Masturbation, Prostitution, Sodomy:

The Imagination and Non-Reproductive Sexuality in Goethe

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Two Goethe passages use the term “the third” in entirely opaque ways. The complete lack of commentary on these passages in Goethe editions indicates that others have been equally puzzled by them, and both highlights and masks their importance. For the most interesting passages in a work of literature are often the most apparently incomprehensible, those where we stumble, then perhaps hurry on to more agreeable passages that suit our need to reduce everything to simplicity. The passages occur in Goethe’s most important pronouncement on same-sex love, the “Skizzen zu einer Schilderung Winkelmanns*,*”Goethe’s own contribution to a hybrid book he edited, entitled *Winkelmann und sein Jahrhundert* (1805). Goethe’s *Skizzen* are one of the densest, most delightful, and most readable prose pieces he ever wrote. For the first time, Winckelmann’s “homosexuality” – an open secret among intellectuals of the time – was confronted directly in public. And what a confrontation it is! Far from condemning same-sex love like most of his contemporaries, indeed far from merely toleratingit, Goethe positively celebratesit. Goethe explains that the ancients possessed a totality of character – very much in Schiller’s sense in his *Ästhetische Briefe*[[1]](#endnote-1) – that we moderns lack, with our enslavement to specialization and fragmentation. And this totality *required* the ancients to experience “die Verbindungen menschlicher Wesen in ihrem ganzen Umfange,” which means that they had to cultivate that “Entzücken … das aus der Verbindung ähnlicher Naturen hervorspringt” (MA 6.2: 353). And in case we’re unclear what he means, he specifies “die Freundschaft unter Personen männlichen Geschlechts” – though with a nod at lesbians, too. In the section I have been quoting from, called “Freundschaft*,*”Goethe then makes an astonishing assertion:

Die leidenschaftliche Erfüllung liebevoller Pflichten, die Wonne der Unzertrennlichkeit, die Hingebung eines für den andern, die ausgesprochene Bestimmung für das ganze Leben, die notwendige Begleitung in den Tod setzen uns bei Verbindung zweier Jünglinge in Erstaunen, ja man fühlt sich beschämt, wenn uns Dichter, Geschichtschreiber, Philosophen, Redner, mit Fabeln, Ereignissen, Gefühlen, Gesinnungen solchen Inhaltes und Gehaltes überhäufen. (MA 6.2: 354)

Here Goethe uses descriptors of Christian marriage in his day to define the ideal relationship between two young male lovers in antiquity, and thus turns conventional morality of his day on its head. But then comes the passage with the usage of “dritten” that can cause us to stumble:

Zu einer Freundschaft dieser Art fühlte W. sich geboren, derselben nicht allein sich fähig, sondern auch im höchsten Grade bedürftig; er empfand sein eigenes Selbst nur unter der Form der Freundschaft, er erkannte sich nur unter dem Bilde des durch einen dritten zu vollendenden Ganzen. Frühe schon legte er dieser Idee einen vielleicht unwürdigen Gegenstand unter, er widmete sich ihm, für ihn zu leben und zu leiden, für denselben fand er selbst in seiner Armut Mittel reich zu sein, zu geben, aufzuopfern, ja er zweifelt nicht, sein Dasein, sein Leben zu verpfänden. Hier ist es, wo sich W. selbst mitten in Druck und Not, groß, reich, freigebig und glücklich fühlt, weil er dem etwas leisten kann, den er über alles liebt, ja dem er sogar, als höchste Aufopferung, Undankbarkeit zu verzeihen hat. (MA 6.2: 354)

Of course, we often talk of “third parties,” of a “third person,” usually meaning someone objective or impartial in a relationship between two other parties or persons. In this passage, though, one would expect instead “einen zweiten” or “einen anderen,” since there are only two people involved. The likelihood that Goethe is quite simply confused here is perhaps supported by the second usage of “dritt–” that can make us stumble even more seriously. In this passage, in the section “Katholizismus*,*” Goethe seeks to defend Winckelmann against vicious attacks because of his – clearly opportunistic – conversion to Catholicism in Dresden, a step that earned him a splendid papal appointment and the freedom to pursue his studies of ancient art in Rome. And Goethe describes the human instinct to demand consistency and loyalty.

Denn es bleibt freilich ein Jeder, der die Religion verändert, mit einer Art von Makel bespritzt, von der es unmöglich scheint, ihn zu reinigen. […] Ausdauern soll man, da, wo uns mehr das Geschick als die Wahl hingestellt. Bei einem Volke, einer Stadt, einem Fürsten, einem Freunde, einem Weibe festhalten, darauf alles beziehen, deshalb alles wirken, alles entbehren und dulden, das wird geschätzt; Abfall dagegen bleibt verhaßt, Wankelmut wird lächerlich. (MA 6.2: 357)

