

# GOETHE NEWS AND NOTES

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## REPORT ON THE GSNA SESSION AT THE 1992 MLA CONVENTION IN NEW YORK CITY

At the 1992 MLA Convention, the Goethe Society of North America sponsored a session entitled "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Goethe's Representation of the Feminine." Three papers were selected from among approximately 30 submissions, a number indicating the high degree of interest in this topic. No doubt further sessions with an interdisciplinary focus will elicit similar responses from the membership and the profession.

The first speaker was Martha B. Helfer from the University of Utah. Her paper, entitled "Wilhelm Meister's Women," examined Goethe's representation of the feminine in light of three sexual categories that shaped critical discourse in his time: the homoeroticism of Winckelmann's aesthetics; the origin and increasing vogue of the term *Geschlechtscharakter* in the last quarter of the 18th century; and the (Romantic) fusion of the masculine and the feminine, where the feminine is viewed as augmenting and complementing the masculine. A significant portion of her presentation was devoted to clarifying the difference between the terms "androgynous" and "Amazon," which are completely confused in commentaries on this novel. Unlike the conception of women among the Jena Romantics, the female figures in *Wilhelm Meister* do not function as erotic objects, but are merely accessories in a theory of

male self-definition. By analyzing the novel's "obliteration of the feminine," the homoerotic aspects of Wilhelm's character emerge.

The second speaker was Stephan Schindler from Washington University, whose paper was called "Die Frau als lebende Tote: Goethes Mütter." His interpretive starting point was the assertion that in *Werther* and in *Faust*, the idealized mother is conceived of as a corpse. Sons desire union with the mother in death. Such desire marks a regressive wish for a return to the earliest phase of childhood, even to the uterine darkness of the fetal state. Schindler then provided a reading of both works in terms of the family constellations represented in them, the significance of absent fathers and dead (or destroyed) mothers, and the implications of this for the socialization of male children.

The third speaker was Susan E. Gustafson from the University of Rochester. Her title was: "Eugenie as *Kunstwerk*:: The Daughter and the Law of the Father in Goethe's *Natürliche Tochter*." Approaching this drama from a Kristevan perspective, the paper showed how the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine are mapped out and controlled in this work. Eugenie is not allowed to develop a feminine identity in her own right, but is presented always as the father's ideal image of himself. Ironically, Eugenie thus evokes a "Vermischung" of genders, especially evident in her writing activity, that is perceived by father and king as a threat to male identity. Hence the daughter must be sacrificed in order to preserve the male fantasy of fixed borders between male and female.

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