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Journal

The Musical Quarterly, 77(4)

ISSN

0027-4631

Author

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Publication Date

1993

DOI

10.1093/mq/77.4.709

Peer reviewed



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Winter, 1993), pp. 709-717

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742354>

Accessed: 09-01-2018 21:37 UTC

REFERENCES

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Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the Question of Incest

David Warren Sabean

The relationship between Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was extraordinarily complex and has elicited considerable comment from their biographers. They were very close throughout their lives, and there seems to have been a strong erotic aspect to their attachment. Eric Werner speaks of their “consanguinity,” which “evoked almost physical impulses and instincts in Fanny.”¹ He goes on to say that “she adored him, but this was not enough: She wanted to possess him, body and soul.”² Herbert Kupferberg reports that the relationship between Fanny and Felix was so close “that [it] has engaged the attention of more than one amateur psychoanalyst over the years. Even in their own times, there were jests upon the subject, with several family friends jovially asking the Mendelssohns when Fanny’s marriage to Felix would take place.”³ He suggests that Felix liked to arouse and assuage Fanny’s jealousy by turns in his letters.⁴ At age twenty-four during her engagement to Wilhelm Hensel, she wrote to Felix: “I . . . stop before your portrait and kiss it every five minutes . . . I love you, adore you immensely”—Hensel, of course, was painting the picture that aroused her erotic interest so much.⁵ On her wedding day, she wrote to him: “I have your portrait before me, and ever repeating your dear name, and thinking of you as if you stood at my side, weep . . . [every morning and every moment of my life I shall love you from the bottom of my heart,] and I am sure that in so doing I shall not wrong Hensel.”⁶ The translation in Kupferberg is very free, and the passage in brackets does not appear in the letter. I will quote the entire passage later.

The theme, however delicately handled by these authors and however softened by protestations of sublimation, is, of course, incest. The somewhat veiled accounts of many of the biographers suggest that Felix was the object of longing and that he played with Fanny’s affections, occasionally warning her that she was coming too close. Many of the passages that have elicited comment come from Fanny’s letters

to Felix in 1829—when he was in England and she was engaged to Hensel. She wrote on 27 May: “I picture a very lovely scene to myself—out of the raging chaos, in which there’s nothing to grasp except one’s thoughts, you come home in the evening and gradually come in contact with your heart’s innermost feelings again. Then each of us appears in turn and embraces you, and then at the end, shortly before you fall asleep, the full image of home flashes violently, until everything dissolves into a serene mist and blur. Who accomplishes the monumental task of waking you each morning?”⁷ On 3 June, she mentioned her fiancé, and said, “By the way, believe it or not, when we’re together, you, and then you again, are always the topic of our conversations.”⁸ She confessed on 11 June that she and her two sisters sit in front of his picture (painted by Hensel) “for hours and wait for it to move us.”⁹ A few weeks later she wrote, “Once again I need assurance that you’re happy. Sometimes it’s as necessary to me as air is to life, and then it will tide me over for a while.”¹⁰ On 8 July, she wrote about Felix’s coming to help celebrate their parents’ silver anniversary:

And I can also assure you that you will play undisturbed at my house—no mouse may touch you. All the touching will be from within. Hensel is a good man, Felix, and I am content in the widest sense of the word, happier than I ever imagined possible. For I dreamed and feared that such a relationship would tear me away from you, or rather alienate us, but it is, *if possible*, just the opposite. I’ve gained more awareness than before, and therefore am closer to you. I reflect more often, and therefore I reflect on you more often. And the more I have now and will have in the future, the greater I will have you and need you. It’s not possible for you to take any of your love away from me, because you must know, as I do, that I can’t do without even the smallest part of it. I’ll repeat the same to you on my wedding day, because thus far, I’ve never known any emotion or situation in which I wouldn’t have thought and said the same thing.¹¹

Just before her wedding, she wrote a rather obscure passage to her brother in an incredible emotional outpouring. The editor of her letters suggests that she was announcing to her brother that she was a virgin,¹² but as the grammatical structure of the sentences breaks up, it seems more likely that she was confiding just the opposite and filling in the name of her first lover:

