

**Suddenness and Suspended Moment:
Falling in Heinrich von Kleist's
*Penthesilea***

by

Colleen Allen

B.F.A., University of Victoria, 2005

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Matthew Pollard, Co-Supervisor
(Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)

Dr. Helga Thorson, Co-Supervisor
(Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)

Dr. Peter Götz, Departmental Member
(Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies)

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ABSTRACT

In the literary works of the early nineteenth-century German writer Heinrich von Kleist there is little certainty. Kleist's characters experience catastrophic natural and social disasters – earthquakes, revolution and war – and, as if this were not trauma enough, are subject to extreme behaviours and repeated mishaps. Characters leap from windows and break legs, stumble, faint or fall; incidents which lay bare inner psychological states that are as precarious as the external circumstances in which they find themselves. Yet into these violent events Kleist invariably interjects a suspended moment – a moment that might be considered one of intolerable exposure. Although sudden moments and momentary suspension define almost all of Kleist's novellas and dramas, nowhere is this phenomenon so visible as in Kleist's tragedy *Penthesilea*. Taking into account German critic Karl Bohrer's concept of 'suddenness' (*Der romantische Brief: Die Entstehung ästhetischer Subjektivität* and *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*), secondary literature on Kleist, scholarship on gender as well as Kleist's biography, this project will focus on falling and suspended moment within *Penthesilea*, paying particular attention to vulnerability.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Supervisory Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Dedication	vi
For Kleist	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Something to Fear	8
Chapter 2: Falling	27
Chapter 3: Momentary Suspension	49
Denouement	68
Works Cited	71

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For Kleist

“Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind.”

–Susan Sontag

(*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 8)

Introduction

From its very beginnings Kleist's tragedy *Penthesilea* has been a troubling and troubled drama. In an 1808 letter responding to Kleist's presentation of an inaugural copy of his journal *Phöbus* which contained an excerpt of the play, Goethe responded that *Penthesilea* „ist aus einem so wunderbaren Geschlecht¹ und bewegt sich in einer so fremden Region daß ich mir Zeit nehmen muß mich in beide zu finden“ (“is of so strange a race and moves in such unaccustomed regions that he required time to adjust himself to both” (Blankenagel 149))² (II 806).³ Scholarship has marked this letter as critical to *Penthesilea*'s unsuccessful reception as well as a rift between the sensitive and ambitious Kleist and the venerated patriarch, who could neither grasp Kleist's questioning of gender (“Geschlecht”) nor locate himself in the play's setting (“Region”). Goethe's judgment, however, was perceptive. Kleist's drama, with its two protagonists who tax to the utmost the accepted social parameters of Kleist's time, *is* strange. *Penthesilea*, Queen of the Amazons, is beautiful and mutilated, a “mere” woman yet autonomous, noble and a cannibal, while Achilles, heroic demigod of the Greek and Trojan War from Homer's *Iliad*, succumbs to cowardice and wounding. In a word, *Penthesilea* defamiliarizes – the source, I suspect, of Goethe's unsympathetic response.

Kleist began *Penthesilea* at the end of the summer of 1806 in Pillau near Königsberg where he had gone for recurring health problems, the cause of which, according to Joachim Maass' biography on Kleist, was “insuperable heartsickness”

¹ “Geschlecht” not only signifies ‘race’ but may also be translated as ‘gender.’

² All English translations are bracketed. Furthermore, any translation of German text that is not referenced is my own.

³ Citations from Kleist's works are taken from Heinrich von Kleist *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Helmut Sembdner, 9th ed., 2 vols (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993) and are marked in the body of this thesis by volume and page number.

(Maass 103-109). Pressured between financial difficulties and demands from his family to “give up literature and take up a respectable and remunerative career” (98) and his own all-consuming need to write (109), Kleist remarks in a letter to his half-sister, Ulrike: „Mein Nervensystem ist zerstört...und [ich] muss unter drei Tagen immer zwei das Bette hüten. Ich war... fünf Wochen in Pillau, um dort das Seebad zu gebrauchen; doch auch dort war ich bettlägrig, und bin kaum fünf- oder sechsmal ins Wasser gestiegen“ (“My nervous system is ruined. At the end of the summer I spent five weeks in Pillau for salt-water bathing; but... I was confined to bed, and hardly entered the water more than five or six times” (Miller 167)) (II 770).

Even as the early stages of *Penthesilea* were inauspicious, so too were the circumstances in which Kleist continued to work on his play. Caught in the political upheaval of the time, Kleist and his two traveling companions, all three discharged Prussian officers, were arrested by the French military on suspicion of espionage and incarcerated in the château Fort de Joux where they were kept in subterranean cells with small barred windows that allowed little light or air (Maass 115). Kleist petitioned the Minister of War in Paris and they were later transferred to the more habitable Châlons-sur-Marne (116). Surprisingly, Kleist, usually so “hyper-sensitive under normal conditions,” was physically and morally better able to deal with these hardships than his comrades (114), possibly because, as he writes Ulrike: „... wenn nur dort meine Lage einigermaßen erträglich ist, so kann ich daselbst meine literarischen Projekte ebenso gut ausführen, als anderswo“ (“... if my situation is at all bearable, I can work at my writing ... anywhere” (Miller 168)) (II 777).

Kleist’s imprisonment, like much of Kleist’s biography, is a strange story.

Ironically, as there was nothing Kleist could do but wait for the French to release him, one might speculate that Kleist's captivity was probably the only period in his life in which he was free to write unburdened by guilt or painful feelings of failed responsibility towards his family and society. Of further irony is that Kleist's drama – sensational in the broadest meaning of the word – was written in an environment of sensory deprivation. Perhaps it is these conditions that account for Kleist's pronouncement that he made to Marie von Kleist on completion of *Penthesilea* in the late autumn of 1807: „Es ist wahr, mein innerstes Wesen liegt darin... der ganze Schmutz zugleich und Glanz meiner Seele“ (“It is true, my deepest nature is there... all the filth and radiance of my soul together”) (II 797).

If Kleist's tragedy was deemed “monstrous” (Maass 146) and more immoderate in both content and style than “most of his contemporaries could bear” (Fischer 9) – Joachim Maass comments that readings of *Penthesilea* were “unfavourably received in the Dresden salons” (Maass 134) – the play's first dramatization did little to dispel this negative reception. In 1811 the actress Henriette Hendel-Schütz gave a pantomimed rendition of passages from *Penthesilea* at Berlin's Königliches Schauspielhaus while her academic husband, Friedrich Schütz, a philosophy professor (Miller 192), delivered a lecture explaining the work followed by a recital of scene twenty-three, which accompanied his wife's performance (Reeve 79). Reeve notes that although critics acknowledged Hendel-Schütz's “virtuosity,” reviews in the *Vossische Zeitung* neglected even to cite Kleist's name, while the *Stuttgarter Morgenblatt* faulted the play itself for the evening's failure (79). Worse still, Reeve contends, clearly Hendel-Schütz was using Kleist's drama as a means of self-promotion to the detriment of the play's true greatness

– “the spoken word” (79).

Reeve has a point. On the other hand, there is something appropriate about an interpretation of *Penthesilea* that takes into account a disjunction between words and expression; a representation, moreover, that reflects Kleist’s own conflicted feelings about the efficacy of language. In a February 5th 1801 correspondence to Ulrike, Kleist laments his inability to convey to his half-sister his inner world:

...die Sprache taugt nicht dazu, sie kann die Seele nicht malen, und was sie uns gibt sind nur zerrissene Bruchstücke. Daher habe ich jedesmal eine Empfindung, wie ein Grauen, wenn ich jemandem mein Innerstes aufdecken soll; nicht eben weil es sich vor der Blöße scheut, aber weil ich ihm nicht *alles* zeigen kann, nicht *kann*, und daher fürchten muß, aus den Bruchstücken falsch verstanden zu werden. (II 626)

(Even language... is of no use, [it] cannot limn the soul, and gives only torn fragments at best. I always have a feeling as of dread, therefore, when I am on the point of baring my heart to someone, not because the nakedness would embarrass, but rather because I cannot show *everything*, simply *cannot*, and must fear being misunderstood because of this fragmentation.) (Miller 90)

Following Henriette Hendel-Schütz’s presentation of *Penthesilea*, Kleist’s tragedy would subsequently wait until 1876 for its first major stage production (Reeve 80). Once again, language would prove if not problematic then an impediment as the director Solomon Mosenthal saw fit to eliminate roughly one thousand lines, cut “forty-five speaking roles to eighteen,” ascribe a more “classical flavour” to the play’s wording and censor any “offensive parts” in order to accommodate Kleist’s drama to the tastes of Kaiser Wilhelm I’s court theater (80). If Reeve takes umbrage with the omission of the spoken word in Hendel-Schütz’s performance, Kleist scholarship for the most part would consider Mosenthal’s staging close to heresy. As such, even though Kleist’s works usually conclude with a return to customary values (*Das Erdbeben in Chili*, *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* and *Amphitryon*), what remains is an uncomfortable

realization that it is no longer possible to view social mores or the language they use with any degree of naiveté or confidence. To press this point home, *Penthesilea*, with “its structure at variance with the theatrical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” and generally considered “unperformable,” according to Reeve (78),⁴ ends with no such return or restoration, nor any sense that language can avoid slippage.

Just as Kleist’s letters reveal that language and convention are not as categorical as one might assume, neither are gender, identity or class (Wilson, “Transgression” 191). Both Jean Wilson and Marjorie Gelus believe that Kleist reflects the instabilities and anxieties of an age confronted with challenges to its Enlightenment ideals (191). However, Gelus observes, “unlike his contemporaries” (Gelus 59) – for example, Goethe, whose *Iphigenia in Tauris* Ruth Angress⁵ claims is a humanitarian corrective of Euripides’ drama (Angress 101) – Kleist refuses to construct “ideological antidotes” (Gelus 59). Rather, Gelus goes on to say, Kleist dwells at “morbid length on threats to order” (59), as often as not through scenes of extreme and shocking violence. Or, as Wilson asserts, the transgressive nature of Kleist’s novellas and plays “has not gone unrecognized” (“Transgression” 191).

The strategy that Kleist utilizes to assail these social tenets is what Karl Bohrer suggests is „Kleists favorisiertes Motiv“, „Die Katastrophenszene (neben der Idylle)...“ (“Kleist’s favorite motif, the catastrophic scene (next to the idyll”) (*Der romantische Brief* 97) and which Bohrer elsewhere refers to as ‘suddenness.’ While other scholars

⁴ Reeve further comments that *Penthesilea*’s reputation as ‘unperformable’ probably originates with Goethe’s hostility towards Kleist’s tragedy, which had little in common with “the Weimar stage style with its idealized language and gesture and a balanced, dignified approach; more significantly, its content could not be made to conform with the ethical and aesthetic standards of classicism”: *Kleist on Stage 1804-1987* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1993) 78.

⁵ Ruth Angress goes by the surnames of Angress and Klüger, and I will quote her accordingly.

have touched on Kleist's strategy of 'suddenness' – John Ellis refers to it as a “jolting episode” that changes the text's direction to provide an unsettling complexity to Kleist's works (Ellis 116) and Thomas Mann mentions Kleist's “singular style,” in which a “confusion of affects” (Mann 12) “confounds” the reader (23) – to my knowledge Bohrer is alone in his observation that this motif is linked to two events: Kleist's ‘Kant crisis’ (*Der romantische Brief* 88), which „hat [sich] in dem Heiligtum seiner Seele erschüttert“ (“shook the sanctum of [his] soul”) (II 636) and two incidents in which Kleist and his sister Ulrike narrowly escaped death (*Der romantische Brief* 90). These encounters, as well as Kleist's enigmatic Würzburg trip, left Kleist stripped of any epistemological certainty or sense of material security. More explicitly, from these (mis)adventures Kleist would emerge a writer.

My own scholarly interests are indebted to Bohrer's hypothesis but extend his ideas to the concrete and corporeal progression of a fall. If one were to visualize the ‘*Katastrophenszene*’ as an act of falling and the ‘*Idylle*’ as momentary suspension before the fall's inevitable conclusion, this suspended moment might be conceived of as one of utmost vulnerability. One could argue, as John Ellis does, that Kleist's drama is a “play of pessimism” (Ellis 155), a play that points to the impossibility of love within a society based upon patriarchal values. I wish to argue, however, that *Penthesilea* is a provocative study of human fragility that insists on love's possibility.

For the purposes of my analysis I agree with Anthony Stephens that there can be no one “external frame of reference as an authority” to understanding Kleist (Stephens 6). Stephens remarks that Kleist's short stories and dramas survive because of their elusiveness and “richness of meaning” and to apply a single formula or “key” to his

works in an attempt to decode his texts would be to render them a disservice (7). Kleist's tragedy, which Stephens maintains has "a strong claim to being Kleist's masterpiece" (97), is no exception. Rather than relying on one single methodology in my critique of *Penthesilea*, therefore, I will incorporate the approaches of other scholars and critics such as I find helpful for the individual components of my project. My starting place will be Bohrer's 'suddenness.'

Chapter 1: Something to Fear

The concept of ‘suddenness,’ according to Karl Bohrer, directly corresponds to “[Friedrich] Schlegel’s and Kleist’s reflections on the French Revolution” (Bohrer, *Suddenness* 11), specifically Schlegel’s „Über die Unverständlichkeit“ (“On Incomprehensibility”) and Kleist’s „Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden“ (“On the Gradual Completion of Thoughts While Speaking”) (10). Bohrer proposes that these works exemplify an appreciation of “cognitive acts as an event,” that is to say, a cognitive act that “suddenly becomes aware of itself... [but] that cannot be measured, not even logically, by what is already in existence” (10). These essays are not merely psychological critiques of knowledge, Bohrer submits, but rather they “bear on the type of knowledge itself” – knowledge that “flares up ...to pull language to itself” in order to – and here Bohrer directly quotes Kleist’s „Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden” – “bring something incomprehensible into the world” (10). Bohrer further comments that Kleist’s “incomprehensible” and Schlegel’s “incomprehensibility” are “the hallmarks of an exclusive intellectual movement,” a linguistic theory that no longer conceives of “God as the Other” but, instead, displaces this Other into “the aesthetic act of exploratory language itself” (10). More precisely, creativity is no longer the authority of divine manifestation but one markedly human: a proposition that Schlegel treated with composure and Kleist did not – “paradox, cipher [and] irony in Schlegel,” Bohrer notes, and “emotional excitement and astonishment in Kleist” (11).

