

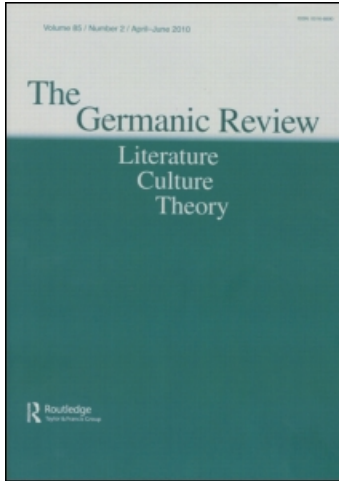
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Publisher Routledge

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## The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t914957646>

### My *Ardinghello*: Heinse and the Importance of Being Epistolary

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Online publication date: 24 February 2011

**To cite this Article** Gramling, David(2011) 'My *Ardinghello*: Heinse and the Importance of Being Epistolary', The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory, 86: 1, 23 – 36

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/00168890.2011.541739

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2011.541739>

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# **My Ardinghello: Heinse and the Importance of Being Epistolary**

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*David Gramling*

Wilhelm Heinse's 1787 painter-novel *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* is an unruly and precarious literary-historical artifact, balancing on the thresholds between text and paratext, archive and translation, excess and omission, Renaissance and *Sturm und Drang*. This article brings recent work on the queer materiality of epistolary exchange (Garlinger 2005) to bear on long-inherited interpretations of *Ardinghello*, seeing in it an endeavor to imagine a rhetorical space for protogay literature in late eighteenth century German humanism. Since the 1990s, much effort has gone into studying queer structures and traces in Lenz and Goethe, and Simon Richter (2006) has suggested that Heinse's "revolutionary fictions" are perhaps best understood in this light as well. What remains undertheorized, however, is the structural relationship between epistolary disclosure and proscribed desire in *Ardinghello*, and a century of Heinse research has seen fit to minimize this particular aspect of his work. With its sidelong reference to Willa Cather's 1918 *My Antonia*, this essay shores up the consequences of upholding a non-epistolary interpretation of an epistolary novel—particularly in the domain of homosocial desire.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, epistolary, gender, masculinity, material culture, sexuality, Storm and Stress

There are but envois, only envois from which whatever was spared or if you prefer "saved" (I already hear murmured "registered," as is said for a kind of receipt) will have been due, yes, due to a very strange principle of selection, and which for my part, even today, I consider questionable, as, moreover, the grate, the filter, and the economy of sorting can be on every occasion, especially if they destine for preservation, not to say for the archive.

—Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card* (7–8)

Coimbra und ich pflegten und bewahrten das Labyrinth.

—Benedikt, *Ardinghello und die glücklichen Inseln* (370)

Why does a utopia need a labyrinth-keeper? Of all the prestigious offices a literary utopist could prescribe for himself at the end of a loquacious “painter novel,” it is odd that the internal frame narrator of J. J. Wilhelm Heinse’s 1787 *Ardinghello und die glückseligen Inseln* elects himself caretaker-for-life of his new utopian society’s maze. From a brief epilogue at the close of the novel, we learn that Benedikt’s tenure in the utopian maze will be custodial rather than exegetical, conservative rather than transformative; he retires to this emeritus position, not to become the charismatic chronicler of all that he has witnessed and experienced, but rather, to become the island’s chief officer of ambiguity, omission, and disorientation. After four hundred pages of kinetic, iconoclastic yarn-spinning across the Italian Renaissance landscape, the “keeper” of these tales of aesthetic heroism chooses to install himself, *long durée*, as a behind-the-scenes maintenance man, tending to the structures of selection through which such stories have become, or failed to become, extant for readers (Keats-Rohan).

In this last, epically stylized portion of the novel, the internal frame-narrator Benedikt’s elite companions are installed as quasi-sacred representatives of the natural elements—sun, water, earth, air. Yet, Benedikt himself opts out of these honorific custodianships, choosing rather to work as keeper of the island society’s monument to secrecy and opacity. Like Diego Velázquez, who implanted a figure of himself as a refracted mirror-image in his 1656 *Meninas*, Benedikt sketches himself into utopian discourse not as a benevolent principal, but as an apophatic trace. Within the constellation of texts, paratexts, and hypotexts that constitute the novel, Benedikt acts as arbitrator between silence and salience—of “placing a second shield within the first,” as André Gide glossed (41) *mise en abyme*. At the novel’s jarring, dioramic happy end, Benedikt stands off to the side—an icon of the prismic editorial principle organizing the text, of its pendulum-swing between omission amid excess. How is one to read this figure Benedikt, the retreating labyrinth guardian, whose name “bene dice” promises trustworthy and authoritative narration? Furthermore, who among the characters in the novel is reading these letters along with us; who granted us permission to read them—and, in another sense, whose intratextual shoulder are we reading over?

