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GENDER, LAUGHTER, AND THE DESECRATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT: KLEIST'S PENTHESILEA AS 'HUNDEKOMÖDIE'

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GENDER, LAUGHTER, AND THE DESECRATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT: KLEIST'S *PENTHESILEA* AS 'HUNDEKOMÖDIE'

Heute zum ersten Mal mit Vergunst: die Penthesilea,
Hundekomödie; Acteurs: Helden und Köter und Fraun.
(HEINRICH VON KLEIST)¹

This epigram, first published in Kleist's journal *Phöbus* in 1808, has received relatively little attention from scholars. It belongs to a series of broadsides that Kleist launched in the spring of 1808, which were modelled primarily, one presumes, on Schiller and Goethe's *Xenien* (1797). The epigrams reserve a particular venom for Goethe himself, and make numerous attacks on aspects of Goethe's life and work. Kleist suggests that Goethe's scientific work represents a futile effort to analyse the genius of his youth, and he alludes indelicately to Goethe's illegitimate son and to his marriage to Christiane Vulpius in October 1806.² In 'Der Theater-Bearbeiter der Penthesilea', mimicry is used:

Nur die Meute, fürcht' ich, die wird in W... mit Glück nicht
Heulen, Lieber; den Lärm, setz' ich, vergönn', in Musik.
(DKV, III, 413)

The thinly disguised reference here is to Weimar, and to Goethe as the director of its theatre, here presented as a man of rather over-refined sensibility.³ Kleist's relationship with Goethe had deteriorated since the latter's production of *Der zerbrochne Krug* in Weimar had been poorly received. A few weeks earlier, Goethe had failed to take up Kleist's invitation to contribute to the newly launched *Phöbus*. In his letter of invitation Kleist had obsequiously presented to Goethe a fragment from his new play *Penthesilea*, which appeared in the first issue of *Phöbus* in January 1808. Kleist admitted his trepidation regarding the likely public reaction to the play (DKV, IV, 407). Goethe responded with the criticism that the work was aimed at 'ein Theater [. . .], welches da kommen soll'.⁴ But he also confessed his unease with the figure of *Penthesilea* herself:

¹ Heinrich von Kleist, 'Komödienzettel', in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Ilse-Marie Barth and others, 4 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–97), III, 412. Subsequent references will use the abbreviation DKV to refer to this edition; volume numbers will be given in small capitals, followed by page numbers in arabic numerals. References to *Penthesilea* cite volume II of this edition, but are referenced by line number only.

² See the epigrams 'Herr von Göthe' and 'Das frühreife Genie', in DKV, III, 412 and 415.

³ For more on Kleist's epigrams and his relationship to Goethe, see Katharina Mommsen, *Kleists Kampf mit Goethe* (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1974), especially pp. 83–89.

⁴ For an illuminating discussion of Kleist's attitude to the theatrical practices of Goethe and Iffland, see Alexander Košenina, 'Will er "auf ein Theater warten, welches da kommen soll?": Kleists Ideen zur Schauspielkunst', *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (2001), 38–54.

Mit der Penthesilea kann ich mich noch nicht befreunden. Sie ist aus einem so wunderbaren Geschlecht und bewegt sich in einer so fremden Region, daß ich mir Zeit nehmen muß, mich in beyde zu finden. (DKV, IV, 410)

Privately Goethe expanded upon this unease with the play:

Beim Lesen seiner *Penthesilea* bin ich neulich gar zu übel weggekommen. Die Tragödie grenzt in einigen Stellen völlig an das Hochkomische, z. B. wo die Amazone mit *einer* Brust auf dem Theater erscheint und das Publikum versichert, daß alle ihre Gefühle sich in die zweite, noch übriggebliebene Hälfte geflüchtet hätten [. . .].⁵

Thus Goethe's sense of the unintentionally comic aspects of *Penthesilea* is closely related to his inability—or perhaps unwillingness—to engage with the play as an exploration of gender roles, or with less harmonious representations of the classical world. There is no evidence that Kleist was aware of the specific nature of Goethe's unease with *Penthesilea*—although the close of Goethe's letter ('Nächstens mehr') leaves open the possibility that he might have sent further comments that have not been preserved.⁶

How, then, should we interpret the epigram 'Komödienzettel'? Clearly, we need to take into account a number of commonalities that the epigram shares with others published in *Phöbus*. One of the key strategies that Kleist deploys in these epigrams is to mimic the voice of his critics, and thereby to expose their supposedly crass judgements to ridicule. Thus the epigram 'Archäologischer Einwand' gives voice to a critic who objects to *Penthesilea* on the grounds of scholarly accuracy; the heroine's maiming of Achilles is criticized, since only his heel was vulnerable (DKV, III, 413). A similar strategy is used in the epigram 'Die Marquise von O...', but with the added twist that the moral standing of the speaker is undermined by her wilfully scurrilous interpretation of the tale.⁷

We might read 'Komödienzettel' along similar lines, namely as an attack by Kleist upon his critics. One such was Karl August Böttiger, whose review of the *Phöbus* fragment appeared in *Der Freimüthige* on 5 February 1808. Böttiger represented the play as the apotheosis of the *Spektakelstück*, and picked out the hordes of fighters on stage, the dogs and elephants, and the use of thunder for ridicule. Like Goethe, Böttiger remarked on the unconventional representation of femininity in the play, and was particularly sarcastic about Penthesilea's

⁵ Goethe's remarks were published in 1832 by Johann Daniel Falk; see *Heinrich von Kleists Lebensspuren: Dokumente und Berichte der Zeitgenossen*, ed. by Helmut Sembdner, rev. edn (Munich: dtv, 1996), p. 259.

⁶ Dirk Grathoff and Jochen Schmidt argue that Goethe's reaction to *Penthesilea* was coloured by his suspicion that Kleist was a Romantic. See Dirk Grathoff, 'Goethe und Kleist: Die Geschichte eines Mißverständnisses', in Grathoff, *Kleist: Geschichte, Politik, Sprache. Aufsätze zu Leben und Werk Heinrich von Kleists* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000), pp. 199–215; Jochen Schmidt, 'Goethe und Kleist', *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, 112 (1995), 111–19.

⁷ See DKV, III, 414: 'Dieser Roman ist nicht für dich, meine Tochter. In Ohnmacht! | Schamlose Posse! Sie hielt, weiß ich, die Augen bloß zu.'

address to her dogs.⁸ Kleist's choice of a little-known variant of the encounter between Penthesilea and Achilles, his eschewing of a conventional five-act structure,⁹ his use of neologisms, and his vehemently anti-Winckelmannian portrayal of the classical world were all targets for Böttiger's assault. It seems likely that Böttiger's review was one of Kleist's targets, and thus 'Komödienzettel' castigates the critics who tended to underestimate the serious tragic import of the play and to focus upon what they regarded as cheap spectacle. In its list of players ('Helden und Köter und Fraun') the epigram not only satirizes Böttiger's emphasis on the chaotic stagecraft of the play, but it also implicitly characterizes it as symptomatic of a mindset that not only excludes women from the category of the heroic, but also places them after dogs.