Kleist’s quick-witted exposé on the origin of the French Revolution is interesting, Bohrer goes on to say, because Kleist’s Count Mirabeau does two things (82). Firstly,

Mirabeau does not “simply reiterate a preexisting idea, that of the sovereignty of the people [but] he discovers the idea in an intuitive burst” and secondly, this “advance into the unknown” is subversive (82):

„Ja,“ antwortete Mirabeau, „wir haben des Königs Befehl vernommen“ – ich bin gewiß, daß er bei diesem humanen Anfang, noch nicht an die Bajonette dachte, mit welchen er schloß: „ja, mein Herr,“ wiederholte er, „wir haben ihn vernommen“ – man sieht, daß er noch gar nicht recht weiß, was er will. „Doch was berechtigt Sie“ – fuhr er fort, und nun plötzlich geht ihm ein Quell ungeheurer Vorstellungen auf – „uns hier Befehle anzudeuten? Wir sind die Repräsentanten der Nation.“ – Das war es was er brauchte! „Die Nation gibt Befehle und empfängt keine“ – um sich gleich auf den Gipfel der Vermessenheit zu schwingen. „Und damit ich mich Ihnen ganz deutlich erkläre“ – und erst jetzo findet er, was den ganzen Widerstand, zu welchem seine Seele gerüstet dasteht, ausdrückt: „so sagen Sie Ihrem Könige, daß wir unsre Plätze anders nicht, als auf die Gewalt der Bajonette verlassen werden.“ (II 320-21)

(“Yes,” answered Mirabeau, “we have heard the King’s command...” I am certain that he made this affable start without the faintest prescience of the bayonet thrust with which he was to conclude. “Yes, Monsieur,” he repeats, “we have heard it...” Clearly he still has no idea of what he is about. “But by what right,” he continues, whereupon a fresh source of stupendous ideas opens up to him, “do you proclaim commands to us? We are the representatives of the Nation!” This is exactly what he needs, and leaping to the pinnacle of audacity, he cries, “The Nation issues commands. It does not *receive* them. And to make myself absolutely clear to you” – only now does he hit on the words that express the total opposition for which his soul stands armed – “you may tell your King that we will not leave our places except at the point of the bayonet.”) (Miller 219)

From Bohrer’s standpoint then, ‘suddenness’ is an “expression of discontinuity” (*Suddenness* vii), as such, a turn against tradition that is “something like a patricide” (84) and which, Bohrer suggests, may be understood as an “actual aesthetic of the unknown and our fear of it” (81). In brief, out of “the emphatic moment” of the French Revolution a new consciousness occurred (81), which Bohrer loosely categorizes as „Kontingenzbewußtheit“ (“contingency consciousness”) (*Der romantische Brief* 92), “das Bewußtsein der Diskontinuität” (“consciousness of discontinuity”) (90) or “das

ästhetisch-katastrophische Bewußtsein” (“aesthetic-catastrophic consciousness”) (88).

The latter refers more to Kleist than to Schlegel, I believe, owing to a series of occurrences that took place in Kleist’s life. Among these, although not foremost in Bohrer’s opinion, was Kleist’s ‘Kant crisis’ (88).

Contrary to much secondary literature on Kleist that places his reading of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Reason*) (88) as the source of what Philip Miller describes as the “most notorious emotional crisis in German literary history” (Miller 6), Bohrer contends that Kleist’s understanding of Kant was not the *cause* of his aesthetic-catastrophic consciousness, per se, but rather a symptom of it, which confirmed Kleist’s already skeptical world-view: „Es ist fraglich, ob die katastrophische Reaktion ein diskursiver Schritt gewesen ist, vielmehr ist es wahrscheinlicher, daß sie schon Ausdruck einer mentalen Verfassung war, die Kants Kritik plötzlich in einem neuen Licht erscheinen ließ“ (“It is questionable whether the catastrophic reaction was a discursive step, it is much more likely that it was already the expression of a mental condition wherein Kant’s *Critique* suddenly appeared in a new light”) (*Der romantische Brief* 88). In actuality, Bohrer asserts, the prime cause was Kleist’s own aesthetic-catastrophic self-consciousness, which, furthermore, had developed gradually (88).

This development might roughly be marked as beginning with Kleist’s quest for *Glück* (happiness or good fortune), a term that for Kleist was inseparable from the Enlightenment precept of *Bildung*, which Miller goes to great lengths to define:

This word is only partially translatable as ‘education’ or ‘culture’ and means the systematic acquisition of immutable moral and natural truths, of firm principles of virtue and appropriateness in action and response as derived purified and enshrined in the highest philosophy, science and art. (Miller 8)

Miller’s protracted definition could be considered a synopsis of a letter that Kleist wrote

to his long-suffering fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge on the 22nd of March 1801. In this letter Kleist wonders whether Wilhelmine is able to relate to “Truth and Education” with the same depth of feeling as he himself does (95): „Ich weiß nicht, liebe Wilhelmine, ob Du diese zwei Gedanken: *Wahrheit* und *Bildung*, mit einer solchen Heiligkeit denken kannst, als ich–“ (“I do not know, Wilhelmine, if you can regard these ideas... with the same piety [that] I do–” (Miller 95)) (II 633).

Were *Heiligkeit* translated as ‘holiness’ and not ‘piety,’ the extent of Kleist’s investment in these concepts may be better understood and therefore, too, the disillusionment that he suffered on his exposure to Kantian philosophy. Truth, Kleist remarks to Wilhelmine, is not as immutable as he would wish it to be:

Wenn alle Menschen statt der Augen grüne Gläser hätten, so würden sie urteilen müssen, die Gegenstände, welche sie dadurch erblicken, *sind* grün – und nie würden sie entscheiden können, ob ihr Auge ihnen die Dinge zeigt, wie sie sind, oder ob es nicht etwas zu ihnen hinzutut, was nicht ihnen, sondern dem Augen gehört. So ist es mit dem Verstande. Wir können nicht entscheiden, ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint. (II 634)

(If everyone saw the world through green glasses they would be forced to judge that everything they saw was green, and could never be sure whether their eyes saw things as they really are, or did not add something of their own to what they saw. And so it is with our intellect. We can never be certain that what we call Truth is really Truth, or whether it does not merely appear so to us.) (Miller 95)

Kleist’s interpretation of Kant left him feeling anxious and without any bearings. In consequence of this he decided to give up his studies and travel in the hopes that he might achieve some measure of equilibrium – something Kleist longed for, I suspect – and “a purpose worth striving for” (97). However, Kleist’s journey was to prove as equally troubling as his ‘Kant crisis.’

Closely following these events, Kleist and Ulrike, who was, as often the case,

Kleist's traveling companion and financial sponsor, were involved in two near-death experiences – a wagon crash where Ulrike and Kleist were thrown, remarkably unhurt, from their carriage and a storm that suddenly materialized and threatened to capsize the packet boat on which they were passengers (*Der romantische Brief* 90, 95). These incidents, Bohrer argues, may be linked to the theme of „plötzlichen Unfalls“ (“sudden accident”) (90) that occurs throughout Kleist's works and together with Kleist's loss of confidence in *Bildung* formulate what Bohrer labels as Kleist's „pessimistische (...) Kulturtheorie“ (“pessimistic cultural theory”) (92).

The premise of Bohrer's argument revolves around Kleist's letter to Wilhelmine written the 21st of July, 1801, in which Kleist on more than one occasion discloses that he feels as if he were heading straight towards an abyss (Miller 113). Bohrer refers to Kleist's repeated mention of the abyss as Kleist's „‘Abgrunds’- Erwartung“ (“the abyss-expectation”) (*Der romantische Brief* 91) which, Bohrer points out, Kleist „[konfrontiert]... in der rhetorischen Manier seiner aufgeklärt-pädagogischen Briefe mit den Gründen, die für das Gegenteil des Abgrunds, für Zukunft and Glück, sprechen“ (“[confronts]... in the rhetorical manner of enlightened pedagogy and an epistolary prose with reasons that speak for the opposite of the abyss, for a future and *Glück*”) (91). From Bohrer's perspective, this interplay between *Abgrund* and *Grund* (abyss and reason) is a strategy that Kleist employs to ward off his abyss-thinking so that he might arrive at a positive alternative (91). Nevertheless, Kleist does not return to a central teleological axiom, Bohrer insists, but alternatively adopts a new telos – that of contingency consciousness (92). In short, Kleist's journey left him situated between the conviction that *Glück* is happen-stance and the belief or hope that he has the wherewithal

within himself to create a meaningful life. The vehicle that Kleist would choose to achieve this objective would be literature, and the purpose worth striving for literary fame.

Bohrer summarizes Kleist's turn to writing as the „Liebesaugenblicks zur Sprache“ (“love moment of language”), whereby Kleist's „«Selbsterhaltung» wird dann nur noch über das Medium Literatur möglich, denn nur hier ist das diskontinuierliche Bewußtsein nicht unglücklich“ (“Self-preservation would only be possible through the medium of literature because only here is discontinuity consciousness not unhappy”) (102, 103). It was a conflict that Kleist would never be able to reconcile (Bohrer 97). Ironically, the cost of this self-preservation would be Kleist's refusal of conventional social expectations, most notably the termination of his relationship with Wilhelmine. However, Kleist's decision to be a writer and the opposing forces that were the foundation of this resolve have, in fact, a biographical precedent that Bohrer omits, but which, I feel, is worth mentioning as Bohrer's thesis affiliates Kleist with Schlegel, thereby positioning Kleist within the parameters of Early German Romanticism – a supposition not necessarily held by all Kleist critics.⁶ This precedent is Kleist's Würzburg trip in August 1800, approximately half a year before his ‘Kant crisis.’

Why Kleist traveled to Würzburg remains to this day unknown, except that the motivation for it yet again implicates Wilhelmine. Joachim Maass recounts that Kleist had instructed his fiancée to write down her ideas of what would constitute happiness for her in their forthcoming marriage (Maass 20). Wilhelmine's reply to Kleist's “thought-problem” (18) – one of the many he assiduously presented her throughout their

⁶ For a brief overview of Early German Romantic literary theory, see: Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 229-305.

relationship – visibly upset Kleist and the next morning he announced that he needed to go away, giving no explanation other than the statement that someone’s happiness and honour, perhaps even life, relied upon it (20). There has been a great deal of scholarly speculation concerning this expedition. Because Kleist met with a Prussian minister by the name of Struensee prior to his departure and, moreover, journeyed under a pseudonym and false papers, some critics believe that the purpose of the trip was a secret political mission (24-5). Maass, however, proposes that the most feasible reason for Kleist’s trip was “to treat some sexual deficiency” (30), the nature of which was possibly physical but probably psychosomatic (29, 30), which Maass then follows up with a cautious association between Kleist’s troubled sexual drive and creativity (30). Heinz Politzer’s conclusions are more direct.

The nucleus of Politzer’s article, „Auf der Suche Nach Identität: Zu Heinrich von Kleists Würzburger Reise“ (“In Search of Identity: On Heinrich von Kleist’s Würzburg Trip”), is the question, „Was machte diesen Sproß einer preußischen Junker- und Offiziersfamilie zum Dichter?“ (“What made the offspring of a Prussian Junker and Officer’s family a poet and writer?”) (Politzer 55). Politzer’s analysis focuses upon three incidents. The first is Politzer’s response to Kleist’s 1799 letter to his former tutor and friend, Christian Ernst Martini, in which Kleist tells Martini that he intends to resign his army commission: „Damit sprang [Kleist] aus der Kette seines Geschlechts und wurde zum Rebellen“ (“By that Kleist leapt out of the generational continuity of his class [and/or gender] and would become a rebel”) (58). Politzer argues that the cost of this „Ausscheiden“ (“removal/cutting out”) was great loneliness for Kleist, which he dispelled by becoming engaged to Wilhelmine later that same year (59). Not that Politzer

dismisses Kleist's engagement as – and here he quotes Thomas Mann – „lauter Unsinn“ (“pure nonsense”) (59). In Politzer's view, Kleist was too scrupulous and serious a young man to treat his obligations frivolously (59). Even so, Politzer does put forward an ambivalent motive for Kleist's offer of marriage, which leads to Politzer's second point. Kleist, Politzer asserts, fell in love with his friend and traveling companion, Ludwig Brockes, a man nine years older than Kleist (73). This was no explicit admission on Kleist's part, nonetheless, in Politzer's opinion: „Das Erwachen von Kleists Naturgefühl – und seines Schöpfertums im allgemeinen – ist nun unschwer auf den Einfluß Ludwig von Brockes zurückzuführen“ (“The awakening of Kleist's connection to nature – and his creativity in general – is in retrospect easily traced back to the influence of Ludwig von Brockes”) (67). However, Politzer's argument does not end at this juncture, but rather, asks what effects these events had upon Kleist.

Clues to Kleist's inner psychological world, Politzer maintains, may be found in Kleist's observations regarding a visit that he and Brockes made to the Julius-Hospice during their stay in Würzburg. In a letter to Wilhelmine dated September 13-18th, Kleist describes several of the patients confined to a wing of the hospital set aside for the insane. From Politzer's perspective, *whom* Kleist singles out is significant, and of these, three figures in particular. The eighteen-year-old youth driven mad owing to an ‘unnatural vice’ and the merchant deranged from pride and frustration as a result of his father having been ennobled but with no hereditary title upon the son, mirror, Politzer surmises, Kleist's own sympathetic identification: „ob mit Masturbation, Homosexualität, oder einem uns unbekanntem Dritten“ (“whether with masturbation, homosexuality or a

third unknown to us”)⁷ – as well as feelings of ‘disinheritance’ from the family military tradition and „Adeldiplom“ (“Noble diploma” or noblëssé) (71). The other figure that Politzer remarks upon is a monk convinced that he has desecrated the word of God owing to an unfortunate slip of the tongue and, therefore, „der Sprache Gottes nicht mehr teilhaft ist“ (“is no longer able to experience the language of God”) (72). The monk’s verbal stumble is a reflection of Kleist’s stutter, Politzer submits, in which Kleist recognized his own „...gebrochene[s] Verhältnis zur Sprache“ (“...broken relationship to language”) and metaphysical helplessness (72). In other words – and Politzer’s third point – Kleist projected his own pathology and fears onto the residents of the Julius-Hospice; fears, Politzer contends, that Kleist would allay through the act of writing (72).

As such, for Politzer, Kleist’s Würzburg trip was a total crisis of identity (73). It is not astonishing, therefore, that it was at this particular moment, Politzer notes, that Kleist, „... die Kurz- und Grundformel seiner Welt fand“ (“... found the basic formula/motif of his world”) (72). In a November 18th letter, which was and is still perplexing and cryptic, Kleist tells his beleaguered fiancée:

Ich ging an jenem Abend vor dem wichtigsten Tage meines Lebens in Würzburg spazieren. Als die Sonne herabsank war es mir als ob mein Glück unterginge. Mich schauerte wenn ich dachte, daß ich vielleicht *von allem* scheiden müßte, von allem, was mir teuer ist.

Da ging ich, in mich gekehrt, durch das gewölbte Tor, sinnend zurück in die Stadt. „Warum,“ dachte ich, „sinkt wohl das Gewölbe nicht ein, da es doch keine Stütze hat?“ „Es steht,“ antwortete ich, „weil *all Steine auf einmal einstürzen wollen*“ – und ich zog aus dem Gedanken einen unbeschreiblich erquickenden Trost, der mir bis zu dem entscheidenden Augenblicke immer mit der Hoffnung zur Seite stand, daß auch ich mich halten würde, wenn alles mich sinken läßt. (II 593)

⁷ Politzer’s ‘unbekannten Dritten’ or ‘unknown third’ may refer to the conjecture that Kleist underwent ‘phimosis’ – adult circumcision. Philip B. Miller, ed. and trans., *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist* (New York: E.P Dutton, 1982) 44.

(On the evening before the most important day of my life I went for a walk in Würzburg. As the sun sank it seemed to me as if my happiness was sinking with it. I shuddered to think that perhaps I must cut myself off from everything that was dear to me.