I can’t conceal from you that my crown adorns a new bride, dear Felix. [The German is “zählt,” not “adorns,” but “belongs to” or “designates.” The floral crown and the ceremony that went with it symbolized virginity. Nonvirgins being married for the first time had to wear a crown of straw.] Two years ago I would’ve hesitated to share this news with you, especially with your little foot

wound, out of fear of increasing your fever. But ever since the time when the entire Lake Sacrow [a lake near Berlin], together with its house, garden, vineyards, heliotrope fragrance, vanilla tea, and people, was transformed into a quartet, you can probably hear with coolness that I—don't venture that [dare not]—O Ritz!—[that]—Victoire—and [with]—Rudolph (Not Gustav) Decker—not Magnus—Oh no, now it's out, and it's very likely that you're falling into a dead faint.¹³

On her wedding day (3 October), she wrote,

I am very composed, Dear Felix, and your picture is next to me, but as I write your name again and almost see you in person before my very eyes, I cry, as you do deep inside [wie Du mit dem Magen], but I cry. Actually, I've always known that I could never experience anything that would remove you from my memory for even one-tenth of a moment. Nevertheless, I'm glad to have experienced it, and will be able to repeat the same thing to you tomorrow and in every moment of my life, and I don't believe I am doing Hensel an injustice through it. Your love has provided me with an inner worth, and I will never stop holding myself in high esteem as long as you love me.¹⁴

There are a number of issues that I wish to sketch in, and I want to put their relationship into the context of middle-class family life during the first half of the nineteenth century. A central problem for Fanny was to assert her own talent or to find a space for her own activity. As in many bourgeois families of the period, boys and girls received similar educations up to a certain age, but young women had to learn abruptly that they could develop no further (or that they would now enter separate tracks). Fanny's father wrote to her when she was fourteen: "Music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession while for *you* it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing . . . and your very joy at the praise he earns proves that you might, in his place, have merited equal approval. Remain true to these sentiments and to this line of conduct; they are feminine, and only what is truly feminine is an ornament to your sex" (emphasis added).¹⁵ When she was twenty-two, he wrote: "you must prepare more earnestly and eagerly for your real calling, the *only* calling of a young woman—I mean the state of a housewife" (emphasis added).¹⁶ Fanny did continue to pursue her musical development, but as long as her father was alive she published nothing under her own name. Felix after his father's death perpetuated the attitude. In 1837, their mother asked Felix to encourage Fanny to publish some of her lieder and piano pieces: "that *you* haven't requested and encouraged her to do it—this alone holds her back."¹⁷ Felix wrote back that he could not in good conscience encourage a woman.

The relationship between brothers and sisters was an absolutely central theme for the post-Napoleonic German family. Heinz Reif in his study of the Paderborn nobility demonstrates that the new bourgeois family ideals during this period became characteristic even of the provincial nobility: Domesticity (*Innerlichkeit*), friendship, marriage and courtship based on emotion and individualization and sentimental cohesiveness were valued. Familial relations came to be marked by intense inner experience and the construction of personal connections based on feeling, with a tendency to develop individualized ways of expression.¹⁸ In this period appears among families from the nobility to the *Bildungsbürgertum* a new emphasis on dyadic relationships, which partly at least excluded others in the family. There was a great interest in letter writing to address individuals in the family and to construct special relations among those of the same age. Above all, this was a time for brothers and sisters to construct individual emotional relationships. The post-Napoleonic period was one of particular intensity for brothers and sisters for the nobility, whose social, political, and familial structures were undergoing considerable reorientation, but the constellation goes back to the last three or four decades of the eighteenth century for bourgeois families.

Between 1770 and 1830, German literature was obsessed with the problem of incest. Michael Titzmann has counted 487 literary texts in this period that dealt with the issue, and they were overwhelmingly (80 percent) concerned with incestuous relations between brother and sisters.¹⁹ By no means was the theme of sibling incest derived from any consciousness of actual incidents within bourgeois families. Rather, the theme offered the opportunity to think about problems of sentiment, emotional attachment, feelings, duties, and obligations within the family. It offered writers the chance to explore the terrain of love and eroticism and the different kinds of emotions connected with each of them. In many of the stories, a couple fall in love not knowing that they are brother and sister, and the point of the narrative is to sort out the sets of feelings as they alter their relationship under the changed conditions of their knowledge. Titzmann argues that there was a general shift, however, over the period from one where kinship considerations took precedence over erotic ones to one where the erotic took precedence over kinship.

