitudes but also to question the origin of such certitudes in sexual difference. Not only does Kafka's language “break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings,” but it also explores the barriers imposed on language by notions of gender and biological destiny. Descriptions of Grete's intentions toward Gregor as she takes care of him and his room, for example, are deliberately rendered in a labyrinth of double-entendre that suggests the blurring and exchanging of masculine and feminine “essences.” “The furniture did not hamper him in his senseless crawling round. . . .” Unfortunately, his sister was of the contrary opinion; she had grown accustomed, and not without reason, to consider herself an expert in Gregor's affairs as against her parents. . . . This determination was not, of course, merely the outcome of childish recalcitrance and of the self-confidence she had recently developed so unexpectedly and at such cost; she had in fact perceived that Gregor needed a lot of space to crawl about in” (103). In this example, the phrase, “not without reason” (sympathetic to Grete as a rational person), contradicts the initial “unfortunately” (critical of Grete’s female fussiness) just as the words “determination” and “confidence” (suggesting male qualities) contradict the phrase “childish recalcitrance” (traditionally ascribed to women and children). The narrator thus serves as the advocate for Grete's new sense of self while simultaneously suggesting that her confidence is the result of a will to power achieved only “at such cost” and over which neither gender holds the monopoly. In this sense, the principle of indeterminacy claimed by Alice Jardine and others as fundamental to female writing is also fundamental to Kafka's writing—so fundamental that “Metamorphosis” can be read as disclosing the plight and tragic solution of one who is caught between the shameful desire to identify himself with women and the consciousness that he cannot identify himself with men. The rupture inscribed by Kafka's text parallels the fissure between a male identity (historically determined) which is obsessively concerned with Woman as its opposite, and a male desire to become woman, not to possess her.

The word “shame” is central to both Grete and Gregor's experiences. It is a shame that Gregor cannot get out of bed, that he cannot get up to go to work, that his voice fails him, that he cannot open the door of his room with his insect pincers, that he must be fed, that he stinks and must hide his body that is a shame to others. Shame comes from seeing oneself through another's eyes, from Gregor's seeing himself through Grete's eyes, and from the reader's seeing Grete through the narrator's eyes. The text graphically mirrors how we see each other in various shameful (and comic) conditions. Through Gregor's condition, ultimately shameful because he is reduced to the dependency of an ugly baby, Kafka imagines what it is like to be dependent on the care of women. And Kafka is impressed with women's efforts to keep their households and bodies clean and alive. This impression is enlarged with every detail that humiliates and weakens Gregor while simultaneously empowering Grete, who cares for Gregor, ironically, at his own—and perhaps at Kafka's—expense.

The change or metamorphosis is thus a literary experiment that plays with problems the story's title barely suggests. For Kafka there can be no change without an exchange, no blooming of Grete without Gregor's withering; nor can the meaning of transformation entail a final closure that prevents further transformations. The metamorphosis occurs both in the first sentence of the text—“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect” (67)—and in the last paragraph of the story, which describes Grete's transformation into a woman blooming and stretching toward the family's “new dreams” once Gregor has been transformed into garbage (132). Grete's final transformation, rendered in concrete bodily terms, is not only foreshadowed but also reflected by Gregor's initial transformation from human into insect. This deliberately reflexive textual pattern implies that only when the distorting mirrors of the sexual fun house are dismantled can the sons of the patriarchs recognize themselves as dehumanized and dehumanizing. Only when Grete blooms into an eligible young woman, ripe for the job and marriage markets, can we recognize that her empowerment is also an ironic reification. She has been transformed at another's expense, and she will carry within her the marketplace value that has ultimately destroyed Gregor, a value that may destroy her as well.

As many readers have noted, Kafka records the damage that patriarchal capitalist-oriented society inscribes in the psyches of men, but Kafka also records the damage that is done to women. Kafka's transformation of the male role into the female, of Gregor into Grete, mitigates the differences between them and the disrespect accorded to women in a culture concerned with men's upward mobility, a concern with which Kafka was well acquainted in his professional and private life. Kafka's fantasies about the women in his world are revealed in the experiment of “Metamorphosis,” a text written with particular women in mind and suggesting that a relationship with a woman, as Elias Canetti notes, was necessary to Kafka's writing. The purpose of Kafka's correspondence with Felice Bauer, for example, was to forge “a channel between her efficiency and health

