

**The Power of Passion: Homosociality in *Götz von Berlichingen***

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Readers of Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*, his first major work and the play which ignited the "Sturm und Drang" movement, are confronted with a text that bears all the hallmarks of the Storm and Stress: passionate declarations of love, an upended world consumed by the fire of two opposing strains of idealism, and adrenaline-pumping battle sequences. At first glance, this is a play about men, dominated by strong male figures who jockey for position in a male-centric world of war and politics.<sup>1</sup> However, the women in the text are not simply adornments. Berlichingen's sister Maria displays a muted ability to effect change in the course of events, predominantly by exerting her influence on the two men in her life. The power-hungry Adelheid at the bishop's court, meanwhile, does far more than influence events indirectly; she shapes them outright by intentional manipulation of her male lovers.<sup>2</sup> These women at the center of love triangles must be viewed as central to the action and advancement of the play. As we will see, the degree to which passion is present in each love triangle influences not only the strength and character of the male homosocial bonds, but also the woman's ability to exert control. Passion, in the final analysis, becomes both metaphor and fuel for power in the play.

Possibly because the text is seldom read these days, there are fewer feminist and queer approaches to this drama than one might expect. The most prominent attempt, by Susan Gustafson, highlights the prevalence of childhood (and childlike) identification

with father figures in the play. Götz's son Carl, his page Georg, and the adoring monk Martin all view Berlichingen as a father figure, and Gustafson's Lacanian reading persuasively argues for male bonding among these characters that approaches homosexuality. Her reading continues with a look at "the erotic nature of [Weislingen's and Götz's] youthful relationship" (120). She posits that "men bond with men in the play" (112), with the action ultimately driven by Berlichingen's and Weislingen's mutual but unconsummated attraction, highlighted by the fact that neither man can be satisfied with female companions alone, though they are socially pressured to ultimately settle down with a woman. Gustafson sees Maria as a crucial counterweight to their attraction; the men must choose wives, and "the only option left to Götz and Weislingen in the play is a substitutive bonding mediated through the exchange of Götz's sister" (121). At its heart, she claims, Goethe's drama points out the inadequacy of male-female relationships but offers no solutions for the consummation of bonds between men.

Gustafson's interesting approach does much to explain the motivations of the boyish figures in the tale, but can we responsibly consider the womanizing Weislingen and the resolutely devout husband Berlichingen to be homosexual in the modern sense? Are we wise to throw out completely the notion that *Empfindsamkeit* and the "Cult of Feeling" could adequately explain declarations of passion and male bonding without involving homosexual desire? In short, must a homosocial reading of the story necessarily turn to queer theory? Her queer reading also fails to answer a pressing concern about the text: if the quest to unite the men drives the story, why does so much of it unfold under the control of Adelheid, the one woman at the center of a stormy erotic triangle that manages to avoid traditional homosocial competition?

There are other ways to view the homosociality in this text that adhere more rigorously to Eve Sedgwick's original explanation of homosociality, which was itself an update of René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Sedgwick moves beyond Girard's focus on strong male bonding to hypothesize "the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between the homosocial and homosexual"(1), but Sedgwick admits "how far this force is properly sexual...will be an active question" (2). Gustafson's reading of *Götz von Berlichingen* abolishes Sedgwick's continuum and implies an identity between homosocial and homosexual readings. Since the play champions traditional male behaviors, something Gustafson not only admits but relies upon for her reading of identification with father figures, it seems more reasonable to situate this text not at the poles but somewhere along Sedgwick's original continuum, closer to the homosocial (but strongly heterosexual) bonding between men.

Girard's model reminds us that the competitive bond between two men caught in an erotic triangle is homosocial precisely because the desire of the men is *heterosexual* in nature. In desiring the same woman, a bond of rivalry is created, but there is a social component to this rivalry. Goethe's play contains two such erotic triangles: Weislingen and Sickingen love Maria, and Weislingen and Franz love Adelheid. These relationships between men are not mirror images, however. Adelheid, who uses heterosexual passion to control men, wields enormous power. Maria, by contrast, is something closer to the idealized male vision of passivity, yet is not viewed with a great deal of passion by men. Passion and power appear linked in this story, with the homosocial status of the men representing the linchpin governing the outcome.

