

*JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRALASIAN UNIVERSITIES LANGUAGE & LITERATURE ASSOCIATION* (AUMLA) 45, p. 144. KLEIST'S KAMPF MIT GOETHE. Katharina Mommsen. *Heidelberg Lothar Stiehm Verlag*, 1974, pp. 226, 10 illustrations.

PROFESSOR MOMMSEN sees the relationship between Heinrich von Kleist and Goethe in a very different light compared with previous inquiries into this absorbing subject. *Kampf* in this context does not mean merely a struggle, but a contest, a single combat, even a kind of wrestler's match between two giants. Kleist according to his temperament was the more aggressive and militant one whereas Goethe reacted though sometimes forcefully yet in a superior way in this ›Agon‹, this intellectual and musical contest which the ancients conducted parallel with their athletic competitive games. The starting point in the relationship between the two was Wieland's encouragement when on perusing '*Robert Guiskard*' he wrote to Kleist, then 25, that he was destined to fill the gap that even Goethe and Schiller had left unfilled, i.e. to combine the qualities of Sophocles and Shakespeare. The climax of the relationship was the dismal failure of Goethe's production of '*Der zerbrochne Krug*' five years later which: unleashed Kleist's wrath in insulting public invective and understandably alienated Goethe for good. Yet the relationship was on both sides one of admiration and respect on the one hand, of dislike and aversion on the other with a good measure of love-hate thrown in, in short it was-as Professor Mommsen demonstrates so profusely -very complex and went far beyond the personal plane to philosophical, aesthetic and even political incompatibility (cf. their utterly different attitudes towards Napoleon).

It is not possible to expound in detail the subtle and searching ways by which Professor Mommsen traces the many subterranean channels into which the contest was channelled. She shows not only how Kleist's plays from *Amphitryon* to *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* and several of his novellas, but also his accidental writings for his journals such as *Phöbus* and the *Berliner Abendblätter*, even short poems such as 'Katharina von Frankreich' and the illustrations of *Phöbus* were shot through with allusions and 'secret' references to Goethe and his works, and that these were messages to support the assertion that he, Kleist, was artistically equal to the older man and, even if he formulated the goals and desires of a younger generation, deserved to be his heir. Kleist admired and attacked, wooed and repelled Goethe, but basically always yearned for recognition from the one man whom he felt to be the only competent judge in the German literary arena.

Rather startling is Professor Mommsen's discovery of subterranean channels in some of Goethe's works that lead back to Kleist as in the (unfinished) play *Pandora* (1808, published 1810), in the story *Die Wunderlichen Nachbarskinder* inserted in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), and in the fairy tale *Der neue Paris* inserted in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811), all of which contain parallels to and implied criticisms of *Penthesilea*; but even far later Goethe referred to Kleist, as for instance in the Euphorion-scenes of the Helena-Act of *Faust II* the discussion of which leads to the interesting question as to why Goethe admired Byron ungrudgingly ('das größte Talent des Jahrhunderts') and rejected Kleist whose nature was so akin to the former. Goethe's message in these phases of the contest was that harmony was preferable to discord, the humane to the inhumane and pacifism to violence and war.

Professor Mommsen's penetrating approach can be gauged from a discourse that seeks to solve an apparently minor problem which has puzzled many interpreters of *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, the question as to why the Prince is consistently addressed by his cousin Hohenzollern as 'Arthur'. Not only does Professor Mommsen prove convincingly that Kleist is influenced by Shakespeare's *King John* in which the King's nephew, Prince Arthur, is his rival and pretender (an identical situation to *Homburg* that mirrors the 'contest' under review), but also that Goethe's poem 'Euphrosyne' of 1799 refers expressly to Shakespeare's Prince Arthur and creates again a parallel situation to *Homburg*.

The constant interplay of Kleist and Goethe in their works and their mutual reactions to one another is the novel aspect of this book. Occasionally the reader baulks and wonders whether the author does not go too far in finding allusions to the contest. A case in point is the treatment, in a whole chapter, of the novella *Der Zweikampf*. The title (single combat as part of a mediaeval ordeal) points indeed to the central theme of the book. But was the story's message to Goethe really that one day the truth of Kleist's worth would dawn on him or as the last sentences of the chapter assert: 'In seinem Zweikampf mit Goethe war es nicht Gottes Wille gewesen, Sieg und Niederlage sogleich sichtbar zu machen. Erst die Zeit soll die wahre Entscheidung an den Tag bringen' (p. 146)?

Be this as it may, this is a fascinating book and an invaluable contribution to the understanding of both Goethe's and Kleist's personalities and works – a worthy successor to the author's brilliant book on *Goethe and 1001 Nacht*. (1960).