1. Deleuze and Guattari, eds. (n. 4, p. 130 above), 28-42, esp. 28.
and his indecisiveness and weakness.” Kafka insisted that Felice Bauer provide him with the emotional security he needed to produce the work of “a great period in his life,” which included “Metamorphosis.” His fantasies about women’s “fat” and strength are crucial to the understanding of a text in which descriptions of the male character’s frailty, the drying up and flattening out of Gregor’s wounded insect body, are chronicled with meticulous precision. Kafka’s description of this process in fiction reflected his urge to resolve his own masculine identity, to decide whether he was fit as a husband and a man. As Canetti suggests, Kafka attempted this resolution by writing passionate letters to a strong and healthy woman and by describing his ailments to her in obsessive detail. The three most important women in Kafka’s life—Felice Bauer, Milena Jesenská and Grete Bloch—were “securities somewhere far off, a source of strength, sufficiently distant to leave his sensitivity lucid . . . a woman who was there for him without expecting more than his words, a sort of transformer whose every technical fault he knew and mastered well enough to be able to rectify it at once by letter.” (my italics).

By the time Kafka met Felice Bauer, he “had come to feel that his entire future hinged on the resolution of this terrifying dilemma.” Could he marry Felice and remain Kafka the writer? Kafka’s marriage proposals to Felice took the form of letters that discussed marriage in general, and both Canetti and Ernst Pawel describe them as intimating a preordained failure, summarized by Kafka’s statement, “I cannot live with her, and I cannot live without her.” The dilemma was ultimately resolved by his letter of April 1, 1913, in which he confessed to Felice Bauer, “My true fear—and surely nothing worse can ever be said or heard—is that I shall never be able to possess you, that at best I would be confined, like an insentient, faithful dog, to kissing your distractedly proffered hand, not as a sign of love, but merely as a token of despair on the part of an animal condemned to silence and eternal separation.”

By writing about Gregor’s imprisonment in the armored insect body, a writing he pursued at the same time as he wrote his letters to Felice, Kafka seems to have found an image for his self-imposed distance from women as well as an image for the sickness that would make a particular woman, as a source of energy and transformation, necessary to him. Written in a period when his letters to Felice were most self-exposing and agonized, “Metamorphosis” engaged Kafka in deep self-scrutiny regarding his gender and sexual identity. It could be said that Kafka’s writing sprang from his capacity for equivocal self-identifications: struggles with both male/father images and female/mother images that made him unable to live the role of dominating malehood (an incapacity represented by Gregor) but which also enabled him to invent a subversive language that undermined the traditional authority of his father tongue. The “permanent estrangement” resulting from his failure to form an “unequivocal” masculine identity, this arrival “at no solution at all,” enabled him to imagine a world in which male and female desires, characteristics, and differences did not figure as essential properties of human nature. The image of this gender neutrality emerges when Gregor is referred to as a “thing,” an “it.” “It’s dead,” the charwoman announces. “It’s lying here dead and done for!” (128). The increasing reification or it-ness of Gregor’s body is the ground for Grete’s ultimate repudiation of him as a brother and for her own transformation. “But how can it be Gregor?” (125) she asks, a question which echoes Kafka’s own response in writing to Felice Bauer; “I just don’t rest in myself . . . I am not always ‘something,’ and if I ever was ‘something,’ I pay for it by ‘being nothing’ for months on end.”

Such cryptic self-disclosures intimate that this “something” from which Kafka sought to escape by way of ambiguous writings and from which Gregor escapes through his transformation into an insect is Kafka’s image of an unequivocal, completely virile and powerful body. In contrast, we must imagine Kafka’s own body, a body with which he felt “nothing could be achieved” and that body’s imagistic parallel in the “pitifully thin . . . legs” of the insect Gregor, waving “helplessly” around a “bulk” that is “divided into stiff arched segments” (67). The solution for this body, or the fantasy of its possible recovery, is linked to the fat and warmth that woman’s body is imagined to provide. Writing to Felice Bauer, Kafka petitioned for warmth and life-giving blood that he felt his body lacked. “My body is too long for its weakness, it has no fat whatsoever for creating a beneficial warmth, for maintaining an inner fire, no fat from which the mind could someday nourish itself beyond its daily need

9. The Muirs’ translation of “Metamorphosis,” quoted in this article, has been criticized by Ronald Gray in “But Kafka Wrote in German,” in Flores, ed. (n. 1, p. 129 above), 242–52. The Muirs’ translation of this particular passage, however, supports my reading of Grete’s eventual transformation in relation to Gregor’s dehumanization.
1. Quoted in Canetti, 33.
without damaging the whole. How shall the weak heart... manage to push the blood through the entire length of these legs?" 3

