

## **Bettina von Arnim's *Goethe's Correspondence With a Child*: Woman's Literary Autobiography as a Statement**

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### Summary:

Bettina von Arnim (1785-1859) was a publisher, activist and a celebrity of cultured circles of Weimar-Jena and Berlin around 1800. She stepped onto the literary scene when already 51, with the epistolary book *Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*. Published in 1835, the book immediately awoke great interest as the authentic biography of Goethe, while von Arnim was not perceived as the author, but publisher of Goethe's correspondence. Only in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the original letters were discovered, it became evident that Bettina von Arnim was very much the author of her book: she amended and rearranged the authentic letters and changed their content to suit her purposes. In doing so, she openly disregarded both literary and social norms, the most important ones being the code of the autonomy of art and firmly defined sex/gender roles of her time. She did not write Goethe's biography, but her own autobiography, which is literary although it includes her life and which made her an author despite being a woman. Today's value of this text is manifold: it is a contribution to the revision of the predominantly male literary canon and to the genre of women's autobiography as a distinctive mode of self-representation.

Since the title of this essay contains an abundance of Saxon genitives, it is only reasonable to begin by clarifying what belongs to whom, in which way and why. I would therefore like to start by dividing the topic into three main parts, with the fourth part as a conclusion to these three. In doing so, I will try to connect each section to the larger background concepts and include each part into the corresponding spatial and temporal frameworks. Bettina von Arnim will be perceived as the author of the work of a complex genre affiliation entitled *Goethe's Correspondence With a Child* that is not a biography of a man, but an autobiography of a woman, which represents strong genre and gender statements in the context of Germany around 1800. In each part I will outline biographic and historical contexts surrounding the text

and the author, since both have remained quite unknown outside the borders of German-speaking literature and literary theory.

The reference to Germany „around 1800“ is not a vague approximation of time, but a suggestion of new periodization in the history of literature. German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1987) uses this descriptive label to denote the threshold between early modernity and modernity, the period between 1750 and 1850, which he also identifies as the “long 18<sup>th</sup> century” or the “Sattelzeit”. In line with the tendencies stemming from the tradition of women studies, this periodization has been increasingly used in the context of cultural and literary revival of women's texts. The new option was initially implemented as a form of rebellion against cultural and literary dominants which have determined and mapped literature and theory composed, critiqued, published and launched almost exclusively by male authors. This androcentric perception of literary history resulted in monolithic umbrella terms such as „Goethezeit“, as this period is often called. This name for the era was inaugurated by literary historian Herman August Korff in 1923, when the first volume of his overview of classic-romantic literary history was published. This is also the most controversial name for the period: it leads one to believe not only that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the only prominent author at the time, but also that there were no women authors writing or publishing back then. And although the underrepresentation of works by women authors in the canon of German literature and in syllabuses of universities mirrors the idea behind this periodization, the above statements do not correspond to the actual state of affairs. The turn of the century was a period when women wrote copiously. And not only did they write, they also published their texts and were active on the literary scene, especially in the dual city Weimar-Jena and in the literary circles and salons of Berlin. Apart from writing – creating texts – they also led mesmerizingly interesting lives, so although my work aims at concentrating on the literary production – or, more specifically, their autobiographical work in the context of the literary production - it was impossible to put their lives aside. Bettina von Arnim herself could not do it: she was living for almost 50 years before she started writing. Taking her eventful family and social lives and her activity on the political scene into consideration, it proves right what Karin Tebben (1998) emphasized in the context of literary activity around 1800: the most desirable status for a woman author was to be a widow, since she was financially secured and with all the time in the world for writing (28). Bettina von Arnim's husband – Achim von Arnim, German poet and novelist - died in 1831, four years before her 51<sup>st</sup> birthday, when *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*, her first work, was published.

In today's context we can clearly and undoubtedly state that Bettina von Arnim is the author of the aforementioned book. However, she was not perceived as the author in 1835, when the book was published, and the reasons for it are twofold. First and foremost, it was believed that she simply collected letters of Goethe and issued them, and therefore could not be the author, but a mere publisher of *his* book. Secondly, and more important in the contextual framework I am proposing in dialogue with the standards of the period around 1800, a woman cannot be an author. Woman's authorship is a highly controversial concept: authors are male, since women are programmed for life, not art, and the two are binary oppositions according to the contemporary standards. Author is also the one whose works belong to the canon – and women, since they write about life, write canonically unacceptable autobiographical genres. It is important to note that the very first book by Bettina von Arnim was published and advertised as Goethe's book, from the title on, and it was done so on purpose. She planned on giving it a title *Ich und mein Dämon*, which would have been a more appropriate heading considering the content, but finally decided to change it to *Goethe's Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*, counting on attracting wider audience. It was a strategy, and possibly a carefully thought-out one, to put Goethe both on the covers of her book and inside it.

*Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde* is a book of very complex genre affiliation. Critics and theoreticians have been highly cautious when labelling the text: it was described as epistolary prose, biography and autobiography. The most common label, however, has been the one of epistolary book: Bettina von Arnim has even been praised as the inaugurator of the genre. Whichever term we choose, it denotes the book as a whole, but that book still encompasses the multiplicity of genres: letters, monologues, poetry, diary entries and travelogues. It resists classification according to the genre and canon standards, which relates to the problem of author and authorship: as a woman, Bettina von Arnim cannot be an author, while her text, autobiographic by affiliation, is not eligible for inclusion into the canon.

This epistolary book, or *Briefbook*, as it is called in German, consists of three textual and two paratextual parts. The textual part begins with Bettina von Arnim's correspondence with Goethe's mother, Frau Rath, further flows into her correspondence with Goethe and ends with the *Diary or Book of Love*. When the book was published, the audience and the critics focused primarily on part two, reading it as original letters of Goethe and to Goethe. The truth remains that Bettina von Arnim was in correspondence with Goethe for a long time, but this book does not consist of their authentic letters. That Bettina played copy-paste with original letters to suit her purposes was first claimed by George Henry Lewes, the author of *Life of Goethe*

(1864). The English critic and philosopher enumerated chronological and factual inconsistencies in Bettina von Arnim's text, insinuating that Goethe's text is rather creatively adjusted, both in its form and content.

Upon closer analysis of the carefully structured form of the book and close reading of its textual and paratextual parts, I can agree with what some of the authors already stated – among them Christa Bürger (1990), Wolfgang Bunzel (2008) and Kay Goodman (1985): this is not a biography of Goethe, as perceived by Bettina von Arnim's contemporaries, but a literary autobiography of a woman, Bettina von Arnim. Throughout the textual parts it is evident that she always puts herself first, talks about herself as the central figure of the narration, and there is more of her letters inside than anyone else's, even Goethe's. Aside from Bettina herself, Goethe might be the main protagonist of Bettina von Arnim's book, but he is in there primarily as an object of her artistic literary design. As for the importance of preface and inscription of the book, it is twofold: in the context of writing and publishing women's texts around 1800, they are strategically important, and they are crucial for the reading of this book as an autobiography of a woman, rather than biography of a man.

Gerard Genette (1997) perceives paratext as a „threshold of interpretation“ and subscribes to Lejeune's statement that paratext is „a fringe of a printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text“ (2). Paratext thus implies the discourse around the text, or rather a number of additional elements that are the integral part of the „book“ in which the text is published: inscriptions, epigraphs and different functions of the segment Genette dubs the „original preface“ (196). In the case of the epistolary book by Bettina von Arnim, the paratext realized in the form of inscription and preface is important strategically, at the level of production and publication of the text, as well as interpretation-wise, from the point of view of the book's reception. Contrary to what one might expect in the context of women's writing and publishing strategies around 1800, this is where Bettina von Arnim imposes her authorial self on the audience, penetrating their reading experience, and offers them the key to reading the text.

Looking at the book as a whole, with its visibly clear and careful structure, it is hard to believe that a structure so elaborate and planned did not influence the content. Close reading of the preface and inscription in today's reception context demonstrates that it is highly unlikely the author simply gathered her letters and Goethe's letters and released them without any editing. However, these aforementioned parts of the book were either not read or have

been omitted: in fact, the 2008 edition quoted in the bibliography is the first one after the original edition from 1835 which contains all textual and paratextual parts and functions therefore as a well-rounded unit. Actually, not even the first edition had all the parts immediately included: the text was published in two volumes in February 1835, while the third part, the *Diary*, was released as the third volume a month later. Yet if one reads the preface and inscription attentively and strictly in the context of the rounded unit of the *Briefbook* with all its parts included, there are some clues which the author prepared for a careful reader. For example, in inscription she stated:

„It is no gift of chance or of whim, that is brought here to you. By well reflected reasons and with joyful heart, I bid you to the best, I am able to offer (...)“<sup>1</sup>

In stating so at the very beginning of the text, she possibly attracts attention to her own creative work in the background of the text that follows, which is not a „gift of chance or of whim“, but rather a creation she put her time and effort into. What she also does is relativize the importance of truth in the sense of factual verifiability:

„All are not fit to sound truth, but only its appearance; to trace the secret ways of a profound nature, to solve the problems in it – is denied to them (...)“

In the context of authenticity and truthfulness, the following is also important:

„... protect these pages like your plants, and so again leave unminded the prejudice of those, who before they are acquainted with the book, condemn it as not genuine, and thus deceive themselves of truth.“

This is an indication that the text has its own poetic, literary truth, which sheds a completely different light to what was perceived as authentic.