Gendered readings of the play tend to focus on the Amazon state and the compatibility of women and war. Older readings of the play often detected a mismatch between Penthesilea's behaviour and her gender. An extreme version of this approach is exemplified by Siegfried Streller, who suggests that Kleist follows Rousseau's view that a woman's purpose is child-bearing: 'sera-t-elle aujourd'hui nourrice et demain guerrière?' Accordingly, Streller argues that the Amazon state is unnatural and that Penthesilea's call for the scattering of Tanaïs' ashes also represents 'die Aufforderung, den Amazonenstaat aufzulösen, wieder nach natürlichen Gesetzen zu leben, die der Frau die Liebe und das Mütterliche als Lebenserfüllung zuweisen'.¹⁰ Yet this reading is based on the assumption that Kleist retained his youthful conservatism about gender roles, an assumption which, as we shall see, is problematic. Hans Wolff argues that the Amazon state is portrayed as the result of a Rousseauian social contract, but that this *Vernunftstaat* is ultimately condemned as inhumane.¹¹ Manfred Durzak argues that Penthesilea's killing of Achilles is the direct outcome of the cruel and inherently violent law of Tanaïs that governs the Amazon state.¹²

⁸ See Böttiger's review of the *Phöbus* fragment: 'Man schimpft auf die jetzigen sogenannten Spektakelstücke, und besonders geht es über das Pferdegetrampel, das jetzt auf den großen Bühnen oft eintritt, her. Aber so toll, wie der Spektakel in diesem Trauerspiele getrieben wird, dürfte er doch wohl nirgends ausgeführt sein. Außer Scharen von Griechen und Amazonen, Mädchen und Müttern — Weibern kann man doch nicht sagen — treten im 19. Auftritt Amazonen mit Meuten gekoppelter Hunde und Elefanten, mit Sichelwagen und Fackeln auf. Nun folgt eine schöne Anrede der Penthesilea an ihre Hunde . . . Hierzu rollt der Donner. [. . .] Ach! Du armer Kotzebue, über dessen Theatercoups man so sehr herzieht, hättest du das gewagt, ausgetrommelt wärest du von jedem Buben geworden!' (*Lebensspuren*, pp. 201–02).

⁹ Linda Hoff-Purviance catalogues numerous structural parallels between Homer's *Iliad* and the unusual twenty-four scene structure of *Penthesilea*. See Linda Hoff-Purviance, 'The Form of Kleist's *Penthesilea* and the *Iliad*', *German Quarterly*, 55 (1982), 39–48.

¹⁰ See Streller, *Das dramatische Werk Heinrich von Kleists* (Berlin: Rütten und Loening, 1966), pp. 99–125 (pp. 100, 117).

¹¹ See Hans Wolff, *Heinrich von Kleist: Die Geschichte seines Schaffens* (Bern: Francke, 1954), pp. 198–205.

¹² See Manfred Durzak, 'Das Gesetz der Athene und das Gesetz der Tanaïs: Zur Funktion des Mythischen in Kleists *Penthesilea*', *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts*, 6 (1973), 354–70.

A more positive view of the Amazon state was offered by Ruth Angress in a ground-breaking article of 1982, in which she suggests that the Amazon state should not be considered abnormal, that the state's demands on the individual are not unreasonable, and that the Amazons are often portrayed more attractively than the Greeks. Angress argues that the killing of Achilles does not imply condemnation of the Amazon state itself, since Penthesilea actually disobeys its laws and the killing horrifies the Amazons.¹³ Angress's approach to the play has found limited acceptance, however, and several critics remain doubtful of the emancipatory potential of the Amazon state.¹⁴ More recently, Helga Gallas and Renée Schell have demonstrated how, in different ways, Penthesilea's subjectivity is influenced by Greek models of heroism and femininity.¹⁵ A number of critics have given greater historical specificity to Kleist's portrayal of gender in the play by linking it to changing attitudes towards female emancipation in the era of the French Revolution, while others have argued that the play opens up a dialogue with the models of femininity outlined by Weimar Classicism.¹⁶

I would endorse this view of *Penthesilea* as an attack upon the enlightened humanism propagated in Weimar Classicism. Kleist's attack derives its power from the continuing hegemony of the classical ideal, rather than from the obsolescence of Weimar Classicism, as Walter Müller-Seidel contends.¹⁷ The ferocity of Kleist's epigrams is not a reaction to the critical responses to Goethe and Böttiger, but rather a reflection of the ferocity of his earlier assault. In my argument I build upon the arguments of Gallas and Schell to argue that

¹³ See Ruth Angress, 'Kleist's Nation of Amazons', in *Beyond the Eternal Feminine: Critical Essays on Women and German Literature*, ed. by Susan L. Cocalis and Kay Goodman (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1982), pp. 99–134.

¹⁴ See Sigrid Lange, 'Kleists *Penthesilea*', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 37 (1991), 705–22; Anthony Stephens, *Heinrich von Kleist* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 97–126. For a more positive, but not uncritical, view of the Amazon state, see Seán Allan, *The Plays of Heinrich von Kleist: Ideals and Illusions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 141–77.

¹⁵ See Helga Gallas, 'Antikenrezeption bei Goethe und Kleist: *Penthesilea* — eine Anti-Iphigenie?', in *Momentum dramaticum: Festschrift for Eckehard Catholy*, ed. by Linda Dietrick and David G. John (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1990), pp. 209–20; Renée M. Schell, 'The Amazon Body: Wartime Sexuality and Female Subjectivity in Kleist's *Penthesilea*', in *Conquering Women: Women and War in the German Cultural Imagination*, ed. by Hilary Collier Sy-Quia and Susanne Baackmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 126–42.

¹⁶ See *inter alia* Stephens's and Mommsen's monographs and the essays by Lange and Gallas cited above, Inge Stephan, '„Da werden Weiber zu Hyänen . . .“: Amazonen und Amazonenmythen bei Schiller und Kleist', in *Feministische Literaturwissenschaft: Dokumentation der Tagung in Hamburg vom Mai 1983*, ed. by Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel (Berlin: Argument-Verlag, 1984), pp. 22–42, and Dirk Grathoff, 'Liebe und Gewalt: Überlegungen zu Kleists *Penthesilea*', in Grathoff, *Kleist*, pp. 125–31. In his essay 'Goethe und Kleist' Grathoff argues that Kleist misread Goethe, but contends in any case that, *pace* Mommsen, Kleist's engagement with Schiller was of much greater significance than his relationship with Goethe (p. 211).