Then, walking back to town deep in thought, I went through an arched gate. “Why,” I wondered, “does the arch not cave inwards as it has no support?” “It stands,” I replied, “*because all the stones seek to collapse at once*” – and out of this thought I drew to me an indescribably reassuring consolation, which stood by my side up until the decisive moment, that I, too, would not collapse, even if I lost all courage.)

Kleist’s ‘arch-motif’ metaphorically ties Bohrer and Politzer together. Both Bohrer and Politzer meet on the matter of Kleist’s ‘contingency consciousness,’ even if Politzer does not expressly use the term. Both agree that Kleist’s decision to become a writer is a means by which Kleist mediates the terrible stress of uncertainty – whether political, metaphysical or of individual identity. And, in consequence of their analyses, both share the viewpoint that Kleist’s ‘Kant crisis’ was, as Politzer observes, „nicht um Kant, sondern um Kleist“ (“not about Kant, but about Kleist”) (75-76). Where Bohrer and Politzer’s paths diverge, however, is on the subject of gender. If, as Bohrer claims, Kleist’s works articulate profound rupture, surely it is because Kleist intuitively understood that the crux of human history is gender relations; an issue, consonant with Politzer, that left its mark on Kleist, but which, in any event, Kleist never tired of reappraising.⁸

The most ardent and intriguing illustration of Kleist’s treatment of gender is his tragedy *Penthesilea*, in which one might conjecture, in keeping with Bohrer and Politzer’s hypotheses, that Kleist’s ‘pre-history,’ so to speak, his contingency

⁸ A case in point is Kleist’s comedy *Der zerbrochne Krug*, in which Adam, an elderly and dissolute judge, must officiate at the very trial that finds him guilty of attempting to forcibly seduce Eve, a local village girl. Further examples are Kleist’s *Die Marquise von O* and the rape and impregnation of the unconscious Marquise by an officer who only moments before rescues her from just such a fate but then later offers his hand in marriage, or Alkmene’s concurrent seduction-violation by Jupiter in Kleist’s satirical and tragicomic, *Amphitryon, A Comedy After Molière*.

consciousness and crisis of sexual identity join together and are adamantly expressed in his tragedy. Allowing, as I propose, that gender in Kleist's drama is contingent, this is more fully appreciated, I believe, knowing something of Kleist's two protagonists' 'pre-history,' which Josine Blok's *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth* thoughtfully explicates.

As Blok's title implies, her interests centre on how Greek society shaped its ideas of alterity and 'otherness' through its mythical representations, in particular an 'otherness' to the "set values of masculinity and femininity within epic heroic code," which the Amazon motif signified (Blok, vii, ix). Blok postulates that the Amazons presented Greek heroes with an "insoluble dilemma" (281). While these women were equal to men, in fact "equivalence was a prerequisite for the presentation of the Amazons as opponents in battle" (434), a woman on the battlefield upset this "principle of equality" (281). Specifically, Blok comments, fighting the Amazon was an act of valour, a "man-to-man combat," but the moment the Amazon was dead "the honor of the victor" became problematic since the adversary was no longer a "worthy antagonist but a dead woman" (283). In brief, while Amazon similarity to men was permissible on the battlefield, their femininity was not and, as a result, was refused conscious acknowledgement (435).

Blok goes on to argue that the gender ambivalence that the Amazons embodied is explored at greater length in the story of Achilles and Penthesilea, a summary of which she cites from Proclus' epic *Chrestomathia*:

The Amazon Penthesileia, a daughter of Ares, a Thracian by [genos], comes to the help of the Trojans. Achilles kills her as she is acting like a hero [aristeusan], and the Trojans bury her. And Achilles kills Thersites because he has been abused and mocked by him for his alleged [eroos] for Penthesileia. A

dispute arises among the Achaians over the killing of Thersites. After this Achilles sails for Lesbos, and after sacrificing to Apollon, Artemis and Leto he is purified of the killing by Odysseus. (195, 196)

A later variant of this confrontation re-works Thersites' sexual innuendo into an overt allegation that Achilles commits necrophilia upon Penthesilea's corpse (201). To be precise, according to Blok, Thersites voices what should have been left unspoken (198) – that despite the Amazon's martial nature, their bodies are irrefutably female (276-277). For Blok, Thersites' defamation of Achilles' character articulates a “turbulent disruption of [gender] norms” (173), albeit in the form of a taboo (198). However, Blok does not follow up on Achilles' infraction but prefers to read the myth of Achilles and Penthesilea as a shift in how Greek society viewed the “Amazon paradox” (442). Where once the Amazons' gender ambiguity was so unbearable it could not be acknowledged consciously, now, Blok submits, with Achilles and Penthesilea as “lovers separated by battle but reunited after death,” this paradox is transformed into a symbol of harmony and hope (442).

I admit I find Blok's conclusion strange. Presuming that Achilles and Penthesilea signify a re-evaluation of masculine and feminine identity, or more definitively, as Blok remarks, the admission that “a man or a woman may combine both aspects of the different sexes [and] that the sex of the body never offers absolute certainty about sex as a psychological quality” (282), how might one account for the violence that defines Achilles' and Penthesilea's relationship or the violation that occurs between them? If Blok ignores this question, Kleist, with his “radical bent for the extreme,” who did not eschew scenes of horrific brutality (Fischer 1) and who believed, ironically, given his sympathetic depiction of the Amazons, that *Penthesilea*: „Für Frauen scheint es im Durchschnitt

weniger gemacht als für Männer...“ (“on average appears less made for women than men...”) (II 796), does not.

Kleist’s reconfiguration of the Amazon myth, as represented in his original source, Hederich’s *Gründliches Mythologisches Lexikon* (Maass 110),⁹ or, so to speak, his own version of the Amazonian kingdom’s ‘pre-history,’ establishes the Amazon nation on the reprisal of a group of Scythian women against an invading army who kill their husbands and sons, and force the women “to share their loathsome beds” (Agee 93).¹⁰ In response to this atrocity – and the only scene in Kleist’s drama, in which Penthesilea and Achilles talk to one another at length (Angress, 112) – Penthesilea narrates:

Die Betten füllten, die entweiheten, sich
 Mit blankgeschliffnen Dolchen an, gekeilt,
 Aus Schmuckgeräten, bei des Herdes Flamme,
 Aus Senkeln, Ringen, Spangen: nur die Hochzeit
 Ward, des Äthioperkönigs Vexoris
 Mit Tanaïs, der Königin, erhartt,
 Der Gäste Brust zusamt damit zu küssen.
 Und als das Hochzeitsfest erschienen war,
 Stieß ihm die Kön’gin ihren in das Herz;
 Mars, an des Schnöden Statt, vollzog die Ehe,
 Und das gesamte Mordgeschlecht, mit Dolchen,
 In einer Nacht, ward es zu Tod gekitzelt. (I 388)

(The desecrated beds began to fill
 With daggers, sharp-edged wedges cut and shaped
 From ornaments, in secret by the hearth,
 From spangles, buckles, rings; only the wedding
 of Vexoris, the Ethiopian King,
 And young Tanaïs, the Queen, delayed the kiss
 Each held in keeping for her captor’s breast.
 And when at last the wedding feast had come,

⁹ For further study of Kleist’s use of sources, see Roger Paulin’s discussion on Kleist’s reading of Hederich’s *Lexikon* as well as other influences that Kleist may have incorporated into his play: “Kleist’s *Metamorphoses*. Some Remarks on the Use of Mythology in *Penthesilea*,” *Oxford German Studies* 14 (1983): 35.

¹⁰ All citations of *Penthesilea* in English are taken from Joel Agee’s translation and are indicated by page number in the text: *Penthesilea*, By Heinrich von Kleist (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

Tanaïs plunged her knife into his heart,
 Mars in his stead carried out the marriage rite,
 And in a night the murderers had their itch
 Well satisfied, with knives, till they were dead.) (Agee 93)

Had the women been content with solely wreaking vengeance on their husbands' usurpers, the matter would have ended there. Instead, the women proclaim themselves a sovereign dominion, a "Frauenstaat" (I 389) whereby „den fürder keine andre\ Herrschsüchtige Männerstimme mehr durchtrotzt...“ (“... the arrogant\ Imperious voice of man shall not be heard” (Agee 94)) (I 389). What is insupportable for these women, therefore, even though not explicitly stated, is the institution of marriage itself. But if marriage demands a high price, so, too, does independence. As Queen Tanaïs mounts the altar steps to receive the emblem of her new found women's state, the golden bow formerly the possession of kings, a voice declares that such a state would be a laughing-stock, because women, impeded by full breasts, could never draw a bow and loose its power as readily as men (Agee 94). Following this challenge, in a brutal moment, Queen Tanaïs tears off her right breast and with this act inaugurates Amazon autonomy (Agee 94). How might this baptism, as Kleist describes it, of those „die den Bogen spannen würden“ (“whose task it [is] to wield the bow and arrow” (94)) (I 389), a deed ultimately hugely practical yet ruthlessly self-punitive, be understood?

From Ruth Angress' standpoint, Kleist's nation of women may be extreme but not, she insists, deviant or abnormal (Angress 111). Therefore, to treat Amazon society as a ridiculous construct, Angress continues, “perverse to start with and doomed from the start,” is to weaken the impact of Kleist's tragedy (111). Angress further argues that within the context of Kleist's play this exclusively female society is no more peculiar than the unisex armies of the Greeks and Trojans and, consequently, one ought not “to

condemn one out of hand while approving of the other as more natural” (117). While this may be true, what Angress does not allude to in her critique is the Amazons’ ritualized mutilation of their one breast. In Angress’ view, the focus of Kleist’s drama is the conflict between the individual and his or her anti-social urges, the community and the institutions that threaten and even at times destroy the powerful ego drives of these individuals (Angress 99). By this I understand Angress to mean that the individual and the institution are mutually exclusive and Penthesilea and Achilles two wildcards who stand in contrast to – and here I quote Angress – the Amazons and Greeks’ “highly organized social groups which derive from the Enlightenment’s dream of a rational setting for large numbers of individuals” (Angress 134). But to omit the Amazons’ pre-history as Kleist portrays it is to exclude a defining moment within that history and, too, within the play itself, which contests Angress’ position.

In her article, “The Wounded Self: Kleist’s Penthesilea,” Ursula Mahlendorf further challenges Angress by maintaining that the Amazons’ repetition of Queen Tanais’ self-disfigurement is a re-enactment of their original trauma, by which, “the war-like lifestyle of the Amazons is guaranteed” (Mahlendorf 260). Through this “mechanism of identification with [their] aggressor[s],” Mahlendorf remarks, the Amazons transform “the passive experience of being overwhelmed into the equivalent of overwhelming another” (260). In other words, Kleist’s Amazons and Greeks both belong to violent and aggressive societies (255). From Mahlendorf’s perspective, Penthesilea and, Achilles too, suffer from narcissistic wounding and a “fragile sense of self” (253), in which each is trapped between need and fear of the other, both reflecting the underlying need/fear dilemma existing within their respective social orders (263). In contradiction to Angress,

Mahlendorf's analysis holds that Amazonian society *is* perverse, as well as that of the Greeks and Trojans,' while Kleist's two protagonists signify fragmented parts of a neurotic whole – and, Mahlendorf observes, Kleist's own "wounded self" (255). If the wounded self, as Mahlendorf defines it, is a psyche "divided against itself and split in its relationships to life," as such, a self stranded between the binary oppositions by which society is delineated (266), Lilian Hoverland extends this supposition.

Similar to Politzer, Hoverland subscribes to the belief that Kleist suffered from repressed homosexuality (Hoverland 58), although Hoverland takes this conviction one step farther to suggest that at the heart of *Penthesilea* is Kleist's attempted resolution of a bisexuality that he could not admit to in real life (81-2). For Hoverland, who is influenced by French feminist Luce Irigaray's deconstructivist theories (59), the quintessential presentation of Kleist's conflicted sexual identity is the Amazons' newly adopted icon, the bow and arrow (76). The bow with its bent and concave shape, she explains, appears as female, while the straight, shooting arrow denotes the male (76). Hoverland contends that the bow and arrow form a relationship that is characterized by a tension that cannot be assuaged; for the Amazons to remain combative and alive the bow must be repeatedly bent and the arrow sent off over and over again (76). The scene that concretizes the great pain of this tension, Hoverland claims, is the High Priestess' reaction following Queen Tanaïs' self-mutilation when both breast and bow fall to the ground, whereby the "male-female split" becomes apparent (76):

Still auch auf diese Tat wards...
 Nichts als der Bogen ließ sich schwirrend hören,
 Der aus den Händen, leichenbleich und starr,
 Der Oberpriesterin daniederfiel,
 Er stürzt, ' der große, goldene, des Reichs,
 Und klirrte von der Marmorstufe dreimal,

Mit dem Gedröhn der Glocken, auf, und legte,
Stumm wie der Tod, zu ihren Füßen sich.– (I 390)

(Upon that deed a silence fell...
Only the whirring of the bow was heard,
As it dropped from the deathly pale, stiff hands
Of the High Priestess to the temple floor.
It dropped, the Empire's giant, golden bow,
And clanged against the marble steps three times
With a resounding drone, like a huge bell,
And lay, silent as death, before her feet.–) (Agee 95)

Hoverland points out that a parallel may be drawn between the Amazons' severed breast, the falling bow and the arch motif from Kleist's Würzburg trip. In Kleist's *Penthesilea*, Hoverland comments, "... breast, bow [and] arch... appear as predominantly feminine symbols... [that] impl[y] a masculine... component" (Hoverland 80). If the bend of the arch seems to be feminine, Hoverland proposes, the etymology of the word substantiates this conclusion; arch translated as 'Gewölbe' means 'Rundung' ('curve/roundness') and by way of its Greek root relates to the words 'Bucht' and Busen' ('bay' and 'bosom') (80). Within the arch overall, however, each stone accentuates a masculine verticality (80). And like the breast and the bow, Hoverland goes on to say, in answer to the pull exerted by the earth, the arch "ultimately falls downward" (80). But what specifically does Hoverland mean by this and how does it relate to Kleist's ostensibly unresolved bisexuality?

Re-iterating Kleist's speculations on the arch's precarious yet stalwart formation, Hoverland notes that why it remains intact is because of each stone's wish to fall to the ground (79-80). In Hoverland's opinion, like the bow and breast, the arch constitutes an intrinsically male-female tension; the stones' verticality are representative of "masculine structure and differentiation" while their downward pull expresses a "yielding to a

Prothoë

...Stand, stand as does the vaulted arch stand firm
 Because each of its blocks inclines to fall!
 Present your head, the keystone, to the gods
 And all their gathered lightning, and cry: Strike!
 And let yourself be split from head to toe,
 But do not waver in yourself again...) (Agee 62)

That gender plays an integral role within *Penthesilea* is beyond doubt, although I do think that Kleist's drama encompasses a broader implication of gender than Hoverland allows for and which I will further explore. Still, I am indebted to Hoverland, as well as the other critics I have discussed in this chapter. In my view, and building on their hypotheses, within this passage sudden catastrophe and contingency consciousness, a fragile self split and under siege, and longing for certainty converge in the mercurial temperament of the gods and the iconic representation of the arch. What keeps this structure standing is the keystone, which, in itself, or so Kleist's use of the word 'Scheitel' implies, is not without its complexities or fragility. For ease, Agee translates this word as 'head' but a more exact rendering is 'top' or the line where the hair parts; that is to say, where the right and left hemisphere of the human cranium come together or, as the case may be, separate. Perhaps this choice of word, however, may also be understood as a re-visiting, conscious or unconscious, of Kleist's ideas on Kantian philosophy, for within the context of the scene, what Penthesilea decides will specify her fate. In other words, how Penthesilea thinks determines a reality or Truth that is capricious only if she wavers within herself. Or so it is hoped. In any event, implicated in whether the arch stands or falls, I suggest, and to borrow from Blok, is the 'Other,' in which binary oppositions, 'otherness' and falling are inextricably connected.