Woman's body, in contrast to Kafka's own, is fantasized as the carrier of a life force, just as Grete is the carrier of the nourishment (initially milk, then cheese) upon which Gregor greedily suck. "Metamorphosis" thus unfolds by contrasting Gregor's maimed and dying body with the evolving, blooming body of Grete, who takes Gregor's place as family provider and favorite. The incident is more than allegorical; it is the literal representation of the family's need. And since this need and the fantasy it engenders not only is situated in the text's images but also permeates the text's rhetoric as it eschews "solid conclusions," it signals Kafka's attempt to dismantle his own male presumptions by destroying Gregor's. Gregor's obsession with his father is transformed into an obsession with his mother and sister. To be closer to them, and because of them, he infantilizes his body, struggles with his sister, and, consequently, moves toward death. 4 The source of the image of Gregor's gigantic, armor-plated body is Kafka's fantasy about burying his own body and being born into another that can create (as he imagines woman's body does) a beneficial warmth, an inner fire.

While the first image in the story's first paragraph suggests a man buried in an insect body, the desire for an exchange of bodies is even clearer in the second image of the paragraph, a picture Gregor keeps on his wall of the muff-laden "lady." This image extends the burial metaphor by indicating how one soft (symbolically female) image is followed swiftly by another "hard" (symbolically male) image, to conflate them in terms of gender. Sharply contrasted with Gregor's "stiff," "dome-like," and impenetrable form, with its small openings that make it difficult for him to speak, the lady in furs has a large opening; she is vaginal and furry: "The picture... showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!" (67).

In this ambiguous sentence, which suggests both Gregor's male erotic response to women, the desire to stick a phallic "forearm" into a fur muff, and Gregor's identification with a lady encased in fur the way he is encased in armor, a third possibility also arises: that this is a metaphor for a male-female compound. The lady is also engaged in a phallic or lesbian action on her own behalf, as if her body sported both penis and vagina to which the male spectator can only respond: ""Kafka's mocking of strict sexual symbolism, his conflation of phallic and vaginal, has been so carefully done as to suggest that he is as afraid of the union of the two as Otto and Gregor are. The identity of the lady and the man seems to have been dissolved, as if the separation of the sexes were itself a separation of the self."

"Gregor" and "Grete." The lady in the muff foreshadows the transformations that will occur in the Samsa siblings—the first a change of Gregor into a body that rocks "to and fro" (73), that snaps its jaws, that "crawls" (88), and sucks "greedily at the cheese" (91). Gregor's transformation is regression; his male sexuality is neutered and utilized. He is suspended not only "between being and non-being..." but also between opposing symbols in a world recreated to conform to them. Gregor does not, as Kafka does not, "just... rest in [him]... he wishes to rest somewhere else; namely, in another body, woman's body. Such a wish also indicates Gregor's wish to rest with Grete. She is an image of an alternative and possible self. "With his sister alone had he remained intimate, and it was a secret plan of his that she, who loved music, unlike himself, and could play movement on the violin, should be sent next year to study at the Conservatorium, despite the great expense that would entail" (95).

What Pawel, Kafka's biographer, calls Kafka's "crab-like approach to women" and "often most comically earnest eagerness... to foster women's intellectual growth," does not seem prompted, at least for Gregor, by what Pawel calls an "unconscious need to desex-"ize them." 6 Instead, it is Gregor who wishes to become unsexed, and Kafka who imagined, in his diaries, that a power woman could empower him as well: "With my sisters—and this especially true in the early days—I was often an altogether different person than with other people. Fearless, vulnerable, powerful, prizing, moved as I otherwise only am when I am writing." 7 Kathy, sister Ottla would have served particularly well for the figure of Grete. "Throughout her rebellion and search for self, defying father, working the land, breaking away from home, marrying a Jew—she in fact acted out her brother's wildest and most improbable dreams." 8 If Ottla was the female double who lived out Kafka's dreams, it can be argued that the exchange motif in "Metamorphosis" is a radical autobiographical fantasy, concerned not only with the relationships of fathers and sons, but also with those sisters and brothers, and suggesting what Kafka might have had he been more like Ottla. Inscribed within this wish, however, is an ironic nightmare about masculinity that affects both brother and sister, both Gregor and Grete.

