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“Die Leute wissen nicht, was sie mit mir beginnen sollen”: Differing Representations of the Life
of Elisabeth, Empress of Austria

For over a century, Elisabeth, Empress of Austria, has been a figure firmly enveloped in a tight cocoon of myth and legend. As such, she became a bestseller on the book market and in movie theaters. One of the most widely known representations of her is the 50's German movie trilogy based loosely on her life. These movies, featuring a teenage Romy Schneider and Karlheinz Böhm as the gentle, yet dashing young Franz Joseph, portrayed Elisabeth as a simple country girl who brings a fresh breeze of naiveté and artlessness to the stifling empirical court in Vienna. This specific way of presenting Elisabeth is by no means unusual. Aside from these movies there are a host of books which tend more towards fictional than historical accounts of her life. Even some of the biographies, which as a genre should be historically accurate, tend to lean towards a romanticizing portrayal of her life.

The subject of this paper is a contrast between two biographies written about Elisabeth of Austria. The first one, *Elisabeth- 'Die seltsame Frau'*, by Egon Caesar Conte Corti, dating back to 1935, is written in the romanticizing style, which is echoed in the movies. The second one, *The Reluctant Empress*, written by Brigitte Hamann, is a historically more accurate biography, published in 1982. This paper focuses on some of the critical and problematic aspects of Elisabeth's life, her engagement to Franz Joseph, which marks the beginning of her life as Empress, her excessive preoccupation with sports and traveling, and finally, the Mayerling tragedy, in which Crown Prince Rudolf killed himself and his young companion Mary Vetsera. Another big issue in her life, is Elisabeth's involvement in the political issues of her time, especially the compromise with Hungary.

However, this is a very complex issue which would exceed the boundaries of this paper. Therefore let it suffice to say that Hamann emphasizes Elisabeth's political influence and activities considerably more than Corti does, who sees her generally as politically passive.

The two biographies differ drastically in their style of narration. Corti's biography reads like a fictional novel. There is hardly any direct reference to sources disrupting the flow of his narration, which gives the reader the sense that Corti is a kind of omniscient narrator, who seems moreover to have directly witnessed some of these events, since he offers personal experiences of people living in close proximity to the Empress, without pointing that out in the text as he goes. He uses a very emotionally invested style of language, which enhances the sense that the author was personally witnessing the events he describes. The biography is divided into 15 chapters, each with a host of smaller, often just one page long, subcategories. The chapter arrangement follows the chronological sequence of Elisabeth's life, beginning with her engagement and ending with her death.

Brigitte Hamann's biography, on the other hand, reads strikingly different. She speaks with the voice of the more distanced historian, who names her sources directly instead of weaving them into a narrative net, which the reader cannot untangle anymore. Her fourteen chapters are arranged according to topics rather than chronology, although she still maintains a general chronological sequence among those issues. She also begins with Elisabeth's engagement and ends with her death, but in between there are chapters like "The Cult of Beauty" and "The Burdens of Public Appearance" (v). She draws more heavily from Elisabeth's poems, even in the titles to her chapters, as a way of carefully arriving at the personal view of Elisabeth.

The obvious differences in the approach of both historians become even more apparent in their prefaces. Corti's biography, titled *Elisabeth - Die seltsame Frau*, was the first official biography written about her. Previous to this work there was not much known about the private life of Elisabeth of Austria. The House of Habsburg was very skilled in keeping its family life a strictly private matter. A good public relations machinery and strict censorship were the means of controlling what became public and what did not. This secrecy partly contributed to the large amount of myths, rumors and gossip anecdotes surrounding the last Habsburg emperor and his family.

The structure of Corti's preface already is indicative of his strategy as a biographer. He is emphasizing, even overly emphasizing, his historical credibility by quoting in the very first paragraph, people closest to the Empress. These would be - interestingly enough it is not the Emperor who is quoted - her ladies in waiting, Landgräfin von Fürstenberg and Ida von Ferenczy. Both of these quotes suffice to set the figure of Elisabeth up. She is the kind of person who inspires legends and she has recently come under attack together with the entire Habsburg Dynasty. Corti takes a strongly defensive position to this unjustified slandering, and his biography has to be seen in this light. He further declares that he wishes to clarify these misunderstandings by bringing his readers to a better understanding of Elisabeth and the circumstances of her life. She is to be made more accessible as a normal person, who has good and bad sides like everybody else. This seems contradictory, since he continually refers to her in a way that is denoting her as a monarch. He moreover claims that there is no need of criticism regarding any issue in Elisabeth's life, although he admits that there are points in her life which are best described as precarious. Despite his professed objectivity, Corti in the title of the book still described or even stamped Elisabeth as "seltsam". He deems previous publications on Elisabeth's life worthless. The authors of those works are dismissed as completely unknowledgeable on the issue at hand. The sources at his disposal are radically different from the basis these people worked from. Corti, coming from an influential aristocratic family, which has had access to court circles for a long time, had direct access to original personal sources. Among those, listed proudly on the title page, are the personal effects of Elisabeth herself and the diaries of her daughter Marie Valerie. The list of aristocratic notables whom he thanks for assisting his research, is likewise very impressive.