¹⁷ See further Walter Müller-Seidel, '*Penthesilea* im Kontext der deutschen Klassik', in *Kleists Dramen: Neue Interpretationen*, ed. by Walter Hinderer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), pp. 144–71 (pp. 163–64).

the Greeks' self-image as humane, rational, enlightened beings is subjected to critical scrutiny in the play. Kleist shows how hegemonic male attitudes to women played a key role in the founding of the Amazon state; but I would argue that scholars have not recognized sufficiently the extent to which the Greeks' views continue to influence Penthesilea's behaviour and that Achilles therefore bears some responsibility for the tragic denouement of the action. Both the Greek and Amazon societies are flawed, but the brunt of criticism is directed at the Greeks. This becomes apparent if we consider the elements of double-edged comedy within the play, which seem initially to be directed at the freakish Amazons, but whose real target turns out to be the complacent Greeks.¹⁸ In this reading, what Böttiger diagnosed as the crude spectacle of Kleist's dramaturgy and Penthesilea's stylized suicide are revealed to be integral elements of Kleist's critique of Enlightenment and Weimar Classicism, rather than cheap effects.¹⁹ This, surely, is the implication of the epigram 'Komödienzettel'. Thus I argue that Kleist's discourses on gender and Enlightenment and his dramatic practice are inextricably linked.

This is not to suggest that we should read *Penthesilea* as a comedy: Kleist undoubtedly thought of the play as a tragedy, and his letters show that he hoped that it would move the public to tears rather than to laughter.²⁰ Indeed, he famously remarked to his cousin Marie von Kleist that 'mein innerstes Wesen liegt darin, und Sie haben es wie eine Seherin aufgefaßt: der ganze Schmutz zugleich und Glanz meiner Seele' (DKV, IV, 397–98).²¹ Yet Kleist was no stranger to hybridizing genres. *Amphitryon* and *Der zerbrochne Krug* both carry the designation *Lustspiel*, but both plays explore the tragic potential of their action quite extensively, and in the former case it is debatable whether the designation of tragedy might not have been more appropriate. Nor do Kleist's tragedies en-

¹⁸ To my knowledge, only Ruth Angress has identified comic elements in the portrayal of the Greeks, but this line of enquiry remains somewhat underdeveloped in her study. See Angress, 'Kleist's Nation', pp. 119–22.

¹⁹ For more on how Kleist's works cite and parody key scenes, turns of phrase, and even formal characteristics of works by Lessing and Schiller, see Ruth K. Angress, 'Kleists Abkehr von der Aufklärung', *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (1987), 98–114. Angress portrays Kleist as 'der verlorene Sohn der Aufklärung, der nicht wiederkam ins Vaterhaus' (p. 114); his works critique enlightened concepts without delivering a *Weltanschauung* of their own.

²⁰ In a letter to Marie von Kleist, Kleist describes the reaction of private audiences in Dresden to the play: 'Es ist hier schon zweimal in Gesellschaft [*sic*] vorgelesen worden, und es sind Thränen geflossen; soviel als das Entsetzen, das unvermeidlich dabei war zuließ' (DKV, IV, 396). Kleist drew further attention to the lachrymosity that the play induced when he went on to describe the moment when he told Ernst von Pfuel, with whom he was sharing quarters, of the death of Penthesilea. Kleist claimed that Pfuel wept at the news (DKV, IV, 396), whereas Pfuel reportedly asserted that it was Kleist himself who was distraught (*Lebensspuren*, p. 171). Kleist sent Marie an excerpt from the close of the play, and he expressed satisfaction that it had moved her to tears (DKV, IV, 397).

²¹ Helmut Sembdner's reading of the word 'Schmutz', rather than 'Schmerz' in this quotation has been the subject of some controversy. The editors of the Deutscher Klassiker Verlag edition of Kleist's works endorse Sembdner's reading, which seems to have brought a—possibly definitive—end to the debate. For a brief account of the controversy, see DKV, IV, 908–09.

tirely exclude the possibility of laughter. Indeed, Heinrich Zschokke reported that it proved difficult to complete a reading of the final act of Kleist's first play, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, since the entire company, including Kleist himself, were so hopelessly overcome with laughter (*Lebensspuren*, p. 63). Kleist's works invite—and even demand—such unexpected responses.

The complexity of Kleist's works is in some measure a response to the rapidly shifting political and intellectual climate in which he lived. Inge Stephan notes that the late eighteenth century was increasingly hostile to female emancipation. Stephan identifies a rejection of the 'gelehrte Frau', which represented an ideal figure for the early Enlightenment, which was progressively replaced by 'einen neuen Typus, den der empfindsamen, tugendhaften Frau' (Stephan, p. 25). The French Revolution saw an upsurge in public activism by women, which took the form of protests, such as the famous march on Versailles of 5 October 1789, which made Louis XVI again the prisoner of Paris. Women fought for the Revolution, and continued to do so even after their participation in war was outlawed in 1793.²² The Revolution also fuelled demands for female equality, as evidenced, for example, in Olympe de Gouges's *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* (1791), which demanded the extension of legal equality to women. De Gouges's execution in 1793 shows that the call for gender equality was, in fact, perceived as a threat to the Revolution, rather than as a logical extension of it.

Stephan shows how texts by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Fichte, Hegel, and Schiller can be read as a defensive reaction to the growth of female emancipation. Fichte, for example, argued in his *Grundlagen des Naturrechts* (1796–97) that women were inferior to men, and that a married woman's existence could not be conducted independently of her husband (Stephan, p. 31). Anthony Stephens has pointed out that Kleist undoubtedly knew Fichte's work and almost quotes from it in his letter to his fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge of 30 May 1800 (Stephens, p. 21). In these early letters to Wilhelmine, Kleist assumes a strongly conservative position on women's roles:

Deine Bestimmung, liebe Freundinn, oder überhaupt die Bestimmung des Weibes ist wohl unzweifelhaft u unverkennbar; denn welche andere kann es sein, als diese, *Mutter zu werden, u der Erde tugendhafte Menschen zu erziehen?*

Und wohl Euch, daß eure Bestimmung so einfach u beschränkt ist! Durch Euch will die Natur nur ihre Zwecke erreichen, durch uns Männer auch der Staat noch die seinigen, und daraus entwickeln sich oft die unseeligsten Widersprüche. (DKV, IV, 130)

This insistence on the naturally given, distinctive roles of the sexes is typical of Kleist's thinking on gender around 1800. Here he distinguishes between

²² A useful overview of research on women's participation in the Revolution is provided in Elisabeth Krimmer, *In the Company of Men: Cross-Dressed Women around 1800* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), pp. 37–41.

the simple destiny of women to become mothers, and the dual demands on men from nature and the state. In *Penthesilea* Kleist was to envisage a radically different scenario, in which his female protagonist not only had duties to the state, but herself functioned as its figurehead.

