

Introduction

The Work of Karoline von Günderrode

The poet, dramatist, and philosopher Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) published several collections and individual pieces of writing, including *Poetic Fragments*, at the start of the nineteenth century. Günderrode was a nuanced and original thinker whose varied writings include philosophical fragments, dialogues, erotic, mystical, and religious poetry, ballads, epic, tragic and comic dramas, and fictional and semi-fictional fragments that consider political, historical, religious, and philosophical questions. Her work was known to many of the leading intellectual lights of her day, including Bettina Brentano/von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, Georg Friedrich Creuzer, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. She was a major influence on the modern German writers Anna Seghers and Christa Wolf, and has inspired works of fiction, music, film, and poetry. However, despite a steady cult following, Günderrode's writing is generally little known even to German speakers, and is practically unknown in the English-speaking world. This gap should be addressed, since Günderrode's work is not only often beautiful and powerful, but also reflects her original, at times radical, philosophical thought.

Günderrode's work reveals a thoughtful and innovative engagement with philosophical questions and literary themes of her age, but there has been little attention to her contributions to these fields. In part, this is because Günderrode wrote at a time when women were

expected to restrict their writing to particular styles (charming, sweet, whimsical) and genres (letters, diaries, lyrical poetry), when their desire to be published was often seen as reflecting vanity or other dubious or unfeminine personality traits, and when their efforts were thought to be of lower intellectual, literary, and creative merit than the work of their male peers.¹ As a result, the disciplines of German literature and philosophy have yet to explore G nderrode's treatment of literary themes or her approach to philosophical questions about metaphysics, subjectivity, death, free will, ethics, politics, and gender roles. G nderrode was also one of the first interpreters of Asian and Middle Eastern philosophy, religion, and culture in Germany and Europe, and studying her appropriation of these sources can provide information on the modern European adoption of ideas from the East.

G nderrode's work will certainly be of interest to fans and scholars of German literature. But my interest in G nderrode is primarily a philosophical one, and this book aims to promote the interpretation of her work as a contribution to the philosophical, as well as literary, culture of her time. Thus, this book has two goals. First, the translations of G nderrode's writings make these pieces available to an English-speaking audience, allowing them to be enjoyed by more readers and more readily included in courses on German literature and philosophy. Second, the critical material included in this volume indicates some of the ways in which G nderrode's writing reveals a rich and innovative philosophy, justifying the inclusion of G nderrode's work in the academic study of philosophy. In particular, this book points out G nderrode's unique contributions to the German Romantic and Idealist projects of reimagining metaphysics, personhood, freedom, gender roles, and possibilities for social and political arrangements. These areas of G nderrode's thought all require closer study, and it is my hope that this book will invite more readers and scholars to embark on this rewarding investigative task.

The Reception of G nderrode's Work

There is a long tradition of fascination with G nderrode's life, relationships, and suicide, and G nderrode has been the subject of several films, novels, and poems, as well as many biographical or biographically oriented essays and books.² However, this construction of a "G nderrode

mythos” has not been accompanied by rigorous or extensive attention to either the literary or philosophical merits of her writings. In fact, as a number of commentators have pointed out, the attention to Günderrode’s biography and psychology has tended to distract attention from her work, or at best to focus the study of her writings on their connections with events in her life or their supposed function as forms of escape or wish fulfillment.³ Meanwhile, in English-speaking culture and scholarship there is very little awareness of any sort about Günderrode or her work.

At the time of their publication, Günderrode’s two collections, *Poems and Fantasies* and *Poetic Fragments*, were met with moderate attention and mixed reviews. The work was widely enough known to reach Goethe’s eyes, as we know from a letter he sent in 1804 stating that the poems of *Poetic Fragments* “are really a peculiar phenomenon.”⁴ Reviews of Günderrode’s work also appeared in well-circulated journals. A review of *Poems and Fantasies* in *Der Freimüthige* claimed that “[a] beautiful, tender, feminine mind reveals itself therein, and arouses expectations for the future,” but maintains that the ideas are “seldom or never original; some have reminiscences and hold them for original ideas!”⁵ Günderrode’s friend Christian Nees von Esenbeck reviewed the collection in the *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, providing generally positive comments but criticizing Günderrode’s errors in form.⁶ *Poetic Fragments* received a very warm review in the *Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1806*;⁷ however, the *Freimüthige* review of this collection was harsh, referring to the pieces as “school exercises” and advising that they would have been better left unpublished.⁸ Nees von Esenbeck’s review of *Poetic Fragments*, published after Günderrode’s death in 1807, was also quite negative, claiming that Günderrode’s work had taken a “false direction” after *Poems and Fantasies*.⁹ Nees’s review also shows early signs of the sexist and mythologizing tendencies that came to characterize the Günderrode reception. Notably, Nees claims that Günderrode “wanted to poetize as a woman in a manly spirit” but that her “feminine nature” caused her to fall short of her goal, “her flight flagging in a powerless middle.”