Overall, Corti seems to overly accentuate his credibility and the credibility of his research method. This, at least on a modern academic reader, has the effect that one now mistrusts his research, his sources and the objectivity of his work. His writing style in general betrays a certain kind of personal investment in the issue. By taking a resolute defensive stance on the issue of the Habsburg family, one cannot help but wonder how thoroughly and objectively he deals with what he himself calls "Heikles" (v).

Brigitte Hamann presents herself, her work and not least of all Elisabeth in a very different light. Her biography bears the title “The Reluctant Empress”, which together with the first line of her preface: “This book is the life story of a woman who refused to behave according to her rank.”, sets up an image of Elisabeth as somebody breaking the mold of a conventional role she was supposed to play (vii). Whereas Corti presented her from the perspective of someone deeply steeped into a monarchy-based society, Hamann sees her from the opposite angle. Here, Elisabeth becomes an untimely supporter of democracy, a rigorous individualist and the model of ‘Selbstverwirklichung’, by now a buzz-word in contemporary Western society. She presents Elisabeth’s life as a continuous struggle, which did not render any feeling of fulfillment or happiness for Elisabeth, which Hamann sees as the tragedy of her as well as Rudolf’s life, whom she considers very similar in terms of personality and their perspective on life. Elisabeth waged war on several fronts. She fought for beauty, resulting in rigorous exercise, which she could not keep up as she grew older. And finally, her most private struggle. Elisabeth wanted to be renown as a poet. Hamann declares these poems, which until then had been kept in secrecy in Swiss Federal Archives in Bern, as her primary source for her biography of Elisabeth. Since then, Hamann has published these poems as a poetic diary of Elisabeth. The fact that Elisabeth had entrusted these most private documents to a Swiss archive, furthermore indicates, in Hamann’s opinion, the strong democratic mind set of the Empress.

As she lists her sources, it becomes apparent that Hamann was not as privileged as Corti in having free and direct access to these family papers. She is not clearly running in the same social circles as Corti did. Instead Hamann lists people, who managed to secure her access to these personal documents. In contrast to Corti, she only once states her perspective and work method as a biographer. She sees herself as a historical scholar and that is all she claims. Among historians this is enough. She does not have to mention over and over again, like Corti does, that she will stay away from any material that is not historically accredited. However, at the end of her preface, Hamann gets into a melodramatic depiction of Elisabeth’s life, setting her up as the “minus” to Franz Joseph’s “plus”, thereby not only instating them as polar opposites, but as cancelling each other out, which I do not think is an appropriate metaphor for their relationship (x). Moreover, she seems to almost

force Elisabeth into the role of modern woman, interpreting every dislike on Elisabeth's side towards the society around her as an indication of her avid support of democracy. Therefore, as far as the prefaces of both Hamann and Corti go, they seem to limit themselves by their own personal perspective on Elisabeth.

Corti begins his presentation of Elisabeth and her life by pointing out that she is the product of a marriage between cousins, which Corti pronounces "bedenklich"(3). The numerous offspring of that marriage is characterized by him as follows:

In ihm [their first son Ludwig] und den folgenden Kindern macht sich die Inzucht psychisch dadurch fühlbar, daß die in einzelnen Gliedern der Nachkommenschaft Maximilians I. schwach vorhandene Neigung zu Weltflucht, Verlegenheit und einer gewissen nervösen Unruhe in verstärktem Maße wiederkehrt.(3).

Corti actually goes further than that, by indicating that Elisabeth had felt the wish to die from her childhood on. He relates the anecdote of the death of David Paumgarten, a brother of her favorite childhood playmate, which signifies the first direct encounter of death, Elisabeth experienced. Corti describes her state of feeling:

Urplötzlich, wie unbewußt zieht Sehnsucht nach dem Tode durch die Seele der jungen Prinzessin, [...].Sisi weiß nicht recht, wohin mit sich und ihrem kleinen Herzchen, es ist immer unruhig, immer erregt. Lachen und Weinen sind einander gar so nahe, der Schalk leuchtet in den Augen, aber die Träne gewinnt oft die Oberhand. In Briefen und Gedichten kommt Frohsinn nicht zum Ausdruck, nein, eher Weltschmerz, Liebessehnsucht und Begeisterung. (18f.).

These descriptions strongly foreshadow Elisabeth's future emotional state and is maybe presented this early in the biography in order to explain and excuse a behavior as being predestined and predetermined by her incestuous parentage. This kind of foreboding does not leave room for character development. Corti projects the emotional instability of a young girl on the woman into which Elisabeth is growing. Elisabeth is presented as doomed to misery from the very beginning.

Hamann, on the other hand, gives Elisabeth room for development. She strongly emphasizes that Elisabeth at the time of her engagement and wedding is still "only just past childhood, a long way from being fully developed."(3). Using terms like "childlike fiancée" and reporting how the Emperor installed a swing in the garden of his summer estate in Bad Ischl which Elisabeth used with

“childish glee”, reinforces this notion (19). She does not foreground the possibility of mental health problems, as Corti does.