Kleist's early prescriptiveness on gender was shown with even greater clarity in his comments to and about his sister Ulrike. She is known to have cross-dressed in order to attend lectures and to travel freely.²³ In a poem written for his sister to mark the New Year of 1800, Kleist deploys the figure of an amphibian (albeit a biologically incorrect one) to express his unease at her cross-dressing:

Amphibion du, das in zwei Elementen stets lebet,
 Schwanke nicht länger und wähle dir endlich ein sichres Geschlecht.
 Schwimmen und fliegen geht nicht zugleich, drum verlasse das Wasser,
 Versuch es einmal in der Luft, schüttele die Schwingen und fleuch!
 (DKV, III, 406)

To be sure, in his letter of May 1799 Kleist did acknowledge how valuable Ulrike's friendship was to him intellectually and socially (DKV, IV, 36). Yet he also expounded the importance of having a *Lebensplan*, and while he claimed explicitly that he did not wish to exercise 'einen Einfluß auf die Annahme eines bestimmten Lebensplanes', he castigated Ulrike for having decided not to marry. Kleist argued that becoming a wife and mother represented her 'höchste Bestimmung', and its rejection would represent a 'höchst strafbaren u verbrecherischen Entschluß', leading to great unhappiness in later life (DKV, IV, 41–42).

This dissatisfaction with Ulrike's failure to embody an ideal of femininity was no passing gripe. Kleist returned to the theme more than two years later in a letter to Adolphine von Werdeck. He described how he and Ulrike had travelled together through the Rhineland, but claimed that Ulrike's aberrant gender behaviour was an impediment to his happiness:

Ich wäre auf dieser Rheinreise sehr glücklich gewesen, wenn — wenn — Ach, gnädigste Frau, es giebt wohl nichts Großes in der Welt, wozu Ulrike nicht fähig wäre, ein edles, weises, großmüthiges Mädchen, eine Heldenseele in einem Weiberkörper, u ich müßte von Allem diesen nichts sein, wenn ich das nicht innig fühlen wollte. (DKV, IV, 253)

Kleist's remarks centre on the supposed contradiction between Ulrike's gender and her conduct and character. He goes on to relate several examples of her behaviour:

Auf einer Fußreise in dem schlesischen Gebirge aß u trank sie nicht vor Ermüdung, ward bei dem Sonnenaufgang auf der Riesenkoppe ohnmächtig, u antwortete doch

²³ See Kleist's letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge of 3 June 1801 (DKV, IV, 228–33 (p. 231)).

immer, so oft man sie fragte, sie befinde sich wohl. Vor Töplitz fuhren wir mit einem andern beladenen Wagen so zusammen, daß wir weder vor- noch rückwärts konnten, weil auf der andern Seite ein Zaun war. Der Zaun, rief sie, muß abgetragen werden — Es gab wirklich kein anderes Mittel, u der Vorschlag war eines Mannes würdig. Sie aber gieng weiter, und legte, ihr Geschlecht vergessend, die schwache Hand an den Balken, der sich nicht rührte — Mitten in einer großen Gefahr auf einem See bei Fürstenwalde, wo die ganze Familie im Nachen dem Sturme ausgesetzt war, u Alles weinte u schrie, und selbst die Männer die Besinnung verloren, sagte sie: kommen wir doch in die Zeitungen — Mit Kälte u Besonnenheit geht sie jeder Gefahr entgegen, erscheint aber unvermuthet ein Hund oder ein Stier, so zittert sie an allen Gliedern — Wo ein Anderer überlegt, da entschließt sie sich, u wo er spricht, da handelt sie. Als wir auf der Ostsee zwischen Rügen u dem festen Lande im Sturme auf einem Bote mit Pferden u Wagen dem Untergange nahe waren, u der Schiffer schnell das Steuer verließ, die Segel zu fallen, sprang sie an seinen Platz u hielt das Ruder — Unerschütterte Ruhe scheint ihr das glücklichste Loos auf Erden. Von *Bahrdten* hörte sie einst, er habe den Tod seiner geliebten Tochter am Spieltische erfahren, ohne aufzustehen. Der Mann schien ihr beneidens- und nachahmungswürdig. [. . .] Einst sagte sie, sie könne nicht begreifen, wie üppige Gedichte, oder Mahlereien reizen könnten — ? (DKV, IV, 253–54)

Kleist's objections to Ulrike's behaviour take several forms: her failure to recognize and admit to her physical weakness; her tendency towards unladylike behaviour, especially in getting involved in physical labour or positions of leadership; and the failure to give the correct emotional response in various situations (danger, grief, art). Kleist sees in Ulrike's conduct an imperfect, but none the less heroic attempt at the performance of masculinity, characterized by 'der Widerstreit zwischen Wille u Kraft' (DKV, IV, 253). He shows a particularly acute interest in the moments where the performance is not sustained, such as in situations of great physical exertion or sudden danger, as when she is confronted unexpectedly with animals. Kleist shows an awareness of the comic potential of such moments; here he exaggerates the comedy by counterpointing Ulrike's usual boldness with her sudden quivering.

I would propose that the vehemence with which Kleist argues that gendered behaviour forms part of a rational *Lebensplan* itself suggests a certain defensiveness about the tenability of such a rationally planned existence, a notion which he later abandoned and ironized in his work. *Das Erdbeben in Chili*, for instance, can be read as a demonstration of the impossibility of pursuing a rationally planned existence in an unpredictable world. Indeed, Anthony Stephens has noted how Kleist's mature works often shed an ironic light on positions he had previously espoused.²⁴

Kleist's letters provide evidence that his stance on gender gained in complexity in later years. His letter of January 1805 to Ernst von Pfuel is remarkable

²⁴ In a different context, Stephens remarks on 'Kleist's proclivity for quoting in his poetic works views he had espoused prior to 1801, but almost always in a context that should alienate them from the audience or reader' (Stephens, p. 22).

for its blending of concepts of friendship and physical love. The question of whether the letter provides incontrovertible evidence of Kleist's homosexuality is a complicated one, not least because, as Joachim Pfeiffer has shown, the letter is heavily stylized and employs numerous literary and historical allusions.²⁵ However, the letter provides fascinating evidence of the process by which Kleist rethought the gendering of behaviour:

Ich habe deinen schönen Leib oft, wenn du in Thun vor meinen Augen in den See stiegst, mit wahrhaft *mädchenhaften* Gefühlen betrachtet. [. . .] Ich heirathe niemals, sei [du] die Frau mir, die Kinder, und die Enkel! (DKV, IV, 336–37)

What is significant for the present discussion is the new flexibility with which Kleist now assigns gender roles. In urging Pful to give up his idea of returning to the Prussian army, Kleist sets out the prospect of founding an alternative family. In the letter he first ascribes female desires to himself, then later urges Pful to take on the role of his wife. To be sure, heterosexual gender relations remain the framework within which Kleist's rethinking takes place, but there is now a decided playfulness in evidence in his discussion of gender roles.