Chapter 2: Falling

There are all manner of delineations for the act of falling. A casual glance through any dictionary or thesaurus lists, for example: to plummet, collapse, transgress and fall apart, to lose a high position, tumble and perish; a list by no means complete. Kleist's drama, in my opinion, is preoccupied with two instances of falling from which, like a domino effect, every other occurrence of falling throughout the play proceeds: the first is the Amazon assault on Greek and Trojan armies alike, which falls outside the parameters of Greek logic and normative values; the second is the moment when Penthesilea's glance meets Achilles and she falls in love with him. Both falling outside the periphery of established social customs and falling in love are inseparable within this tragedy, each a counterpart of the other, in which 'otherness' plays a principal part.

So alien and incomprehensible is the Amazon offensive against the Greeks and Trojans that Odysseus declares it is a contravention of all that is natural:

So viel ich weiß, gibt es in der Natur
Kraft bloß und ihren Widerstand, nichts Drittes.
Was Glut des Feuers löscht, löst Wasser siedend
Zu Dampf nicht auf und umgekehrt. Doch hier
Zeigt ein ergrimmtter Feind von beiden sich,
Bei dessen Eintritt nicht das Feuer weiß,
Obs mit dem Wasser rieseln soll, das Wasser,
Obs mit dem Feuer himmelan soll lecken. (I 326)

(I thought till now that Nature knows but force
and counterforce, and no third power besides.
Whatever quenches fire will not bring water
Seething to a boil, nor vice-versa.
Yet here appears a deadly foe of each,
Upon whose coming, fire no longer knows
Whether to trickle with the floods, nor water
Whether to leap with heaven-licking flame.) (Agee 8, 9)

Odysseus' monologue is bracketed by his demands for a helmet full of water and

his acknowledgment on receiving it. Just as Odysseus is dependent upon water – in its proper element – for his survival, so too, these lines submit, is Greek society dependent upon rational thought for its good government and authority; thought based upon binary oppositions as elemental as fire and water. Anything other than this prescribed construct, as Diomedes exclaims, threatens „... den ganzen Griechenstamm\ Bis auf den Grund... zerspalten“ (“[t]o split all Greece down to its very roots” (9)) (I 327). Ironically, this same construct keeps the Greeks trapped in an untenable position, sidetracked in a battle that for them, Carol Jacobs notes, “makes no sense” (88). Odysseus’ tautological assumption of a binary world-view in which Penthesilea and the Amazons must ally either with the Greeks or the Trojans becomes a conclusion that ultimately appeals to a framework that constructs binaries – logical or not – that, moreover, manifests the Greeks’ greatest fear, the subsequent loss of Achilles and the Trojan War:¹²

Odysseus.

Sie muß, beim Hades! diese Jungfrau, doch,
Die wie vom Himmel plötzlich, kampferüstet,
In unsern Streit fällt, sich darin zu mischen,
Sie muß zu einer der Parteien sich schlagen;
Und uns die Freundin müssen wir sie glauben,
Da sie sich Teukrischen die Feindin zeigt.

Antilochus.

Was sonst, beim Styx! Nichts anders gibts. (I 324)

(Odysseus

She has no choice, this maiden! Having dropped
From heaven, clad for war, into our midst
To mingle in our fight—what choice has she,
Except to side with one against the other?
She must, by Hades! And we likewise must
Presume her friendly, since she battles Troy.

¹² Carol Jacobs argues that *Penthesilea*’s twenty-four scenes are a “carefully placed wedge” within the twenty-four books of Homer’s *Iliad*, in which, it is said, “[w]ithout Achilles, Pergamon’s walls... will not fall” and the Trojan War would be lost: “The Rhetorics of Feminism,” *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Bronte, Kleist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 86, 88.

Antilochus

Why, yes, by the river Styx! It clearly follows.) (Agee 6)

If Agee's translation of Antilochus' reply downplays Kleist's emphatic „Nichts anders gibts“ (“Nothing other exists”) and, in so doing, downplays the Greeks' deeply troubled response to the Amazon attack, Hans Neuenfels' made-for-television drama, *Heinrich Penthesilea von Kleist* (1983), does the opposite. Organized as a ‘play within a play,’ Neuenfels' film collages together contemporary Berlin along with Neuenfels himself in several shots, a mix of nationalities from different eras, scenes from another of Kleist's tragedies, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, as well as including Kleist, played by the actress who plays Penthesilea – which accounts for Neuenfels' title – looking through a window at a display of his works before finally placing on his brow the laurel wreath he had longed to wrest from Goethe during his lifetime (Miller 177). While the whole effect is a somewhat unsettling although fascinating medley of interactions in which Neuenfels explores and explodes gender/identity, author/work and time/place dichotomies, the production nonetheless sympathetically encapsulates the Greeks' overwhelming confusion and anxiety at the Amazon onslaught.

Neuenfels' dramatization opens with the Greeks solemnly entering into a room, one after the other, and carefully placing themselves around a map outlaying the tactical positions of the Greek and Amazon armies. Odysseus indicates first right then left, illustrating, as Jacobs comments, that the logic of war – any war – is “one of definable oppositions” (Jacobs 91), before finally losing his composure and shouting, “Was wollen diese Amazonen uns!?” (“What do these Amazons want with us!?”). With that the shot cuts to a smoke-filled montage of wounded and slain men, their comrades carrying them on stretchers or, unable to support their dead weight, falling with them in their arms –

Odysseus bending over to place his hand on the chest of one and withdrawing it covered in blood – while a drummer with powdered wig, rouged lips, sensitive and anguished, steps to the forefront and two soldiers, one carrying a flag, dance a minuet behind him. To all intents and purposes the scene is an embodiment of grief-stricken decorum in which the ritualized conventions of war have apparently been defiled.

This courtly and homoerotic tableau is brusquely interrupted by a piercing scream and the arrival of a Greek Captain recently returned from battle, the cause of his hysteria the Amazons' near-capture of Achilles. Adrastus' ensuing narration of Achilles' headlong flight from the Amazons and resultant crash is the climax to a sequence of events that begins with the formalized and familiar world of the Greeks and ends with them exiting in shock and disarray, their self-possession and convictions profoundly undermined. Furthermore, the Greeks intellectual and emotional 'fall,' or, to be more specific, the collapse of their cultural terms of reference, parallels Achilles':

Der Hauptmann.

[er rollt] Von eines Hügels Spitze scheu herab,
 Auf uns kehrt glücklich sich sein Lauf, wir senden
 Auf jauchzend ihm den Rettungsgruß schon zu:
 Doch es erstirbt der Laut im Busen uns,
 Da plötzlich jetzt sein Viergespann zurück
 Vor einem Abgrund stutzt, und hoch aus Wolken
 In grause Tiefe bäumend niederschaut.
 Vergebens jetzt, in der er Meister ist,
 Des Isthmus ganze vielgeübte Kunst:
 Das Roßgeschwader wendet, das erschrockne,
 Die Häupter rückwärts in die Geißelhiebe,
 Und im verworrenen Geschirre fallend,
 Zum Chaos, Pferd und Wagen, eingestürzt,
 Liegt unser Göttersohn, mit seinem Fuhrwerk,
 Wie in der Schlinge eingefangen da. (I 330)

(Captain

...Rolling his chariot down a fearful incline,
 Racing in our direction, with our cry

Of jubilation welcoming his rescue:
 Alas, the sound soon dies within our hearts,
 For suddenly his horses pull up short,
 Rearing before a sheer abyss, staring
 Down from the clouds into a grisly depth.
 Vain now his mastery of the Isthmian art,
 So often and with such perfection practiced:
 The team of four throw back their heads and stagger
 Backward against the lashings of the whip,
 And stumble in the slackened harness, falling,
 A chaos of collapsing wheels and horses,
 And in their midst, the son of gods, Achilles,
 Supine and powerless, caught as in a snare.) (Agee 14)

Not only is the Amazon attack unnatural and a perversion of all that is normal from the Greek perspective, but also implied by Odysseus and later plainly stated by Achilles, the Amazons themselves are equally aberrant. In order to propagate their race the Amazons must foray into the world of men and seek the one they ‘love’ on bloody battlegrounds (Agee 92), whereby each Amazon is obliged to conquer and take prisoner a mate for the Feast of Roses, a ritualized orgy in which the women become pregnant (Agee 97, 98). Following this festival, the men must then return home lest the Amazons fall in love with their captives and, like their mothers before them, are subjugated (Agee 98). On hearing this account of Amazon courtship, Achilles responds by asking: „Und woher quillt, von wannen ein Gesetz\ Unweiblich, du vergibst mir, unnatürlich\ Dem übrigen Geschlecht der Menschen fremd?“ (“What place, what time could issue such a law\ Unfeminine, forgive me, unnatural\ So foreign to all other tribes and nations?” (92)) (I 387). That Achilles conflates the customary mores of his own nation with natural law appears to elude him. As Ruth Angress cautions, one ought to be careful before speaking of what is “natürlich” and “unnatürlich” within this play (122). But if, in Odysseus and Achilles’ eyes, the Amazons contravene accepted Greek precepts, what – or more

appropriately, whom – might these two men consider ‘natural’?

Referring to Homer’s *Iliad* and the onset of the Trojan War, Jacobs identifies Helen as the ideal representation of Greek values: “[c]ommon sense has it that man is man, and woman woman; which is to say, a woman like Helen, [a] clear opposite of manly virtues, the passive object of passion, rape, desire, jealousy, and [finally] war” (88). Penthesilea, on the other hand, Jacobs asserts, “is about, and goes about, making the ground precarious for the staging of love and war” (85, 86) and, in consequence, signifies a third place or term – “the ‘Drittes,’ which violates the natural law declaring power and its resistance as the only conceivable forces” (92). As such, Jacobs remarks, Penthesilea challenges “the principal concepts on which Homer’s text and rational thought are based” (86). And yet, even though Jacobs’ correlation between gender and binary oppositions to a certain extent implies¹³ a relationship with dominant ideology – as do Blok, Mahlendorf and Hoverland – for Judith Butler dominant ideology and gender constructs are not in any way exclusive of one another. That is to say, what falls inside or outside normative parameters is arguable.

Butler’s overriding agenda, Sarah Salih points out – an agenda not only political but also deeply ethical – is to “valorize contingency, unknowingness and unrealizability themselves” as constitutive parts of a radical project that both seeks to resist and extend “discursive norms by which subjects are currently defined” (Salih 6). In keeping with Salih’s observations, Kleist and Butler make interesting bedfellows, for, as Ilse Graham notes, Kleist suffered from a “deep ontological insecurity, born of a defective sense of

¹³ Discussing gender and feminist perspectives, Michel Chaouli mentions that, despite its title “The Rhetorics of Feminism,” Jacobs’ chapter “says not a word about feminism, leaving it to the reader to make the connections”: “Devouring Metaphor: Disgust and Taste in Kleist’s *Penthesilea*,” *German Quarterly* 69, 2 (Spring 1996): 140.

identity” (Graham 13). If Graham’s pronouncement of Kleist is somewhat harsh, still, it is true that he longed to ameliorate this insecurity. In an ironic reflection that says as much about contemporary society’s latent fears – at least from Butler’s perspective – as Kleist’s, Graham further comments:

The [problem] arises [as to] what sort of a world a person needs who so profoundly lacks an anchorage within himself. The answer is that he requires a world that shall be a stable [sic] and solid vis-à-vis to his own mutability. He needs a world of objects that are reliably ‘there’ so as to demarcate the fluctuating frontiers of the self. (13)

In other words, despite Kleist and Butler’s seemingly antagonistic frames of reference or methodologies, they ask the same questions.¹⁴

Why, Butler wonders, is the breakdown or collapse of gender binaries “so monstrous, so frightening that it must be held to be definitionally impossible...?” (*Gender Trouble* viii-ix). Butler’s response to this question is that gender configurations “are set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (12). If gender identity is linguistically and culturally presupposed, so too, Butler submits, is any identity based upon the body (12). According to Butler, sex, namely, male-female, which is seen to cause gender, masculine-feminine, and which, in turn, purportedly causes the “heterosexualization of desire,” is a fictive binary (24).¹⁵ To be precise, the “tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible ‘sex’ ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations” (201).

¹⁴ I am not alone in realizing that a critical dialogue between Kleist and Butler exists. Grant McAllister briefly mentions Butler in relation to Kleist’s “gender confusion”: *Kleist’s Female Leading Characters and the Subversion of Idealist Discourse: Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) 172.

¹⁵ For this summary, I also consulted David Gauntlett’s website (University of Westminster). 12 February 2007. <<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>>.

Citing, almost verbatim, Nietzsche's account of how metaphor becomes anthropomorphic truth or reality,¹⁶ Butler maintains that "[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 45). Lest Butler's ideas concerning the body be rejected out of hand, she reminds us that not only are "the power relations that infuse the biological sciences... not easily reduced" but that the medico-legal alliance that emerged during nineteenth century Europe "spawned categorical fictions that could not be anticipated in advance" (44). There is "no gender identity behind the expressions of gender," Butler contends, but rather that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34).

While Butler employs the words 'gender' and 'identity' somewhat loosely or interchangeably, she does so on the basis that both are inseparably linked together and both erroneously delineated:

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (23)

More explicitly, as drag queens, lesbians, and bisexuals, as well as those who cross-dress and are transgendered exemplify, the idea of a fixed or core identity simply is not true (24). Butler defends this hypothesis by arguing that within lesbian and gay cultures their gender practices often thematize what is looked upon as 'natural' in parodic contexts

¹⁶ Nietzsche contends that anthropomorphic truth is only "the metamorphosis of the world into man," whereby metaphors are perceived as "the things themselves." This "hardening and congealing of a metaphor guarantees absolutely nothing concerning its necessity and exclusive justification": "On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense," *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, Trans. Daniel Breazale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979) 85, 87.

(xxx) and that this “replication of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (43). In short, Butler proposes that, “Gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original,” but instead, “as copy is to copy” (43), or, alluding to Salih’s synopsis of Butler’s ideas on performativity, “ontological stability” is an illusion (Salih 11).

Butler’s desire for a more fluid conceptualization of gender identity is, she freely admits, a dogged effort to circumvent the habitual and often mundane violence of a linguistically determined natural or ‘presumptive’ heterosexuality – which Butler elsewhere labels as ‘compulsory’ – within a “masculinist sexual economy” (Butler xxxiii).¹⁷ In turn, these constitutive categories both buttress and reinforce “the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (46). To be exact, Butler continues – and mentioning her own “tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes” (xx) – these “ideal morphologies of sex” condemn those who “fail to approximate the norm... to a death within life” (xxi).

