

NATUR- UND FABELREICH IN FAUST II. Katharina Mommsen, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1968, pp. VII, 255. Review in: *THE JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AND GERMANIC PHILOLOGY*. Vol. 70, No. 1 (Jan. 1971) pp. 117 f.

Ten years ago, Katharina Mommsen published her highly meritorious book on *Goethe und 1001 Nacht* (Berlin 1960). In that volume she uncovered an amazingly rich trove of literary themes, situations, and plot sequences from the *Arabian Nights* that served Goethe as convenient starting points for a great variety of his poetry and prose. In her present volume she applies many of her findings to the interpretation of some of the more enigmatic portions of Goethe's *Faust II*, in particular, the miraculous scenes of Act II, the Classical Walpurgis Night, and Act III, the Helena act.

It is only natural that, as an expert in a field which has largely been overlooked or ignored by *Faust* interpreters, Mrs. Mommsen tends to make the most of her monopoly. Once she recognized the eminently generative force of oriental imagination, she expanded the scope of her research to include the realm of mythology, especially, the myths and legends of ancient Hellas that are known to have occupied Goethe during the writing of the two most colorful acts of *Faust II*. Censuring the majority of newer, ideological commentators for their alleged indifference toward fundamental source research, she advocates a restoration of „Quellenforschung“ which might open new vistas into the „meaning“ of *Faust*.

That such reorientation has been profitable is shown by the manner in which Mrs. Mommsen interprets Faust's nuptials with Helena in the light of the Leuke myth (i.e., the supernatural union of Achilles and Helena, after their deaths, on the island of Leuke), or in the manner in which she elucidates, by means of the Perseus myth, Mephisto's encounter with the Phorcyads. She offers similar mythological clues with regard to Chiron and Manto as well as other participants in the night of magic on the banks of the Peneios River and the shores of the Aegean Sea. She observes that both Faust and Homunculus, in search of their ultimate objectives, are „handed on“ from one super natural councillor to another. Each of these instances, analyzed in detail, finds its potential counterpart or model in the *Arabian Nights* or in the columns of Goethe's trusted old source book, the mythological lexicon of Benjamin Hederich.

Many of these facts have been known to Faust scholars. The interpretive conclusions Mrs. Mommsen draws from this evidence are new and often surprising. They concern the dramatic functions of Helena and Homunculus, of Mephistopheles and Faust. According to the author, the two acts under consideration are primarily a grandiose example of Goethe's „Lust zu Fabulieren“ which conceived of Homunculus and Helena in the relation of contrast rather than continuity (as has been the customary view). Thus Helena comes to assume the features of a magic „product,“ ultimately the perfection of Art, the „dream of Hellas,“ „das Leben im Fabelreich (der Dichtung,)“ whereas Homunculus stands for the slowly evolving process of life „im Reich der Natur.“ Accordingly, the dichotomy in the book's title reveals – or conceals – the juxtaposition of „Natur“ and „Kunst,“ familiar from other writings of Goethe.

In contrast to traditional *Faust* interpretation which, following G. W. Hertz, has been in the habit of considering Helena a „real“ person, the author contends that

Helena, once she appears at the beginning of Act III, must under no circumstances be regarded as such, but as a phantom, an idol, a configuration of „unreality“ or „Schein.“ At times she needlessly seems to belabor this point of unreality, in obvious contradiction to Goethe's confession to Schiller of 12 September 1800 that „meine Helena [ist] wirklich aufgetreten.“ A scrutiny of the paralipomena which Mrs. Mommsen faithfully consults does not yield a clear decision as to what Goethe may have meant by „wirklich“ or „als wirklich.“ Consequently, the reader is left in a quandary regarding Mrs. Mommsen's rather simplistic standard of „normal reality“ and is inclined to suspect her designation of Helena as „reality of art“ to be a revival of outdated allegorism.