Despite this evidence of a shift in Kleist's attitude to gender, it seems to me that—with the exception of its gruesome conclusion—*Penthesilea* offers some scope for those who wish to read it as a misogynistic comedy. From the first, the Greeks view Penthesilea as a madwoman, and in view of the almost schizophrenic variability of her temperament and her tendency towards dislocation from reality, some readers might agree. In Scene Nine the queen stares intently at the sun, which she identifies with Achilles, and fantasizes about dragging it down to earth (ll. 1337–86). In Scene Twenty the action borders upon the downright farcical, as Penthesilea aims her bow at her fellow Amazons, prompting Prothoe to take cover and an Amazon priestess to dash for safety behind the queen (ll. 2440–42). To be sure, it is difficult to sustain this comic reading beyond Scene Twenty-Two, but there is, none the less, a certain comic tone in earlier scenes.

If the play does not endorse this misogynistic laughter, why does it offer some scope for such a reading? Bianca Theisen argues that one of Kleist's literary techniques is to confront readers with 'Leerstellen' that they are required to bridge with their own assumptions: 'Vervollständigen sie [Kleists Leser] die trügerischen Urteile, supplementieren sie die über Leerstellen organisierten Schlußprozesse, werden ihre Urteile und Schlüsse an sich selbst gespiegelt und immer wieder nur auf sich selbst zurückgeführt. [. . .] Kleists Leser lesen, wie

²⁵ See Joachim Pfeiffer, 'Friendship and Gender: The Aesthetic Construction of Subjectivity in Kleist', trans. by Robert Tobin, in *Outing Goethe and his Age*, ed. by Alice Kuzniar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 215–27.

sie lesen.²⁶ While at its extreme conclusion Theisen's argument suggests the uninterpretability of Kleist's works, it does help to explain why Kleist's texts seem to yield multiple meanings, in that they encourage lines of interpretation as a means of simultaneously undermining them.

It seems to me that in *Penthesilea* Kleist invites his readers to approach the question of female emancipation from a decidedly misogynist perspective, namely that of the Greek warriors, but that this perspective is placed in an ironic light. The Greeks kings do not take the Amazons seriously. Odysseus relates how they attempted to broker an alliance with Penthesilea, but she turned bright red at the sight of Achilles, and remarked to her friend that her mother never met a man such as him. Odysseus' and Achilles' response is telling: 'wir sehn uns lächelnd an' (l. 92). Odysseus proceeds to describe how Penthesilea rebuffed them, and how, in the following Amazon onslaught, Greeks and Trojans were forced to unite against the common enemy, almost forgetting the rape of Helen (ll. 133–38). A similar attitude manifests itself in the report by a Greek captain in the second scene. The captain relates how Achilles became trapped on a rocky promontory and Penthesilea tried to find a way of reaching him, resisting all attempts by her women to hold her back and suffering a fall in the process. In this episode, Penthesilea is variously described as 'gleich einer Rasenden' (l. 306), 'wie beraubt des Urteils' (l. 314), 'die Hyäne, die blind-wütende' (l. 331), and as 'die sinnberaubte' (l. 342). In the third scene, however, derision again gives way to concern, as Kleist masterfully renders Penthesilea's pursuit of Achilles using *teichoskopia*. The Greeks' arrogance is comically deflated as Penthesilea draws closer to Achilles, prompting one Greek soldier to remark:

Bei allen hohen Göttern, die uns schützen!
 Sie wächst zu seiner Größe schon heran!
 (ll. 409–10)

The Greeks betray astonishment at the possibility of a woman fighter matching Achilles' heroic greatness. Yet when Penthesilea later stumbles, Diomedes attributes the event not to good fortune, but to Achilles' superior mental faculties, which he suggests may have enabled him to plan the course of the pursuit (ll. 511–19).

The Greeks' attitude towards the Amazons is conditioned by their sense of intellectual sovereignty, but the Amazons are hard to assimilate to their pre-existing view of the world. Antilochus's initial question—'Was wollen diese Amazonen uns?' (l. 13)—proves to be difficult to answer, since the Amazons attack both Greeks and Trojans. As Odysseus remarks:

²⁶ See Bianca Theisen, *Bogenschuß: Kleists Formalisierung des Lesens* (Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach, 1996), p. 11.

So viel ich weiß, gibt es in der Natur
 Kraft bloß und ihren Widerstand, nichts Drittes.
 (ll. 125–26)

The Greek world-view appears to be based upon a simple dichotomy, of action and reaction, friend and foe. The Amazons undermine this totalizing world-view, not only by forcing the Greeks and Trojans to make common cause on the battlefield, but by practising an entirely different model of warfare, not as a means to territorial or material gain, but rather to achieve reproduction; they only intend to capture the Greeks temporarily. The play can be seen as a celebration of the sheer dynamism of the Amazons, which demonstrates the power of channelling sexual desire into combat.

Achilles himself never takes the Amazons seriously as warriors, and this arrogance proves to be his downfall. Even when an Amazon warrior is pointing a bow and arrow at him, he still believes that they are incapable of allowing him to be harmed (ll. 1428–37). Even after Penthesilea's narrative concerning the origins and conventions of the Amazon state, Achilles continues to believe that her need to triumph militarily before she can allow herself to love him is 'eine Grille, die ihr heilig' (l. 2460). Even when he learns that Penthesilea is accompanied by dogs and elephants, he continues to believe that they are 'zahm, wie sie' (l. 2548). In this sense, then, Achilles' death results from this patronizing attitude to the Amazons, for it leads him to place himself in danger by failing to defend himself in the final encounter.

Achilles views Penthesilea's belligerence as a performance of masculinity that hides the feminine essence of her character. In this sense, his attitude recalls Kleist's portrayal of Ulrike, which viewed her conduct as a performance of masculine heroism that hid an underlying vulnerability. As we saw previously, Achilles' perception of a mismatch between Penthesilea's behaviour and her gender has often been accepted by critics as a key to the play. Yet as Elisabeth Krimmer notes, 'any interpretation of *Penthesilea* that relies on stable gender categories is subverted by the fact that in Kleist's drama gender metaphors run wild'.²⁷ Moreover, the play does not suggest that the military prowess of the Amazons is inferior to that of the Greeks (see Angress, 'Kleist's Nation', pp. 115–16). Indeed, as we shall see, Penthesilea's act of barbarism is paralleled, and indeed influenced by, Achilles' supposedly heroic behaviour.

Achilles' death is not the only means by which the play criticizes the Greek mindset. *Penthesilea* also explores the consequences of male hegemony for the structure of the Amazon state. Achilles and Penthesilea talk to each other only once during the play, during the lengthy fifteenth scene. Here Achilles asks

²⁷ See Elisabeth Krimmer, 'The Gender of Terror: War as (Im)Moral Institution in Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* and *Penthesilea*', *German Quarterly*, 81 (2008), 66–85 (p. 78). See also Ruth Klüger, 'Die andere Hündin: Käthchen', *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (1993), 103–15, especially p. 113.