Consequently, if Butler’s analysis of the binary gender frame as oppositions of supremacy and control, or its painful flipside, the experience of outsider-status or that of one subordinate to another strikes a familiar note, it is because, I suggest, Kleist’s play inhabits both of these worlds. Rather than subscribing to Carol Jacobs’ assertion that Penthesilea occupies a third place outside of opposing binaries – but neither dismissing it

¹⁷ What Butler is specifically alluding to and taking issue with is Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist anthropology (and any feminist theory that appropriates this premise) and its “problematic” nature (women)/ culture (men) distinction in which women are “given as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institution of marriage,” in order to affect the incest taboo, as well as, Butler claims, consolidate “the homoerotic unconscious of [a] phallogocentric economy”: “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix,” *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006) 50, 52, 55.

out of hand – an argument could be made that both Penthesilea and Achilles ‘wildly oscillate’ between the dictates of their respective cultural ideologies and ‘laws’ – the Amazons’ customs simply an inversion of Greek tenets – in which the principle script is that of domination versus defeat and subservience.¹⁸ Moreover, Kleist replicates this oscillation by means of a frenetic back and forth staging within his tragedy or, as Linda Hoff-Purviance declares, “... the dialectical alternations of *personae* on stage” (Hoff-Purviance 46). If the teichoscopic narration of Achilles’ fall, which Neuenfels precedes with Adrastus’ frantic shriek, is an example of Hoff-Purviance’s thesis of alternating on-stage *personae*, the scene that follows Achilles’ near-disastrous tumble exemplifies the drama’s convoluted and furiously-paced tension.

Having managed to disentangle himself and right both his chariot and horses, Achilles flees towards the Greek encampment with Penthesilea in full pursuit while her band of women trail behind her. In an implicitly erotic scene that returns to the bow and arrow motif – and ostensibly calls into question Hoverland’s conclusion on the impossibility of integral male-female components – Penthesilea is both a receptacle to the rush of air that she draws into her lungs and a projectile that seeks to penetrate:

Der Ätolier. Seht! wie sie mit den Schenkeln
 Des Tigers Leib inbrünstiglich umarmt!
 Wie sie, bis auf die Mähne herabgebeugt,
 Hinweg die Luft trinkt lechzend, die sie hemmt!
 Sie fliegt, wie von der Senne abgeschossen:
 Numidsche Pfeile sind nicht hurtiger!
 Das Heer bleibt keuchend, hinter ihr, wie Köter,
 Wenn sich ganz aus die Dogge streckt, zurück!
 Kaum daß ihr Federbusch ihr folgen kann! (I 335)

¹⁸ For this line of thought I am indebted to Matthew Pollard’s reference to Kleist’s tragedy as a drama of “sodomasochistic oscillation between submission and domination”: “Reading and Writing the Architecture of the Body in Kleist’s *Penthesilea*, *Body Dialectics in the Age of Goethe*, eds. M. Henn and H. Pausch, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik* 55 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003) 372.

(Etolian

Look! With what eagerness
 She hugs her thighs around her charger's body!
 How, parched with thirst, bent low into the mane,
 She sucks into herself the hindering air!
 She's flying as if shot straight from an iron bow!
 Numidian arrows don't fly half as swiftly!
 The army lags behind, like trotting curs
 Left panting in a full-stretched greyhound's wake!
 Her plume itself can hardly follow her!) (Agee 20)

Achilles, too, if one customizes Hoverland's comparison of the arch's curve to a breast, becomes feminized through his manoeuvre to evade her: „... lenkt im Bogen spielend noch!“ (“...turning in an arc as if to tease her” (Agee 21)) (I 335). Together Achilles and Penthesilea form anatomically inverse parts of a bow and arrow; an image that is honed even more so when Achilles, like the snap of a tensed bow, abruptly wrenches his team aside and Penthesilea shoots past him (21). If Achilles' and Penthesilea's gender slippage or role-reversal – one of only two instances within Kleist's play – foreshadows the drama's tragic outcome, nonetheless, this iconography also exposes the violent parameters within which Penthesilea and Achilles woo one another. Parameters that Helmut Schneider describes as a “spectacular choreography of standing and falling” (Schneider 509).

Kleist's “recurrent stage directions,” Schneider argues, may be regarded as a gestural language that creates a configuration of movement – and here he includes the German word *Bewegungsmuster* that roughly translates as a model or pattern of bodily motion and/or emotion – in which “individual figures serve as components of an overriding scenic arrangement” (503). Furthermore, this gestural language, with its “arbitrary, temporal, and contingent character,” wholly subjugates the individual to the circumstances or event, and is, Schneider observes, the hallmark of Kleist's writing

and all-consuming love come about? For Ingrid Stipa the impetus or spark that initiates it are the final words of Penthesilea's dying mother, Otrerë (Stipa 31), who, in one of the more enigmatic scenes in Kleist's drama, foretells that Penthesilea's 'betrothal' garland will adorn Achilles' brow (Agee 100).

That said, Stipa qualifies her observation with the proviso that the credit for Penthesilea's deviation from established Amazon courting customs does not belong to any one individual, per se, but rather to Lacan's "discourse of the Other" (Stipa 31).¹⁹ With this in mind, Stipa remarks, any readings of *Penthesilea* – and here Stipa is primarily referring to Kleist's heroine – which are based upon an ideology of the self that "presupposes a subject in control of its destiny" are flawed: readings, for example, that claim the play's tragic consequences stem from an "unresolved conflict between private and public interests, or from the fatal struggle between the intrinsic (true) and extrinsic (false) self" (32). Rather, Stipa argues, Kleist presents a different subject, "one who misspeaks" and "one whose desire to possess the other... is so overwhelming that it will stop at nothing to attain its goal, not even mutual destruction." (32). Or more expressly, a subject prey to both language and libidinal drives, who, as I understand Stipa, is without recourse from either (37).

While it may be difficult to invalidate Stipa's somber conclusions or prognosis – that the metamorphosis from "reason to non-reason" is, at any given moment, determined by Kleist's *Zufall* (chance) and Lacan's Other (37)²⁰ – nevertheless, it seems to me that

¹⁹ Dylan Evans specifies Lacan's 'discourse of the Other' as "the unconscious," in which "speech and language are beyond one's conscious control": *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2001) 133.

²⁰ Here I take Stipa's usage of 'The Lacanian Other' to include: "both another subject, in his radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order [relating to the phallus and linguistic structure] which mediates the relationship with that other subject." Embedded in this concept is Lacan's "barred

Stipa's treatment of Otrere's part in Penthesilea's downfall – and, subsequently, Achilles, too – risks ignoring questions that could offer greater insight into the two protagonists' situation. Why, for example, does the Queen of a band of women who had, as Mohammad Kowsar firmly states: "... sworn militant enmity toward the male of the species, used men only to propagate their own kind [and who, accordingly,] eliminated sons at birth" (Kowsar 62), break with her society's cardinal rule forbidding individual identification of prospective mates or, to quote Carol Jacobs, "the interdiction against naming the particular object of desire" (96)?:

Prothoe. So nannte sie den Namen dir, Otrere?
 Penthesilea. – Sie nannt ihn, Prothoe, wie's einer Mutter
 Wohl im Vertraun zu ihrer Tochter ziemt.
 Achilles. Warum? Weshalb? Verbeut dies das Gesetz?
 Penthesilea. Es schickt sich nicht, daß eine Tochter Mars'
 Sich ihren Gegner sucht, den soll sie wählen,
 Den ihr der Gott im Kampf erscheinen läßt. –
 Doch wohl ihr, zeigt die Strebende sich da,
 Wo ihr die Herrlichsten entgegenstehn.
 – Nicht, Prothoe? (I 394)

(Prothoë
 And so she named him to you, Queen Otrere?
 Penthesilea
 She named him, Prothoë, as well a mother
 May take her child into her confidence.
 Achilles
 Why should she not? Or does the law forbid this?
 Penthesilea
 It is not fitting for a daughter of Mars
 To seek out her opponent; she must choose
 The one sent by the god to stand against her.–
 If in her zeal, however, she shows herself
 Before the princeliest foes, so much the better.
 –Is that not so, Prothoë?) (Agee 100)

And, were the last three lines of the text interpreted as Penthesilea's apology for Otrere's

Other," another name for the first incomplete 'other' or mother [based upon Freudian thought which delineates sexual difference in terms of the mother's lack of penis] (Stipa 133).

transgression of Amazonian law, of necessity, one must ask – what kind of a mother would set a beloved daughter up for such hubris? The answer, perhaps, is one who has been castrated.

Any theory that is predicated upon woman's 'lack,' that is to say, a theory that proposes a psychic structure in which "one person plays subject and the other must serve as... object" is, according to Jessica Benjamin, a structure that forms "the fundamental premise of domination" (Benjamin 7, 8).²¹ This configuration may be traced, Benjamin comments, from the relationship between mother and infant and the infant's earliest awareness of sexual difference into adult eroticism and male and female cultural images that, even now, espouse Freud's model of development, the Oedipus complex, which identifies "girls as object and boys as subject" – an opposition, Benjamin asserts, that "distorts the very ideal of the individual" and "preserves the structure of domination even while it appears to embrace equality" (8). The locus for this structure is the rapprochement phase that an infant enters at around fourteen months (34), in which the assertion of the self (omnipotence/independence) and the need to be 'recognized' by the 'other' (vulnerability/dependence) conflict – a concept that Hegel articulated, Benjamin observes, long before the arrival of modern psychology and its exploration of the self (31).

So as to further comprehend Benjamin's argument, it would be useful to briefly recapitulate what Hegel means by 'recognition' and for this I will turn to a lecture by

²¹ Benjamin's study not only focuses on the problem of domination, but also asks why an individual participates in his or her submission within the system of domination: *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) 9.

Alexandre Kojève:²²

[To] speak of the “origin” of Self-Consciousness is necessarily to speak of a fight to the death for “recognition.”

Without this fight to the death for pure prestige, there would never have been human beings on earth. Indeed, the human being is formed only in terms of a Desire directed toward another Desire, that is – finally – in terms of a desire for recognition. Therefore, the human being can be formed only if at least two of these Desires confront one another. Each of the two beings endowed with such a Desire is ready to go all the way in pursuit of its satisfaction; that is, is ready to risk its life – and, consequently, to put the life of the other in danger – in order to be “recognized” by the other, to impose itself on the other as the supreme value; accordingly, their meeting can only be a fight to the death. And it is only in and by such a fight that the human reality is begotten, formed, realized, and revealed to itself and to others. Therefore, it is realized and revealed only as ‘recognized’ reality.

In order that the human reality come into being as “recognized” reality, both adversaries must remain alive after the fight. Now, this is possible only on the condition that they behave differently in this fight. By irreducible, or better, by unforeseeable or “undeducible” acts of liberty, they must constitute themselves as unequals in and by this very fight. Without being predestined to it in any way, the one must fear the other, must give in to the other, must refuse to risk his life for the satisfaction of his desire for “recognition.” He must give up his desire and satisfy the desire of the other: he must “recognize” the other without being “recognized” by him. Now, “to recognize” him thus is “to recognize” him as his Master and to recognize himself and to be recognized as the Master’s Slave. (Kojève 143, 144)

Although Benjamin concurs with Hegel that recognition is essential to human existence, her definition of the term is far different. So overarching is this concept, Benjamin points out, that there are any number of “near-synonyms” for it: “to recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar” and, Benjamin concludes, “love” (15-16). Hegel, however, Benjamin claims, “posits a self that has no intrinsic need for the

²² Alexandre Kojève was a Marxist-Hegelian philosopher whose readings of Hegel “influenced an entire generation of French philosophers, including Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, and Lacan.” Alexander Kojève, *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology*, “Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,” eds. William McNeill and Karen S. Feldman (Malden: Blackwell, 1998) 141. I have excerpted a portion of Kojève’s commentary based on Section A of Chapter IV of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Autonomy and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Mastery and Slavery.”

other, but uses the other only as a vehicle of self-certainty” (33).²³ Moreover, she notes, this “monadic, self-interested ego is essentially the one posited in classical psychoanalytic theory” (33). For Hegel and Freud, Benjamin continues, the self “begins in a state of ‘omnipotence’ (Everything is an extension of me and my power),” which the self wishes to affirm through its encounter with the other but cannot do so, for “to affirm itself it must acknowledge the other, and to acknowledge the other would be to deny the absoluteness of the self” (33). From Hegel’s perspective, Benjamin maintains, “it is simply a given” that this movement between self assertion and recognizing the other, “*must* break down; it is fated to produce an insoluble conflict;”²⁴ a conflict that culminates in a master-slave dynamic (32) and which may be reversed, but is never reciprocal or equal (62). However, Benjamin counters that domination – and its complement, submission – is the result of “a breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition...” (12). The operative words here are ‘tension’ and ‘mutual,’ which, in order to explain their meaning, Benjamin revisits the relationship between mother and infant.

The “need for *mutual* recognition, the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other,” Benjamin puts forward, is what many theories of the self have overlooked (23). In emphasizing separation-individuation over relatedness to others (25),

²³ Butler sees “a different Hegel from the one found in Benjamin’s work.” In Butler’s view: “Whatever self emerges in the course of [Hegel’s] *Phenomenology of the Spirit*... it is transformed through its encounter with alterity, not in order to return to itself, but to become a self it never was. Difference casts it forth into an irreversible future. To be a self is, on these terms, to be at a distance from who one is, not to enjoy the prerogative of self-identity (what Hegel calls self-certainty), but to be cast, always, outside oneself, Other to oneself”: *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 148.

²⁴ Benjamin includes a footnote explaining why this tension has to break down: “... for Hegel every tension between oppositional elements carries the seeds of its own destruction and transcendence (*Aufhebung*) into another form. (...) Without this process of contradiction and dissolution, there would be no movement, change, or history.” However, Benjamin adds, “we do not need to accept this conclusion in order to draw on Hegel’s understanding of this process...” (Benjamin 32).

Benjamin goes on to say, no psychological theory has satisfactorily articulated the mother's independent identity, and, therefore, even those accounts of the mother-child interaction which consider parental responsiveness invariably revert to a view of the mother as the baby's "first object of attachment, and later, the object of desire" (23). Rather, Benjamin contends, the mother must retain an independent centre outside her child, for only then, as the child increasingly establishes his or her own independent center, will the mother's recognition "be meaningful... to the extent that it reflects her own equally separate subjectivity" (24).

In other words, Benjamin's hypothesis is an attempt to revoke gender polarity with its concomitant binary or splitting²⁵ that idealizes the father as a "paternal ideal of separation" and denigrates the mother as a "seductive threat to autonomy" (135), in favour of paradox, in which two subjects negotiate and re-negotiate the tension between independence and dependence – an interaction Benjamin refers to as intersubjectivity (29). The inability to sustain this paradox, Benjamin insists, has had disastrous consequences for both men and women, specifically, the damage inflicted on the male psyche by the repudiation of femininity is analogous to woman's 'lack' (161). As such, Benjamin is saying two things: the first is that "beneath the sensationalism of power and powerlessness" is a longing for recognition (84); the second is that recognition is "organized within the frame of gender" (104).