Note that Goethe manages to smuggle sexuality into the equation, indeed with the word “Freund” he refers back to the section “Freundschaft,” on same-sex love, and equates same-sex and opposite-sex love. And he also echoes the earlier description of male-male “marriage” and its valorization of “die Wonne der Unzertrennlichkeit … die ausgesprochene Bestimmung für das ganze Leben”. And yet here, Goethe treats such fidelity with obvious distance, even irony – and it is worth mentioning that his ridicule targets implicitly the very concept that later in life he championed, *Entsagung,* which of course has a clear sexual component. This passage leads into Goethe’s almost self-consciously frivolous defence of Winckelmann’s religious inconstancy, and here we find the other odd use of “dritt-”:

War dieser nun die eine schroffe, sehr ernste Seite, so läßt sich die Sache auch von einer andern ansehn, von der man sie heiterer und leichter nehmen kann. Gewisse Zustände des Menschen, die wir keinesweges billigen, gewisse sittliche Flecken an dritten Personen haben für unsre Phantasie einen besondern Reiz. Will man uns ein Gleichnis erlauben, so möchten wir sagen, es ist damit, wie mit dem Wildbret, das dem feinen Gaumen mit einer kleinen Andeutung von Fäulnis weit besser als frisch gebraten schmeckt. Eine geschiedene Frau, ein Renegat machen auf uns einen besonders reizenden Eindruck. Personen, die uns sonst vielleicht nur merkwürdig und liebenswürdig vorkämen, erscheinen uns nun als wundersam, und es ist nicht zu leugnen, daß die Religionsveränderung Winkelmanns das Romantische seines Lebens und Wesens vor unserer Einbildungskraft merklich erhöht. (MA 6.2: 358)

This may have been one of those passages that provoked the fury of the Jena Romantics against the “heathen” Goethe’s Winckelmann book: Goethe not only calls conversion to Catholicism, which Friedrich Schlegel was already considering during this period, “sittliche Flecken,” but justifies it on grounds that could hardly satisfy a commited Catholic and indeed brazenly compares a convert with a divorced woman and her with over-ripe meat, thus poking fun also at the two divorced women in the brother Schlegels’ lives. But what are the “dritte Personen” here? Should it not again be simply “andere Personen”? This passage seems to support the assumption that in both places, Goethe is using “dritt-” rather loosely, or, to speak plainly, he is using it incorrectly.

But we can imagine another reading, an imaginative one, a triangular one. In both passages, the imagination plays a central role. In this latter passage, our imagination – it ends with “Einbildungskraft” – causes us to see an apostate in an entirely different light, through rose-coloured lenses, as “wundersam,” “romantisch.” Of course, “dritt[e] Personen” does not seem to signify the imagination itself. But consider another passage – yes, a third one – that hovers between the two uses of “dritt-” and elucidates them. It is one of the most astounding claims in the essay, and indeed undermines both Winckelmann’s and Goethe’s classical aesthetics. In the section “Schönheit*,*”immediately following the one “Freundschaft*,*”Goethe explains the origins of same-sex love from the sense for beauty. The beauty of the human body is fleeting – Goethe, along with other contemporaries, located it in the older adolescent male body.[[2]](#endnote-2) According to Winckelmann, there are two ways to “fix” this beauty, to make it less transient: castration and the work of art. In this section of his essay, Goethe focuses on the work of art, which stands “in seiner idealen Wirklichkeit vor der Welt.” He continues:

Für diese Schönheit war Winkelmann, seiner Natur nach, fähig, er ward sie in den Schriften der Alten zuerst gewahr; aber sie kam ihm aus den Werken der bildenden Kunst persönlich [!] entgegen, aus denen wir sie erst kennen lernen, um sie an den Gebilden der lebendigen Natur gewahr zu werden und zu schätzen.

Finden nun beide Bedürfnisse der Freundschaft und der Schönheit zugleich an einem Gegenstande Nahrung, so scheint das Glück und die Dankbarkeit des Menschen über alle Grenzen hinauszusteigen, und alles, was er besitzt, mag er so gern als schwache Zeugnisse seiner Anhänglichkeit und seiner Verehrung hingeben.

So finden wir W. oft in Verhältnis mit schönen Jünglingen, und niemals erscheint er belebter und liebenswürdiger, als in solchen, oft nur flüchtigen Augenblicken. (MA 6.2: 355 f.)

The word “persönlich” is astonishing here, and is made even more baffling by the accompanying verb “entgegen kommen”: the statue is somehow a person, and of course Goethe means the statue of a “Jüngling,” something like the Apollo Belvedere. In the most famous description in all of art history, Winckelmann had figured the statue as a living being. Goethe, in a letter to Frau von Stein from Italy, described his encounter with ancient art in terms similar to the passage quoted: “Ich lasse mir nur alles entgegen kommen und zwinge mich nicht dies oder jenes in dem Gegenstande zu finden” – and then he mentions the Apollo Belvedere.[[3]](#endnote-3) The statue comes to life, entirely violating Winckelmann’s and Goethe’s precept of what Kant called “ein uninteressiertes und *freies* Wohlgefallen,” which also excluded “das [Interesse] der Sinne“ (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* 287) as a prerequisite for aesthetic pleasure: for in Goethe’s formulation, the statue is alive and becomes a model for the spectator’s desire for other young men, “[die] Gebild[e] der lebendigen Natur.” This explains why Goethe uses the term “einen dritten,” referring to a person: “[das Bild] des durch einen dritten zu vollendenden Ganzen,” what he calls right after that an “Idee,” adopting Winckelmann’s platonic language, which is even more pronounced in Goethe’s term “Form.” The “Dritter” as person is the work of art that comes toward us “persönlich,” or, more accurately, it is our *imagination* that brings the work of art to life, gives it platonic form and seeks a real lover to correspond to it: Winckelmann “legte […] dieser Idee einen [...] Gegenstand unter.” Our act of imagination *creates* the lover, and Goethe associates this process with same-sex love.