Corti, after his introduction of Elisabeth, introduces Franz Joseph as a “schlanker, eleganter, blühend frischer und gesunder Leutnant im Generalskleid”, still a young man of just 23 years (17). Corti describes him as being completely under the strict control and guidance of his mother, who in fact is described as “der einzige Mann am Hofe” (10). Sophie, Archduchess of Austria actually missed her chance of being empress of Austria herself, when she manipulated at the abdication of Ferdinand in 1848, that the throne did not go to her husband, Archduke Franz Karl, but to her eldest son Franz Joseph, who thus ascends the throne being 18 years old (Corti, 9-13). Corti describes her feelings or attitude on this occasion as follows:

Wenn sie ihm jetzt das Thronfolgerecht ihres Gatten und die äußere Würde einer Kaiserin zum Opfer bringt, so will sie in Wirklichkeit doch Herrin bleiben und die ersten Schritte des jungen Kaisers beaufsichtigen und lenken. (14).

Therefore, she is also the one assuming an active role in looking out for a suitable consort for Franz Joseph. A connection with Hungary, against which Archduchess Sophie shows an openly hostile posture, is thus declared unacceptable. Much more important is a connection with Germany, especially Bavaria, which is among the three most powerful states within Germany at that time and which has the added advantage of being the home of Archduchess Sophie. Ludovika, Sophie’s sister, recommends her eldest daughter Helene, a tall, beautiful girl, “das weiß, was es will, und ungleich ernster und verständiger ist, als ihre übrigen Geschwister.” (17). Later on, Corti presents Helene in a slightly unfavorable light, claiming that she has “etwas Energisches und Hartes in den Zügen”, which makes Elisabeth, who is shown to be “vollkommen unbekümmert”, appear to greater advantage (23). Franz Joseph’s choice then becomes more understandable to the reader. András, in his biographical work on Franz Joseph, remarks on the Emperor’s weakness for beautiful women, as indicated by his rather long list of former lovers, including a wide range of women from countesses to dancers (81). The choice then seems to have been clearly made for purely superficial reasons.

Hamann, besides accentuating the immaturity of Elisabeth, in a physical as well as psychological sense, furthermore emphasizes the political and financial drawback of this match.

Elisabeth herself was a member of only the ducal line of the Wittelsbach family, which was a serious flaw in her pedigree, and made acceptance among the aristocracy in Vienna difficult. Elisabeth's dowry and trousseau were also insufficient. Hamann reports that Elisabeth was taken shoe shopping as soon as she arrived in Vienna, which was quite an embarrassment (32). Corti does not make direct mention of this at all, but, on the contrary, lists with gusto the process of preparations for the ensuing wedding, including the compilation of her wardrobe.

In regard to political details connected with the wedding, Corti lists only one other possible matrimonial match for Franz Joseph, meaning one with the Hungarian line of the House of Habsburg. Hamann gives a more complete list of attempted matches for Franz Joseph. There are, aside from the Hungarian one, a match with Princess Anna of Hohenzollern, a niece of the Prussian king, to which the Prussian king did not consent, and a match with Princess Sidonie of Saxony, who did not appeal to Franz Joseph, sickly as she was (8). Hamann thereby stresses the extreme tenacity with which Archduchess Sophie pursued an Austrian connection with Germany. Corti generally refrains from giving political detail, especially in connection with the engagement and wedding, since he wants to give it a fairy tale-like quality, removed from any political or economical considerations. It is a love match not a connection for merely political purposes. With Corti, it seems Franz Joseph reaches the conclusion to marry Elisabeth in the blink of an eye. Thus, Franz Joseph insists on proposing to Elisabeth ASAP, and against the warning and concerns his mother poses, he does this via Elisabeth's mother on the third day of their acquaintance (25). As the question is put to her "Die Kleine" answers:

Ja, wie sollte man den Mann nicht lieben können? Aber wie kann er nur an mich denken, ich ja so jung, so unbedeutend. Ich würde ja alles tun, um den Kaiser glücklich zu machen, aber ob es wohl gehen wird? (28).

And later on she remarks to her governess: "Ja, ich habe den Kaiser schon lieb. Wenn er nur kein Kaiser wäre!" (28).

Hamann, stresses, in addition to Elisabeth's immaturity and her lack of aristocratic status, how unsuitable Elisabeth's personality is for the role of an empress. She quotes Ludovika, who claims that Elisabeth, having grown up mostly in the country side has never really experienced anything of

courtly life at all (9). Possenhofen, the summer residence of Elisabeth's parents in the country, is her favorite place in the world. Being therefore a neophyte in the aristocratic world, Elisabeth did not have any idea at all of what it meant when the Emperor danced the cotillion with her at the ball in Bad Ischl. That this was equal to an official engagement never entered her mind. Being ignorant of such understated ceremonies, Elisabeth is shown to almost 'stumble' into her engagement with Franz Joseph. When she was informed of the Emperor's proposal for marriage, the conversation between Ludovika and Elisabeth must remain "an open question" (16). Hamann at this point quotes from a later statement of Ludovika, which indicates that a refusal of marriage was completely out of the question due to the position and rank of Franz Joseph (16). Elisabeth, however, later in her life referred to this event as follows:

Marriage is an absurd arrangement. One is sold as a fifteen-year-old child and makes a vow one does not understand and then regrets for thirty years or more, and which one can never undo again (18).