To be sure, I have grossly simplified the premise of Benjamin's argument. Still, Kleist pre-empts her. If, as Stipa proposes, Otrerë's death-bed injunction is the catalyst

²⁵ Technically, Benjamin comments, splitting pertains to a defense mechanism against aggression, but in a broader sense, splitting represents "any breakdown of the whole, in which parts of self or other are split off and projected elsewhere... [indicating] a polarization, in which opposites— especially good and bad— can no longer be integrated..." (Benjamin 63).

that sets in motion Penthesilea's ferocious chase of Achilles and the drama's subsequent tragic progression, in keeping with Benjamin, Penthesilea's ensuing remonstrance is territory disturbingly familiar:

Ist das die Siegerin, die schreckliche,
 Der Amazonen stolze Königin,
 Die seines Busens erzne Rüstung mir,
 Wenn sich mein Fuß ihm naht, zurücker spiegelt?
 Fühl ich, mit aller Götter Fluch Beladene,
 Da rings das Heer der Griechen vor mir flieht,
 Bei dieses einzgen Helden Anblick mich
 Gelähmt nicht, in dem Innersten getroffen,
 Mich, *mich* die Überwundene, Besiegte?
 Wo ist der Sitz mir, der kein Busen ward,
 Auch des Gefühls, das mich zu Boden wirft?
 Ins Schlachtgetümmel stürzen will ich mich,
 Wo der Hohnlächelnde mein harret, und ihn
 Mir überwinden, oder leben nicht! (I 343)

(Is this the conquering Queen, the fearsome one,
 Who's mirrored back, as soon as I approach him,
 By the steel harness covering his breast?
 This, the proud empress of the Amazons?
 Oh cursed by all the gods! Do I not feel,
 Just when the Greeks are fleeing me all around,
 That the mere sight of this one, single hero
 Could touch and paralyze my inmost soul
 And make me, *me*, the conquered one, the vanquished?
 Where does this feeling come from that has power
 To cast me down, yet has no breast to live in?
 I'll throw myself into the fray of battle,
 Where, with his mocking smile, he waits for me,
 And overcome him, or else live no more.) (Agee 31-32)

But what Kleist's Amazon Queen is unable to fathom – or, in the reflection of Achilles' armour, see²⁶ – Kleist has already answered. Returning to Penthesilea's catastrophic fall and Achilles' close escape, the Dolopian watching these events declares:

²⁶ Chris Cullens and Dorothea von Mücke offer the perspective that what paralyzes Penthesilea when she looks at Achilles "is the sight of her own mirror image... [which is] revealed to be dependent on the gaze of an other who produces this mirror image. And to the degree that she can never be identical with this gaze, her identity manifests itself as a fundamentally split one": "Love in Kleist's *Penthesilea* and *Käthchen von Heilbronn*," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 63 (1989): 465.

Ihn schützen alle Götter!
 Um drei Pfeilschüsse flog er fort und drüber!
 Kaum mehr mit Blicken kann sie ihn erreichen,
 Und der Gedanke selbst, der strebende,
 Macht ihr im Atemlosen Busen halt! (I 337)

(Beloved of all the gods!
 Three arrow shots away he's flown, and more!
 Scarcely with shaded eyes can she still reach him,
 And thought itself comes of a breathless halt
 Within her heart, arrested in its craving!) (Agee 23)

Supposing, as I submit, that Penthesilea's craving heart is akin to longing for recognition and at heart of Penthesilea and Achilles' all-or-nothing courtship is a dialectic between subordination and submission, in which 'otherness,' or, to be exact, the gendered splitting of subject and object, prevents or impedes recognition, might such a reading invoke, as Jost Hermand complains, "anthropological generalities" that preclude "the specificity of Kleist's perspective... [and] the uniqueness of his familial, educational, and cultural background...?" (Hermand 54).²⁷ Possibly. And yet Benjamin provides a theoretical setting to what Kleist's drama conceptualizes – a profound challenge to the normative values of Enlightenment ethos. With Hermand in mind, a parallel may be drawn between what Benjamin refers to as "societal rationality" and the "hegemony of impersonal organization" supported by male domination, which "determines all the major binary oppositions: public and private, universal and particular, rational and empathetic, subject and object" (Benjamin 216, 217) and Ruth Klüger's observations regarding Kleist's „Prinzip der Auseinandersetzung“ ("principle of contention") (Klüger 163).

Kleist, Klüger argues:

²⁷ Hermand, in particular, censures Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, which, he claims, are apparently "beyond any historical conditionality whatsoever": "Kleist's *Penthesilea*: Battleground of Gendered Discourses," *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich von Kleist*, Ed. Bernd Fischer (New York: Camden House, 2003) 54.

zitiert, plagiiert, parodiert und variiert andere, manchmal in geheimer und privater Anspielung, dann wieder offen und vor breitem Publikum. Kleist hat sich auf eine ganz besondere, rebellische Art und Weise mit seinen Vorgängern geschlagen, mit jener älteren Generation, der die Vernunfts- und Menschenrechts-Thesen der Aufklärung noch als verbindlich galten, auch wenn sie ihr in pessimistischen Momenten nicht immer recht durchführbar erschienen.

(quotes, plagiarizes, parodies and modifies others, sometimes as secret and private allusion, then again in the open and for a broad public. Kleist had an especially rebellious character and manner with his predecessors that chipped away at that older generation who up-held the Enlightenment thesis of human rights and rationality, regardless of whether, in their more pessimistic moments, this thesis did not always seem feasible.) (164)

In other words, despite the contemporaneity of Benjamin's argument, and Butler's too, the premise of their hypotheses, which calls into question obdurately presumptive and hierarchical binaries – the very essence of Enlightenment precepts – is, if not in sympathy with Kleist, then similarly preoccupied. Beneath these Enlightenment precepts, that is to say, the guise of mastery and domination and “irritable reaching” after certitude (Benjamin 10), is, Benjamin suggests, a profound defenselessness (161). In concert with Kleist's ‘catastrophic-idyll’ motif, therefore, were Penthesilea and Achilles' chaotic and frenzied chase of one another visualized as an act of falling and the space where the two lovers meet as momentary suspension before the fall's inevitable conclusion, this suspended moment might be considered one of utmost vulnerability (Fitzpatrick 90.)²⁸

²⁸ I am indebted to Andrea Fitzpatrick for these ideas, which she discusses in her article on “the falling deaths of the September 11 victims;” specifically, Richard Drew's iconic and disturbing seventh frame of Norberto Hernandez's long trajectory from one of the twin towers: “The Movement of Vulnerability: Images of Falling and September 11,” *Art Journal* 66, 4 (Winter 2007): 90.

Chapter 3: Momentary Suspension

To go against socially accepted ethos and, as Benjamin points out, risk exposure and defenselessness takes an inordinate amount of courage – or a certain degree of insanity. Even so, what society decrees is logical or rational or what is not, are not necessarily exempt from one another. Odysseus, annoyed over Achilles' near capture and Prothoë troubled by Penthesilea's refusal to go back to Themyscra with their prisoners, each, in turn, endeavours to reason with their errant charges. Odysseus informs Achilles of King Agamemnon's orders to return posthaste to Troy whereby they will ensnare Penthesilea between the two opposing armies and, in so doing, force her to „... wem sie die Freundin sei, erklären“ (“declare whose friend she is” (Agee 29)) (I 341). At the same time, Prothoë beseeches Penthesilea not to act impetuously and assures the Amazon Queen that she has positioned the army so well that Achilles is now cut off by Scamander (Agee 34). But, should he continue his pursuit, Prothoë vows, he will not succeed in rescuing any of the captives nor „... kein Gelächter einer Jungfrau stören“ (“disturb a maiden's laughter from afar” (Agee 34)) (I 346). Rather than assume, however, as Elisabeth Krimmer does, that Odysseus and Prothoë's strategies are wholly political in character, namely, the Greek defense or conquest of territory versus the Amazon propagation of their kind, and that Kleist's two protagonists, “the only ones who have lost sight of all political goals” (Krimmer 77), one might ask if there are any further grounds for Odysseus and Prothoë's tactical maneuverings?

How, for example, might Odysseus' loathing and animosity towards Penthesilea be construed or interpreted? Outlining Agamemnon's planned ambush of the Amazons in the Scamander valley, Odysseus tells Achilles:

Beim Gott des Donners! Nirgends, oder dort
 Kühlst du die Brunst dir ab, die, rastlos drängend,
 Gleich einem jungen Spießer, dich verfolgt:
 Und meinen besten Segen schenk ich dir.
 Denn mir ein Greul auch, in den Tod verhaßt,
 Schweift die Megäre, unsre Taten störend,
 Auf diesem Feld herum, und gern möcht ich,
 Gesteh ich dir, die Spur von deinem Fußtritt
 Auf ihrer rosenblütten Wange sehn. (I 339)

(Ah, by the god of thunder! There or nowhere
 You'll cool the heat of that devouring, urgent
 Fire that pursues you like a rutting buck:
 And for this enterprise you have my blessing.
 For to me too, she's hateful unto death,
 The rampant fury, sweeping all about,
 Crossing our deeds, and I'll admit I'd like it
 If I could see the outline of your heel
 Imprinted on her rosy-petaled cheek.) (Agee 27)

At first deliberation, notwithstanding the excitable tone of Odysseus' declamation, there appears to be a clear-cut separation between the Greeks – or so Odysseus presumes – and what he deems the animal passions of Penthesilea and her tribe of women. If the demonstrability of this conclusion is threatened by Achilles' inability to hear Odysseus' words – intent as he is on shrugging off the Greek paradigm of reasonable behaviour – still, this serves merely to perplex Odysseus:

Odysseus.	Hast du gehört, Pelide,
Was wir dir vorgestellt?	
Achilles.	Mir vorgestellt?
Nein, nichts. Was wars? Was wollt ihr?	
Odysseus.	Was wir wollen?
Seltsam.– Wir unterrichteten von den Befehlen	
Dich der Atriden! (I 341)	

(Odysseus	
Achilles, did you hear	
The orders we conveyed to you?	
Achilles	Conveyed?
No, I heard nothing. What is it you want?	

Odysseus
 What we want? Strange— We told you what the sons
 Of Atreus want!) (Agee 28, 29)

Only later, when Achilles spurns Agamemnon's orders and swears not to cast his eyes on Pergamon's walls until he sets a bridal crown of gashes on Penthesilea's head (30), does Odysseus' perplexity and frustration turn to marked alarm. And yet, an aerial perspective, so to speak, of Odysseus and Prothoë's strategic plans imply that both parties do, in fact, share a point of reference – the Scamander valley – a tract of land that not only represents separation and entrapment, but also foreshadows the subsequent encounters of Kleist's two main protagonists. In that case, what might this common territory signify? Worth exploring, I believe, is the passage following Prothoë's condemnation of Penthesilea's lunacy to return to battle in order to bring the elusive Achilles to his knees (Agee 36):

Penthesilea. Das ist ja sonderbar und unbegreiflich!
 Was macht dich plötzlich denn so feig?
 Prothoe. Was mich?—
 Penthesilea. Wen überwandst du, sag mir an?
 Prothoe. Lykaon,
 Den jungen Fürsten der Arkadier.
 Mich dünkt, du sahst ihn.
 Penthesilea. So, so. War es jener,
 Der zitternd stand, mit eingeknicktem Helmbusch,
 Als ich mich den Gefangnen gestern—
 Prothoe. Zitternd!
 Er stand so fest, wie je dir der Pelide!
 Im Kampf von meinen Pfeilen heiß getroffen,
 Sank er zu Füßen mir, stolz werd ich ihn,
 An jenem Fest der Rosen, stolz, wie eine,
 Zu unserm heiligen Tempel führen können. (I 348)

(Penthesilea
 Why, this is most peculiar, quite confounding!
 What makes you suddenly afraid?
 Prothoë
 Afraid?)

underlying motivations make for no easy or clear-cut assumption that this is so. But fear of what? Treading with what I hope is discernment and sensitivity – for, in my view, ‘otherness’ and language constructs inform the terrible violence of this event – to return to my question, perhaps the answer may be found in Fitzpatrick’s treatise on the September 11 catastrophe and the images of those who fell to their deaths.

Citing Retort²⁹ and cultural theorist Susan Buck-Morss, Fitzpatrick remarks that one of the most incisive and forceful consequences of the terrorist attacks was “the exposure of the vulnerability of the state” and that what, in fact, disappeared on September 11 was “the apparent invulnerability, not only of US territory, but of US, and, indeed, Western hegemony” (Fitzpatrick 86). However, rather than focusing on the geopolitical repercussions or implications of these events, Fitzpatrick’s primary interest is vulnerability “at the individual level of embodied subjectivity”³⁰ – although, of course, she adds, not without acknowledging that “those individuals represent more encompassing images of nation-state vulnerability” (86). Accordingly, Fitzpatrick comments that:

When different media capture such fragile subjects, in liminal moments that cannot be adequately named, vulnerability becomes an issue of representation. This attention to vulnerability is neither prurient nor morbid. Vulnerability is a complex condition centrally tied to agency, to the subject’s ability to exert or extend itself in the world and to be recognized by others. Images of falling make acutely evident the body’s simultaneous potential for vulnerability and its capacity for agency. Images of falling challenge codes of representation on two significant levels: visually, in terms of the subject whose body is arrested by the medium; linguistically, in terms of the viewer’s ability to respond and identify what is seen. Vulnerability therefore implicates the subject of representation *and*

²⁹ Retort is a Berkeley-area collective, whose members include Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts (Fitzpatrick 86).

³⁰ Subjectivity for Fitzpatrick involves “language, images, cultural and political institutions and their discourses, names and identity categories.” Among other things, Fitzpatrick is interested in extending “the notion of subjectivity to the dead [and] to show how they are acutely vulnerable to representational violence” (Fitzpatrick 86).

the viewer: while the falling subject is left in a state of suspended animation in the image, the viewer is held in a state of speechlessness, unable to name what or whom is seen. (Fitzpatrick 85)

With these ideas in hand, there exists, I propose, a cross-over where Kleist and Fitzpatrick intersect. If, as Fitzpatrick contends, nation-state and individual vulnerability are one and the same, and implicated in its expression – or lack of it – is the culpability of language, as such, then, an analogy may be made between Fitzpatrick’s liminal³¹ moment and Kleist’s momentary suspension, in which Penthesilea and Achilles, for the first time, but not the last, meet without their armour. It is, however, a meeting predicated on an image and a lie, in which, I suggest, the stillness of the image and Drew’s frozen seventh frame of Norberto Hernandez’s long fall – as well as the complicity of language underlying both representations – are comparable.