In the eighteenth century, the operative concept for same-sex love, a subset of *non-procreative sexuality*, was “sodomy,” which signified any sexuality that did not serve reproduction: not only same-sex love, but any kind of non-genital sex between man and woman (e.g., anal or oral sex), as well as masturbation, using a dildo, bestiality, and even sex with the devil (cf. Zedler 328—35). The “geschiedene Frau” may have held the same association for Goethe, for the two women whom he knew most prominently in this category, Dorothea and Caroline Schlegel, did not produce children in their second marriages, though they had in their first (to be sure, only Caroline could have figured as a clear example of this pattern at the time Goethe wrote the Winckelmann essay). For Goethe, same-sex love is engendered by imagination, which in turn is aroused by beauty; moreover, I would argue, imagination and its products – literature, art, semiotics – play a role in other manifestations of non-reproductive sexuality.

To me, the existing theories of triangulation do not seem to account very well for this phenomenon and treat literature as a rather simplistic field of endeavour. For example, Albrecht Koschorke cites Girard’s notion of mediated desire, a concept that has been justifiably influential in theories of the third. However, in the case of literature, Koschorke focuses mainly on character constellations: triangular relationships, family triangles, patricide, etc. (18). Concretely, he hints that Goethe’s novels cannot be understood without reference to “triadisch[e] Beziehungsprozesse” (29), trailing off, at the end of his essay, onto the well-worn track of triangular personal relationships. Examining triadic relationships may have served us well, as Eve Sedgwick’s theories of male-male bonding through a woman have shown; her analysis has given rise to a flourishing branch of scholarship. But is that all there is? Surely literature is richer than just love triangles and patricide, and I would suggest that overcoming the age-old emphasis on character analysis will lead us more to the core of what interesting writers are really after. Imagination as the third, in particular in the history of sexuality, seems to me a fecund area for literary study.

The eighteenth century seemed obsessed with the dire sexual consequences of an over-active imagination. Or at least it did for a while: the Enlightenment debate on masturbation has often been exaggerated, since it was really a controversy of only a few years in the late 1780s and focused on the circle around one obsessed writer, Johann Heinrich Campe, as Isabel Hull has shown (258—80). But certainly, reading in general was tinged with suspicion in the eighteenth century. As new social groups, primarily the middle class, began to read more – much more – than just the Bible and devotional writings they had previously read, fears arose of *Lesewut* creating social disorder. In the excess of imagination, the anxiety around sexual transgression was never far off the page. It is here, rather than in elucidation of love triangles and such, where I think the figure of the Third can be most productive. We already have studies that read Werther’s obsession with Lotte as a product of his life of the imagination, and his obsession has been read as masturbatory (by Stephan Schindler and more recently Edward Potter). And earlier readings (for example, Bruce Duncan and Erdmann Waniek) stressed that Werther falls in love with Lotte through literature: Homer, Klopstock, Goldsmith, Ossian. Wilhelm Meister, too – to follow Koschorke’s focus on Goethe’s novels – places models such as the gender-transgressive figure of the Amazon between himself and a desired woman. And of course the adultery in the *Elective Affinities* is initially an act of imagination, when Eduard and Charlotte fantasize their respective lovers while having sex with each other. So the character triangles possibly have a much wider valence when we see the imagination as the Third. I would stress here that the imagination has to be understood widely, as the root of literature and art, which are often also figurations of the Third.

Goethe’s most unique work from this perspective is the *Venetian Epigrams,* written mainly in 1790 during his second sojourn in Italy. Like Goethe’s portrayal of the origin of same-sex love in the Winckelmann book over a decade later, the *Venetian Epigrams* depart entirely from our usual notions of Classical Weimar aesthetics. For this reason (among others), the cycle of epigrams in the style of the Roman erotic poet Martial was long ignored or treated with palpable embarrassment.[[4]](#endnote-4) Here Goethe engaged in an experiment that he had begun with the *Roman Elegies:* Could the German public and indeed censors manage explicitly erotic works in the mould of Propertius or Martial? The experiment failed; Schiller “censored” both works before publishing them in his journals without the most explicit texts.[[5]](#endnote-5) Because these were essentially “external” reasons for truncating the cycles, much recent scholarship has taken the pre-censorship manuscript versions as the basis for analysis.