A terse, harsh fable at the close of *Ardinghello*’s short frame-preface forewarns us—and perhaps also forewarns the enframed text itself—that a certain mode of literary-historical logic prevails in this porous “*Verlassenschaft*” of letters and reports. To give the reader a sense for the *modus operandi* of inclusion and exclusion criteria through which the extant textual artifact has emerged, the fable stages a dialogue between a wax idol and a nearby hearth fire. The melting idol complains that the fire is devouring him, while other materials within the fire’s reach remain unaffected:

Der Verfasser setzt seiner Schrift folgende Fabel vor, um sinnlich zu machen, daß auch das Nützlichste unschuldigerweise schädlich sein kann.

»Ein wächserner Hausgötze, den man außer acht gelassen hatte, stand neben einem Feuer, worin edle campanische Gefäße gehärtet wurden, und fing an zu schmelzen. «Er beklagte sich bitterlich bei dem Elemente. »Sieh«, sprach er, »wie grausam du gegen mich verführst! Jenen gibst du Dauer, und mich zerstörst du!« Das Feuer aber antwortete: »Beklage dich vielmehr über deine Natur; denn ich, was mich betrifft, bin überall Feuer.« (9)

Here ends, abruptly, the fictional eighteenth-century frame-editor's front matter for the novel. The hearth fire's gloating insistence—that "I am always and everywhere fire"—predicts that narrative accounts persist or dissolve, over the course of literary-historical consolidation, according to an unforgiving categorical constant. In the one case, extreme heat consecrates the durability of the Campanian vessels, while the same heat deforms and disperses quotidian ephemera, here in the form of the wax idol. The precarious, adversely positioned artifact of desire (the wax idol) cannot survive the ubiquity and uniformity of the element fire—which is, in turn, in the business of conferring longevity through transformative "Erhärtung." The fire rebuffs the idol's plea pitilessly, suggesting that it owes its plight to its own nature and constitution, not to the fire's wrath.

The literary-historical fable of the wax idol brings the preface to a close, marking thereby a threshold between the nontranslated front matter of the novel and the translated archive of letters, between eighteenth-century Germany and sixteenth-century Italy, between text publication and text discovery. The remaining bulk of the novel consists of a letter correspondence between Benedikt (the future maze-keeper) and his friend and blood-brother Ardinghello, who—from afar—recounts acts of amorous intrigue and vigilante transgression throughout the Renaissance Mediterranean. Only a few pages from the close of the text, the rough-and-ready cast of characters depicted in the letters then quite suddenly reconvenes on the Mediterranean islands of Naxos and Paros, ostensibly to tie up loose ends once and for all. The novel switches genre—in this last, marginally reliable installment—from dramatic letter exchange to brief epic tableau, documenting the founding and covenant of an intentional community based on radical humanist principles. It is noteworthy that, in the utopian projection that closes the novel, the maze-keeper's beloved friends are enshrined as the executors of precisely those natural elements that so threaten the salience of the ephemeral wax figure. What exactly is the fable announcing about the "nature" of the found bundle of stories, letters, and utopian reports that follows it?

In his inquiry into twentieth-century Spanish epistolary novels, Patrick Paul Garlinger argues that

Many of the thematic, formal, and historical characteristics associated with epistolarity accrue new significance when considered in conjunction with homosexuality: individual privacy and public surveillance, memory, love and loss, confessions and confidentiality . . . . How does letter writing emerge and substantially shape the representation of queer desire? What types of queer subjectivity emerge when we train our signs on epistolary fiction? (Garlinger)

Here, Garlinger conceives the potentially stereoscopic, potentially surveillable materiality of the letter genre as both a heuristic for and an emblem of same-gender desire—a desire that is always located on a precarious threshold between public and private domains. Structurally, dispatching a letter and disclosing a desire (even to oneself) are identical; both are illocutionary acts of avowal and evidence; their value emerges precisely in that moment when they become, irrevocably, "out of one's hands." Whereas Garlinger surveys twentieth- and twenty-first-century epistolary fictions—in which gay/lesbian self-identification was a

socially thinkable, if still precarious, option—this article pursues Wilhelm Heine’s epistolarity as a meditation on the “wax idol” of German protogay literariness in the late eighteenth century—when cognitive recourse to the categories “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” was not yet possible.