Kafka's relation to Ottla, and Gregor's to Grete, cannot be summed by the term "womb envy," but the notion of a masculine orientation so acute that the imagination en-tombs or en-womb, itself indicates the degree to which the male world is a horror...
prison for both Kafka and Gregor. Identification with the apelike father Samsa and the contemptuous, pseudo-urbane boarders (who demand that Grete play the violin for their entertainment) becomes impossible for Kafkasque men whose introversion is the sign and style of their sensitivity to women, as well as to masculinist brutality. Kafka's wish to feminize his being appropriates the image of the "box" or "house" found frequently in women's writings; Gregor's body is a kind of box or tomb in which his maleness is both incarcerated and protected against masculine requirements and invasions. In "Metamorphosis" Kafka imagines the stages by which the repressed bachelor—whose "only amusement...is doing fretwork" as he "stays at home every single evening" (76)—is replaced by the potentially marriageable Grete with her lively "young body," musical talent, and "good job" (132). This replacement is envisioned as a transformation of bodies. Descriptions of the insect's body emphasize its passivity, its being sealed off and shut in. Gregor's brown belly is "dome-like"; he "could not turn himself over" (68); he "let himself fall against the back of a near-by chair, and clung with his little legs to the edges of it" (79). Gregor vacillates between the active, transcendent mode of the male and what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "immanence" of the second-sex's condition, first penetrating the world outside his room, from which he is violently driven back by his father, then returning to rest passively within his "naked den to wait for his sister to minister to him."

Kafka's text is structured to represent systematically, in the most concrete terms possible, the process by which Gregor's male identity is demolished. Initially, he is preoccupied with male ideals; "I'll be attending to business very soon," he assures his family and chief clerk (78). Even after he realizes what his body has become, he expects the attendance due an older brother; he expects Grete to "notice that he had left the milk standing, and not for lack of hunger...would she bring in some other kind of food more to his taste?" (90–91). Ironically, by making such demands, Gregor empowers Grete to make him her dependent, and when her attitude toward him becomes less sympathetic as he becomes more filthy and stinking ("hardly was she in the room when she rushed to the window, without even taking time to shut the door") he responds by becoming hostile: "Not only did she retreat, she jumped back as if in alarm and banged the door shut; a stranger might have well thought he had been lying in wait for her there meaning to bite her" (99).

Using the subjunctive—"a stranger might well have thought"—Gregor quickly distances himself from hostility and disassociates himself from the violent "stranger" he might become. With Grete's increasingly frequent gestures of disgust, Gregor passes through various stages of responsive male aggression, each of which is thwarted not only by his father's physical abuse, but by his own awareness of Grete's growing "determination" and "self-confidence" that tempts her to "exaggerate the horror of her brother's condition" (103). She is no stranger to him once he begins to see himself through her eyes. He must submit his masculine prerogative to her. He must eat what she gives him (she becomes the family's cook), scuttle under the sofa so that she is protected from the sight of him, even though he finds this difficult because "the large meal had swollen his body" (92), and he must remain there in deference to her. As Grete sweeps his room and feeds him, the only one who has not forgotten him, he realizes that he has relinquished his male status to her. The sentence "In this manner Gregor was fed" (92) highlights, even in its grammar, his passive, dependent relation to her and indicates the moment in the text when Greor's degradation and gradual disappearance are finally exchanged for Grete's social upgrading and visibility. As Grete tires of functioning as Gregor's charwoman and nurse, he becomes dirtier, less human; without her ministrations he ceases to care for himself. As she withdraws her service from him, her female voice begins to rise independently in the text, alongside the conflated voice of narrator and male character. "Streaks of dirt stretched along the walls...Gregor used to station himself in some particularly filthy corner when his sister arrived, in order to reproach her with it...but she simply had made up her mind to leave it alone" (115). It is Grete, not the oedipal father or desultory mother, who announces that Gregor "must go...that's the only solution, Father. You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we've believed it for so long is the root of all our troubles. But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature, and he'd have gone away on his own accord" (125).

Speaking for her idea of Gregor and as if she were Gregor, Grete pronounces a death sentence whose symptomatic word choices ("solution," "believed it for so long," "root of...our troubles") mark the moment of her rite of passage into an independent, if harsh, sphere of womanhood that separates her from the world of her father(s). "We must try to get rid of it," her sister now said..."When one has to work as hard as we do, all of us, one can't stand this continual torment at home on top of it. At least I can't stand it any longer!" (124). Having passed through stages of submission and sympathy, through the burden of symbolically mothering a being

9. Canetti (n. 3, p. 136 above) writes in this connection that "Kafka's room is a shelter, it becomes an outer body, one can call it his 'forebody'" (27).
that resembles a sickly and degenerate child, and having replicated
her brother’s stages of maturation and professionalism (for she now
has a job), Grete initiates her liberation. Like Gregor, who had
wanted to “tell his chief exactly what I think of him” (68), Grete feels
repressed and exploited at work. She becomes, in the words of Julie
Mitchell, “vulnerable to the return of (her) own repressed, oppressed
characteristics.” Her decision that Gregor “must go” involves her in
a “tit-for-tat psycho-moral solution” that dehumanizes her ethically
as it inspires the bloom of her body and confidence.