As something of a puppeteer controlling the knight Weislingen and his page Franz, Adelheid is one of the more interesting figures in the play. In the initial 1771 version of the text shown only to Goethe's Strasburg friend Salzmann (who loved it) and to Herder (who condemned it), Adelheid was an even more prominent figure. Goethe admits in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* that the play was skewing too heavily in favor of her story: "ich hatte mich, indem ich Adelheid liebenswürdig zu schildern trachtete, selbst in sie verliebt, unwillkürlich war meine Feder nur ihr gewidmet, das Interesse an ihrem Schicksal nahm überhand"(570).<sup>3</sup> Her physical beauty attracts Franz and Weislingen upon first glance, and her refusal to commit entirely to either man reveals her true intent: to control them both by "playing" either side, sometimes telling each man what he wants to hear and at other times using reverse psychology to manipulate them. Weislingen, for his part, is completely taken in, and the urgency of his desire is apparent in his language: "Könntest du mich lieben, könntest du meiner heißen Leidenschaft einen Tropfen Linderung gewähren! Adelheid!"(118)

Weislingen's servant Franz, actually the first of the two to fall in love with Adelheid, is if anything even more desperately passionate about her. His enchantment is evident in his hyperbolic description of her beauty: "Das letzte Mal, da ich sie sahe, hatte ich nicht mehr Sinne als ein Trunkener. Oder vielmehr, kann ich sagen, ich fühlte in dem Augenblick, wie's den Heiligen bei himmlischen Erscheinungen sein mag. Alle Sinne stärker, höher, vollkommener, und doch den Gebrauch von keinem"(102). Adelheid, though confessing to the audience that she feels sorry for Franz, is not above using him as well. When he wants to stop functioning as the go-between for her and Weislingen, she tells him "Geh, entdecke deinem lieben Herrn mein Geheimnis! Ich war die Närrin, dich

für was zu halten, das du nicht bist” (154), though she knows he would not betray her. When he demurs, she promises him “Wanke nicht von deiner Lieb und Treu, und der schönste Lohn soll dir werden”(155).

Weislingen remains ignorant of Adelheid’s dealings with the page, though he does express jealousy when he realizes she remains a free spirit. Because Weislingen is ignorant of the relationship with Franz, for most of the play his attitude toward the servant is not of a homosocial nature, and one witnesses only an unremarkable master-servant relationship. Upon being told that Franz has been poisoning Weislingen and then threw himself out the window in remorse, Weislingen’s only comment is “Ihm ist wohl”(170). Later, though, it becomes clear that Weislingen maintained fond feelings for his servant, for he expresses rage at Adelheid rather than Franz: “Mein Franz, verführt durch die Abscheuliche!”(171) Benjamin Bennett’s comment that Weislingen’s name is morphologically similar to “Weichlinge” is appropriate not only in his inability to choose between Berlichingen and the Bamberg court, but also in his waffling between Adelheid and Franz until it is literally too late (Bennett 337). His remorse after the fact is almost the exact opposite reaction one might have normally suspected from Weislingen, an admittedly jealous lover who suddenly discovers a hidden love triangle – thus arguing convincingly that despite the erotic triangle there is no competitive homosocial bond between these male suitors.

Unlike his master Weislingen, Franz knows about the “other man” in Adelheid’s life, so his homosocial relationship to Weislingen is fully realized from the start. Interestingly, Franz does not consider Weislingen a rival or threat, and instead maintains a stance of honor and admiration toward him. Only at the end of the play, when Franz is

coerced by Adelheid's reverse psychology and her deployment of tears as manipulation (168), does he agree to poison Weislingen. Yet he is clearly torn by the decision. He comes clean to his dying master, ranting incoherently "Gift! Gift! Von Eurem Weibe! – Ich! Ich!"(170)

Adelheid secures her power by allying herself with Weislingen, but, upon losing interest in him, courts Franz to get rid of Weislingen. Though he does her bidding, Franz is conflicted and clearly still bound by his moral duty to his master. Weislingen expresses no rage at Franz for the betrayal, and instead directs his vitriol at Adelheid. From the moment of revelation, Weislingen's relationship to Franz became tinged by homosociality, but like Franz's view of Weislingen, it was never defined by competition or rivalry.