## THE MATTER OF EPISTOLARITY

Prevailing winds in Heine scholarship have, however, not entirely encouraged inquiry into this potential mutuality between epistolary structure and proscribed desire in his fictions. In a survey of the eighteenth-century *Briefroman* genre, Gert Mattenklott argues that

Die Fernstellung von Ort und Zeit spielt [im *Ardinghello* Roman] wegen der Aktualität der inneren Erfahrungswelt kaum eine Rolle. Die Briefadressaten haben sich sonst selten eine erzählerische Funktion, während ja die seit dem Werther verbliebene Funktion der Briefform: nämlich die individuelle Selbstdarstellung des Schreibenden und die Fiktion von Authentizität, im Tagebuch erhalten bleiben. (201)

For Mattenklott, the letter correspondence in Heine provides a salutary scaffold through which to deliver a confessional, authentic mode of affect and expression, but the acts of exchange and selection that mark them as communicative events are inconsequential for the narrative and may therefore be bracketed out of textual analysis. Letter-writing, in this view, is primarily a germane conceit for staging guileless immediacy of feeling in an era when the German postal services and epistolary culture were undergoing rapid, coextensive expansion.

In the main, studies of the *Ardinghello* novel as *Freundschaftsdichtung* have proceeded according to this logic—that the medium enables, but does not constitute, much of the message. Otto Keller, for example, understands the letter genre allegorically, seeing in the correspondent and framed narrator Benedikt an agent who, in an exemplary dissolution of the individual into the “soul community” of the male-male friendship, selflessly cedes the lime-light to his beloved friend and fellow *Tatenmensch* Ardinghello. This proto-Romantic fusion of two perceptual horizons through friendship, Keller contends, is the essence of Heine’s consciously intersubjective *Lebensphilosophie*. Ostensibly distinct narrative positions within the novel are, for Keller, always already predesigned to lapse into one collaborative gesture of spiritual concert. Thus, Keller’s reading of the novel relies on a thematic of “overcoming distances,” whereby both the epistolary form and the erotic links between characters are understood as metaphorical, ephemeral, and epiphenomenal.

Certainly, both Keller and Mattenklott are right to identify genial homosociality, the pathos of authenticity, and the imperative to efface intersubjective distances as crucial items of discussion *within* the Ardinghello-Benedikt letters. The correspondents make no less than a routine phatic ritual out of the rhetoric and fantasy of eventual reunion. The ever-present *topicality* of reunion does not, however, account for the novel’s more “labyrinthine” structural qualities: polyvocal and stereoscopic ambiguity of address, the material contingencies of epistolary traffic, communicative misfire and repair, tactical euphemization and face-saving, intrigues of redaction and omission, and an intratextual “traffic in meaning” (Pratt 25) that

has attracted little attention in Heinse criticism to date. Due to a prevailing *topical fallacy*—by which the intimacy and immediacy so lavishly idealized within the letters are assumed to epitomize the novel's structural logic as well—it is easy to forget that *Ardinghello* is not a coherent and self-contained *Entwicklungsroman*, nor merely a novel in letters, but also a found manuscript, a translation, and a curated, redacted archive. Moreover, in stark contrast to *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1772), which foregrounds ineffability, ostentatious elisions, abrupt departures, and the fragmented utterances of the genius, Ardinghello and Benedikt's letters thwart the laconic interiority of *Geniesprache* with adrenaline-filled accounts and aestheticist filibuster—not unlike Heinse's baffling 7,000 pages of lifelong literary prolixity itself. Rosemarie Elliot notes that the syncope, apocope, and elision, which had been the signature of Werther's geniality, are all but absent in *Ardinghello*. When contrasted with Goethe's *Leiden* and Lenz' *Waldbruder* (1776), the most apparent communicative principles of Heinse's novel are excess rather than ellipsis, archive rather than fragment, defeasibility rather than signature. After all, at least six diegetic agents have handled the letters that constitute the textual artifact itself:

1. Ardinghello (the correspondent),
2. Benedikt (the internal narrator and primary letter addressee),
3. Fiordimona (who is alleged to have been the executrix of the archive at one time),
4. the unnamed sixteenth-century compiler of the manuscript (who may be Fiordimona),
5. the eighteenth-century Roman friend who discovers the manuscript at his family estate in Cajeta,
6. the translator and editor, who disclaims any investment in the diegetic world of the interior frame narrative.

(Each of these textual handlers should, of course, be held distinct from the authorial Wilhelm Heinse—though much scholarship persists in equating at least number 6 with the historical author himself.)

The novel's opening paratext, penned by the eighteenth-century editor, reports that his Roman friend had discovered the manuscript at Fiordimona's family villa among countless other neglected Renaissance manuscripts. This editor registers a suspicion that there is more to the story, which he and his Roman friend hope to uncover, and that, in the meantime, much of the manuscript at hand is worth skipping over. The textual artifact is thus billed as a "Verlassenschaft" (Heinse 9) in two senses: as something left behind for posterity, and as something negligible and abandoned. With its multiple handlers and obscured itinerary, the fictive corpus of letters is presented as a fragmentary, unverifiable, porous, and hermetic transmission that, however, might eventually be corroborated or clarified by as yet undiscovered documents.