The exchange of Grete for Gregor, of feminine for masculine pre-
rogatives, is dramatized incrementally throughout the text but reaches
a point of crisis when Grete is compelled to strip the picture of the
lady in the muff from Gregor’s walls. The image suggests Gregor’s last
physical contact with women, his need to be in-furried and enclosed,
to objectify women as sex and “pussy,” his wish to be taken care of by
women who no longer want to take care of him. He “quickly crawled
up to [the picture] and pressed himself to the glass . . . This picture
at least, which was entirely hidden beneath him, was going to be
removed by nobody” (105). Grete’s decision to deprive him of the pic-
ture is perhaps motivated by her sense that it represents a porno-
graphic image of women against which she has rebelled and to which
Gregor still clings, yet her interpretation of the image oversimplifies
the complex meaning it may have for him. “Well, what shall we take
now?” said Grete . . . Her intention was clear enough to Gregor, she
wanted to bestow her mother in safety and then chase him down from
the wall. Well, just let her try it! He clung to his picture and would not
give it up. He would rather fly in Grete’s face” (105).

By yielding the picture to Grete finally, Gregor is made to abandon
his male prerogative to exploit women’s sexual image, and he is sev-
ered from the fixed libidinal habits of the patriarchal world. He not
only gives in to Grete’s will, but he also gives up his sexual image
repertoire in exchange for her repertoire of new—and I will now say,
feminist—desires. Grete’s solution for Gregor thus becomes his solu-
tion for himself. “He thought of his family with tenderness and love.
The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to possibly
even more strongly than his sister.” With this emphasis, Kafka tran-
fers power and responsibility from the traditional patriarchal inheri-
tor, Gregor, to his sister Grete. The exchange is complicated by the
fact that it occurs through the horrific metamorphosis and death of
one whose doubles are both male and female: both father Samsa
who beats his son, and sister Grete whose “young body” emerges in

spring from the “completely flat and dry” corpse (129) of her brother.
Kafka’s final solution for Gregor involves both oedipal and female
complexes: it represents the urge to kill the potential father figure
who is himself, as well as the urge to become woman. Such a reading
of “Metamorphosis,” through what might be called a biographical gen-
der analysis, suggests that the tale is not merely an oedipal fantasy
but more broadly a fantasy about a man who dies so that a woman may
empower herself. Her self-empowering, the transference of a woman
into a position where a man used to be, does not transform the social
system, however, but merely perpetuates it. When women become
as men are, Kafka seems to be saying, there is no progress. Such
metamorphoses merely exchange one delusive solution for another.

In the finale of “Metamorphosis,” a return to normal sex roles is
paradoxically celebrated. Grete has “bloomed into a pretty girl with a
good figure” for whom “it would soon be time to find a good hus-
band” (132). The final irony of Kafka’s text is that despite the bizarre
experiences that the Samsas have endured, no tragic meaning has
been attached to them. The exchange of Grete for Gregor represents
the idea that persons, like utilities, can be replaced. Grete can serve
as her family’s breadwinner either as a woman married to a salaried
husband, or as a woman who has learned to exploit (and be exploited
by) the system that has exploited her brother. The disappearance of
Gregor simply means that the Samsas will move into a cheaper
house, “but better situated,” and that they will take more journeys
to improve the chances of procuring a husband for Grete (132). It is
Grete who will now sell and be sold, who will perpetuate the system of
exchanges and debts that was formerly Gregor’s business. The signi-
ficance of Gregor’s death is referred to with the utter confidence
of a patriarchal blindness that all three Samsas now share equally:
it is all a matter of letting “bygones be bygones” (132). And Grete,
not surprisingly, has become a little patriarch. The sale or sell-out
of her brother Gregor is the “first fruit” of her new rights.

The reader who finds this interpretation of Kafka’s mirror possi-
bly has already learned that some feminist projects are not
metamorphoses but only changes into another kind of the same—
which explains almost a century of interpretations that do not rec-
ognize Grete’s centrality to the story or speak, particularly, to women.
That Grete can be exchanged for Gregor in “Metamorphosis,” that
her substitution for him can be inscribed through male imagination,
suggests also that we must distinguish between masculine writers
and writers who are male; we should acknowledge Kafka’s discom-
fort with the male role and with a language symbolically “owned”
by a male literary establishment. As a prophet of the complexities
engendered by “the woman question,” Kafka’s text, fortunately, no
longer delivers a message only to (alienated) men.

3. The Muir’s translation (n. 2, p. 132 above) does little justice to the strength of Gregor’s
agreement with Grete’s decision against himself; translating the German womiglich as
“if that were possible” (127) when the more accurate translation is “possibly even.”