The lack of rivalry in their relationship seems uncharacteristic, given their passion for Adelheid, but in fact can be understood as a fairly predictable psychological response. By encouraging their passion and "keeping them forever on the hook," Adelheid courts jealousy in both men. With jealousy apparent and direct, neither suitor suppresses the emotion and channels it into the kind of competition typically seen in homosocial relationships. Notably, it is their passion for Adelheid which enables her to manipulate situations: she is able to seduce Weislingen into a politically advantageous marriage, and to court Franz with tears to poison Weislingen when the marriage no longer suits her purposes.

The other major female figure in the play, Berlichingen's sister Maria, is also involved in a romantic triangle. Presented almost as a polar opposite of Adelheid, Maria is not exploitative, but neither is she fully acquiescent, for she is willing to stand up to her

brother on occasion. First linked with Weislingen and later with Berlichingen's ally Sickingen, Maria shares a far less stormy relationship with the men in her life – one might almost characterize this love triangle as passionless, in fact. Her attraction to Weislingen at the start of the play is heavily influenced first by his reputation, then by his appearance and manner. While there are words of love between them, the tenor of these declarations is markedly different from similar exclamations made to and by Adelheid. Maria states almost calmly, for example, "Ihr liebt mich, sagt Ihr. Ich glaub es gerne und hoffe, mit Euch glücklich zu sein, und Euch glücklich zu machen" (98), to which Weislingen replies "Ich fühle nichts, als nur daß ich ganz dein bin"(98). The simplicity and lack of hyperbole here and elsewhere implies a more distant affection than the stormy love Weislingen later displays toward Adelheid. It is true that Weislingen becomes more animated when Maria comes to beg for Berlichingen's life much later in the play, but this can also be attributed to his desolation at Adelheid's betrayal. Significantly, Maria does not join Weislingen in passionately bewailing their fates; instead, she remains focused on securing her brother's release.

With Sickingen, Berlichingen's political and military ally, Maria shares an even more distant relationship. We never see them declare love for each other, and the closest we come is an almost clinical exchange of vows: Sickingen says "Ich führte Euch an den Altar, und Ihr sollt mich zur Glückseligkeit führen," to which Maria answers "Wir wollen zusammen eine Pilgrimschaft nach diesem fremden gelobten Lande antreten"(136). Sickingen in particular seems motivated more by a sense of duty than love; when he first discovers that Weislingen had betrayed them, he declares his supposed love for Maria by stating to Götz: "Es macht euch beiden Ehre, von ihm betrogen worden zu sein. Soll

darum das arme Mädchen in ein Kloster gehn, weil der erste Mann, den sie kannte, ein Nichtswürdiger war! Nein doch! Ich bleibe darauf, sie soll Königin von meinen Schlössern werden”(124). Indeed, Sickingen appears more closely allied to Berlichingen than to Maria, for he refuses to consummate the marriage until Götz has escaped a trap at the castle: “Ich will ihr Bette nicht besteigen, bis ich Euch außer Gefahr weiß”(138). In all respects, Sickingen’s relationship with Maria can be seen more as courtly love than as outright passion – he is one of the dying breed of medieval knights, after all, and this is reflected in his use of *Ihr* and *Euch* rather than *Du* when addressing her.

Whereas the homosocial relationship between Franz and Weislingen had been restrained, gentle, and on the whole honorable, the relationship between Sickingen and Weislingen is characterized by antipathy. This is largely due to their circumstances; they are only engaged as enemies *professionally* and in fact have no direct confrontation with each other in the play, though they speak of each other on rare occasions. Even so, the general level of hatred toward each other speaks volumes about their homosocial status. Sickingen, while ostensibly in love with Maria but not articulate about it, is somehow able to muster up ardent passion in his missives against Weislingen. When he decides to save Maria from the convent, he tells Berlichigen that “[Weislingen] hat ein doppletes Band zerrissen. Wohl Euch, daß Ihr mit dem Verräter nicht näher verwandt worden [seid]” (124). Sickingen uses the same vocabulary of treason when rescuing Götz in a fight and Weislingen’s name comes up: “Vergiß einen Verräter! Wir wollen seine Anschläge vernichten, sein Ansehn untergraben, und Gewissen und Schande sollen ihn zu Toden fressen”(151).