With its outermost preface, penned by the eighteenth-century traveling tourist, the novel opens by declaring its three principles of selection:

1. *Contingency*. In an overabundant and neglected library of trivial heirlooms, the frame narrator happened upon the text.
2. *Dialogical non-foreclosure*. Corroborative narratives might still be found to authenticate the manuscript.

3. *Dispensibility/selectability*. The editor regards an unspecified portion of the manuscript as inconsequential, and readers are encouraged to skip over details, as they would when “walking in the woods.”

As this opening paratext suggests, there are many passages in the novel that can be understood as traces of *negative performativity*, indexing a constitutive omission, refusal, or aphasia.

Despite this prism of disclamatory warnings and urgent fables, scholarship on *Ardinghello* has vigorously deemphasized intertextual traffic in readerly artifacts and practices—not based on any concern that these features, if taken seriously, would render the narrative unpleasantly unverifiable and unstable, but rather on the conviction that the sender-receiver structure adds up to little more than mere stylistic packaging for the epistolary conceit. Yet, this programmatic “de-suspension of belief” in epistolary form—a suspension of belief *in reverse*—doubles down on a long-held philological preference to *disambiguate* the “Age of Goethe,” a period in which literary aesthetics thrived on little else besides ambiguity. As Simon Richter put it:

Against their better knowledge, scholars of German culture have for the last 200 years falsified literary history by assuming, consciously or not, that the complex period known as the Age of Goethe was fundamentally structured along heterosexual lines . . . . It may be more accurate to speak of a network in which the participants were virtually and potentially linked in friendship according to a Greek model of varying and blurred dimensions. (“Winckelmann’s Progeny” 33)

The *virtuality* and *potentiality* to which Richter calls attention here are, after all, the primary organizing principles of Heinse’s textual labyrinth in *Ardinghello*. Fiordimona, for instance—the rich heiress without father, mother, or siblings—must be considered the last surviving character depicted in the bundled manuscript of letters to have been in physical possession of it, before the tourist/translator and his Roman friend happen upon it two centuries later. Thus, Fiordimona’s power to edit, censor, and scuttle precarious signifiers in the letters must be acknowledged as one of the novel’s potent, “virtual” contingencies.

A primary provocation this novel issues, then, can be formulated as follows: given the strident plentitude of narrative illustration on its four hundred pages, to what extent will the novel be able to sustain readers’ curiosity about what has been omitted, about what back-channel transactions are actually taking place amid the logorrhea of depiction? For Keller, Mattenklott, and Frank Black, epistolary and paratextual positionings generate no noteworthy strategic, illocutionary—or in Vivienne Mylne’s sense, “kinetic”—effects, beyond the authentic self-staging of the respective letter writer. Yet, precisely these *conative*, addressee-oriented aspects of text have come to be recognized as crucial to the material semiotics of letter-writing in other contemporaneous texts, such as Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’s 1782 *Les liaisons dangereuses*. Although the epistolary constellations in *Ardinghello* are often subdued by—and, for long stretches of text, fully subsumed beneath—the muscular adventure stories that the letters recount, this is perhaps the best reason to inquire about how and when those constellations of exchange are quietly at work.

The readerly temptation to “take the bait” of manifest significations is, as we have observed, written into the text at the earliest possible opportunity—the traveler’s prologue and its wax idol fable. As with Willa Cather’s 1918 novel *My Ántonia*, the text manuscript is handed off, somewhat dispassionately, to an internal reader-editor. After the “hand-off,” the paratext ostensibly sheds its structural valence, becoming only a conceit on which the story-world of the novel gains its credibility. In Cather’s novel, the executor of the manuscript, a gentleman named Jim Burden, delivers it to its future publisher with the faint gesture:

“Here is the thing about Ántonia,” he says. “Do you still want to read it? I finished it last night. I didn’t take the time to arrange it; I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any form. It hasn’t any title, either.” (280)

Despite the disinterest in his voice, the executor’s surname “Burden” indicates both the materiality of the manuscript under his arm and the emotional “weight” of having borne unique and desirous witness to the story while pretending to care little about it. As with Cather’s novel, the genre form of the selected, solicited, trafficked, and disowned *envoi* in *Ardinghello* is both fundamental to and submerged beneath the narrative arc of the text. In both cases, resisting the temptation to “take the bait”—that is, to bracket out the prism of textual and paratextual provenances—offers important benefits for rethinking this novel in its aesthetic and social moment.