Upon careful reading of Preface it is even more evident that the text Bettina von Arnim guarantees and promises is by no means a document, but a result of her creative effort. In the introductory sentence she states she was busy "preparing these papers for the press", explaining there had been suggestions to change some parts. Regardless of whether the proposals for change had to do with her letters (more likely) or Goethe's (less likely), this certainly is not a legitimate way to treat documents. An indicative part is also the one towards the very end of Preface, where Bettina von Arnim thanked the Chancellor Müller who helped her to get hold of her letters after Goethe's death: she explained that the Chancellor asked for

one of those letters, but she did not meet his request. However, she expressed hope he would be satisfied with the way in which she *used*, or rather utilized the letters:

„(...) may the use I have made of it, prove to him both my thanks and my justification.“

It was common for German women authors from the period around 1800 to use multiple strategies of writing and publishing, two most important being modesty topoi and legitimization by male authors. Modesty topoi or *Bescheidenheitstopoi* assumed different textual and paratextual forms, but they all boiled down to an attempt to show that the authors wrote for pastime, not for money, and that they did not have any artistic pretence. The second strategy was to connect with male authors: either to get them to write a preface to their work or to appear as a publisher of the text. Bettina von Arnim used a different strategy, and an audacious one, too: she utilized the author who gave the name to the period in which she was living and writing in the title of her book. Furthermore, she employed the common slot of preface and inscription and filled it content-wise with what resembled these two strategies, whereas in fact she used it to assert herself and make a statement that the book is about her and her art. In doing so, she made an attempt at governing the interpretation of her text, which was an important cultural, social and literal act. What is more, she disregarded the code of autonomy of art by tampering with existing genre codes, and made use of the great author to become an author herself, interfering with gender roles in the period around 1800.

My claim is that today's value of this text is manifold. It is a contribution to the theory of autobiographics, as well as important contribution to the revision of the predominantly male literary canon, especially when it comes to German women authors around 1800. Today's reception is such that it recognizes innovation and creativity behind her literary methods, but that still does not guarantee the deserved entrance to the canon of literature nor does it do justice to this “neglected masterpiece of 19<sup>th</sup> century”. The last quote stems from Bruce Charlton, who made it his project to transcribe and put on the web the English version of the pioneer work by Bettina von Arnim. The reasons for that are best explained by himself:

“The purpose of this web publication is to bring *Goethe's correspondence with a child* to the attention of both scholars and general readers – and to stimulate the attentions of editors and publishers with the hope that someone may prepare an edition suitable for a broader audience.”

The English version of the text is authored by Bettina von Arnim herself, which is also extremely interesting from the literary translation studies point of view. She published the translation in 1837, and the two volume edition used for this transcription can be found in the library of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne. Charlton transcribed the two volumes, including preface and inscription, and made them available in 2004, stating in his editorial note that the third part was missing and that he was not able to locate it. He also emphasized that the English edition, although it had considerable impact on some key figures of American literature, such as New England Transcendentalists, has never been reprinted.

In her short introduction to an excerpt from *Goethe's Correspondence With a Child* Christa Bürger established that Bettina von Arnim, as a member of „romantic generation“, had the same problem as the whole generation: their quest for their own selves remained barren (2004: 11). I would say that this does not hold true for Bettina von Arnim: her quest for identity in terms of authorship had proved fruitful and modern as well. As Bruce Charlton correctly recognized, the readers nowadays are fascinated and inspired by the gap between fiction and fact and find it stimulating to read the texts which walk the borderline between the two. In this respect, the author living and writing in the period around 1800, Bettina von Arnim, has a lot to offer both to the readership and literary scholars from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from the English version of the epistolary book and the related editorial preface and can be found here: <http://www.hedweb.com/bgcharlton/bettina-goethe.html> (accessed February 1, 2012)