

**Philosophical Inspirations for Violent Fiction and Drama:
Heinrich von Kleist and Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

Submitted by Steven Mark Howe to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in June 2010.

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Abstract

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) is renowned as an author who posed a radical challenge to the prevailing intellectual, aesthetic and ethical orthodoxies of his age. Recently, his elusive works have frequently been seen to represent a poetics of irony that relentlessly deconstructs the philosophical paradigms of Idealism and reflects a Romantic, even postmodern, view of the fundamental ambiguities of the world. For all that this contributes to our understanding of the famed plasticity and inexhaustibility of his texts, however, a limited reading along these lines effects a decided levelling of social, political and intellectual context, and fails to do full justice to the more complex manner in which Kleist articulates the tensions between the secure modalities of Enlightenment thought and the deep anxieties of the revolutionary age.

This study aims to offer a new angle on Kleist's dialogue with the Enlightenment by reconsidering his investment in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Where previously critics have tended to conceptualise this from a biographical perspective as a temporary, personal interest borne of the strict antinomies of nature-civilisation and individual-society, an attempt will be made here to re-establish Rousseau's specific importance as a political thinker whose theories remained a fertile source of creative inspiration and critical reflection for the violent constellations of Kleist's fiction and drama. Focusing on a cross-section of his work, particular focus will be placed on his explorations of the links between religion and fanaticism (*Das Erdbeben in Chili*), the legitimacy of revolutionary violence (*Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*), the performance of nationhood (*Die Herrmannsschlacht*), and the relationship between patriotism and liberty (*Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*). Set in the historical context of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, a mode of discourse will be located which sheds new, important, and at times unexpected, light on the political and ethical issues at play in Kleist's work.

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