This lends the great support to Hamann's assumption that the engagement was an act in which Elisabeth was only passively involved, because she did not have any choice, or participated in as an immature teenage girl, who could not fathom the enormous consequences of this engagement.

With Corti, we see signs of hesitation and doubt only after Elisabeth's return home to Possenhofen. Only then does she wake up from this whirlwind of romance and begins to realize the magnitude of the events at Bad Ischl. And with this realization comes Elisabeth's fear of losing her freedom (32). But Corti still shows overall contentment and enjoyment on Elisabeth's side, who revels in the lavish gifts the Emperor bestows upon her.

The relationship between the Archduchess and Elisabeth, however, is portrayed as extremely hostile. The Archduchess, who accepted the marriage between her son and Franz Joseph mostly out of a bad conscience for having put him onto the throne so early in his youth. Having his will in the choice of his wife, who seemed to be in her attitude an antidote to the strict life at court, would afford him at least domestic happiness. And she is confident, that under her instruction Elisabeth would turn into a capable and responsible empress (28). However, the Archduchess, being rather harsh in her conduct, and Elisabeth being sensitive like a "Mimose", does not bode well for their future

relationship (54). Sophie's tendency to constantly interrupt Elisabeth's privacy, makes her especially hateful to her daughter-in-law. Still, Corti seems to excuse and moderate Elisabeth's feelings by saying: "Elisabeth übertreibt schon, sie redet sich in einen förmlichen Haß gegen die Schwiegermutter hinein, der sie sich rettungslos ausgeliefert fühlt." (57). An even more atrocious conflict occurs when Archduchess Sophie, shortly after Elisabeth's and Franz Joseph's first child is born, orders the infant to be stationed in a room adjoining her own chambers, on another floor than Elisabeth's chambers. Elisabeth is hardly ever alone with her child, and is not entitled to make any decisions regarding the infant care. Finally, Elisabeth gives up the fight against her mother-in-law, and withdraws from both her and her daughter (59). As Elisabeth then returns for the first time after her wedding to Possenhofen, Corti sees her as a "bezaubernd schöne, anmutig und würdevoll auftretende junge Frau" (60). In his eyes, Elisabeth has by then made the transition from child to woman, all within the period of a year.

Hamann situates this transition at quite another point in Elisabeth's life, and offers different circumstances for it. For her, Elisabeth's first perception of her own physical attractiveness is the point of maturity. This takes place during Elisabeth's first journey abroad, which she undertakes by herself. Elisabeth travels to Madeira to recover from a combination of physical and psychosomatic illnesses, resulting in part from the death of her first child, Sophie.

In the case of this first journey, Hamann also indicates Franz Joseph's conduct as responsible for Elisabeth's wish to absent herself from court. Hamann notes, that exactly at the time when Elisabeth is diagnosed with a lung disease, Franz Joseph leaves Vienna to go on a hunting trip to Bad Ischl and stays there for almost a month (100). Hamann furthermore reports widespread rumors circulating at this particular time concerning extramarital affairs, which the Emperor might have engaged in (96). This is a certain contradiction to the role of the suffering husband in which he is always cast in by Corti. As Elisabeth's travel plans commence, there is already a striking improvement in the Empress' condition, who seems "infinitely happy about going to Madeira.", which lends further credence to the fact that her problems seem not exclusively health related (100). Hamann speculates at the possibility of a case of anorexia nervosa (104). Even Corti, seems to have

been aware that Elisabeth's illness was only a pretext to get away from court. Hamann quotes from his manuscript for *Elisabeth-Die seltsame Frau*:

...the cover of illness will reduce all that, and she really is ill, her mental state also affects the body severely. And what would otherwise be a little anemia, an insignificant cough, under such circumstances, almost really an illness.(102).

He becomes even more explicit when writing about the Archduchess' reaction to Elisabeth's proposed vacation:

She [Sophie], however is fully informed and is merely outraged at Elisabeth, who is unmindful of her obligations and who, in her opinion, was only shamming illness in order to escape winter and to be able to pursue her peculiar habits without constraint.(102).

These lines were never published because Corti wanted to rehabilitate and defend Elisabeth and with her the empirical family through his biography (102).

Regarding the issue of Elisabeth's state of health before leaving for Madeira, Marek in *The Eagles Die*, entertains the notion that Elisabeth had been infected with a type of venereal disease, which Hamann also mentions, but dismisses as rumour. Anthony Sinclair, in his book *Death by Fame*, is another biographer who supports this notion. In that case, Franz Joseph contracted the disease from one of his lovers, which according to Marek tended to come from very different backgrounds. Marek reports that Elisabeth, unable to obtain a diagnosis from the court physicians consulted a doctor outside the court environment, arriving at the appointment heavily veiled in order to escape recognition in public. Marek sees in this a reason for the rupture in Franz Joseph's and Elisabeth's marital relationship which persisted in their relationship from then on (130).

Hamann writes, that during her stay in Madeira:

In her solitude far from the Viennese court, Sisi's self-confidence began to blossom. Here the shy, insecure girl from Bavaria turned into a mature young woman exceedingly conscious of her beauty. (128).