### KINESIS, MEMORY, SILENCE

In his study of epistolary novels, François Jost sketches out a binary description for the actions a given letter undertakes: *lettres-confiance* share information with trusted intimates whereas *lettres-drame* strategize for particular effects on the part of an adversarial reader. Mylne advances a similar hypothesis, dividing epistolary utterances into passive and kinetic modes, which she calls *memoire letters* or *event letters*, respectively. As noted above, readings of Heinse’s novel generally presume the former “constative” or “representative” epistolary mode, and, indeed, it appears at first that Ardinghello’s and Benedikt’s letters follow the conventions of the *lettre-confiance*. From the perspective of *Freundschaftsdichtung*, which Keller and Mattenkott presuppose, this homosocial exchange of virile tales and heroic images deserves to be construed as an unmotivated sharing of experiences. In much of the critical research on dramatic versus memoir epistolarity, “relating experiences” (i.e., locution) has tended to be the presumed default motivation in cases of male same-gender exchange, whereas cross-gender or female same-gender epistolary exchange is assumed to involve some sort of illocutionary force: whether intrigue, courtship, or competition.

Yet, the opening scenes of the internal frame narrative in *Ardinghello*, which precede the epistolary traffic, “ionize” the putatively neutral bond between the two male characters and undermine the binary logic of *lettre-confiance* versus *lettre-drame*. Shortly after their meeting, after learning that Benedikt speaks modern and ancient Greek, Ardinghello jumps up from the table, knocking glasses to the floor, swooning “O glücklicher, seltner, wunderbarer Zufall! So jung und schön, und voll Verstand und Erfahrung! Wir müssen ewig Freunde



sein, und nichts soll uns trennen; du bist der Liebling meiner Seele" (20). Keller hastens to interpret this kinetic encounter in the following terms: "Das Wesen Ardinghellos zieht [Benedikt] an. Es ist ihm rätselhaft, wunderbar, wirkt immer machtvoller auf ihn. Er gibt sich ihm hin, wenn ihn dabei auch schauert. Kuss und Umarmung zeigen die völlige Überwindung des Abstandes zwischen erzählendem Ich und Titelfigur" (75). The homosocial, autogenetic trajectory of their spiritual relationship "finds expression," so Keller euphemistically depicts it in the *metaphor* of their physical embrace. From this perspective, the scene is a nonsexual emblem of two men's spiritual union and consequent narrative interchangeability.

Yet, the passage continues as follows: "So fiel er mir um den Hals. Uns verging auf lange die Sprache, und wir waren zusammengeschmolzen durch Kuß und Blick und Umarmung. Endlich nahm er wieder das Wort . . . Ich war ganz erschüttert, durchbrannt von seinem Feuer, seiner Heftigkeit" (20). This long "lapse of language" (*Vergehen der Sprache*) marks not a momentary deferral, but a structuring silence throughout the remainder of the novel, a silence that perhaps has earned the text the generic monicker *Sehnsuchtsroman* (Geiger).

The next day, Benedikt remembers the experience of their embrace, without recounting it: "Mich überlief bei seinem Anblick ein leichter Schauer vor seinem gestrigen Ungestüm; aber er erschien mir von neuem so liebenswürdig, daß ich hingerissen wurde und dem unwiderstehlichen Zuge nachfolgte" (21). Hardly the language of unmotivated homosocial "confidence," Benedikt's abiding attraction to Ardinghello presages what is to come: a fundamentally "kinetic" subtext throughout the novel—a symbolic microphysics of erotic and phatic exchange that unfolds and refolds between the two men, as they brashly codisertate on art and representation.

## THE FATE OF HEINSE'S WOMEN

Given the erotic voltage of Benedikt and Ardinghello's first meeting and their ensuing correspondence, the men's erotic bonds with other women and men—potential, presumed, and manifest—will logically exert an intense, although diffuse, impact on the bearing and composition of their letters. Yet, this dramatic antecedent (their first embrace) is never again spoken of in the letters directly, and is thus routinely overlooked in interpretations of the novel. Some readings, for instance, have focused on the "fate" of the women characters—with the aim of training critical light on the contradictions inherent in Heinse's social project of radically reenvisioning gender roles among the late-eighteenth-century *Bildungsbürgertum*. In "The Female Dilemma in Heinse's *Ardinghello*," Martha Kaarsberg Wallach charges the authorial Wilhelm Heinse with "glaring shortcomings and inconsistencies" in the representation of women in the novel. According to Kaarsberg Wallach's argument, a pattern emerges in Heinse's utopian imagination that favors passive, modest women, along the lines of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Sophie in *Emile* (1762). For Kaarsberg Wallach, this pattern of disempowerment is deeply incongruous with the novel's explicit, antinormative claims about gender expression: although laboring under an ideological imperative from "their" author to liberate themselves from patriarchal dispositions, the novel's women are nonetheless routinely subjected to male violence and exclusion and are occasionally made complicit in violence against other women, such as in Fulvia's apparent collusion in the rape of Lucinde.