The fascination with Günderrode’s supposedly conflictual character and/or otherworldly or mystical nature, her relationship with Creuzer and the role of these factors in her suicide began immediately after her death. A month after Günderrode’s death, one of her friends wrote to another, “Your representation of her three souls is very true. The unity of

these three powers would have been love. —In the reign of the first soul she was woman and inasmuch modern being, in the second man and lived in antiquity. In the third lay the tendency to the accommodation of both in the purely human.”¹⁰ In 1808, G nderrode’s friend Bettina von Arnim wrote a “Report on G nderrode’s Suicide” for Goethe’s mother Catharina Elizabeth Goethe, which was published in von Arnim’s 1839 collection *Goethe’s Correspondence with a Child*.¹¹ The “report” gives poetic descriptions of G nderrode and claims that von Arnim had visions of G nderrode’s death. In 1840 von Arnim published *Die G nderode*, a novelized account of her friendship with G nderrode based on edited versions of their letters, which was translated into English in 1841 by Margaret Fuller.¹² This text exerted a strong influence on the public perception of G nderrode. The book presents “G nderode” as an intellectual and spiritual mentor for the earthier “Bettine,” characterizes G nderode as elusive and disconnected from the everyday world, and emphasizes the two women’s discussions of religion. The image of G nderrode as mystical, detached from the world, and destined for an early death pervades the secondary literature until at least the mid-twentieth century, and emerges even in relatively recent work.¹³ The fact that *Die G nderode* was based on real letters encouraged conflation of the historical G nderrode with the semi-fictional G nderode created by von Arnim.

For more than a century after her death, discussion of G nderrode was largely limited to introductions to collections of her works and letters or biographical articles in encyclopedias and journals.¹⁴ Several partial editions of G nderrode’s writings¹⁵ and collections of her letters¹⁶ appeared, but few studies of her work or thought. A notable exception is Erich Regen’s *Die Dramen Karolinens von G nderode* (*The Dramas of Karoline von G nderode*) of 1910, which was the first text to pay serious attention to G nderrode’s dramas and which is still a useful document for understanding G nderrode’s sources. The eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century reception focused on G nderrode’s biography, particularly her suicide, and represented these as central to her work. Commentators often dismissed or denigrated G nderrode’s writing, especially her dramas.¹⁷ For example, in 1895 Ludwig Geiger wrote that “[i]f Karoline von G nderode had only been a poet, then, despite the significance of individual poems, her renown would have scarcely survived her lifetime. That she is still known today she owes to her personality and her fate.”¹⁸ Where authors praised G nderrode’s work,

they tended to portray her strengths as a writer as mystical and/or as reflections of her personality, as in Karl Schwartz's claim that G nderrode's poems are "the pure mirror of her true beautiful individuality, giving testimony to a tenderness of feeling bound with glowing fantasy and deep earnestness of sentiment."¹⁹

In the 1930s, biographies of G nderrode by Otto Heuschele, Margaret Mattheis, and Richard Wilhelm appeared,²⁰ but G nderrode's work received little attention. The period between 1940 and the late 1970s saw the publication of a handful of articles on G nderrode's writings, but the most significant texts were collections of G nderrode's letters by Max Preitz,²¹ a publication of G nderrode's study book by Preitz and Doris Hopp,²² and dissertations by Waltraud Howeg and Annelore Naumann.²³