This is a positive contrast to her existence at the Viennese court, where she "was treated as a pretty little fool and pushed aside whenever serious matters were discussed."(104). Hamann alludes here to the fact that Franz Joseph only discussed political matters with his mother never with his own wife.

Moreover, Elisabeth “became aware of her beauty and her effect on practically every man.” (104). This is due to the fact that for the first time men, besides her husband, openly admired her beauty. In particular Count Hunyady, who tutored her in Hungarian, proved to be an agent of her self-awakening. This did not result in an affair by any means, instead she used him “to test the power of her radiance.” (128). Count Hunyady was only the first in a long row of admirers, to whom Elisabeth behaved coldly, only inciting their admiration without allowing them favors of any kind (128). Elisabeth actually only enjoyed their admiration as a confirmation of her beauty and attraction.

Back in Vienna, Elisabeth began to use her husband’s love for her beauty in order to blackmail him into having things done her way. This becomes especially apparent, in the case of Rudolf’s early education. Rudolf, as the Crown Prince, underwent an extremely harsh course of education, which was executed by the tutors selected by Archduchess Sophie and the Emperor. In the course of this tour de force, Rudolf came close to a physical and mental breakdown. Elisabeth then intervened by writing up writing up a formal ultimatum to Franz Joseph:

I wish to have reserved to me absolute authority in all matters concerning the children, the choice of the people around them, the place of their residence, the complete supervision of their education, in a word, everything is to be left entirely to me to decide, until the moment of their majority. I further wish that, whatever concerns my personal affairs, such as, among others, the choice of the people around me, the place of my residence, all arrangements in the house, etc. be reserved to me alone to decide.
Elisabeth, Ischl, 27 August 1865. (122)

This document is “Elisabeth’s declaration of independence.” (122). Hereafter Elisabeth got her way more often by threatening renewed removal from Vienna, which she knew would cast a bad light on the monarchical household (122f).

After she became conscious of her attractiveness, Elisabeth guarded and maintained her physical appearance to a degree that bordered on obsession. Hamann remarks: “This new self-assurance intensified with time into a sense of being one of the elect, based on the recognition of her extraordinary physical looks.” (128). Her physical appearance was the basis of her personality, as she understood it herself. It therefore had to be preserved by all means. Moreover, Elisabeth had a strong sense of aesthetics and discipline, which she used to build and maintain herself in the image of her

aesthetic notions (133). Lisa Fischer in her book *Schattenwürfe in die Zukunft - Kaiserin Elisabeth und die Frauen ihrer Zeit*, remarks on Elisabeth's hair style: "Sie legte jedoch in der Folge die fremde Krone des Reiches ab, um ihre Selbstschöpfung mittels ihrer Haare allgemein sichtbar zu machen." (9). She is referring here to the crown-shaped hair style which Elisabeth made popular, in particular the famous diamond stars which Elisabeth wore interwoven in her hair on the famous Winterhalter portraits. Fischer again: "Die Krone gehörte nicht mehr der Königin, sie war ein Teil des weiblichen Körpers geworden, sie gehörte der Frau selbst." (67). In this way, Fischer even lends a political interpretation to Elisabeth's attire. By using her natural features as royal emblems, royalty becomes open to every woman and is not a mark of rank and pedigree.

Hamann reports that the maintenance of Elisabeth's physical appearance proved to be no trifling matter and was the cause for further scandal. Elisabeth had rings and bars installed in her suites in the Hofburg Palace, to enable her to pursue a daily work-out routine. Hamann notes in this context: "For a woman of her day, this was really scandalous behavior." (139). Moreover, there were oil baths, the sleeping with a wet cloth over her waist in order to keep it slim, and her mattress filled with horse hair (Fischer,69).

But her beauty also worked against her, by making her a celebrity figure, whom everybody wanted to catch a glimpse of: "Her innate timidity and unsociability were not relieved by these public appearances; instead, they were reinforced to such a degree that she developed a virtual terror of strangers." (Hamann, 132).

Corti presents Elisabeth's preference for sports and traveling in a very different light. Since Corti tries to explain and interpret Elisabeth's eccentricities as much as possible in order to rehabilitate her somewhat scandalous reputation, he offers a very different context for her fitness obsession. He presents Elisabeth's sports activities, as well as her travels, as a way of dealing with crisis situations. Elisabeth first shows this 'unwomanly' urge for physical activity after the loss of her first child, Sophie, who died at the age of two due to sickness (79). Her need for solitude also takes on precarious forms during this time: "Elisabeths Schmerz nimmt zuweilen ganz ungewöhnliche Formen an. [...] jetzt aber läßt sie außer dem Kaiser überhaupt niemand in ihre Nähe" (79). Another instance