Penthesilea why the Amazons have intervened in this conflict. She explains why she is not permitted to seduce a man in the conventional manner, but must rather find a mate on the battlefield (ll. 1887–1901).²⁸ This elicits a typically uncomprehending response from Achilles:

Und woher quillt, von wannen ein Gesetz,
Unweiblich, du vergibst mir, unnatürlich,
Dem übrigen Geschlecht der Menschen fremd?
(ll. 1902–4)

Just as Odysseus had earlier claimed to define the boundaries of the natural, here Achilles claims the power to define what is appropriate in terms of gender, nature, and even humanity. Penthesilea's initial response to this remark is again evasive: she claims that the origins of the state lie in the distant, mythical past and its structures are now unchallengeable, having been determined by 'der ersten Mütter Wort' (l. 1909). Only after further probing by Achilles does Penthesilea reveal the real origins of the state, which lie in the experience of invasion by Ethiopian armies, which was followed by the killing of the men, the rape of the women, and finally an uprising by the women, who killed the invaders in their beds. The women eschew domesticity, and determine the establishment of a new state:

Ein Frauenstaat, den fürder keine andre
Herrsücht'ge Männerstimme mehr durchtrotzt,
Der das Gesetz sich würdig selber gebe,
Sich selbst gehorche, selber auch beschütze:
Und Tanaïs sei seine Königin.

(ll. 1958–62)

However, as Renée Schell has pointed out, this apparent self-confidence, which is rooted in the women's successful campaign of liberation, is vitiated by an anonymous voice that makes itself heard at the coronation ceremony (Schell, pp. 127–29). The voice claims that the women's state is destined for mockery and defeat, since their breasts will prevent them from developing the full power of their bows. Penthesilea describes how Tanaïs countered the 'feige Regung' (l. 1985) that swept through the people by tearing off her right breast, an action that also gave the women their name: 'Die Amazonen oder Busenlosen!' (l. 1989).

Penthesilea's narrative shows how the origins of the *Frauenstaat* are inextricably linked with a certain defensiveness towards men—even though at this point Penthesilea believes that she has vanquished Achilles. This defensiveness

²⁸ Hilda Brown has pointed out that the strongly lyrical tone of Penthesilea's words here demonstrates the extent to which Penthesilea is attracted to a more conventional mode of living. See Brown, 'Penthesilea: Nightingale and Amazon', *Oxford German Studies*, 7 (1973), 24–33 (pp. 31–32).

is further exemplified in Penthesilea's reluctance to answer Achilles' questions. At the same time, Achilles' reaction to Penthesilea's account illustrates why she reacts thus. At first, he shows fascination and understanding of the women's rebellion, which gives way to a flippant expression of admiration for Tanaïs:

Nun denn, beim Zevs, die brauchte keine Brüste!
Die hätt' ein Männervolk beherrschen können,
Und meine ganze Seele beugt sich ihr.
(ll. 1991–93)

The assumption underlying this remark is, of course, that women can normally dominate men only with their beauty, rather than with their military prowess. Achilles' reaction turns towards astonishment and horror as he learns that the practice of removing the breast is continued in modern times, for what he considers a delusion ('Wahn', l. 2014).

The play demonstrates that male violence towards women precipitated the establishment of the Amazon state, and that the women continue to suffer mockery and the threat of male violence. Achilles horrifies Prothoe by telling her that he intends to treat Penthesilea as he treated Hector (ll. 1513–19). To my mind this is the clearest evidence that the Amazon state is not an obsolete institution.²⁹

Critical assessments of the Amazon state vary widely. One critic sees it as marked by 'vampirism', a reference to how the state 'feeds on' male victims periodically in order to make the women pregnant (Schell, pp. 36–37). The radical separatism of the Amazons entails consequences—including the capturing of male warriors for sex (ll. 2033–87) and the slaughter of male babies (ll. 1965–67)—that many readers find problematic.³⁰ However, I would argue that the emphasis of the play lies elsewhere, namely on the reasons for the establishment of this state. Moreover, the play illustrates elsewhere that the state shows considerable ethical concern, for example in the solicitude with which the Greek prisoners are treated (ll. 964–86). To this extent, it compares favourably with the violent excesses of the Greek warriors.

Other critics have argued that the Amazon state fails to achieve true eman-

²⁹ On this issue, I disagree with Hilda Brown's view that the state is 'woefully inadequate and out of date' now that it is dealing with 'civilized races, such as the Greeks' and should have adapted after repelling the 'threats from barbarian oppressors'. See H. M. Brown, *Kleist and the Tragic Ideal: A Study of 'Penthesilea' and its Relationship to Kleist's Personal and Literary Development, 1806–1808* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977), p. 73. Indeed, Kleist makes a significant revision of the manuscript of *Penthesilea* in referring to the Scythians: the early version terms them 'ein kriegerischer Scythenstamm' (DKV, II, 68), whereas the corresponding line of the *Erstdruck* reads 'Ein Stamm der Scythen, frei und kriegerisch' (l. 1915), thereby further emphasizing the critical connection between a people's autonomy and the warlike spirit which many critics deplore in the Amazons.

³⁰ For an exploration of Kleist's reticence in making moral judgements, see Angress, 'Kleists Abkehr', pp. 109–14.

icipation, and indeed that the new state actually replicates what it has replaced. Sigrid Lange sees a connection here to post-Revolutionary France:

[. . .] unverkennbar trägt [Kleists] Amazonenstaat Züge dieses von Gewaltherrschaft befreiten, auf gemeinschaftlicher Selbstbestimmung beruhenden Ideals, unverkennbar aber auch hat dessen fiktive Realität Natur und Freiheit nicht zur Synthese gebracht. An die Stelle der Gewalt von außen ist die innere Gewalt totalitärer Selbstdisziplin getreten.³¹

This reading is interesting, but it is not altogether convincing. While the demands on Penthesilea are considerable, the Greeks also make similar demands on Achilles, calling upon him to abandon his obsession with Penthesilea and to return to his military duty. Indeed, while Kleist's letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, quoted above, demonstrates his acute sense of how the state places burdens upon the individual, his nationalist writings after 1808—and particularly *Die Herrmannsschlacht*—argue that the collective must take precedence over the individual.