Weislingen is no less engaged to his rival Sickingen. While he mostly appears to consider Sickingen to be a lackey for Berlichingen and thus not worthy of particular note, he expresses a surprisingly strong reaction when Sickingen rescues Berlichingen at his castle: “Der verdammte Sickingen!... Sickingen drohte mit Feuer und Schwert, der hochmütige jähzornige Mann! Ich haß’ ihn. Sein Ansehn nimmt zu wie ein Strom, der nur einmal ein paar Bäche gefressen hat, die übrigen folgen von selbst”(152). Despite the hostile tone and evident hatred on the part of both Weislingen and Sickingen, it must be noted that their homosocial relationship is not driven by apparent jealousy, but by professional competition. Weislingen is concerned not that Sickingen has claimed Maria’s hand, but that Sickingen’s “Ansehn nimmt zu” and his base of followers is potentially growing.

The antipathy between Weislingen and Sickingen never once centers on Maria, and any connection drawn between their rivalry and Maria might be seen to strain interpretive credibility. Yet precisely this sort of competition divorced from an object of desire in fact represents the purest form of homosocial desire. Unlike the Weislingen-Franz bond, the Weislingen-Sickingen connection is a true homosocial bond of competition. While it may be tempting to view the antipathy between Weislingen and Sickingen as representative of homophobic paranoia (Sedgwick accepts Freud’s interpretation of Dr. Schreber, for instance, where he postulates that latent homosexual desire first engenders homophobia which then manifests itself as paranoia), there simply is no evidence in Goethe’s text that these two characters could possibly share homosexual attraction. Indeed, they never even meet.

Merely labeling this bond as homosocial in Girard's sense, however, does not explain Maria's powerlessness. The issue of a woman's relative power in this society seems determined more by the passion directed at her than by the nature of the homosocial bonds which encircle her. As a woman surrounded by less passion than Adelheid, Maria enjoys far less ability to manipulate events. While Maria is able to convince Weislingen to destroy Berlichingen's death warrant, she must do so by appealing to Weislingen's character and boyhood relationship with Berlichingen rather than using the onetime relationship between them: "Weislingen, es ist entsetzlich, daß ich dir zu sagen brauche: er ist unschuldig; daß ich jammern muß, dich von dem abscheulichsten Morde zurückzuhalten. Deine Seele ist bis in ihre innersten Tiefen von feindseligen Mächten besessen"(169). Unlike Adelheid, who frequently appeals to Weislingen's and Franz's desire for her in order to accomplish her goal, Maria must use someone else's relationship to accomplish her goal. With less passion in her arsenal, she is less able to sway events on her own.

Berlichingen's wife, Elizabeth, is even more incapable of effective manipulation. Part of a stable monogamous relationship, Elizabeth is unlike Maria and Adelheid because no one else is vying for her love; there is no love triangle here. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is also no sense of passion surrounding her or in any of the relationships with her, not even with Berlichingen. Their relationship seems characterized more by loyalty than passion; for instance, Elizabeth remains by Berlichingen's side even as he sends away Maria and Sickingen from a dangerous situation. Given the ebullience many characters display in this play, one would expect passionate declarations of love, but Berlichingen merely commands "Elizabeth, du bleibst bei mir!" to which she replies

“Bis in den Tod!” (138). After she leaves the room temporarily, he comments only “Wen Gott lieb hat, dem geb er so eine Frau!” (138). Indeed, Elizabeth is as much a political ally as anything else to Götz, for in all other scenes together in the play they prefer discussion of politics than passion for each other (139, 155). To some extent, Elizabeth’s lack of passion, as well as the previously discussed clinical engagement between Sickingen and Maria, may be considered simply a realistic depiction of the sixteenth-century setting in the play, when marriages among nobility were often contracted purely for the acquisition of allies and new territory. Such an acknowledgement should not, however, dissuade us from evaluating the ramifications to the gendered relationships in the text or otherwise invalidate the comparison between Elizabeth and other female figures. Elizabeth’s lack of emotion, whether historically inspired or not, stands in such sharp contrast to Adelheid as to demand attention. Her equanimity is perhaps most noticeable during Berlichingen’s death scene at the end of the play, where one would normally expect to find a passionate or at least heartfelt exchange between husband and wife. While pathos is there, it manifests itself mostly in remembrances of Berlichingen’s friends and allies. One wonders if there is even love between Götz and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, unlike Maria and especially Adelheid, is totally divorced from passion and correspondingly from power. Completely unable to influence events, Elizabeth merely watches the action of the play pass by her – her role seems to be that of the dutiful wife. It is no accident that her husband Berlichingen also has no real power in the play, and by extension in this society. In his struggle to preserve the older order of knighthood, Berlichingen attempts to convince Weislingen to join his side, but in this endeavor he fails. Likewise, Berlichingen is relatively powerless as an outlaw, but his friend