of this excessive preoccupation with sports occurs as Franz Joseph in June of 1859 goes off to war against France and Sardinia. Then Elisabeth “reitet von früh bis spät und weiß sich vor lauter innerer Unruhe nicht recht zu beschäftigen.” (87). Corti already mentioned this feeling of inner restlessness in his first chapter as part and parcel of Elisabeth’s incestuous genealogy, and as a trait, which she inherited in particular from her father. As Hamann also remarks, Elisabeth’s behavior scandalizes her court environment. Her physician remarks: “Sie entspricht weder als solche [Empress] noch als Frau ihrer Bestimmung” (87). He furthermore criticizes the lack of attention she pays to her children and her excessive yielding to her depressive state of mind, which is all damaging to her health (87). One gets the feeling, that Elisabeth’s health is state property, and that it is one of her obligations to stay in good health for the service of the Emperor and the Empire. Fischer states this blatantly, when she describes the role of an Empress: “In ihrer Rolle als Kaiserinnen gehörten sich die Frauen nicht selbst, sondern dem Reich, waren seiner Reproduktion und seiner Repräsentation verpflichtet.” (29). Corti mentions her diets in the context of these depression: “sie ißt und schläft kaum und ist den ganzen Tag zu Pferd.”(89). The Emperor, “mitten in seinen Kriegssorgen”, is cast as the one suffering under his wife’s eccentricity (89). Although he tries to explain and excuse Elisabeth’s preoccupation with sports as a symptom or coping method for attacks of melancholy agitation, Corti still cannot refrain from some criticism: “Elisabeth hat vergessen, was Etikette gebietet, und lebt ganz nach ihrem Kopf.” (114). This last remark refers to Elisabeth’s demeanor and behavior after her return from Madeira and Venice, the same vacation which Hamann sees as the point of maturity for her.

Corti sees Elisabeth’s love for traveling in the same way as he does her preference for sports. In his eyes, it is a coping mechanism for the strains of life at court, which are overwhelming for Elisabeth:

Elisabeth denkt in ihrer Verzweiflung nicht an die Pflichten als Gattin und Mutter, als Kaiserin und erste Frau eines großen Reiches. Sie ist sich des ungeheuren Aufsehens nicht bewußt, das ihre einer Flucht gleichende plötzliche Abreise in ein so fernes Land machen muß. (98).

Corti generally presents Elisabeth as somewhat of an hypochondriac, who is “eher geneigt, jede Krankheit ernster zu nehmen, als notwendig.”(113). Corti’s emphasis on the extremely hostile

relationship between Archduchess Sophie and Elisabeth, which severely disrupts Elisabeth's and Franz Joseph's family life, also functions as an explanation for Elisabeth's numerous escapes from court. When Sophie dies, Corti notes that Elisabeth fulfills her obligations as Empress more deferentially than she did before, placing the blame for Elisabeth's reluctance to fulfill her representatory duties on the bad relationship with Sophie (237). At this point however, Corti begins to speak of increasingly overt differences in character between Elisabeth and Franz Joseph:

Je älter das Kaiserpaar wird, desto mehr treten die ganz verschiedenen Charakteranlagen der beiden hervor: die Nüchternheit, der Pflichteifer, die Arbeitsamkeit auf der einen, die leidenschaftliche Hingabe an eine augenblicklich beherrschende Idee, das innere Erleben, der ewige Kampf zwischen Phantasie und Wirklichkeit der eigentlich unbeschäftigten, sicher aber doch krankhaft nach Beschäftigung sehnenen Frau auf der anderen Seite. (360).

Her frequent journeys hurt the Emperor:

Er fühlt sich einsam, wenn Elisabeth ferne weilt. Es kränkt ihn, daß seine Frau an dem Schicksal des Reiches so wenig Anteil nimmt, sich um den Hof kaum mehr kümmert, immer seltener repräsentiert und so traurig ist. (360).

More so, since in public rumors circulate "deren Erörterung für ihn [the Emperor], auch wenn sie nicht wahr sind, peinlich sein müssen." (109). These rumors probably refer to intimate details of Franz Joseph's and Elisabeth's marriage, which Corti, in contrast to Hamann, never reports on in this biography. In regard to traveling, as in the context of sports, Corti seems to excuse Elisabeth's escapades and escapism as much as possible as caused by hereditary mental problems.

The next issue to be compared in the two biographies are the events at Mayerling in 1889, where Crown Prince Rudolf committed suicide together with the young Mary Vetsera.

Corti shows that Elisabeth had no way of knowing or even foreseeing the dilemma of Rudolf:

Die Entwicklung ihres Sohnes, auf die sie ja nie viel Einfluß hat nehmen können, macht ihr immerfort Sorge. Jetzt, wo er erwachsen ist, entgleitet er ihre schon gar. (319).

Corti generally relieves Elisabeth from guilt regarding Rudolf's dilemma, he only mentions once that her exclusive focus on her youngest child, Marie Valerie, prevented her from paying attention to her son (412). Being not familiar with Rudolf's life at all, Elisabeth is very surprised to hear of his engagement to Princess Stephanie of Belgium. She is in London at that time and regrets these news, because she considers Rudolf to be too young, he is 22 at this time, to get married (316). In one