In keeping with Josine Blok’s exposition, a fifth-century red-figure cup by the Penthesilea Painter, named after this particular work (Boardman and La Rocca 109), depicts Penthesilea fallen at the feet of Achilles who is plunging a sword into her breast. The focal-point of their engagement is the interchange of glances between the two, in which Achilles falls in love with Penthesilea at the very moment that he kills her. The cup’s “burden of intensity” and “violent pathos” is, according to Boardman and La Rocca, one of the great masterpieces of ancient art (107). Kleist rewrites the story that attends this illustration, without compromising any of its emotional and intellectual complexity. Following a violent clash between Kleist’s two protagonists, where they

³¹ There are numerous ways to interpret this word. I have elected to go with David Statt’s definition of limen (liminal) as “the threshold of a physiological or psychological response,” by which I understand Fitzpatrick to mean (and trust this is in keeping with her intention) a threshold that cannot be crossed: *The Concise Dictionary of Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1998) 20 May 2010 <<http://ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login?url=http://www.myilibrary.com?id=31891>>.

come together like „zween Donnerkeile\ Die aus Gewölken in einander fahren“ (“two thunderbolts colliding in mid-heaven” (Agee 51)) (I 359), Achilles does, undeniably, send Penthesilea reeling from her horse and, like his mythic counterpart, moved by her dying look, falls in love with her (Agee 51-52). But here any similarity to the original story ends.

Kleist’s Amazon Colonel witnessing Penthesilea’s defeat reports that Achilles, grief-stricken and cursing his own deed, woos Penthesilea back to life and, in reaction to Prothöe’s rescue of the unconscious Queen, throws down his sword and shield and tearing off his armour follows after her (52). To be sure, Achilles’ lack of armour is debatable, for even though he announces to the Amazons defending Penthesilea – who by an earlier command are forbidden to harm him – that he is in every sense a man disarmed, all the same, he does nothing to stop his fellow Greeks striking down several of their number or refrain from ordering the death of another (67-69). But this is not the only occasion of Achilles’ “restricted outlook” (Allan 152).

In an interim scene, with Prothöe in attendance, Penthesilea rallies, of sorts, but physically and psychologically traumatized – she asks Prothöe, how could Achilles strike her such a devastating blow? (Agee 54) – she is, nevertheless, torn between the dictates of Amazon society and her own longing for Achilles (55). Becoming increasingly disoriented (60-61), Penthesilea consequently loses touch with reality and again loses consciousness (64).³² Such is Penthesilea’s condition when Achilles comes across her. In

³² Anthony Stephens points out that, “[f]ainting is not uncommon in Kleist’s works, and usually signifies an incapacity of the individual consciousness to deal with the contradictions of experience.” Furthermore, according to Stephens, this “hiatus in experience [and] sudden loss of consciousness” alludes to “the fragmentation of the self,” which was not foreseen by writers and thinkers of the German Enlightenment, but common to twentieth-century fictions: *Heinrich von Kleist: The Dramas and Stories* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994) 119.

the following exchange, Achilles' response to Prothöe's plea that he declare himself Penthesilea's prisoner rather than she his, „Als bis ihr Geist dazu gerüstet steht“ (“at least until her spirit has put on its armor“ (Agee 75)) (I 374), is no less incongruous than his laying down of arms:

Achilles. Mein Will ist, ihr zu tun, muß ich dir sagen,
 Wie ich dem stolzen Sohn des Priam tat.
 Prothoe. Wie, du Entsetzlicher!
 Achilles. — Fürchtet sie dies?
 Prothoe. Du willst das Namenlos' an ihr vollstecken?
 Hier diesen jungen Leib, du Mensch voll Greuel,
 Geschmückt mit Reizen, wie ein Kind mit Blumen,
 Du willst ihn schändlich, einer Leiche gleich—?
 Achilles. Sag ihr, daß ich sie liebe. (I 374)

(Achilles
 My will, I have to tell you, is to treat her
 Just as I did King Priam's haughty son.
 Prothöe
 What was that, monster!
 Achilles —Is she afraid of that?
 Prothöe
 You would inflict the unspeakable upon her?
 This youthful body here, you man of horrors,
 Adorned with beauties like a child with flowers,
 You mean to drag it, like a corpse, in shame—?
 Achilles
 Tell her I love her.) (Agee 75)

This passage, Ruth Angress remarks, is difficult and possibly the best way to explain it is that Achilles, “out of some native sadism, is treating Prothöe cruelly before assuring her that he does not plan to kill the queen” (Angress 106). The alternative, Angress states, is that in Achilles' mind “the sexual act is a form of desecration” (106).³³

³³ Angress counters those critics who, even to this day, label Kleist's reading of the ancients as *ungriechisch*. She further comments that Kleist knew the *Iliad* in detail and in his play he calls repeated attention to Achilles' past, in which Achilles kills King Priam's son, Hector, and desecrates his body: “Kleist's Nation of Amazons,” *Beyond the Eternal Feminine: Critical Essays on Women and German Literature*, eds. Susan L. Cocalis and Kay Goodman (Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1982) 102.

To make matters “more intriguing and more difficult,” Angress continues, Prothöe follows the association; that is to say, she does not read Achilles’ threat as an intention to take Penthesilea’s life and subsequently, as he did Hector, refuse her a decent burial, but rather “she is thinking of something shameful analogous to *Leichenschändung* (“necrophilia”) (106).³⁴ Angress goes on to say that this combination of “veiled sexual hints and sadistic twists” not only makes the breaking of old mores compelling in a modern context, but persuades us, too, that what occurs between Kleist’s two protagonists is “das Namenlose,” which Angress describes as “a horror that includes all others in a potent combination of sex and violence” (106). In other words, the backdrop to Penthesilea and Achilles’ encounter is not innocuous. Neither, from my perspective, is their meeting proper.³⁵

If Achilles prefaces his avowal of love, as Angress specifies, using imagery of bodily desecration in reference to Hector, so, too, comparatively, does Penthesilea (105). Having recovered from her faint and believing Achilles her captive, Penthesilea wishes to know, induced perhaps by intuitive misgivings, whether Achilles is, indeed, the Peleid:

Sprich, wer den Größesten der Priamiden
Vor Trojas Mauern fällte, warst das du?
Hast du ihm wirklich, *du*, mit diesen Händen
Den flüchtgen Fuß durchkeilt, an deiner Achse
Ihn häuptlings um die Vaterstadt geschleift?–

³⁴ Dany Nobus’ scholarly treatise offers the insight that “the prime motivating factor behind necrophilia is the possession of an unresisting and unrejecting partner.” Moreover, Nobus suggests, if one extends the definition of necrophilia “to include all instances of love for the dead... the practice may be much more frequent than commonly assumed”: “Over My Dead Body: On the Histories and Cultures of Necrophilia,” *The Unconventional, The Disapproved & The Forbidden*, eds. Robin Goodwin and Duncan Cramer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) 185, 176.

³⁵ Cullens and von Mücke refer to Manfred Durzak’s article, „Das Gesetz der Athene und das Gesetz der Tanais: Zur Funktion des Mythischen in Kleists *Penthesilea*,“ wherein Durzak proposes that scene 15 of Kleist’s tragedy is “a utopian counterpoint to the entire play, analogous to the happy valley of the *Erdbeben in Chile*.” While I agree with Cullens and von Mücke that this scene does not present “an unproblematic utopian realm of transparent communication,” all the same, I do not consider Bohrer’s „Die Katastrophenszene (neben der Idylle)“ unsubstantiated (Cullens and von Mücke 462).

Sprich! Rede! Was bewegt dich so? Was fehlt dir? (I 384)

(The one that slew King Priam's greatest son
 Before the walls of Troy!—speak! Was it you?
 And was it you, *you*, who, with these hands, drove
 A wedge through that swift foot and dragged him headlong,
 Tied to your axle, around his father's city?
 Speak! Talk! What moves you so? What is the matter?) (Agee 88)

In reaction to Achilles' affirmative reply, still, Penthesilea is not entirely convinced of who he is, and only when Prothöe draws her attention to Achilles' armour, which his immortal mother, Thetis, „[b]ei dem Hephäst, des Feuers Gott, erschmeichelt“ (“won [b]y flattery from the god of fire, Hephaestos”), does she pronounce the „[u]nbändigster“ (“unbridled”) Achilles as hers (Agee 88) (I 384). While desecration and conquest bracket, as I propose they do, Penthesilea and Achilles' ‘suspended moment,’ it cannot be said that the moment itself is without its difficulty or complexity.

Chris Cullens and Dorothea von Mücke comment that instead of ideal communication and a resultant mutual understanding between Kleist's two lovers, what, in fact, transpires between them is a new round of misunderstandings and aggressiveness (Cullens and von Mücke 473). Achilles' observations on Penthesilea's narration of the Amazons' origins are not only misogynist, Cullens and von Mücke put forward, but as Penthesilea recites her personal history, Achilles becomes more detached and distant (474). While Achilles' culturally engendered misogyny is evident and already remarked upon, not quite so evident, however, is his detachment and distance. H.M. Brown, for example, submits that Penthesilea's explanatory account of her life emerges by way of Achilles' questions and promptings (Brown 61).³⁶ Nonetheless, despite Achilles'

³⁶ Brown's thesis goes one step further to speculate that Penthesilea is reluctant to reveal her individual story due to the rigidly repressive nature of an Amazon state that is a “backward-looking and fear-ridden

involvement, their dialogue, as Cullens and von Mücke note, ends in an impasse with Penthesilea wanting Achilles to go to Themiscrya and the “Rosenfest” and Achilles insisting that she go with him to Greece and marriage (Cullens and von Mücke 474). If ‘impasse,’ as it is so defined, is tantamount to a “blind alley; [a] position from which there is no escape” (McIntosh 606), how might Penthesilea and Achilles’ subsequent deadlock be interpreted? The answer, I believe, lies with Hector.

Just as Penthesilea and Achilles’ meeting begins with Hector’s desecration, so, also, does its break-up and dissolution. Penthesilea concludes her narrative by telling Achilles that as she drew near the banks of Scamander, she all but saw him felling Priam’s son in full flight, his face flushed high with victory as Hector’s bloodied head dragged behind him, Priam himself begging at Achilles’ tent, and that she wept hot tears „... wenn ich dachte\ Daß ein Gefühl doch, Unerbittlicher\ Den marmorharten Busen [ihm] durchzuckt“ (“...to think that through [his] breast\ Though hard as marble and devoid of mercy\ A feeling might still find its darting way” (Agee 102)) (I 396). She then reveals to Achilles that when she first set eyes upon him, at that same moment she knew, „[d]er Gott der Liebe hatte sich ereilt“ (“[t]he god of love had struck [her] with his arrow”) and then and there she resolved to win him or to die (Agee 102) (I 396). What ought to have happened next and what does not, referring to Hélène Cixous, is an expression of confidence between them (Cixous 63). Instead, Penthesilea’s disclosure of love is abruptly broken by her demand to know why Achilles is staring, while the stage directions convey that in the distance there is the sound of clashing weapons approaching (Agee 102).

This moment, preceding, as it does, the advance of the Greek and Amazon armies and Penthesilea's realization of Achilles' deception, is decisive. If it demonstrates Achilles' inability to transcend Penthesilea's 'otherness' and his own social inculcation, it also demonstrates Penthesilea's inability to see Achilles other than through the filter of Hector's defeat and, as Jean Wilson declares, her chauvinism of "the one who has overcome the one who overcame Hektor" (*Challenge* 146). What is going on here, Wilson asserts, is not simply a question of Achilles' treatment of Hector or Penthesilea's "unfeminine behaviour," but rather that both – and at this point Wilson broadens her argument – men and women, within their respective cultures, are forced to act in such a manner that prevents the achievement of their true potential (148). In other words, Wilson emphasizes, the existing generation of Amazons and Greeks in Kleist's tragedy remain "dumb before the word of tradition, which has become the dead letter of the law" (148). This cause and effect relationship between the two protagonists and the societies to which they belong is better appreciated, from my understanding of Wilson, in the cause and effect relationship that binds Hector, Achilles and Penthesilea together.

The Homeric Achilles' perverse handling of Hector's corpse, Wilson contends, "at some level questions the norms and values of his culture" (152). Citing Adam Parry's article, "The Language of Achilles," Wilson recounts that in the conventional heroic world, Achilles' slaying of Hector wins him great glory, even though, in reality, he fought to avenge the death of Patroklos and, for this reason, the glory society confers is meaningless to him (152). Achilles' tragedy, therefore, is that he has "no language with which to express his disillusionment... [and] can in no sense... leave the society which has become alien to him;" a state of affairs, Wilson claims, comparable to Penthesilea's

(152). Wilson further argues, like Angress, that Penthesilea's repeated approbation of Achilles' outrageous deed, as Angress effectively summarizes, "turns to imitation with Achilles the victim" (Angress 104).³⁷ And yet, neither Wilson nor Angress go on to pursue the ambivalent emotions that underscore this transgression, but which, in my view, surface later.³⁸ An ambivalence that begins to show itself in Penthesilea and Achilles' last exchange.

Returning to Penthesilea and Achilles' 'momentary suspension,' Cixous observes that in the brief hiatus in which Penthesilea and Achilles are together, there is "a kind of beautiful duo" (Cixous 63). Then, Cixous remarks:

... communication is cut, not magically and all at once, because Kleist has a very strong rapport with the real. The cut is determined in a thousand ways. There is an ephemeral moment of equilibrium that could be called the moment of grace. It is followed by disequilibrium and loss that do not have one and only one cause. (63)

As such, I submit that the break between Penthesilea's declaration of love and Achilles' 'stare' is, in keeping with Cixous' conjecture, the first cut in communication, which, furthermore, marks a psychological threshold, a 'liminal moment,' as it were, wherein an unnamed vulnerability and the breakdown of language – that is, what is said or what is not – are intimated. What occurs from here on, literalized by Penthesilea and Achilles' recurrent mutual wounding, is simply a progression of cuts.

Consequently, as Cixous proposes, now cognizant of Penthesilea's "historically phantasmatic necessity," namely, the "condition of capturing the man she loves [in order

³⁷ In conjunction with this summary, Angress notes that "the pity of Hector which is evident in Homer's account is quite lacking in Penthesilea's admiration for Hector's killer" (Angress 104).

³⁸ For example, Leonard Muellner explains the extreme grief that Achilles feels for Patroklos' death, which results in his violent abuse of Hector's body. Ultimately, however, a sympathetic identification between Achilles and Priam develops by way of the grief they feel over their respective losses: *The Anger of Achilles: Mênis in Greek Epic* (London: Cornell UP, 1996) 172–174.

to] raise him up again and love him,” Achilles is ready to divest himself of his own phantasms, desires and arms, and “to go over to the other side” (64). Or so he thinks – “the apprenticeship of the other that he is capable of making,” Cixous continues, “lacks a tiny something” (64). Towards this end, Achilles informs Diomedes that Penthesilea is in love with him and, „Beim Styx! beim ganzen Hades!“ (“By the Styx! By all of Hades!”) that he loves her too, and, thus, he has sent a herald to challenge Penthesilea to what he is convinced will be a mock battle (Agee 118) (I 406). Kleist critics have often and rightly taken Achilles’ arrogance and presumption in this matter to task. Little spoken of, however, is the loss of face that Achilles’ admission of love and intent costs him.