Of greater importance is her interpretation of Mephistopheles. Taking her cue from the well-known stage direction at the end of Act III, which suggests Mephisto's (Phorkyas) share in „Helena, klassisch-romantische Phantasmagoric,“ and linking it to the Emperor's jovial appointment of Mephisto as his court „Scheherazade“ (the Emperor does not really know *who* it is that he is talking to!) Mrs. Mommsen literally makes Mephistopheles the producer of the Helena act, a play within a play, and assigns to him as sorcerer supreme the dramatic function of poetic creativeness: all through the act, as before at the imperial court, Mephistopheles keeps on telling miraculous stories, „Märchen“ – poetry („Dichten“), after all, is the magic skill of make-believe – and it is only in his creation that Helena assumes her tenuous „reality.“

Such interpretation of Mephistopheles as a „creative artist“ (which, ironically, contains a grain of „truth“) comes distressingly close to a reversal of the traditional, classical view concerning the „divine“ powers of poetic creativity, held by Goethe and most writers of his time, and the reader is tempted to suspect that the philosophical confusion prevailing at this point between the notions of unreality, illusion, deception, make-believe and –aesthetic appearance („Schein“) was acceptable to the author as long as it served her hypothesis of Mephisto's „magisches Fabulieren,“ derived from her studies of the *Arabian Nights*. The author fails to indicate at this point that, similarly, Mephisto seems to have a hand in the „making“ of Homunculus without calling the artistic talents of his „magisches Fabulieren“ into play. There is an essential difference between the creation of make-believe money (Act I) and the creation of art, even though some may consider the achievement of inflation a „Kunststück.“ Even as potential master of the phantasmagoria, Mephistopheles remains an imposter.

Reflections on the morally questionable implications of art, the aesthetic, might be in order; but such reflections would clearly go beyond the pale of this book. Still Mrs. Mommsen must have sensed this discrepancy in Mephisto's nature when she states that, as an artist, a poet, Mephistopheles „ist gewiß von einem rechten Teufel weit entfernt“ (p. 242; cf. also p. 80). It would be futile to engage in „diabolodicy“ at this point. To be sure, Mephistopheles is much more than an allegorical „Verkörperung des radikalen Bösen“ (p. 80); but endowing him, as the author does, with the human talent of poetic creativeness amounts to reducing a principle of existence – the principle of negation, limitation, destruction, nonexistence – to the dimensions of an oversized human individual.

In proportion to the emphasis placed on Mephistopheles, Faust is accorded relatively meagre attention. It should be noticed, however, that within the increasingly symbolical, transcendental atmosphere of the play even he is dealt

with primarily under the aspect of his limited, personal individuality (rather than that of his potential „humanity“). Under her premises, the author has no reason to deal with the latter. Consequently, Faust is of small interest to her; he figures only insofar as his dramatic situation substantiates possible influences of oriental lore or reveals a person in a state of mental imbalance („verrückt“) whose obsession with beauty is in desperate need of a psychological cure. Such cure he promptly receives through Mephistopheles' staging of his phantasmagoria. This revives old literary parallels: Goethe's own *Lila* of early Weimar days portrayed the „psychic cure of a mind disrupted by the loss of his beloved,“ a theme suggested by a magic event in *1001 Nights*. To what extent the Helena episode might possibly contribute to Faust's potential intellectual emancipation from Mephistopheles remains a problem not dealt with in this book.

Mrs. Mommsen's treatise offers a number of interesting insights. She makes it plausible, for example, why Helena's removal from Sparta to Arcadia hastens her inescapable return to Hades. She points at illuminating connections between the Classical Walpurgis Night and Goethe's *Italian Journey*, III. But such observations remain incidental under the urgency with which she presents her hypothesis – that of the creative „Fabulierkunst“ of Mephistopheles. At times, the reader may wait in vain for a gentle word of appreciation of poetic irony or poetic symbolism which Goethe's „Fabulierkunst“ doubtless entailed. Unfortunately such problems rarely enter into the discussion; nor are they included in the topical index. Regarding the compositional structure of the two acts, particularly, the Classical Walpurgis Night, the author generally observes a simple linear succession of scenes without probing into the extremely subtle employment of a poetic principle of antithesis and synthesis and the relative participation of Faust, Mephistopheles, and Homunculus in such a sequence (cf. *JEGP*, [1955], 591-611). A mere juxtaposition and comparison of the Northern and *Classical Walpurgis Nights* and their real or imaginary „interludes“ must remain on the surface and leads to no substantial results.

Mrs. Mommsen's book is challenging and illuminating in many ways. Her thesis that „Quellenforschung“ must precede interpretation is, of course, valid as it requires circumspection and judicious judgment. Possibly, Goethe himself, „insofern es nötig wäre,“ might have furnished a commentary on this book:

Da muß sich manches Rätsel lösen.
— Doch manches Rätsel knüpft sich auch.