aspect Corti establishes a very close connection between mother and son. He portrays Rudolf as having the same character traits as Elisabeth has: “Auch er hat die Maßlosigkeit seiner Mutter in vielen Dingen geerbt und betreibt seine Passionen mit demselben Feuer wie sie.” (319). Corti mentions Rudolf’s liberal political views, which caused him to be at odds with his court environment: “Kronprinz Rudolf ist noch ganz unausgeglichen, alles gärt in ihm. Er ist geneigt, die liberalen Anschauungen stark zu übertreiben.” (323). As in the case of Elisabeth, Corti leans strongly towards a description of Rudolf as being mentally unstable, which proves to be the ultimate reason for his suicide. This is emphasized by the mentioning of the medical autopsy report which was published on February 2, 1889 in the *Wiener Zeitung*, and which reported abnormal results of the examination of Rudolf’s brain (424). Rudolf is shown as isolated, aimless and moreover afraid of the burden awaiting him in his future position as emperor. As a result, he is overindulging in morally depraved behavior, having numerous affairs with women ranging from aristocrats to prostitutes, and drinking excessively (413). The thought of death is still frightening to him, sick of his life as he might be, and he therefore searches for a companion, “der ihm hinüberhilft ins Jenseits, der ihn ermuntert, wenn er im letzten Augenblick in Todesangst erlahmt.” (414). This companion is the 17 year old Mary Vetsera. As the suicide is discovered, both Elisabeth, Baroness Vetsera and Franz Joseph believe that Mary poisoned the Crown Prince (420). As the Emperor learns that it was in fact Rudolf who had pulled the trigger, he collapses in grief (421). And at this point we get one of the most favorable descriptions of Elisabeth’s conduct from Corti:

Aufschluchzend sinkt Elisabeth zu Füßen des Bettes nieder. Franz Joseph ist ja nicht da, und sie kann sich einen Augenblick gehen lassen, sie, die in den abgelaufenen Stunden Übermenschliches geleistet hat, um sich um ihres Gatten willen zu beherrschen, und ihren eigenen furchtbaren Schmerz deshalb niederkämpfte und schweigen hieß. Wie immer in großer, wichtiger oder schwerer Stunde, ist Elisabeth an ihrem Platze. Alle Spielereien und Phantastereien fallen von ihr ab. Im Moment, wo es nottut, tritt das Große, Edle und Gute in ihrer Natur hervor, und sie ist zu jedem Opfer bereit. (423).

Elisabeth stays with her husband and only leaves for Wiesbaden at the end of April (431). During her stay there, Corti again notes that Elisabeth is indulging her tendency for sports to the point of physical exhaustion. Her feet are troubling her and “Sie können nicht viel besser werden, weil Elisabeth wieder beginnt, während der Kur übertrieben viel Bewegung zu machen.” (432). Corti

mentions some of the rumors circulating at this time, according to which the Empress is seen as completely demented as a result of the death of Rudolf (431). Although Corti denies their credibility, his including them is a statement in itself. Again, he seems to want to excuse this enormous crisis by proposing some mental instability from Elisabeth's side as being the real reason behind it. This would not only offer an explanation, but also rule out the possibility of guilt of any party involved.

Hamann, on the other hand, lays part of the responsibility for Rudolf's demise on Elisabeth.

She writes:

For all practical purposes, Gisela and Rudolf grew up without a mother. Elisabeth was so preoccupied with her own worries and cares that she devoted little time to the children and offered them neither warmth nor security. (321).

Hamann also points out the similarities in character between mother and son, only that she, unlike Corti, focuses on the positive character traits: "Temperament and talents, imagination, liveliness, sensibility, wit, a quick understanding - all these he shared with Elisabeth." (322). She also mentions Rudolf's increasing isolation even within the immediate family. This due on one side to his liberal political views, which can be traced back to his liberal tutor, whom Elisabeth instated for her son's education against the will of Archduchess Sophie and the Emperor, as mentioned above. This is cited as the only instance in which Elisabeth defended Rudolf, who was suffering under the despotic and cruel treatment of his former tutors. Hamann notes: "Emotional disturbances, especially nocturnal anxiety attacks, however, stayed with him for years, indeed for the rest of his life." (123). These are the symptoms of the mental imbalance, which Corti notes as well, but he ascribes them to the incestuous gene pool, not to the influence of Rudolf's tutors. The fact, that Elisabeth from then on was responsible for the development of Rudolf's political views by being in charge of his education, and the people he associated with, makes her in a way responsible for his increasing isolation within the empirical household. Especially the companionship with Guyla Andrassy, which Elisabeth arranged by taking Rudolf with her on her trip to Hungary, probably laid the foundation for Rudolf later liberal political views (322). The increasing division between Rudolf and his father on political matters might have been alleviated by Elisabeth's mediation, but she completely refrained from any intervention at this point (331). Hamann notes, that Elisabeth's preoccupation with her

youngest daughter, whom she loved with an intensity bordering on obsession, made her blind to anybody else's problems (336).

Rudolf also found himself alone, when he began to experience problems in his own marriage to Princess Stephanie of Belgium. Reports by the lady-in-waiting to Elisabeth, Marie Festetics, confirm that often the monarchical couple were the last ones to learn about scandals, which had been the talk of the town for weeks. Therefore it is not Elisabeth's fault that she did not notice the marital problems immediately. But even when she did learn about them, she consciously refrained from any intervention whatsoever, referring to her own disagreeable experiences with her mother-in-law, who was intervening in Elisabeth's marriage all the time. Therefore, Rudolf did not find his mother accessible whatsoever for any conversation on the topic of his marriage (331).