Wedged between Diomedes and Odysseus’ deprecating comments, both men leave little doubt as to their incredulity and contempt of Achilles. Diomedes tells Odysseus that Achilles has it in mind:

[Penthesilea] den Helm zerkeilen;
Gleich einem Fechter, grimmig sehn, und wüten;
Dem Schild aufdonnern, daß die Funken sprühen,
Und stumm ich, als ein Überwundener,
Zu ihren kleinen Füßen niederlegen. (407)

(...To split [Penthesilea’s] helmet;
Look fierce, and bluster, like a warrior;
Go pounding at her shield, make might sparks,
And mutely, as a man disarmed and vanquished,
Lay himself down before her dainty feet.) (Agee 120)

Odysseus, in turn, responds to Diomedes’ ridicule with a curl of his upper lip and a diatribe on Achilles’ madness (120). As the argument heats up, the increasing disaffection between Achilles and Odysseus yet again involves their conflict with Troy. When Odysseus demands to know if Achilles has forgotten their great fight, Achilles counters:

Wenn die Dardanerburg, Laertiade,
 Versänke, du verstehst, so daß ein See,
 Ein bläulicher, an ihre Stelle träte;
 Wenn graue Fischer, bei dem Schein des Monds,
 Den Kahn an ihre Wetterhähne knüpften;
 Wenn im Palast des Priamus ein Hecht
 Regiert', ein Ottern- oder Ratzenpaar
 Im Bette sich der Helena umarmten:
 So wärs für mich gerad so viel, als jetzt. (I 408, 409)

(Son of Laertes, if the walls of Troy
 Should sink, you understand, so that a lake,
 A bluish one, replaced the battlements;
 And if at night gray fishermen attached
 Their boat by moonlight to the weathercocks;
 And if a pike were lord in Priam's palace,
 And if in Helen's bed a pair of otters,
 Or, say, a pair of water rats, embraced:
 It would mean just the same to me as now.) (Agee 121)

If Achilles' dreamscape narration implies that the Greek and Trojan war over Helen – along with its concomitant values – is no more real or authentic than Achilles' decision to go to Themiscrya and attend the Festival of Roses with Penthesilea, this eludes Odysseus. Nevertheless, although Achilles may be the more imaginative, still, he is unable to put himself in Penthesilea's place.

Undermined in both body and spirit from her encounter with Achilles, when Penthesilea receives Achilles' bogus challenge, as John Gearey notes, she could not have been more vulnerable (Gearey 139). In what resembles a litany, but one left unanswered, Penthesilea repetitively asks:

Der mich zu schwach weiß, sich mit ihm zu messen,
 Der ruft zum Kampf mich, Prothoe, ins Feld?
 Hier diese treue Brust, sie rührt ihn erst,
 Wenn sie sein scharfer Speer zerschmettete?
 Was ich ihm zugeflüstert, hat sein Ohr
 Mit der Musik der Rede bloß getroffen?
 Des Tempels unter Wipfeln denkt er nicht,
 Ein steinern Bild hat meine Hand bekränzt? (I 403)

(He knows my weakness, and would challenge me
 To match his strength in battle, Prothoë?
 This faithful breast leaves him unmoved until
 With his sharp spear he's broken it to pieces?
 Did all the words I whispered in his ear
 Resound on it as vain and speechless music?
 The temple in the trees means nothing to him,
 My hand laid garlands on a marble statue?) (Agee 113)

Gearey suggests that Penthesilea's utter disbelief – borne out by her suddenly turning pale (Agee 112), and always a sign of imminent “catastrophe or death” in Kleist's works, Bohrer asserts (*Suddenness* 182) – is, in effect, proof of an opposite belief of a hope that even now in some way she and Achilles will be reunited (139). Had Penthesilea breathing space from any further crisis and time to recuperate (138), Gearey puts forward, in a different frame of mind, “in her anger, let us say, at the gods and fate, she might have been able to muster some slight skepticism or caution or strength against the event” (139). And yet, despite the Amazons' cavalier attitude as to whether their captives are Greek or Trojan, Kleist's drama *is* set within the parameters of war and what is war, but, as Elaine Scarry alleges, an indisputable “physical reality of... mounting wounds [that] has as its verbal counterpart the mounting unreality of language” (Scarry 134). As it is, Gearey concludes, by way of Achilles' invitation taken “in [an] extremity of weakness, Penthesilea is driven to an extremity of violence” (Gearey 139).

Penthesilea's cannibalistic consummation of Achilles has been well-remarked upon. Paulo Medeiros argues that transgressive eating and its obverse, starvation, both its mythic and literary portrayal as well as its contemporary reality, represent desire and power that “clashes with societal norms” (Medeiros 13). Medeiros goes on to say that Penthesilea's bestiality and “peculiar form of loving cannibalism,” wherein she not only

defeats Achilles, but, in company with her dogs, rends him in pieces (17), is the resolution of an inner conflict that ultimately “upholds her predominance as warrior, and, by extension, that of her subjects” (19). Michel Chaouli, quoting an earlier critic who claimed the play’s “feverish twitchings... rawness and wildness evoked terror, loathing and disgust,” contends that Kleist’s drama broadly, and Penthesilea specifically, confront Kant’s seminal work on aesthetics, *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgement)* (Chaouli 125), by way of precariously sustaining/undermining the boundaries that separate “the beautiful and the disgusting [and] the figurative and the literal” (126). Jeffrey Sammons perceptively states that “[i]t is characteristic of Kleist to place characters in impossible situations that destroy the very structure of the self (...) [accordingly,] the queenly Penthesilea becomes a cannibal” (Sammons 35).

Like Kleist scholarship, Penthesilea, also, attempts to understand this incident. With no consciousness of her appalling attack, Penthesilea tells Prothoë that she does not care who robbed Achilles’ breast of its Promethean spark, she will pardon the culprit, but whoever so foully wreaked such havoc upon him, on her, Penthesilea vows, she will exact her vengeance (Agee 143). Kleist deals the hand that reveals what happened meticulously. Penthesilea discovers that Achilles loved her and all he wanted was to yield to her and go to Themiscrya. She discovers, too, that it was she who broke through and violated „... durch alle\ Schneeweißen Alabasterwände...“ (“...every snow-white alabaster wall” (Agee 143)) (I 424) of Achilles’ body. Thirdly, Penthesilea discovers language’s capricious and deadly temperament: „Nicht? Küßt ich nicht? Zerrissen wirklich? spricht? (...) – So war es ein Versehen. Küsse, Bisse\ Das reimt sich, und wer recht von Herzen liebt\ Kann schon das eine für das andre greifen.“ (“No? Didn’t kiss him? Really tore

him? Speak? (...) —So it was a mistake. A kiss, a bite\ The two should rhyme, for one who truly loves\ With all her heart can easily mistake them” (Agee 145)) (I 425). If desecration, love, and language are all implicated here, I believe there exists a direct parallel between this scene and the ‘first cut of communication’ in Kleist’s momentary suspension. That is to say, Hector, Achilles and Penthesilea come full circle – or nearly.

Renouncing Amazon laws, “abjuring,” as Martin Greenberg observes, “love as conquest, as ambition, as impersonal sexual drive” (Greenberg xlv), bereft of Achilles and no longer belonging anywhere, using only words as a weapon, Penthesilea takes her life:

Denn jetzt steig ich in meinen Busen nieder,
Gleich einem Schacht, und grabe, kalt wie Erz,
Mir ein vernichtendes Gefühl hervor,
Dies Erz, dies läutr’ ich in der Glut des Jammers
Hart mir zu Stahl; tränk es mit Gift sodann,
Heißätzendem, der Reue, durch und durch;
Trag es der Hoffnung ewgem Amboß zu,
Und schärf und spitz es mir zu einem Dolch;
Und diesem Dolch jetzt reich ich meine Brust:
So!So!So!So! Und wieder! – Nun ists gut.
Sie fällt und stirbt. (I 427)

(For now I shall descend into my breast,
And dig a shaft, and quarry out the cold
Ore of a feeling that annihilates.
This ore I purify in fire of grief
To hardest steel; in poison then, of bitter,
Burning remorse, I soak it, through and through;
Now carry it toward Hope’s eternal anvil,
And grind and sharpen it into a dagger;
And to this dagger now I yield my breast:
So!So!So!So! Again! —Now it is done.)
[She falls and dies.] (Agee 148)

In his explication of Penthesilea’s suicide, Seán Allan remarks, congruous with his perspective that Achilles was “a braggart and womanizer” whose feelings ran more along the lines of lust than love (Allan 172), that only at the end of Kleist’s tragedy does

Penthesilea understand that “love cannot exact love” (174). Allan further submits that this awareness brings with it the realization that only through her own destruction, “the willing instigator of her love for Achilles,” will she escape from this commitment, and it is “for this reason and not to ‘atone’ for her ‘crime’ that she kills herself” (174). Indeed, Allan continues, the absence of a tangible weapon underscores that it is “the pain of her unrequited love for Achilles that is the ‘killing feeling’ (‘vernichtendes Gefühl’) that is ultimately responsible for her death” (174). But the ‘killing feeling’ that Allan speaks of, Kleist metaphorically alludes to not only as ‘ore’ but also as ‘cold.’ Thus, the ‘cold ore’ of a feeling that Penthesilea wishes to expunge in a ‘purifying fire of grief’ – in keeping with the repeated testimony of violation that occurs throughout Kleist’s play and, in turn, her own defilement of Achilles, such that „... ihn das Mitleid nicht beweint“ (“... pity will not weep for him” (Agee143)) (I 424) – is, I propose, pitilessness. Nor, in my view, is this element, as Angress asserts, particular only to Penthesilea and Achilles (Angress 104), but, instead, like a vein in an ore body, runs through Amazon and Greek society alike, in which, moreover, language is instrumental. Rather than Allan’s ‘love cannot exact love,’ what Penthesilea realizes, perhaps, in the “omission and redescription” of language, which, according to Scarry, are nearly inseparable (69), is violence begets violence. This is not to say that Penthesilea does not die of a broken heart. Suspended between Kleist’s ‘cold ore’ and ‘purifying fire of grief,’ is, I suggest, loss and vulnerability. These same ambivalent emotions may be found in Kleist’s suicide.

Denouement

Approximately three years after the completion of *Penthesilea*, on the 21st of November, 1811, ever true to his unique way of seeing the world, Kleist shot Adolfine Henriette Vogel, a married woman he had befriended and who was suffering from terminal cancer, and then himself. An excerpt of the official report by a court officer named Felgentrev reads:

Both corpses were found approximately one hundred paces from the main road, on the hill close by the lake, the so-called little Wannsee. On the southern side, it is overgrown with trees, and affords a partial view of the Wannsee and the road to Potsdam. Both were in a small trench of approximately one foot in depth and three in diameter, sitting feet to feet and facing each other, but with torsos fallen backwards. The male had on a brown cloth frock coat, a white batiste muslin vest, gray cloth trousers, soft boots with rounded toes, his face bloodstained around the mouth, but only slightly. The female, however, wore a white batiste dress, a fine topcoat of blue cloth, and white kid gloves, and under the left breast was a bloodstain about the size of a Thaler on her dress, together with what seemed to be burn marks around it. Otherwise there were no signs of external violence on either body... The man according to our impression seemed around thirty years of age, with darkish beard, and blue eyes. (Miller 207, 208)

Kleist and Henriette Vogel's suicide is, according to Bohrer, an "almost staged death-scene," by which Bohrer means, from my understanding, the beauty of its theatrical execution that Felgentrev's report bears witness to. Bohrer further notes that Kleist's suicide, which he declares is analogous to the "'art for art's sake' of European aestheticism," namely, "suicide for suicide's sake," has, without cynicism, been called Kleist's "last literary work" (Bohrer, *Suddenness* 173, 174).³⁹ One ought not to look for Kleist's motives in his 'existential' situation, as many have, Bohrer claims, and, were an autobiographical explanation sought, even Kleist's "hopeless social and economic position after the demise of the periodical *Berliner Abendblätter*, which he had taken on only a few months earlier," still does not wholly explain, in Bohrer's view, Kleist's

³⁹ It is not my intention to connect Kleist's suicide explicitly to *Penthesilea* as a literary act.

suicide, as none of these, Bohrer continues, explain Kleist's "lifelong longing for death à deux" (175). Rather, Bohrer contends, if one wishes to consider Kleist's suicide seriously, "not as a literary act but as the last link in a chain of imaginative acts" (175), in that case, one must look to Kleist's prose works, omitting the language of his plays – and here Bohrer cites *Penthesilea* and *Prince of Homburg* – which, with their emphasis "on the rapture of death" would take away from approaching the problem as prosaically as possible (175). Nevertheless, despite Bohrer's somewhat arbitrary separation between Kleist's prose and dramas, I do feel that his analysis is relevant to my own interests.

The first hint of Kleist's suicide "prepared in his prose," Bohrer maintains, is a reflection written by Achim von Arnim to the brothers Grimm following Kleist's death after his reading a volume of Kleist's stories – "It is a death like Wolfdietrich's, when the skeletons of all those he had slain beat him to death" (178). In other words, Bohrer remarks, Kleist's prose is murderous because "the most horrible things are narrated calmly, coldly, from a distance, allowing us to suspect a hidden complicity on the author's part" (178). The strategy Kleist uses to achieve this, Bohrer goes on to say, is the frequent and intense emotional outbursts of his characters juxtaposed with a narrator seemingly emotionally uninvolved, the result of which is an emotionality that takes on "an air of tacit malevolence... [and] one of punctual finality" (179). With this in mind, I believe an analogy may be drawn between Bohrer's assertion and an observation that John Gearey makes in his reading of Kleist's drama.

Referring to *Penthesilea* and Achilles' impasse just before their respective armies separate them, Gearey points out that Kleist could have brought his heroine to renounce Amazon laws then and there – as she later goes on to do – but Kleist "knows no pity in

his art” (Gearey 136). While Gearey’s critique reiterates to some extent Bohrer’s contention, they both together, in my opinion, lay bare the implication of pitilessness that runs like a thread throughout Kleist’s tragedy. One might conclude from this that Bohrer has too quickly disqualified this play. Or one might take a different tack and, returning to Benjamin, surmise that Kleist’s ‘authorial complicity’ is the consequence and result of, as Bohrer asserts, “an extremely lonely person” (Bohrer 189) in, I would further comment, a “rationalized and depersonalized” (Benjamin 186), you could say, pitiless, society. But whether, as Bohrer observes, Kleist’s suicide is seen as some “third thing, something incommensurable... [or] more psychologically or more socially determined” (Bohrer 189), as if the two are necessarily separate, still, Bohrer continues, Kleist’s “feverish instability of psychic identity” – by which Bohrer means bipolar depression and I, consonant with my thesis, something much more than this – “was vulnerable to the extreme” (182).

If, as I have argued, Kleist’s ‘instability of identity’ and Bohrer’s thesis on ‘suddenness’ and ‘contingency consciousness’ go hand in hand within Kleist’s tragedy, in which, I suggest, at heart of Kleist and his protagonists is, in keeping with Benjamin, a longing for recognition – which may explain Kleist’s perplexing lifelong need for someone to die with – so, too, possibly, does Kleist’s ‘extreme vulnerability’ exist in Fitzpatrick’s ‘liminal moment.’ One might conjecture that this moment is a pause before certainty, a hesitation before categorical belief and love’s greatest possibility, that is to say, love that falls outside the parameters of domination and control. It begins, to borrow Jeffrey Sammons’ perfect description of Kleist, with an “unruly imagination” (37).

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