The role of imagination, of art and literature is abundantly obvious in the *Roman Elegies,* too,and has been recited in various interpretations.We only need to think of the famous passages in the *Roman Elegy* V where the poet runs his hand over the breast of his beloved and understands marble statues, and then taps out the metre of hexameters on her back as she sleeps (MA 3.2: 47). It is difficult to say whether literature and art are ancillary to the beloved woman, or the woman is ancillary to literature and art. In either case, imagination and its products are essential ingredients of a fully satisfying sexual bond between two people – that is, their Third. But the *Venetian Epigrams* radicalize the connection between a couple and the third that is imagination, just as they radicalize both sexual dissidence and religious heterodoxy in a combination that is paradigmatic for the posture of the *libertine.* This was Goethe’s most shocking work for contemporaries, and would have been much more outrageous had it been published in its original form, which we cannot fully restore because a few passages were scratched or cut out or erased from the manuscripts in the late nineteenth century, probably, at the beginning, by Goethe’s last heir and grandson Walther von Goethe before he died in 1885.[[6]](#endnote-6) The epigrams from these and other manuscripts that were not published during Goethe’s lifetime were the most scandalous of the works called the Secretanda, kept back from full publication even in the standard Weimar Edition until 1915, in the very last volume of addenda and corrections, where few readers noticed them. Goethe is here at his cheekiest, both sexually and religiously. For a taste of the brazenness in many of the epigrams that Goethe did not publish, consider what is probably the most offensive poem Goethe ever wrote, at least for a Christian sensibility:

Sauber hast du dein Volk erlöst durch Wunder und Leiden

Nazarener! Wohin soll es dein Häufchen, wohin?

Leben sollen sie doch und Kinder zeugen doch christlich,

Leider dem früheren Reiz dienet die schädliche Hand

Will der Jüngling dem Übel entgehn sich selbst nicht verderben,

Bringet Lais ihm nur brennende Qualen für Lust.

Komm noch einmal herab du Gott der Schöpfung und leide

Komm erlöse dein Volk von dem gedoppelten Weh!

Tu ein Wunder und reinige die Quellen der Freud und des Lebens

Paulus will ich dir sein Stephanus wie du’s gebeutst. (MA 3.2: 94)[[7]](#endnote-7)

Translation: Jesus, you didn’t do a good job of redeeming your little band of followers. According to the Bible, they are supposed to be fruitful and multiply, but until marriagable age (in Goethe’s day relatively late by modern standards) a young man has to resist early stimulation and console himself with masturbation. If he tries to escape this evil, prostitutes (Lais was a famed prostitute in antiquity) only give him venereal diseases. Next time you should redeem us by coming down to Earth again and doing new miracles: free us from masturbation and syphilis, purify our genitals and fluids. If you do that, I’ll convert from being your denier to being your apostle (St. Paul) or martyr (St. Stephen), whichever you like. A poem full of scorn for Christianity and a plea for free love – and a classic libertine poem, like one of the elegies that was held back at Schiller’s wish from publication in the *Roman Elegies*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Given the scholarly neglect of the *Venetian Epigrams,* it is no surprise that some of their elemental poetic patterns have remained unexamined. One of these is the patently *dialogic* nature of the work. Again and again, much more so than in other poetry of Goethe’s, poems are addressed to some sort of “du” or “ihr”—sometimes the muses, even the epigrams themselves, but mostly to an anonymous “Freund” or “Freunde,” who stand in for imagined readers. There are two levels here, as in many eighteenth-century works. The first is what I have elsewhere called “characterized” readers, those who are fairly well developed as characters much like those on the level of a work’s “content,” often readers who themselves speak up in the text (Wilson, “Readers”). This sort of “characterized” reader or “narratee” was introduced into eighteenth-century German literature by way of Laurence Sterne’s pioneering novel or meta-novel *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,* published in the 1760s, where the narrator constantly banters with fictional readers. The most brilliant practitioner of this device in Germany was Christoph Martin Wieland, who had a marked impact on Goethe and, I would argue, on the romantics, who lent this technique philosophical significance as a feature of what we call romantic irony. (Wieland, whom the romantics viciously attacked, possibly had at least as much impact on them as their purported models, Cervantes, Sterne and Shakespeare.) Much like Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt,* speech by and to the characterized reader reminds us relentlessly that we are reading a work of fiction, not experiencing the world represented there in an unmediated way.