We can put the issue of brother/sister incest in this period in perspective by comparing it with the discourse in the period immediately preceding it. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the burden of incest discussion was carried by the brother-in-law/sister-in-law, or as writers put it, marriage with the deceased wife's sister. There was a long theological and juridical literature on the

subject, which it is not necessary to rehearse, but the basic point (to bring the relationship under the sign of incest or *Blutschande*) was that a husband and wife were constituted as one flesh and blood through intercourse, so that a man and his sister-in-law came to share the same substance mediated through the sister/wife. The taboo was violated several times in the seventeenth century by high nobility and princes, each time prompting a flurry of bitter tracts.²⁰ One prince at mid-century married his wife's sister and convoked an academic conference, inviting all of the concerned theological and legal scholars to deliver papers on his project—all of which were duly published in a conference volume.²¹

Now, it was not just the objects of discussion that contrast in the two periods, but the nature of the discourse about the family as well. In the earlier period, the issues were inheritance, alliance, kinship, the patriarchal family, the well-ordered house, deference, and honor—all brought under the sign of blood. In the later period, the issues were affection, emotion, selfhood, love, passion, friendship—the construction of alliance and the organization of kinship under the sign of sex.²² In Wieland's *Agathon*, for example, the limits between erotic and familial affects and instincts are explored. There are also curious erotic constellations in literature whereby a man finds his wife from his sister's closest friends or his own closest friend's sisters. Of course, it was not just in literature that the problem of incest was worked out; it was also a central theme for juridical science and theology. The professor of theology at Wittenberg, Carl Nitzsch, in 1800 tried to derive a new foundation for the incest prohibition from moral sentiment rather than positive commandment as in Mosaic law.²³ His reasoning took him to the internal constellation of the family. He contrasted *pure* love—the kind of sentiment a man has for his sister—sympathetic, benevolent, altruistic, unselfish—with marital love, which always involves sexual lust, animal drives, egotism. Brotherly/sisterly love is about the “other.” Marital love is about yourself. “The greatest tenderness between spouses never moves us as much as that between siblings.”²⁴

Fanny and Felix are only one sibling pair among many from the period that has elicited considerable comment. The relationship between Goethe and his sister Cornelia has been analyzed by Otto Rank, Kurt Eissler, and others as incestuous.²⁵ Indeed, Eissler comments that here “one touches possibly the very nerve center of Goethe's creativity.”²⁶ “Her imago became his indelible companion.”²⁷ Among other things in common between the two pairs is the suggestion that the man's creativity grew out of the specifics of the sexual/emotional dynamics of the bourgeois family. In both cases, the

woman, after an early education that was not differentiated by gender, was abruptly made to understand that her destiny was to be radically different from that of her brother. And in both cases the brother pursued strategies to enforce the gender divide. In the first generation this led to the early death of the sister through suicide or depression; Cornelia herself took to her bed in sorrow and depression right after her marriage to Goethe's friend. Ulrike Prokop writes,

To an explosive self-consciousness of young men corresponds passivity and depression of the young women of their age—at least as far as the young women were oriented towards learning, who shared the inner world with their brothers, especially in the stratum from which the male genius and great creators were produced. I am certain that a systematic analysis would demonstrate an extraordinarily high number of depressive young women among the intelligentsia who even died because of it. . . . Cornelia Goethe's experience was no exception.²⁸

Prokop lists among the Frankfurt and Darmstadt intellectual families a dozen or so women around 1770 who died in their twenties from melancholia, "weakness," suicide, or "consumption."²⁹

By the generation of Fanny and Felix, some accommodation had taken place, but the problem of autonomy for women, with the brother's individuality and self-determination, if not the brother himself as an object of longing, remained. Prokop's analysis of Goethe's letters to his sister reveals the conflicts that may characterize such brother-sister relationships up to the time of Fanny and Felix:

The letters to Cornelia are interwoven with a structural contradiction. The sister is addressed as a rational being as an equal among equals in the Republic of Argument. At the same time, as soon as she is addressed as woman, prohibitions are expressed and boundaries are drawn. . . . [There is] an indissoluble contradiction between the developmental needs of female individuality and the prescribed gender roles of the woman. . . . Cornelia's concern with the objects of culture, her devotion to the object, is through violence through external pressure bent back to the motif: to educate oneself in order to please. Education remains limited to the house, held at a low level, and broken off in development.³⁰