Although the Amazon state undoubtedly makes great demands of its members, it is unclear whether Kleist regards these demands as excessive. As Ruth Angress argues, 'Kleist's mythological nation of women [. . .] demands an unusual degree of conformity, but every community demands more conformity than the Kleistian individual is willing to give' ('Kleist's Nation', p. 111). Moreover, Lange's view does not take account of the differences between Penthesilea and Achilles. Whereas Achilles has scant regard for Greek military goals and even contemplates the prospect of Troy sinking beneath the waters with amused detachment (ll. 2518–26), Penthesilea shows great commitment to her community and its aims. She is not simply coerced into her military role by the conventions and demands of her state.³² She explains that after the death of her mother she was initially reluctant to assume the duties of state, but that her attitude changed as she approached the battlefield:

In dem Maße,
Als ich mich dem Skamandros näherte,
Und alle Täler rings, die ich durchrauschte,
Von dem Trojanerstreite widerhallten,
Schwand mir der Schmerz, und meiner Seele ging
Die große Welt des heitern Krieges auf.
(ll. 2172–77)

Penthesilea's excitement at the world of war is closely allied to her ambition. The Amazon women all feel great excitement at fighting the Greeks, but Penthesilea

³¹ Lange, 'Kleists *Penthesilea*', p. 708. For similar readings, see Stephens, p. 121; Yixu Lü, *Frauenherrschaft im Drama des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: iudicium, 1993), pp. 148–203.

³² By contrast, many critics regard Penthesilea's relations with the Amazon state as entirely involuntary. See e.g. Durzak, pp. 354–70.

is particularly attracted to Achilles, both for his military prowess and for his brutality (ll. 2178–2202). Achilles is also a representative of the highest human achievement, and to that extent not only an object of desire, but also a symbol. Indeed, he is closely identified with the sun-god Helios in the course of the play, and Penthesilea's desires even transcend the earthly, as she imagines storming the heavens and dragging the god Helios down to her (ll. 1383–85).

Penthesilea was originally loath to succeed her mother as Amazon queen. Yet despite the tensions between her wishes and her duty she embraces her new role and finds a previously unsuspected enthusiasm for war within herself. However, the state's expectations are only one form of pressure on Penthesilea. Her dying mother also urged her to seek out and vanquish Achilles, which brings her into conflict with the letter of Amazon law. But the pressures on Penthesilea also include the dismissive attitude of men towards female autonomy, which, as we saw, played a role in the very inception of the state. Moreover, her own erotic desire for Achilles cannot be repressed indefinitely; it prevents her overcoming him, but it also draws her to him. When she receives Achilles' final challenge, Penthesilea believes that Achilles intends to kill her (ll. 2384–87), but she also intends to recapture the prisoners who were lost due to her previous misadventure (l. 2397). Her final act of barbarism is the outcome of all of these countervailing pressures, an act of expiation, but also a form of revenge.

I would therefore argue that in *Penthesilea* Kleist is not demonstrating the incompatibility of femininity and heroism, or of women and public roles. Rather, the play is a demonstration of the multifarious pressures placed upon an individual by society. The tensions within Penthesilea's character—her need both to vanquish and to love Achilles, her commitment to the Amazon state and her contravention of its laws, her lust for life and her nihilistic despair—are all aspects of the pressures generated by these social roles, the 'unseeligsten Widersprüche' that Kleist had formerly argued were a fundamental part of men's experience. Penthesilea's position between social roles is mirrored in Achilles' situation within the Greek state, but Achilles shows a greater ability to choose between his roles as lover and warrior, and even ridicules the Greek *casus belli* (ll. 2518–26). For Penthesilea, such a choice proves impossible. Her atrocity against Achilles is intended to make good her previous transgressions of Amazon law and to mark her overcoming of her sense of inferiority to Achilles. Yet it is a tragic paradox that neither intention is fulfilled: the Amazons are horrified at her contravention of their ethical code, and to vanquish an unarmed man is really no accomplishment at all.

For some critics, Penthesilea's atrocity represents a warning concerning the growing demands for female emancipation in the wake of the French Revolution. Inge Stephan sees in the play an intertextual reference to Schiller's 'Das

Lied von der Glocke', with its warning about the implications for bourgeois culture of the Revolution:

Freiheit und Gleichheit! hört man schallen,
 Der ruh'ge Bürger greift zur Wehr,
 Die Straßen füllen sich, die Hallen,
 Und Würgerbanden ziehn umher,
 Da werden Weiber zu Hyänen
 Und treiben mit Entsetzen Scherz,
 Noch zuckend, mit des Panthers Zähnen,
 Zerreißen sie des Feindes Herz.³³

Stephan argues that *Penthesilea* replays this scenario, but in doing so scratches away the harmonizing veneer on idealist gender discourses, and exposes the underlying 'Wille zur Macht'. However, Stephan ultimately sees Kleist's response to *Penthesilea* as an ambivalent one, where sympathy and open rejection are closely entangled.³⁴

As we saw previously, it is possible to see Achilles' death as the outcome of his failure to take seriously the idea of women as warriors. Yet *Penthesilea*'s desecration of Achilles also serves to illuminate the obverse side of the rational, civilized culture of ancient Greece that Winckelmann had portrayed. *Penthesilea* explains that in approaching the battlefield, she imagined all the great moments of history in her head, but concluded that Achilles' heroism was extraordinary:

Den Lieben, Wilden, Süßen, Schrecklichen,
 Den Überwinder Hektors!

(ll. 2185–86)

She shows particular fascination with Achilles' treatment of Hector (ll. 2194–2202), which she replicates in desecrating Achilles' body.³⁵ By placing these two events in parallel, and by enacting a specific instance of imitating Greek models—as prescribed by Winckelmann to the artist—Kleist foregrounds the dark side of antiquity.

Critics have often detected a dialogue between *Penthesilea* and Weimar Classicism, and particularly Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*.³⁶ In Goethe's play Iphige-

³³ See *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, ed. by Julius Petersen and others, 43 vols (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1943–), II/1 (1983), ed. by Norbert Oellers, p. 237.

³⁴ See Stephan, pp. 39–40. Christa Wolf points to a similar ambivalence in her essay 'Kleist's *Penthesilea*', in Christa Wolf and Gerhard Wolf, *Ins Ungebundene geht eine Sehnsucht: Gesprächsraum Romantik* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1985), pp. 195–210.

³⁵ As Ruth Angress rightly argues: '[*Penthesilea*'s] admiration will eventually turn to imitation with himself as victim' ('Kleist's Nation', p. 104). Helga Gallas argues similarly: 'Sie will ihn [Achilles] nicht haben, sie will sein wie er' (Gallas, p. 215).