Participation in the new society on Paros and Naxos, which Kaarsberg Wallach assumes to be the novel's unequivocal telos, appears furthermore to be a "reward" for appropriate femininity, while exclusion from participation is tantamount to an authorial interdiction on those among the novel's women who champion characteristics such as public immodesty, political self-assertion, and transgressive sexuality.

It is indeed true that Benedikt and Ardinghello attempt to outbid one another rhetorically at the expense of women, fashioning an elite and antibourgeois "fraternity of two," in keeping with the lingering *Sturm und Drang* ethos. This masculinism is explicitly opposed in the text to feminine ascriptions like *Fraubasengutartigkeit* and *Allgehorsam* (56). In taking up a certain militancy toward gendered social structures, the *Tatenmensch* Ardinghello often lashes out at women in a grandiose manner—or at least reports having done so in his letters to Benedikt. He celebrates, in one letter, his own disruptive attacks on matrimony as an institution of heterosexual monogamy and derides women who consent to enter into it. Ardinghello sums up the politics of matrimony dismissively, pontificating that only un-clever women would marry if they could avoid doing so, that goddesses do not marry, and that marriage is akin to slave ownership. Ardinghello boasts to Benedikt about how he has forcibly disrupted two wedding ceremonies and condemns the concept of the husband as a "little sultan" (224). The social critique that Ardinghello cultivates—in part to nourish his bond of homoerotic autogenesis with Benedikt—systematically targets those women who themselves appear all-too-ready to acquiesce to gendered institutions.

Consequently, Kaarsberg Wallach's analysis understands the novel as a kind of prison house for women who are betrayed by their author's insatiable and yet hypocritical drive for emancipatory self-stylization. This assessment, however, traces the representation of women directly back to the authorial Heinse, without considering how the representations of women are always already being trafficked by motivated, *intratextual* handlers of one sort or another. Kaarsberg Wallach, thus, analyzes fictional representations of women in the text as finally located directly beneath Heinse's (libertine-functional) pen, rather than as situated in intratextual exchange and epistolary traffic. Here, again, the disadvantages of a nonepistolary approach to a epistolary novel come more clearly into focus.

As with Keller and Mattenklott's observations above, Kaarsberg Wallach analyzes the themes and signifieds of the text as *locutions*, while bracketing out the illocutionary modes and motivations that subtend them. This approach assumes a "flat," universally accessible, and unmediated text, as if the stories told within the novel are crafted for the extratextual reader alone.

This leads Kaarsberg Wallach to conclude, for example, that the transgressive figure of Fiordimona is "really half a man," without considering through which acts of symbolic exchange these descriptions of her are produced and circulated within the text. When, in the beginning of part 4, Ardinghello declares (to Benedikt) that Fiordimona is everything he has never been able to find among women, this statement supplementally encrypts a message about their own erotic history. This particular letter to Benedikt also switches footing midstream to include Fiordimona as a secondary addressee. The distinction between Benedikt as epistolary addressee and Fiordimona as apostrophic addressee breaks down, as Ardinghello writes (to Benedikt), "O sie ist so ganz, was ich wünsche! . . . O Fiordimona, mit dir möchte ich ewig leben und unaflöslich mich mit dir verflechten. Du allein kannst bei allen

Reizen der Schönheit meine Freundin sein; einen so hohen kräftigen Geist habe ich bei deinem Geschlechte noch nicht gefunden” (203). Both Fiordimona and Benedikt are addressees here: Fiordimona as the extraordinary female exemplar and Benedikt as the “powerful spirit” who sets the standard for women to imitate. Given that this frame of enunciation—with its multiple and ambiguous addressees embedded in a context of erotically inflected male-male exchange—is typical, rather than exceptional, for Heinse’s novel, an analysis of the fate of the women must be undertaken not only on the level of the signified but in the pragmatic context in which those signifiers are exchanged.

