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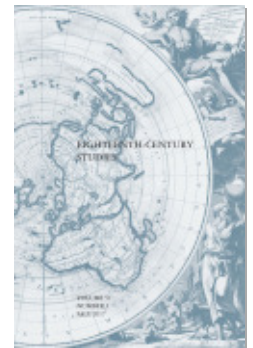
Armed Ambiguity: Women Warriors in German Literature and Culture in the Age of Goethe by Julie Koser (review)

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Julie Koser, *Armed Ambiguity: Women Warriors in German Literature and Culture in the Age of Goethe* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016). Pp. 250. \$34.95.

Most students of German culture will vividly recall the striking depiction of the Amazonian Queen devouring her beloved Achilles in Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* (1808); Julie Koser's recent monograph garners new evidence regarding the prevalence of such representations of strong women by German-speaking authors in the wake of the momentous social upheavals of the French Revolution, as French women actively took to the streets against monarchical oppression. Koser discursively explores how news reports of these events reverberated in the literary imaginations of both men and women writing in reaction to the specter of these armed women and to the possibility of women's equal participation in the state. She examines the polyvalent nature of the woman warrior as a trope, and how liminal, cross-dressing figures of armed ambiguity were imbued with both utopian and dystopian potentials by writers with progressive as well as counter-revolutionary political agendas. Koser convincingly lays out evidence that the trope of the warrior woman became an important figure for renegotiating the role of women in public life at the outset of the nineteenth century.

In her introduction, "Mythologizing the Woman Warrior," Koser investigates how myths relate to the politics of ideology and identity formation. Working from Roland Barthes's notion of myths as systems of signs used to convey messages, she notes that it is not the object itself that is represented—here, the figure of the warrior woman—but how these messages are transmitted that determines their social significance. In other words, Koser is concerned with the rhetorical strategies employed by writers to depict armed women. In the book's first chapter, "The Power of the Press: Eighteenth-Century German Print Culture Constructs the Woman Warrior," Koser discursively examines representations of women's violent participation in the French Revolution. She relates important news reports from several regional German-language newspapers, which she understands largely as reaffirming a reactionary, counter-revolutionary social order. Her second chapter, "Armed Ambiguity Personified: The French Assassin Charlotte Corday and German Ambivalence," then pivots away from these negative news reports to the highly publicized assassination of the prominent Jacobin publicist, Jean-Paul Marat, by the Girondist sympathizer Charlotte Corday in 1793. Koser reads the latter's celebration as indicative of a discursive shift away from the malignant notion of warrior women toward a semiotic mobilization of Corday as a heroine whose violence no longer carried a teratological weight, instead coming to embody a patriotic self-sacrifice for the good of the emerging French Republic. Koser explores two lesser-known German dramatic receptions of this highly publicized female assassin: Heinrich Zschokke's *Charlotte Corday oder die Rebellion von Calvados* (1794) and Engel Christine Westphalen's *Charlotte Corday* (1804), in which her act of terrorism was portrayed as a "moderate" reprisal against the Jacobin betrayal of the enlightened values that had initially informed revolutionary thought.

Chapter 3, "Armed Virtue: The Woman Warrior as a Defender of the 'Domestic' Good," explores two works by Benedikte Naubert, *Geschichte der Gräfin von Thekla von Thurn oder Scenen aus dem dreissigjährigen Kriege* (1788) and *Philippe von Geldern. Oder Geschichte Selims, des Sohns Amurat* (1792), as well

as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797) and Friedrich Schiller's *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801). Koser uses the term "domestic" to investigate not only the public/private divide that bifurcated gender roles into distinct spheres of activity, but also the emerging sense of "German" identity in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic invasions, reading these texts as mobilizing armed women against external enemies.

In Chapter 4, "Emancipatory Fantasies: The Woman Warrior as Liberator and (Proto-)Feminist," Koser argues that women warriors were utilized as literary figures not only to promote heroic self-sacrifice for the national or domestic good, but also to explore women's violent participation in the French Revolution. In her analysis of Therese Huber's tremendously moving novel, *Die Familie Seldorf* (1795/96), Koser explores how Huber's protagonist, Sara Seldorf, cross-dresses and participates in Revolutionary violence while also critiquing the brutality of warfare itself. Indeed, Koser views Huber's very act of writing—that is, publishing—as embodying women's desires to participate in public life, just as her protagonist obliterates binary notions of gender roles. Similarly, Koser reads the romantic poet Karoline von Günderrode as living out emancipatory fantasies through her fictions, specifically her 1804 poems "Darthula nach Ossian" and *Mora*, and the 1805 poem *Hildgund*. If Huber's and Günderrode's heroines imply revolutionary social sentiments, Caroline de la Motte Fouqué's novel, *Das Heldenmädchen aus der Vendée* (1816), employs the trope of the warrior woman in a counter-revolutionary effort to lend poetic support to absolute monarchy through her aristocratic, cross-dressing protagonist, which Koser also reads as an "empowering model of female activism and women's patriotic contribution to the political cause and welfare of the country" (143).

Koser's last chapter, "Treasonous Transgressions: A Nation of Women Warriors and the Politics of Desire," is undoubtedly the pinnacle of her study. In this beautifully researched and written essay, she tackles Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* (1808). Koser understands Kleist's drama as "a critique of state-sponsored warfare in which a culture and practice of violence is created to fulfill the needs of both the state and its citizens" (161), but she also points to the play's underlying ambiguity and its ominous depiction of female agency.

Armed Ambiguity brilliantly combines new historicism, discourse analysis, and feminist thought to explore depictions of women warriors in German-language print culture, novels, dramas, and lyrical texts at the turn of the nineteenth century. Koser's project is innovative, in that she sets male and female writers side by side and explores both canonical and noncanonical works between the outset of the French Revolution and the downfall of Napoleon, observing how women's bodies served as semiotic battlegrounds for competing narratives about women's place in society. Overall, her writing is lucid, informative, and engaging—both in terms of her interaction with existing scholarship and her provocative close readings of texts—and Koser leaves the reader ready to set out into the world with a more critical eye and appreciation of (often ambiguous) depictions of warrior women.