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Notes and Documents

MacKenzie and Goethe: Two "Men of Feeling" on Suicide

Henry MacKenzie and Goethe achieved widespread popularity through a sentimental novel at approximately the same time, MacKenzie with *The Man of Feeling* in 1771 and Goethe with *Leiden des jungen Werthers* in 1774. Both books are attempts to describe an ideal "man of feeling" and the two authors seem to agree on a number of points. The Scotsman and the German disagree, however, as to whether or not one's feelings could justify suicide. It was the heroine's death in Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1771) which raised the question.

In Lessing's play, a version of the Roman tale of Appius and Virginia, Emilia urges her father to murder her in order to prevent her marriage with the villainous nobleman who permitted her lover's death. Her father stabs her during the final scene—more a suicide than a murder.

MacKenzie gave his views on the matter in 1788 while addressing the Royal Society of Edinburgh on German drama. He considered the plot of *Emilia Galotti* "more regular than happy, and the denouement neither natural nor pleasing."¹ Objecting to German drama's lack of "delicacy of feeling," he felt that scenes such as the one depicting Emilia's death "assault the imagination and the heart of the reader with unsparing force." Undoubtedly, it was the heroine's violent death on stage which marred *Emilia Galotti* for MacKenzie. All other violence involved in the plot is merely reported. Furthermore, MacKenzie states that in German drama frequently "the language is highly virtuous while the action is libertine and immoral." As if to acknowledge his disagreement with Goethe on the subject of *Emilia Galotti*, he added, "From the author of the *Sorrows of Werther*, this does not surprise."² (His paper treats Goethe's *Goetz von Berlichingen*, *Clavigo*, and *Stella*.)

Emilia's suicide repulsed MacKenzie but it seems to have attracted

¹ See MacKenzie's "Account of the German Theatre," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, II, Literary section (1790), 176.

² *Ibid.*, 167.

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Goethe. He specified that at the scene of Werther's suicide "*Emilia Galotti lag auf dem Pulte aufgeschlagen.*" The reference could hardly be more prominently placed, coming within less than a page of the novel's end. Leonard Forster holds that Goethe did not introduce literary references idly. He notes that Werther begins by reading Homer, switches to Ossian once he becomes entangled in his romance with Lotte, and finally turns to *Emilia Galotti*. After summarizing a number of explanations for this last choice, Forster concludes that Goethe was led to refer to Lessing's play here because of its apparent condoning of suicide.³

The conflicting reactions of MacKenzie and Goethe to Emilia's suicide are something of a touchstone for distinguishing between their opinions as to how a "man of feeling" should be governed by his emotions. For MacKenzie, to be guided by one's feelings is to give oneself over to a sentimental but non-destructive humanitarianism. With Goethe, on the other hand, it is a matter of surrendering oneself to one's passions, even one's destructive passions. To the Scottish "man of feeling," Emilia's death was a violation of moral and literary sensibilities. To his German counterpart, it was an act of passionate necessity and a moral precedent for the suicide of his young hero.

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³ Leonard Forster, "Werther's Reading of *Emilia Galotti*," *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, N.S. 27 (1958), 34-43.