During his first and longer Italian sojourn, Goethe experienced a phenomenon that in his mind firmly tied the figure of the third to this foregrounding of a work’s fictionality. He describes it in a short essay published in 1788,“Frauenrollen auf dem Römischen Theater durch Männer gespielt.” He turns the Vatican prohibition of women on the stage into a fascinatingly modern meditation on gender and representation that very much looks forward to Judith Butler’s insights on performativity. For Goethe, the men who play women in the Roman theatre are more convincing than women would be in at least some of the same roles. That is because they give rise to a unique aesthetic pleasure, one that he says was previously unknown to him. The reason behind it is, “*daß bei einer solchen Vorstellung, der Begriff der Nachahmung, der Gedanke an Kunst, immer lebhaft blieb*, und durch das *geschickte Spiel* nur eine Art von *selbstbewußter Illusion* hervorgebracht wurde.” He says that this gives rise to “ein doppelter Reiz, […] daß diese Personen keine Frauenzimmer sind, sondern Frauenzimmer vorstellen. Der Jüngling hat die Eigenheiten des weiblichen Geschlechts in ihrem Wesen und Betragen studiert; er kennt sie und bringt sie als *Künstler* wieder hervor; er spielt nicht sich selbst, sondern eine dritte und eigentlich fremde Natur” (MA 3.2: 173 f.). Here, as later in the Winckelmann essay, the term “dritte” is apparently used consciously; we might have expected “zweite” or “andere,” since the male actor is imitating the other sex, but it seems to me to refer to the imaginary gender that he is playing. It is the foregrounding of this representation, what Goethe calls “selbstbewußte Illusion,” that gives rise to this pleasure. And two years later, in Venice, Goethe sought to recreate this aesthetic pleasure in erotic poetry.

Of the 136 epigrams in the most important original manuscript of the *Venetian Epigrams* (MS. H55), ten feature readers who speak up and address the poet directly; seven of these were included in the published version, along with some new ones of the same type.[[9]](#endnote-9) Quite a few other epigrams draw attention to the work and its genesis specifically, so that Stefan Oswald sees poetological self-reflection as the dominant theme in the work (379), though he does not examine specifically the fictional readers. As in Sterne and Wieland, most of the readers who speak up satirize themselves; they represent narrow, conventional responses to the sexual and religious heterodoxy of the poems. For example, one epigram begins with the reader objecting to the salacious writing, to which the poet responds:

„Wagst du Deutsch zu schreiben unziemliche Sachen!“ – Mein Guter

Deutsch dem kleinen Bezirk leider ist griechisch der Welt. (MA 3.2: 104)

This response reverberates with double-entendre: the poet may simply mean that the wider world does not understand German, so it is not worth worrying about writing obscenities in that language; but he may also be referring obliquely to “Greek love,” the term Goethe used for sodomy.[[10]](#endnote-10) In several cases, the reader’s banter draws explicit attention to the *book* he or she is reading, the *libellus epigrammatum* that made up the classical divisions of Martial’s epigrams (consisting of about 100 epigrams each), a term that Goethe also uses for his own cycle in letters from Venice and afterward (see MA 3.2: 498). When the poet writes excessively about the street acrobat Bettina, the reader interjects:

“Welch ein Wahnsinn ergriff dich im Müßiggang, hältst du nicht inne?

Wird dies Mädchen ein Buch? Stimme was klügeres an.”

Wartet bald will ich die Könige singen die Großen der Erde

Wenn ich ihr Handwerk und sie besser begreife wie jetzt.

Unterdessen sing ich Bettinen denn Gaukler und Dichter

Sind gar nahe verwandt und die Verwandtschaft zieht an. (MA 3.2: 99)

Despite his stated intention, the poet does go on to “sing” of kings, though still without really comprehending their actions – material for satiric treatment. But first he writes yet another epigram in which he refers to the “Büchlein” that he is writing, reminding us again and again of the text’s fictionality. This sort of metatextual reflexivity goes so far that in one case, the reader addresses the epigrams themselves, and they respond:

“Epigramme seid nicht so frech!” Warum nicht? Wir sind nur

Überschriften, die Welt hat die Kapitel des Buchs. (MA 3.2: 113)

– a typically Goethean defense of erotica as part of life. But it is also clearly the kind of “selbstbewußte Illusion” that he referred to in the essay on cross-dressing in the theatre. The mention of the „Buch“ or, more often, “Büchlein” of epigrams, constantly reminds us that we are reading a book, not experiencing real people and events.

Alongside this explicitly “characterized” reader is another, more abstract one, more or less equivalent to what Wolfgang Iser called the “implied” reader, and others have called the “ideal” or “intended” reader of a text. But it is via the characterized, satirized reader that we can define the implied reader. As we saw, in the *Venetian Epigrams* the characterized reader is inadequate to the text, scandalized by it and sometimes impatient with what s/he sees as irrelevant or unimportant matter: “Hast du nicht gute Gesellschaft gesehn,” this reader asks, “es zeigt uns dein Büchlein | Fast nur Gaukler und Volk und was noch niedriger ist?” (MA 3.2: 104). And of course the poet defends his choice of low-life subject. This inadequate characterized reader is a foil for the implied or ideal reader, who appreciates sexuality as part of human nature and enjoys even what *seem* to be forays into triviality and low life, for example the street contortionist whom the poet calls Bettina, and the prostitutes. The implied reader is attuned to the partly hidden codes and strategies for making the erotic visible. However, the poet has to take account of conventional tastes, as part of his experiment of publishing explicit erotic poetry, on the model of ancient Greek and Roman writers, in the modern, Christian age. But he turns this necessity into a virtue, playfully probing the aura of the forbidden. In a series of epigrams he searches for vocabulary that a pious German reader will accept as a substitute for openly obscene words. As we saw, the theme is launched by one of these prudish readers, who asks the poet: “Wagst du Deutsch zu schreiben unziemliche Sachen!” (MA 3.2: 104). The poet’s strategy is to introduce foreign words and German words formed from them, thus poking fun at the contemporary requirement that dangerous material was only to be discussed in Latin publications, not in German ones. In sketches for the epigrams, Goethe playfully returns to this theme again and again, asking, for example, whether his readers will accept such vocabulary:

Ungern brauch ich [in] meinen Gedichten die anderen Sprachen.