Ardinghello’s regret in the same letter (“Du solltest sie sehen”) might express a reaction to the content of another recent letter from Benedikt that has been stricken from the manuscript without explanation. What must have occurred between Benedikt and Chiara such that Ardinghello is led to address the infelicitous interaction in such a topical way? In the absent letter, it appears that Benedikt has tersely narrated a failed heterosexual romance that Ardinghello, in turn, wishes to encourage and reinvigorate. By beginning his own letter with a comparison between “meine Fiordimona” and “deine Chiara,” Ardinghello projects a future of homosocial heterosexual bliss, framed by a promise of intimacy between the two men. Ardinghello’s somewhat baffled response to Benedikt’s omitted letter, that “das hab ich noch nicht erfahren, in der Liebe so von einem Weibe überflogen zu werden” (221), may suggest that the loveless interaction Benedikt had allegedly sketched out in the missing text was indeed an extraordinary disaster, which Ardinghello now wishes to sweep under the rug. This particular letter epitomizes a moment of heteronormative tutelage and a simultaneous perpetuation of the homoerotic bond—using women as the negative foil for the discourse.

Fiordimona, the eventual guardian of the bundle of correspondences, may have omitted this letter because of its libelous or compromising effect for Benedikt, its unfavorable representation of Chiara, or the judgments it expresses about Ardinghello’s other sexual and romantic attachments. It is equally possible, within the economy of selection, that Ardinghello destroyed this dangerous letter and euphemistically recast its contents into an isomorphic heteronormativity—that is, “your Chiara” and “my Fiordimona,”—in his reply letter. From this perspective, what Kaarsberg Wallach describes as authorial misrepresentations of women in the novel is always already bound up in an intratextual exchange, in which the power to fortify a bond between sender and receiver is at stake. Even the most descriptive, subdued *lettre-confidance* between them is thus always also a *lettre-drame*.

## HAPPY TOGETHER?

Kaarsberg Wallach aptly points out that the Paros–Naxos parallel society is an “unlikely end for the women.” Indeed, this utopian turn is unlikely for all of the novel’s characters; there had been, up until Benedikt mentions Ulazal’s plan, no intention to manifest a utopian territory in the novel, though Ardinghello and Benedikt had frequently exchanged visions of “Inseln der Glückseligkeit” in their letters. The utopian account is also an unlikely implantation, considering the stylistics of the text thus far. After a brisk rundown of the events through which the Ottoman-sponsored Italian colony emerges, the utopian epilogue takes on a mythic tone and syntax incongruent with the extensive social descriptions of the preceding 350 pages. Oddly, no discrete events take place in this society—only honorific, prescriptive tableaux. As

Benedikt begins narrating the island, as Ardinghella has ostensibly described it, he writes in the present indicative mood, whereas in previous situations of reported speech, he has generally used the subjunctive mood. This anomaly in the utopian epilogue suggests that Benedikt is enunciating a vision of events that in fact never occurred, thereby preemptively claiming the prerogative to “finish” the story of his relationship with Ardinghella as he chooses.

Further discrepancies in the utopian tale support this theory. There is no account provided about how and when Benedikt decided to move to Naxos and Paros. He suddenly emerges into this utopian arrangement like a projected image, becoming one of the “wir” which “waren meistens lauter unbegangener Jugend” (368). The Ottoman sultan’s son Amurath’s meeting with Ardinghella is also described as if Benedikt had been present to view it: “Dieser [Ardinghella] trat auf in männlicher Jugend” (367), although the meeting is reported only in Ardinghella’s letter. Such rhetorical and perspectival discrepancies suggest that Benedikt is fantasizing a utopian society in which he and Ardinghella could reconcile the best of both their worlds—that is, public heterosexuality and private homosexuality. The utopian description in the past tense eventually yields to a present-tense account of the ideal republic, in which “Hier wird kein Nero gedeihen” (374). This turn from the descriptive to the prescriptive, from the narrative past tense to the present historiographical voice, further suggests that Benedikt’s account is the expression of a private desire, rather than a triumphant communal achievement. As we have observed, Benedikt is the only explicit proponent of a territorial utopia, in contravention of Ardinghella and Fiordimona’s desires for emancipatory transgression in currently existing societies. Beyond Benedikt, no other character mentions the idea of establishing a new society.

Kaarsberg Wallach’s analysis of the fate of the novel’s women bears further mention here. She states, “When one examines the female characters in Ardinghella as a group, patterns emerge which are characterized by ambivalence and tension.” The fate of the women appears less in the form of a gradually emerging pattern throughout the novel than as a sudden, synthetic one-page summary at the end, a strident and topical inventory-taking of most of the women’s dispositions at one instant, as Benedikt saw fit to characterize them. Quite abruptly, readers are requested to believe that Cäcilien and Fiordimona have liquidated their extensive assets to fund the experimental society, that Lucinde has discovered her true royal paternity, and that Fulvia found the island society unbearable and fled. Benedikt also reports the women are housed on a separate island from the men, thus prescribing separate-but-equal female and male societies. Thanks to such a mapping, Benedikt can be assured both distance from the women and constant companionship with Ardinghella, even as the latter settles into an idealized heterosexual marriage. As with the Oberst’s closing proposal in Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz’s *Die Soldaten* (1776)—that a separate army of soldiers’ prostitutes be established—gender segregation on Paros and Naxos is put forth as a progressive achievement in social engineering.