Even as Rudolf began making remarks about his imminent death, nobody took him seriously (339). The only one he confided in at this point, was Marie Festetics, who did not dare to inform Elisabeth about her son's precarious situation for fear of upsetting her too much (339). It is therefore somewhat surprising that Elisabeth was the one to be first informed about her son's death on January 30th, 1889. The first reports stated that it was Mary Vetsera, who had poisoned him. Hamann, like Corti, praises Elisabeth's composure and self-control in this moment, especially as she was the one informing everybody, from the Emperor, Rudolf's wife to Helene Vetsera of the unfortunate event. What Corti omits, is the accusations Elisabeth made against Rudolf's wife, Stephanie: "If one comes to know this woman properly, one must excuse Rudolf for looking elsewhere for distraction and a narcotic to ease the emptiness of the heart in his own home." (342). Hamann shows Elisabeth more active in finding out the reasons for Rudolf's suicide. She dispatches Guyla Andrassy to go to Helene Vetsera's house to make more inquiries, which do not, however, render any results. Hamann mentions possible political reasons behind Rudolf's death, but there is not enough information and evidence available to support this theory (344). Elisabeth's visit at Rudolf's coffin in the Capucchine Chrypt, which Corti declares a sign of Elisabeth losing her senses due to overpowering grief, is here another attempt Elisabeth makes, to find out the reasons for her son's death. She invokes his spirit to question him about his motivation (346).

In order to have a church funeral for Rudolf, an affidavit declaring him mentally unstable had to be procured. Corti, in his description of the Mayerling tragedy takes this official declaration of insanity for fact and builds his argument around it.

In the aftermath of Rudolf's death there is a sense of apocalyptic gloom descending over the House of Habsburg. Hamann notes: "With Rudolf's death, Austria-Hungary's future seemed to have died." (343). Only the Emperor himself, appears oddly more relaxed and more happy during this time, which makes the theory of a conspiracy leading to Rudolf's death because of his political views vaguely possible (347). Elisabeth, on the other hand, experiences a second blow of fate shortly after Rudolf's death, when her trusted friend Andrassy dies as well. After that, she gives away "all her light-colored gowns, umbrellas, shoes, scarves, purses and all accessories to Gisela and Valerie. She kept only the plain mourning outfits; for the rest of her days she did not wear colored dresses again." (348).

Both biographers describe Elisabeth's death as an absolution after a life filled with struggles and hardships. For Corti, who describes her throughout the book as teetering at the brink of some form of mental derangement, this is his last opportunity to portray her in the most favourable light. Being dead, her beauty still as vibrant as ever, it is easy for him to exalt one last time over her majestic pose and appearance (516). It seems this immobile, passive beautiful female body, is the ideal, which in Corti's eyes, Elisabeth should have fulfilled during her lifetime. In great detail he reports on the reactions of the public, who fell into deep mourning for their Empress.

Hamann describes Elisabeth's death in the same terms as Corti does: "This sensational act of violence in Geneva was a deliverance for a deeply unhappy, emotionally disturbed, and physically debilitated woman, whose parting left hardly a gap." (370). This last part of the sentence is the great distinction to be made between the two biographers on this issue. Hamann reports the general lack of public mourning for Elisabeth, even from the side of the Emperor, who quickly and calmly resumes his daily routine. Even her favourite daughter, Valerie, shows relative complacency, and sees the death as the way in which Elisabeth herself would had wished to die (370). Regarding the public,

Hamann notes that their show of sorrow and mourning was mostly aimed at the Emperor himself, whom they saw as the victim of this blow of fate (371).

Elisabeth herself, had been too much of a controversial figure for the public's taste to cause acute sorrow on the side of her subjects. This is why Corti in the 1930's had to do excessive explaining and interpreting - from his conservative, aristocratic standpoint - in order to literally 'sell' Elisabeth to a public, in which the myth around her life was still largely present. Hamann, writing fifty years later, was able to portray her more accurately since Elisabeth by then had become acceptable in her eccentricity as a forerunner of female emancipation. This also tends to be the direction in which all subsequent accounts of Elisabeth's life, as mentioned in the course of the paper, tend to lean. Even in popular entertainment Elisabeth is now presented quite differently than in the 1950's movie trilogy. The musical *Elisabeth*, which premiered 1992 in Vienna and was written by Michael Kunze and Sylvester Levay, shows her in roughly the same way as Hamann portrays her, even overly accentuating her eccentric, non-conformist nature.

In my own opinion, the real Elisabeth was somewhere in between Corti's account of her and Hamann's. I do not believe the over-simplistic, traditional portrayal of her, nor do I think the completely self-absorbed, forefighter of women's liberation figure, Hamann describes. This seems to me a case of pressing a historical figure into a schemata, which did not exist in her days. Of the two biographers, I do believe though that Hamann came closer to a realistic and accurate depiction of her.

I think maybe Elisabeth was actually right, when she said about herself:

Die Leute wissen nicht, [...] was sie mit mir beginnen sollen, weil ich in keine ihrer Traditionen und längst bekannten Begriffe hineinlasse. Sie wollen nicht, daß man ihre Schubladenordnung störe. (*Stationen*, 33).

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