Wäre es sicher! so arm sieht sie anmaßlich [?]

Aber bald wird mirs unmöglich, ich habe der Distichen viele,

Manches sagt ich noch nicht weil es die Sylbe verbot.

Wenn du es Leser erlaubst, so brauch ich manchmal ein Wörtchen

Deutscher Leser erlaube mir nun bey fremden zu

Du verstehst ja [?] doch alle Sprachen geschickt

Fremde Sprachen verstehst du, o deutscher Leser, in einem

Kleinen Gedichte verstehst du wohl auch ein fremdes Wort.[[11]](#endnote-11)

What these sketches with feigned anguish over spicy language resulted in, was a finished epigram that Goethe did not publish, addressed to the phallic god Priapus:

Gib mir statt der Schwanz ein ander Wort o Priapus

Denn ich Deutscher ich bin übel als Dichter geplagt.

Griechisch nennt ich dich φαλλος, das klänge doch prächtig den Ohren,

Und lateinisch ist auch Mentula leidlich ein Wort

Mentula käme von Mens der Schwanz ist etwas von hinten

Und nach hinten war mir niemals ein froher Genuß. (MA 3.2: 101)

This poem gives “phallogocentrism” new meaning – naming becomes an etymological joke. But the human mind (mens) and penis (mentula) are not as disparate as one might think. The poet is in any case playing with the expectations of negatively characterized prudish readers who cause him terminological headaches, and provokes them with the surprising and (to Goethe’s contemporaries) shocking allusion to anal sex. This poem is the prelude to a series of epigrams that allow him to write about prostitutes – but only with the (characterized) reader’s permission to hide them behind a code.

Lange hätt’ ich euch gerne von jenen Tierchen gesprochen,

    Die so zierlich und schnell fahren dahin und daher.

Schlängelchen scheinen sie gleich, doch viergefüßet, sie laufen,

    Kriechen und schleichen, und leicht schleppen das Schwänzchen sie nach.

Seht hier sind sie! und hier! sie sind verschwunden! Wo sind sie?

    Welche Ritze, welch Kraut nahm die Entfliehenden auf?

Wollt ihr mir’s künftig erlauben, so nenn’ ich die Tierchen Lacerten;

    Denn ich brauche sie noch oft als gefälliges Bild.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The joke here is that the characterized reader, who presumably gives his or her permission to use this image, doesn’t know yet what it stands for. Goethe published this epigram in the cycle, but without its context in the original manuscript, so that it is not *entirely* clear that these “lizards” are prostitutes. In the next epigram, the poet says that one of these “Lacerten” lures him into a “Spelunke,” so the reader now suspects that a woman of ill repute is meant, but there the poet does not explain “Spelunke.” That epigram gives rise to a supremely metatextual one, again poking fun at prurient readers who finally demand to know what the poet is up to:

Was Spelunke nun sei? verlangt ihr zu wissen, da wird ja

    Fast zum Lexikon dies epigrammatische Buch.

Dunkele Häuser sind es in engen Gäßchen, zum Kaffee

    Führt dich die Schöne, und sie zeigt sich geschäftig, nicht du. (FA 1: 458)

A reader who knows the manuscript version will be astonished that Goethe dared to include this poem in the final printed version (as no. 69), or that Schiller allowed it, because the obscene meaning of “drinking coffee” is explained in an epigram that appears only in the manuscript:

Caffé wollen wir trinken mein Fremder! – da meint sie b[ranlieren]

Hab ich doch, Freunde, mit Recht immer den Caffé gehaßt. (MA 3.2: 104)

With the code word for “branlieren” (masturbate) we are back to the lexicon, the epigram that defines itself, the “epigrammatisch Buch” that refers constantly to itself and introduces a blur of code words for sexual *parts* and especially *acts* that fall firmly into the realm of the forbidden and obscene. This sex is heterodox not only because it is not procreative and indeed occurs outside marriage, but precisely because the woman is *active* and turns the gendered relationship of normally active male and passive female on its head – a common attraction of the prostitute for men, of course. And the reader is again drawn in, this time a “Freund” who presumably isn’t bothered by this transgression, an idealized or implied reader who is on the same wavelength as the poet. Indeed, the reversal of gender roles reflects the reversal of roles of traditionally active author and passive reader – now the reader, like the prostitute, is active. The transgression climaxes in a longish epigram that describes the prostitutes’ activities in realistic detail, as well as the supposed effects of her manipulation of the “Schwanz” that has no name; but this one was *not* included in the published cycle:

Seid ihr ein Fremder, mein Herr? bewohnt ihr Venedig? so fragten

Zwei Lacerten die mich in die Spelunke gelockt.