Most of the relatively small amount of secondary literature on G nderrode and her work has emerged since 1979, when Christa Wolf published a collection of some of G nderrode's writings and letters (*The Shadow of a Dream*)²⁴ and a fictionalized encounter between G nderrode and Heinrich von Kleist in her novel *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (translated as *No Place on Earth*). Notably, Wolf omitted G nderrode's plays from her collection of G nderrode's work, on the grounds that they were less successful than her poetry and fragments.²⁵ In *Kein Ort. Nirgends* and the introduction to *The Shadow of a Dream*, Wolf presents G nderrode as an untimely poet whose death was a necessary sacrifice to the changing times in which she lived. While Wolf's work greatly increased interest in G nderrode's writings, her influential interpretation contributed to a literature that viewed G nderrode's work largely in relation to her suicide, rather than in relation to literary traditions or philosophical questions and problems. The literature that emerged in the 1980s continued to focus on G nderrode's biography, but with a new, feminist emphasis on the impact of social constraints on G nderrode's work and life.²⁶ Representative of this tendency is Margarete Lazarowicz's *Karoline von G nderrode: Portrait of a Stranger* (1986), which analyzes G nderrode's correspondence to support the claim that G nderrode's acquaintances subjected her to isolating, socially normalizing criticism and advice, and provides biographical interpretations of most of G nderrode's works.

Wolf's rehabilitation of G nderrode contributed to G nderrode featuring among German women writers whose work received new attention starting in the 1980s, along with von Arnim, Annette von Droste-H lshoff, Therese Huber, Sophie von La Roche, Sophie

Mereau, Benedikte Naubert, Rahel Varnhagen and others.²⁷ Discussion of Günderröde's work, and the occasional English translation, began to appear in books and articles on eighteenth and nineteenth century writing by women²⁸—a trend that continued in the 1990s²⁹ and after the turn of the century.³⁰ A number of authors began to explore the new forms of identity that they argued emerged in women's writing around 1800, including in the work of Günderröde. Texts on this topic include articles by Karl Heinz Bohrer, Lorely French, Sara Friedrichsmeyer, and Helene Kastinger Riley.³¹

The 1990–91 publication by Stroemfeld/Roter Stern of a complete German edition of Günderröde's writings, edited by Walther Morgenthaller, has helped make Günderröde's work accessible to a German-speaking audience. Since the publication of this edition, discussion of Günderröde's work has appeared in collections not just on German women writers, but on German literature in general.³² Articles by Barbara Becker-Cantarino, Sabine Gözl, Marjanne Goozé, and others analyze particular pieces by Günderröde as original contributions to German literature.³³ Several articles have continued the interest that emerged in the 1980s in the potential of Günderröde's work to suggest new forms of self-construction and provide strategies of resistance to patriarchal forms of writing and thinking.³⁴ A few more explore the relationship of Günderröde's work and thought to Eastern philosophy and mythology.³⁵ Some commentators have also begun to investigate the philosophical and political aspects of Günderröde's thought, notably Ruth Christmann, Helga Dormann, and Lucia Licher.³⁶ Most significantly, Christmann, Dormann, and Licher published books on Günderröde's work that investigate the relationship of her thought to the philosophical, social, political, mythological, and religious ideas to which she was exposed, particularly the work of the Early German Romantics.³⁷ In 2006, new biographies of Günderröde by Dagmar von Gersdorff and Hopp appeared.³⁸

As the above summary shows, there exist a few texts that explore the philosophical aspects of Günderröde's work and several more that interpret Günderröde's writings as contributions to German literature, particularly women's literature, in the early nineteenth century. However, the majority of texts on Günderröde are still very general and introductory, focus on her dramatic life, failed love affairs, and early suicide, and/or interpret her work in biographical and psychological terms. As a result, much work must still be done in order to piece together a

thorough interpretation of Günderröde's philosophical thought and its significance for German Romanticism and post-Kantian Idealism, and to raise the profile of her writings to the point at which they can be accepted into mainstream research.

This Book

The collection translated here consists of five pieces by Günderröde, which she published together in 1805 as *Poetic Fragments* (*Poetische Fragmente*). As was common for women writers at the time, Günderröde used a pseudonym for this publication: "Tian"—which to Günderröde's contemporaries sounded male or androgynous. The five works in this volume are representative of Günderröde's religious and erotic poetry and her use of momentous historical events and characters as foils for her development of philosophical and political claims. *Poetic Fragments* comprises two epic historical dramas, *Hildgund* and *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca*, and three poems or sets of poems: the ballad "Piedro," the mystical poem cycle "The Pilgrims," and the erotic poem "The Kiss in the Dream." The latter is one of Günderröde's best-known works.