Sickingen has power as a secret ally. In short, the only figures in the play who have the power to influence events are ones embroiled in passionate relationships, but Berlichingen is not one of them. Despite the play's title, the story is largely not about Berlichingen himself and his actions, but rather more about those who control his destiny for him. This is part of the point of the play – despite his stated goal of preserving the order of knighthood, the ostensible hero of the story cannot even control his own destiny, let alone the world order.

The ones with the power in the play, especially the power to control events, are the women at the center of love triangles. Adelheid's scheming, in particular, is central to the action of the story. Taken together with Maria's diminished ability to exert influence and Elizabeth's nonexistent authority, Adelheid's power seems to imply that the play posits passion as an overall proxy for power. The homosocial bonds of the men in the play vary based on the level of passion present for the woman at the center of their attention – passionate declarations for Adelheid paradoxically result in lessened competition for Weislingen and Franz, while the highly competitive suitors Weislingen and Sickingen display no real passion for Maria. To be embroiled in an erotic triangle with a true homosocial relationship, in this play, is to transfer authority and control to men. Adelheid, by engendering outright jealousy (i.e., passion) rather than allowing emotions to be suppressed to the point of competition, avoids the typical homosocial constellation and thus manages to carve out a position of power for herself.

While "Sturm und Drang" is frequently seen as a movement in literature strongly identified by emotion and passion, we have seen that passion is restricted only to those in love triangles. Moreover, the play does not just display passion at large, but a specific

kind of passion that functions as a proxy for power. In fact, it is only by establishing such a specific application for passion-as-power that enables the play to enact the “Sturm und Drang” we think of today.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Arlene Akiko Teraoka summarizes critical opinion that the “play is essentially about - and is structure around - the tragic conflict between a great individual and his repressive world”(Teraoka 30).

<sup>2</sup> Adelheid has long been acknowledged as representative of Shakespearean villainesses. Rudolf Ibel notes that “Neben Götz kann nur noch Adelheid, die Gegenspielerin im Lager der Feinde, bestehen. Auch sie wirkt naturhaft-dämonisch, getrieben von der Leidenschaft des Geschlechts und einem sich damit verbindenden Machtgefühl, das ins Politische spielt. [Ihre Leidenschaft] koppelt sich mit kalter Berechnung und steigert sich so ins Satanische” (Ibel 69), while Benjamin Bennett suggests her tragedy mirrors Götz’s own: “He and Adelheid represent the same basic Shakespearean human type, and the tragic quality of the first version arises not from Adelheid’s villainy, but from a situation that enables the forces of weakness, ‘Die Schwachen,’ who will rule the future, to derive profit from her natural strength” (Bennett 341-2).

<sup>3</sup> Many scholars have also drawn attention to Goethe's claim for spontaneous production for this work; he claims “[ich] fing eines Morgens zu schreiben an, ohne daß ich einen Entwurf oder Plan vorher aufgesetzt hätte” (HA IX, 570). Arlene Akiko Teraoka offers this quote as an example of naive acceptance of Goethe's own reasoning for the changes between the 1771 and 1773 versions. Bennett sees the reduction of Adelheid's role as an renewed emphasis on Götz's inactivity, since the fascination with Adelheid seemed to be a compensation for Götz's inactivity (Bennett 343), a view borne out by G.A. Wells's assertion that “some changes Goethe made in his 1773 revision of the play seem calculated to elevate Götz” (Wells 84).