Ratet – Ihr seid ein Franzos! ein Napolitaner! Sie schwatzten

Hin und wieder und schnell schlürften sie Kaffe hinein.

Tun wir etwas! sagte die Schönste, sie setzte die Tasse

Nieder, ich fühlte sogleich ihre geschäftige Hand.

Sacht ergriff ich und hielte sie fest; da streckte die zweite

Zierliche Fingerchen aus und ich verwehrt es auch ihr.

Ach! es ist ein Fremder! so riefen sie beide sie scherzten,

Baten Geschenke sich aus die ich doch sparsam verlieh.

Drauf bezeichneten sie mir die entferntere Wohnung

Und zu dem wärmeren Spiel spätere Stunden der Nacht.

Kannten diese Geschöpfe sogleich den Fremden am Weigern

O so wißt ihr warum blaß der Venetier schleicht. (MA 3.2: 103)

In passing: in this and other passages, Goethe turns out to be fairly conventional when it comes to masturbation. The suggestion in the previously quoted epigram that he “hates” masturbation as much as coffee is bolstered here by typical eighteenth-century physiological arguments against the solitary sin: it is “schädlich” and an “Übel” that makes its devotees pale and sickly. Goethe’s only innovation is that what he is describing here is not solitary sex; though the usual theories attributed the ill effects to the absence of a woman,[[13]](#endnote-13) Goethe extends the malaise even to the “hand job.” Nevertheless, masturbation is clearly part of life, and Goethe is intent to portray sexuality in all its forms: he mentioned to Herder his “Buch Epigrammen [...], die, hoff ich, nach dem Leben schmecken sollen” – again reflecting Martial, whose dictum “jede Seite von mir schmeckt nach dem Menschen allein” Goethe used as a motto for the first publication of the work, and who also did not shy away from the theme of masturbation.[[14]](#endnote-14)

After we read these poems, we begin to see masturbation in other places; the “geschäftige Hand” of this poem had appeared in the rather more reserved *Roman Elegy* V: “Ich befolge den Rat, durchblättre die Werke der Alten | Mit geschäftiger Hand täglich mit neuem Genuß” (MA 3.2: 47). (The suggestion of sexual touching is suggested in the original manuscript of this poem, where the line “Aber ich habe des Nachts die Hände gerne wo anders” is replaced by the rather more respectable “Aber die Nächte hindurch hält Amor mich anders beschäftigt”; MA 3.2: 46 f.). Is Goethe deploying even in the lofty *Elegies* the well-known eighteenth-century topos of ‘one-handed reading’? Here, too, it is a reader – the poet as reader – who has the “geschäftige Hand” that is used both in sex and in reading. In the *Venetian Epigrams,* which are much more explicit than the *Elegies,* a published epigram may have the same connotation, referring to the book of erotic poems itself and thus bringing together the metatextual self-reflection with the theme of self-satisfaction:

Wenn auf beschwerlichen Reisen ein Jüngling zur Liebsten sich windet,

    Hab er dies Büchlein, es ist reizend und tröstlich zugleich;

Und erwartet dereinst ein Mädchen den Liebsten, sie halte

    Dieses Büchlein, und nur, kommt er, so werfe sies weg. (no. 80; FA 1: 459)

The book is stimulating (reizend), but also soothing (tröstlich) – in other words, it is good for one-handed reading, replaced by the real lover when he or she is finally present.[[15]](#endnote-15) But the epigram also points out the limits of (erotic) literature, which is no stand-in for real relationships, just as masturbation is a poor substitute for sex with a partner. The work of erotic literature describes *itself* as functional, dispensible, occasional, indeed pornographic. Yet this description is doubtless tongue-in-cheek, again creating an unreliable characterized reader as opposed to the implied reader who realizes that this poetry is anything but merely functional. Indeed, it is a literature that trains the reader to become active, creative, and ultimately imaginative.

To conclude, the imagination takes the form of persons, but imaginary ones. In the Winckelmann essay, it is statues that seem to come to life and approach the male viewer, who then compares the statues’ ideal beauty to real young men and conceives desire for such men. This is strikingly like the male lover in the *Roman Elegies* who feels the surface of a female statue and compares it to the body of his beloved, in this case in a “heterosexual” situation. But the very similarity of these processes unsettles the easy distinction between heterosexual and homosexual love, just as Goethe was later to trouble this difference in the figures of the androgynous, indeed sexless angels who are the object of Mephisto’s imaginative desire in the penultimate scene of *Faust II*, “Grablegung (Burial)” (see Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben* 315-47)*.*

In the *Roman Elegies* and the Winckelmann essay, the Third is a work of art, the product of the imagination which in turn fires the imagination of the subject’s desire for the other. In the *Venetian Epigrams,* the imagination takes the form of the imagined or implied reader, likewise a creation of the writer, figured also in interaction with the book itself (*Büchlein*). As I said, the *explicit* version of this reader, who speaks up in the text, is a characterized reader, a negative foil for the ideal or implied reader whom Goethe imagines. Goethe may even be referring back to another of his characterized readers, in *Werther,* who is addressed in the short prefatory note, with its suggestion that this *Büchlein* should be his friend if he has no other – “laß das Büchlein deinen Freund sein” – a grossly inappropriate use of the novel that many critics have, I think mistakenly, taken to be addressed to an ideal rather than a caricatured reader.

