

## Wizard Fight: Alchemy and the Critique of Modernity in Goethe and Kleist, 1808-1811

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Although known primarily as an author, philosopher, and scientist today, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe held several positions at the Weimar Court between his arrival in 1775 and his retirement from service in 1817. One of them, from 1791 to 1817, was the intendant of the Weimar Court Theater, a uniquely powerful position in theater administration in the German-speaking lands at the time. In this role, he put on Heinrich von Kleist's comedy *The Broken Jug* (1808), and the staging was, famously, a disaster, allegedly one of the major reasons for the sputtering of Kleist's authorial career and perhaps even an indirect cause of his suicide in 1811. Goethe's opinion of Kleist was decidedly mixed, and there has long been speculation that Goethe deliberately sabotaged the staging of Kleist's comedy – for instance, turning it into a three-act play when it was written as one act. Various scholars have tried to save Goethe's honor: Wolf Kittler, for instance, has demonstrated that the political subtext of the play's finale was never going to resonate well with the audience of the Weimar court.

However, beyond the authors' opinions of each other and their politics (whether implicit or explicit), we can also find Goethe and Kleist engaged in a fraught dialogue critiquing modernity through references to alchemy and hermeticism. Ronald Gray established the throughline of alchemy in Goethe's thought and works with his 1952 study *Goethe the Alchemist*, and Waltraud Wiethölter and Susan Sirc, among others, have filled in further details with reference to his novel *Elective Affinities*. Diethelm Brüggemann has not created as clear a critical consensus for the importance of alchemy in the work of Heinrich von Kleist, but his 2004 study of most of Kleist's novellas, *Kleist. Die Magie* (Kleist: Magic), is certainly a work to be reckoned with. In the prologue, Brüggemann discusses Goethe's and Kleist's mutual interest in alchemy and argues (with reference back to his 1985 book *Drei Mystifikationen Heinrich von Kleists* (Three Mystifications of Heinrich von Kleist)) that Kleist had recognized the alchemical arguments in the fragment of *Faust* published in 1790 and provoked Goethe by responding to them in *The Broken Jug*. Thus, Goethe's staging was deliberate sabotage, although the two authors (on Brüggemann's reading) were the only two people in position to understand what was at stake in Goethe's staging.

Otherwise, Brüggemann does not go into detail about the possible mutual influences of the authors on each other, but 1808 and 1809 saw the publication of Goethe's *Faust I* and *Elective Affinities*, respectively, and Kleist wrote most of his novellas, as well as his last three plays, between 1808 and 1811. Scholars have long recognized Kleist's parody of themes from Goethe's works in terms of individual plot elements or symbolic motifs, but a comparison of the authors' use of alchemical references is outstanding, and the possibility of mutual influence has rarely been considered. The Napoleonic Wars caused considerable upheaval in Germany during these years, and both Goethe and Kleist thought that these were not simply passing military and political problems but symptomatic of the historical rupture caused by the French Revolution. They used alchemical symbolism – especially the idea of the chemical marriage from Johann Valentin Andreae's 1616 work of that name – to comment on what had gone wrong in modernity through an esoteric language that also let them work around both censorship and public opinion. This paper will start from a close reading of the idea and images of chemical marriage and follow their transformations from Kleist's 1807 novella "Jeronimo and Josephe" (re-titled "The

Earthquake in Chile” in its revised form in 1810) through Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* and into Kleist’s late novellas “The Foundling” and “The Betrothal in Santo Domingo,” as well as his final play *Prince Friedrich von Homburg*.