³⁶ See e.g. Gallas; and Catherine E. Rigby, *Transgressions of the Feminine: Tragedy, Enlightenment and the Figure of Woman in Classical German Drama* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996), pp. 150–71.

nie's honesty and capacity for dialogue win the day, and tragedy is averted. For Helga Gallas, the key difference between the plays concerns human autonomy:

Iphigenies Diskurs ist ein didaktischer, erziehender, er nährt die Illusion von der Autonomie des menschlichen Subjekts. Penthesileas Diskurs belehrt nicht, er verunsichert, er fordert heraus, und er macht die Gespaltenheit des menschlichen Subjekts sichtbar. (Gallas, p. 128)

Gallas notes the power of Amazon laws and of Otrere's dying words in vitiating Penthesilea's autonomy, but I have argued that the sovereign rationality of conquering men also plays a continuing role in the tragedy. By dividing the world into rational and irrational, natural and unnatural, masculine and feminine, the Greeks perpetuate the prescriptiveness of the anonymous voice at the founding of the Amazon state. Yet the play also demonstrates that the Greeks' supposed rationality is underlain with irrationality and brutality. Superstition is a prominent feature of the Greeks' world-view, as shown when the captain wrongly reports Achilles' capture (ll. 242–43); his reason for lamenting the event is not so much concern for Achilles, but the belief—perhaps following Calchas' prophecy—that Troy would not fall without Achilles' participation in the siege (see Allan, p. 147). Achilles himself exposes the absurdity of the Greek *casus belli* (ll. 2518–26), and attacks his fellow Greeks' reverent attachment to their cause, calling Greece 'den alten, meerzerfressnen Isthmus' (l. 2477). The Greeks' not-so-latent brutality is demonstrated in Achilles' attitude towards Penthesilea, which often mixes desire and aggression, and which differs little from his treatment of Hector. As he tells his fellow Greeks he will not return to Troy:

Als bis ich sie zu meiner Braut gemacht,
Und sie, die Stirn bekränzt mit Todeswunden,
Kann durch die Straßen häuptlings mit mir schleifen.
(ll. 613–15)

There is an explicit parallel to this remark at the end of the play, when Penthesilea sees Achilles' disfigured body for the first time, and remarks: 'Ach, dieser Kranz von Wunden um sein Haupt!' (l. 2908). This repetition suggests that there is little substantial difference between Penthesilea's and Achilles' behaviour.

Kleist also interrogates Greek civilization by scrutinizing the Greeks' use of language as the vehicle of reason. They speak of using their 'rednerische Kunst' (ll. 227, 623) to bring Achilles back to rational behaviour, but in both instances they discuss the use of force in case of need (ll. 229–37, 624). Odysseus' self-important prolixity is comically undercut in the first scene, as his lengthy account of recent events leads Antilochus to remark that he is repeating himself word for word (l. 103). In fact, when Achilles confides to Diomedes his inten-

tion to allow Penthesilea to gain a victory over him, he reveals that the power of the 'Sittenrichter' Odysseus lies not in his words, but in his gestures:

Mir widersteht's, es macht mir Übelkeiten,
 Wenn ich den Zug um seine Lippe sehe.
 (ll. 2451–52)³⁷

As Michael Perraudin observes in a different context, Kleist's works suggest 'dass Sprache nicht primär ein Medium für den rationalen Austausch unvor-ingenommener Ideen und zum Erreichen der Wahrheit ist, sondern der fast willkürliche Inhalt eines einzigen Aspekts der irrationalen und unbewussten Machtkämpfe, die den Hauptteil des menschlichen Lebens ausmachen'.³⁸ Language also fails as a means of communication in the case of Achilles' challenge to Penthesilea. She fails to understand his messenger's words, and has to ask Prothoe to repeat it to her (l. 2375). More seriously, however, she cannot discern Achilles' intention, leading to the play's tragic conclusion. Within the Greek camp, too, even simple conversation can degenerate into monosyllabic exchanges (ll. 2511–14).

For Kleist, language proves to be a force of chaos. As Anthony Stephens has remarked, the characters' language anticipates—and perhaps even shapes—the action of the play. For example, the play is full of images of hunting well before Penthesilea joins with her pack of hounds.³⁹ Following her atrocity, Penthesilea initially attributes it to mis-speaking, a case of confusion between 'Küsse' and 'Bisse' in the moment of passion (ll. 2981–83). Yet then she claims that it is, in fact, others who are guilty of using language frivolously; she was deadly serious in saying that she could eat up her beloved out of love (ll. 2991–99). With this, Kleist acknowledges and celebrates the ability of words, not to control and determine the human subject, but to subvert established designations and meanings. Penthesilea's suicide, where language becomes the weapon by which she takes her own life, illustrates graphically the power of language over the life of the human subject.

For Dirk Grathoff, the intertextual reference in *Penthesilea* to Schiller's 'Das Lied von der Glocke' is not a sign that Kleist endorses Schiller's fear of the emancipated women of the French Revolution. Rather, Grathoff argues, in my view rightly, that Kleist's play is concerned to question Schiller's privileging

³⁷ In *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden*, Kleist speculates further on the power of subrational, non-verbal communication to change the course of world history: 'Vielleicht, daß es auf diese Art zuletzt das Zucken einer Oberlippe war, oder ein zweideutiges Spiel an der Manschette, was in Frankreich den Umsturz der Ordnung der Dinge bewirkte' (DKV, III, 537).

³⁸ Michael Perraudin, 'Zur Gestik und ihren Bedeutungen in Kleists Erzählungen', *German Life and Letters*, 61 (2008), 154–70 (p. 158).

³⁹ See Stephens, pp. 103–05. Compare also David Constantine's remarks on the 'thickening of the imagery' in the play, in his essay 'Näher haben wir das!', *Oxford German Studies*, 33 (2004), 21–35 (pp. 26–29).

of culture over nature. Kleist rather demonstrates the connection between the two, and undermines the superior position of culture by demonstrating the failure of language (Grathoff, pp. 129–31). More generally, however, we can interpret *Penthesilea* as a frontal attack on the values of enlightened rationalism that Kleist had previously espoused and on Weimar's classical humanism. Yet the play is not a celebration of irrationality for its own sake. Rather, in *Penthesilea* Kleist scrutinizes the rational, civilized society of the Greeks, and demonstrates not only its latently barbaric and irrational side, but also the bloody consequences of a discourse of the rational and the natural that makes claims to universal validity. Nor is the play a celebration of the *Frauenstaat* as such, for it is clearly a flawed institution, whose members regularly chafe against its laws and reinterpret them even while asserting their validity. The play is, however, a reflection on the implications of cultural diversity for the Enlightenment, a theme Kleist had begun to reflect on as early as 1801. As he wrote in a letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge on 15 August:

Man sage nicht, daß eine Stimme im Innern uns heimlich und deutlich anvertraue, was Recht sei. Dieselbe Stimme, die dem Christen zuruft, seinem Feind zu vergeben, ruft dem Seeländer zu, ihn zu braten u mit Andacht ißt er ihn auf— (DKV, IV, 261)

It is precisely the universal claims of enlightened discourse that are targeted in *Penthesilea*, a discourse that in Kleist's own early letters had been deployed not only to educate, but also to prescribe correctly gendered behaviour. In the play, laughter initially seems to support the universal claims of enlightenment, but then these claims become the target of laughter; and finally, they are torn apart by Penthesilea and her dogs.

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