From Lenz’s *Die Soldaten* to Werther’s famous suicide in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Leiden* and Herz’s emigration to America in Lenz’s *Waldbruder*, sexually transgressive German texts of the 1770s and 1780s often proposed escape scenarios for their protagonists, so that they might eventually abscond from the society they had heretofore been in the business of critiquing. In contrast to Lenz’s and Goethe’s epistolary novels of aesthetic escape, Heinse’s internal narrator Benedikt seems to escape into utopian discourse

and design, harvesting the ideals of his beloved correspondents and organizing them into an unverifiable chronicle of an alternate society, declaring with triumphal resolve, “Sie erhielten, was sie wollten” (367). Yet, the utopia that Benedikt narrates is a suspicious and precarious one at best. Whereas eighteenth-century constructions of utopias were most often faithful to the etymology of “no place,” the Naxos-Paros society is specifically located in a politically delicate sphere between the Ottoman Empire, the Italian sovereign states, and the Greek islands—a millennia-old site of political strife and sexual marginality. (The procedure of procuring and negotiating for the space on the island, the narrator reports, required the displacement of contemporary Greeks.) Although narrated in a mythic historiographic register, the utopian episode is destined to be ephemeral, troubled, and endangered by Mediterranean territorial politics.

The foreboding last line, “Doch vereitelte dies nach seligem Zeitraum das unerbittliche Schicksal” (376), closes the utopian account, the found manuscript, and the outer paratextual frame. If Benedikt did indeed fabricate this story as the culmination of his radical imagination, the closing utterance serves his interest in two ways. First, it precludes the reader from seeking corroborative evidence of the island society’s existence. Second, this line forecloses on the story, reserving ultimate narrative authority for Benedikt alone. Although he has rather few words in the novel, Benedikt is certain to claim the last ones, ensuring that the utopian vision will not survive him. After all, the symbolic relation between Benedikt (“Bene Dice”/“eu-pheme”) and his “ou-topia”/“eu-topia” is a homological one. It foregrounds Benedikt as singularly inclined among the novel’s characters to “euphemize” the precarious erotic attachments that contour the narrative thus far into an epic, authoritative epilogue at the novel’s close.

## CONCLUSION

*Ardinghello* offers a complex rendering of epistolary culture in which eroticized acts of exchange through representation are the message as well as the medium. The social acts by which the novel’s characters animate, construct, and exchange stories of love, art, women, men, transgression, and utopia are always subtended, at least on the part of Benedikt, by an acute, although unspoken orientation toward the two men’s first meeting and embrace. The neglected and then salvaged bundle of letters acts as a powerful and often fragile posthistory of that fleeting, precarious encounter—and its prospect for longevity in literary representation finds expression in the plaintive grievances of the wax idol.

Yet, Heinse studies thus far have focused exclusively on the thematics and signifieds of the narrated world in *Ardinghello*, foregoing an analysis of the text as an archive of vulnerable, excitable speech-acts that may—or may not—reach their intended readers. Black’s study of the eighteenth-century English epistolary novel exemplifies the aesthetic bias that leads to this type of disinterest in the materiality of letter fictions:

The reader of fiction does not wish to be reminded over frequently of a device which exists for the sole purpose of conveying the story . . . [An] inappropriateness is felt in this novel [Susannah Gunning, *Memoirs of Mary*] and in others where the letters—their loss, concealment, forgery, and so on—become motives

in the plot. One dislikes apparent confusion of method and matter . . . . Though skill in particular cases qualifies the statement, it would seem that in letter fiction the epistle should be kept as a means of presenting the story and not be unduly obtruded as an agent in the narrative. (58)

Without much difficulty, one senses in Black's admonishment a directive for literary-historical etiquette as well: that the foregrounding of material or institutional culture—of media, form of utterance, and kinetic social exchange—places undue stress on the aesthetic treasure of “the story itself.”

That “one dislikes apparent confusion of method and matter” is a generality to which Derrida assents as well—although from an affective-epistemological, rather than an aesthetic-philological, point of view. He writes unconsolingly in *The Post Card*, “It is not only disagreeable, it places you in relation, without discretion, to tragedy. It forbids that you regulate distances, keeping them or losing them” (5). To a degree of intensity that surpasses contemporaneous epistolary works, *Ardinghello* is a literary-historical bearer of this ambiguous discomfiture of *adestination*, incompleteness, and contingency. The text pulses with an urgent awareness that Benedikt's utopian maze is not likely to reach a distant and future reader—one that might have discovered there the labyrinthine past of protogay literature.

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