And further: "No man can replace her brother. Not only, as psychoanalytic interpretation maintains because she is fixated on the brother incestuously, but also because the valid rules between man and woman with respect to their experience describe a dogmatic stupidity (*bornierte Beschränktheit*)."³¹

The relationship between Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy developed inside the peculiarly contradictory dynamics of

the early nineteenth-century bourgeois family. During that period family relations were being reconfigured to emphasize emotional training and self-development. But at the same time the family became the site for practice in fulfilling sharply differentiated gender role expectations. The stress on feeling was articulated strongly within a sometimes steamy but always eroticized environment. Nancy Anderson describes the English variant in terms of “strong unconscious incestuous feeling” and uses the word “adhesive” to capture the tenor of relations.³² The peculiar stress on brother/sister relationships during the period from 1750 to 1850 was based on close intimacy and frequently a thoroughgoing equality in education through and beyond puberty. The close bonds offered possibilities for experimenting with feelings and emotions, often set off against parental constraint. The contradictions of the family came to be borne most severely by the young women, who often rather abruptly learned that their horizons would be severely limited. Fanny’s father had to warn her about her impending fate precisely because her imagination had been opened up in a household where she had been able to develop her talent and fantasize possibilities for expressing it. All she could do while her father was alive was live vicariously through her brother. Her longing for him was a longing as much for the freedom to do what he could do, as for the reestablishment of a lost intimacy. The family was at once a training ground for rules and discipline and for the free untrammelled flowering of individuality. In many ways these two aspects became embedded in differentiated gender roles. But the heady emotional climate in which women were raised was not just something in stark contradiction to their future roles as housewives and mothers. The education in feeling and the heightened eroticization of relations inside the intimate family circle was part of the dynamic of a new alliance system, where “free choice” directed young people toward proper matches and women mediated between connected households and cultivated relationships between newly mobile kin.

Notes

1. Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age*, trans. Dika Newlin (New York: 1963), 76.
2. Werner, 77.
3. Herbert Kupferberg, *The Mendelssohns: Three Generations of Genius* (New York, 1972), 155.
4. Kupferberg, 158.

5. Kupferberg, 160.
6. Kupferberg, 161.
7. Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn*, ed. and trans. Marcia J. Citron (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon), 42.
8. Hensel, 44.
9. Hensel, 53.
10. Hensel, 57.
11. Hensel, 62.
12. Hensel, 90.
13. Hensel, 87–88.
14. Hensel, 90.
15. Hensel, xl.
16. Hensel, xl.
17. Hensel, xli.
18. Heinz Reif, *Westfälischer Adel 1770–1860: Vom Herrschaftsstand zur regionalen Elite* (Göttingen, 1979), 266–67.
19. Michael Titzmann, “Literarische Strukturen und kulturelles Wissen: Das Beispiel inzestuöser Situationen in der Erzählliteratur der Goethezeit und ihre Funktionen im Denksystem der Epoche,” in Jörg Schönert, with Konstantin Imm and Joachim Linder, ed., *Erzählte Kriminalität. Zur Typologie und Funktion von narrativen Darstellungen in Strafrechtspflege, Publizistik und Literatur zwischen 1770 und 1920*, Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur, vol. 27 (Tübingen, 1991), 229–81.
20. The best introduction to the subject is Carl August Moriz Schlegel, *Kritische und systematische Darstellung der verbotenen Grade der Verwandtschaft und Schwägerschaft bey Heyrathen* (Hanover, 1802).
21. *Unterschiedliche Streitschriften. Responsa, und Gutachten* (Oettingen, n.d.).
22. The distinction between alliance (blood) and sexuality is nicely drawn by Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 147–48.
23. Carl Ludwig Nitzsch, *Neuer Versuch über die Ungültigkeit des mosaïschen Gesetzes* (Wittenberg, 1800).
24. Nitzsch, 76.
25. Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Baltimore, 1992); Kurt Robert Eissler, *Goethe: A Psychoanalytic Study, 1775–1786*, 2 vols. (Detroit, 1963).
26. Eissler, 1:33.
27. Eissler, 1:32.
28. Ulrike Prokop, *Die Illusion vom grossen Paar*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), 1:78.

29. Prokop, 1:78ff.
30. Prokop, 1:52–53.
31. Prokop, 1:53.
32. Nancy Fix Anderson, "Cousin Marriage in Victorian England," *Journal of Family History* 11 (1986), 285.