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Schiller’s *Egmont* and the Beginnings of Weimar Classicism*

This essay examines Schiller’s stage version of Goethe’s *Egmont*, which was performed in Weimar in April 1796 and which Schiller described as “gewissermaasen Göthens und mein gemeinschaftliches Werk”. Beginning with his review of *Egmont* in 1788 the essay demonstrates some of the principles on which Schiller amended the text, and then shows that these match changes in Goethe’s own writing by the mid-1790s. On this basis it evaluates the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller, and other biographical texts, to reconsider the view that Goethe’s misgivings about the adaptation marked a low-point in their relationship. It argues that Schiller’s work on *Egmont* instead deserves to be seen as a constructive experience in the development of the Weimar alliance.

I.

Schiller had spent three weeks in Weimar watching performances by Iffland and his visiting theatre company when he wrote a letter to Körner on 10 April 1796. His aim: to persuade Körner to join him for Iffland’s last performance, Goethe’s *Egmont*, which he had adapted for the stage. He sounds happy with his stay and with his work, describing the new *Egmont* as “gewissermaasen Göthens und mein gemeinschaftliches Werk” (NA 28. 210–211). Goethe, Schiller and Iffland – surely Körner would not want to miss experiencing such a combination of talents.1


1 Originally scheduled for performance on 20 April 1796, *Egmont* was eventually performed on 25 April and was not repeated, as Iffland was leaving Weimar the following day. See NA 13. 324. Except where indicated otherwise, this paper refers to the manuscript version of *Egmont* which Hans Heinrich Borcherdt reproduces in NA 13 and designates there as h1. This is the only extant manuscript which can be confidently
The nature of Schiller’s work on *Egmont* in those few weeks in March and April 1796 defines some of the nature of the greater “gemeinschaftliches Werk” of Weimar Classicism. It contributed to that work in that it confirmed the two men’s cooperation thus far, it opened new avenues in their work on theatrical adaptation, and as Schiller put it in the letter to Körner, it was “of no little use” in the shaping of the *Wallenstein* trilogy. Despite its importance – Peter-André Alt has described the performance on 25 April as one of the “Sternstunden des Weimarer Theaters” – Schiller’s *Egmont*, and these aspects of it in particular, have received relatively little critical attention among the mass of research on Weimar Classicism. This is not least because Schiller’s view of Goethe’s text is generally judged to have been hostile, an attitude which Goethe then reciprocated in kind towards Schiller’s adaptation.

Assessments of Goethe’s feelings are based largely on statements he made long after the event, and they will be discussed later on. The basis for Schiller’s opinion is his anonymous review of Goethe’s text when it was published in 1788 (NA 22. 199–209). Here Schiller was indeed largely critical of the text, but the reasons for this were understandable. Schiller’s feelings for Goethe seem to have been at low ebb (if also at high intensity) in 1788–89. Moreover the publication of *Egmont* threatened to eclipse Schiller’s own untidy *Don Karlos*, which had appeared in book form in 1787, and his history of the Revolt of the Netherlands, which was published only weeks after the review. Part of the reviewer’s dissatisfaction with inaccuracies in the play can be read as an historian’s *tour de force* to demonstrate his own superior familiarity with the same material. Even regardless of such jealousy, Schiller saw *Egmont* in the