In the *Venetian Epigrams,* it may seem initially that the implied reader, like the lover in the Winckelmann book and the *Roman Elegies,* is male, since the poet says “da wird sie geschäftig, nicht du,” addressing the male reader as a sort of supplement or double of the poet. Such addresses to the “Freund” or “Freunde” seem to suggest a kind of macho camaraderie. But in the last epigram that I quoted, the female lover is also portrayed as reading the very *Büchlein* that we are reading, thus undoing the identification of the reader as male, or at least the implied reader – it thus seems to me that this male reader is a characterized one, indeed one whom the poet playfully catches imagining himself in the compromising position with the prostitute and thus drawing attention to the desires that this reader might hope to repress (hypocrisy is a favored theme of both the *Roman Elegies* and the *Venetian Epigrams*). But this “gender trouble,” the apparent contradiction in the gender of the reader, is perhaps intended to remain as the deeper secret of this Third: the imagination questions and unsettles any easy distinction between the lovers, both in terms of gender and of a comfortable separation of fictional character and reader. We are vicariously drawn into the fiction, in a playful suggestion of our prurient, indeed voyeuristic reading habits. The author seems to depend on this participation of the reader, as the profoundly dialogic structure and conversational tone of the *Epigrams* suggests. The writer needs our work of imagination in order to realise his project, to describe a fully sexual human relationship, one that can involve a great deal more than just making babies.

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1. See *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen,* 4th and 9th letters (Schiller 8: 706—810). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben* 173—78. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 20—23 Dec. 1786, Goethe, *Briefe* 2: 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Most recently, Stefan Oswald’s monograph has filled this gap; on the non- or anti-Classical aesthetics and poetological discourse in the *Epigrams,* see 379—400. Most insightful on the *Epigrams* is Horst Lange’s article. On the gender, sexual, and homoerotic aspects, see Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben* 102-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an analysis of this censorship and the concern over Goethe’s potential image as a libertine, especially in the *Epigrams,* see my forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *Der obszöne Goethe und seine Zensoren* (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See the study mentioned in the previous note. These acts of censorship are usually attributed to Grand Duchess Sophie of Saxe-Weimar – unfairly. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. I shall quote the manuscript H55 from MA 3.2 (for abbreviations see “Works Cited”), where it is published for the first time as a whole; however, I quote the published *Epigrams* from FA I, 1, which uses the first edition published in Schiller’s *Musen-Almanach,* rather than from MA, which uses the later version from the *Neue Schriften.* All of the manuscript poems from H55 do appear in FA, but not together as in the manuscript. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The poem “Zwei gefährliche Schlangen”, MA 3.2: 79—80, originally no. 16 in the *Elegies.* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See the following passages (referring to book, epigram, and line number from the manuscript H55, as reproduced in MA 3.2: 83-116): 1.2.5, 1.2.13, 1.59.1-2, 1.64.1-2, 1.81.1, 1.82.1-2, 2.3.1, 2.13.1, 2.22.1-2, 2.26.1, 2.38.1-2. The ones that were omitted from the final version were 1.81, 2.13, and 2.38; 1.64 was substantially altered for publication as no. 55. New in the final version are especially no. 59, which is introduced with the reader’s plea: “Epigramme seid nicht so frech!” (FA I, 1, 456). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the two instances of Goethe’s use of the term, see Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben* 158, 169—70. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. WA I, 5.2, 377; Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv 27/60, Bl. 51r, 52v; cf. Wilson, *Goethe Männer Knaben* 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. No. 67 (FA I, 1, 457); cf. in manuscript H55: MA 3.2: 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Laqueur, esp. ch. 4, “The Problem with Masturbation”. For the German context, see Braun. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Letter to Herder, 3. Apr. 1790, FA I, 1, 1089; Martial: FA I, 1, 443, 1133 (“Hominem pagina nostra sapit”). Goethe’s other references to masturbation are primarily in *Hanswursts Hochzeit,* where the word “branlieren” was misunderstood in the original editorial commentary in the new Frankfurter Ausgabe (FA I, 4, 586; corrected in FA I, 1, 1151 in the commentary to “Caffé wollen wir trinken”), and the late invective poems “Herr Werner ein abstruser Dichter” and “Über ... Junius an die Nachkommen” (FA I, 2, 760, 771). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Oswald’s reading (130 f.) moves in this direction, saying that Goethe—following Martial rather than the earlier proposed Propertius—portrays the book in the woman’s hand as “ein erotischer Stimulans,” but he does not suggest that the ultimate theme is masturbation. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)