Poetic Fragments was the second collection of writings published by Günderröde (*Poems and Fantasies* appeared in 1804) and was to be followed by a third, *Melete*, which had been sent to the publishers at the time of her death in 1806. However, following her death Günderröde's contacts, including Creuzer, who had agreed to arrange publication of the collection, suppressed its publication, fearing a scandal due to the book's allusions to Günderröde's affair with the married Creuzer. *Melete* therefore did not appear until 1906. Günderröde also published separately a number of dramas, poems, and fragments. These writings are almost all either unavailable in English or hard to find, being scattered in anthologies, articles, and dissertations. This book translates the entirety of *Poetic Fragments* and provides critical essays introducing the most important philosophical concerns of *Hildgund*, *Prophet of Mecca* and the poems. These essays are followed by short annotated lists of suggested further reading in English and German, where relevant texts are available.

The first piece in this volume, *Hildgund*, is a play centering on the decision by Hildgund, a warrior-princess from Burgundy, of how to

respond to an offer of marriage from Attila the Hun, whose armies are menacing Burgundy's borders. The introductory essay highlights Günderröde's exploration of the conditions of possibility for agency, particularly for women. I suggest that, characteristically for Günderröde's writings on agency, *Hildgund* addresses the implications for self-determination of how one is treated by others. The play also touches on the related question of whether free will can exist in a universe governed by forces beyond one's control.

The first poem in this volume, "Piedro," is a homoerotic ballad describing Piedro's mission by sea to rescue his kidnapped bride and his encounter with her kidnapper. This poem is followed by "The Pilgrims": two linked poems with Christian mystical overtones, which evoke a sense of rootlessness and longing for union with God after death. The final poem, "The Kiss in the Dream," describes an erotic awakening and erotic longing, connecting this longing to imagery of death. While these poems are very different in form and subject matter, all highlight themes of love, death, and longing. This constellation of concepts is often said to be central to Günderröde's work, and is frequently taken to reflect her own suicidal ideation in connection to her failed love affairs, particularly her affair with Creuzer.³⁹ The introductory essay to the poems analyzes these concepts as they appear in Günderröde's writings, aiming to counteract the tendency to misunderstand the significance of these themes or overemphasize their connections to Günderröde's life and death. I argue that the reduction of the death-theme in Günderröde's writing to its biographical relevance misses the complex set of questions that Günderröde explored using the theme of death, and I examine some of these in the context of Günderröde's broader oeuvre. I also investigate the role of love in Günderröde's thought, particularly in relation to Early German Romantic theories of love.

The final piece in *Poetic Fragments* is Günderröde's longest work, the play *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca*. This play follows Muhammad from his decision to reveal his visions to the people of Mecca, through banishment and a series of battles, to just after his final conquest of Mecca. The introductory essay highlights Günderröde's use of the figure of Muhammad to respond to earlier literary works on the Prophet and to political and cultural change in Europe; her idea of a synthesis of religions and the implications of this idea for her metaphysics; her account of selfhood; and the relationship of her character Muhammad to central concepts in German Romanticism and Idealism. The essay also

explores how the play problematizes the question of free will, addresses the effects of power and recognition on the freedom and personhood of women and other marginalized individuals, and outlines a political ideal.

The remainder of this introduction places *Poetic Fragments* in the context of the rest of Günderrode's work and the literary, political, and philosophical themes with which her writings engage. The next section examines the social context in which Günderrode wrote, which is important both for interpreting Günderrode's writing and for understanding why her work has been neglected despite the relatively high levels of interest in her biography. The subsequent section provides an overview of some of the most significant philosophical topics in Günderrode's writing, while the last section shows how these relate to movements in the philosophy and broader intellectual context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Writing *Poetic Fragments*

The pieces of *Poetic Fragments* are not immediately recognizable as works of philosophy. They are not written in philosophical language and do not explicitly refer to specific philosophers, texts, or ideas. In part, this may reflect Günderrode's engagement with Early German Romanticism, which, as we will see in the last section of this introduction, considered novels, poems, and fragments to be appropriate media for philosophical thought. Günderrode was also subject to constraints regarding the forms in which women were expected to write and the topics they were supposed to consider. Women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not receive the same kind of education as their male peers, and were said to be unsuited for intellectual pursuits such as philosophy and literature. In their investigation of norms for women's writing at that time, Becker-Cantarino and Jeanette Clausen cite a query by Goethe: "Ought one to think about philosophy, let alone natural philosophy, with so much charm, emotion, and high spirits?" These authors also note Johann Gottlieb Fichte's claims that, although women could not make original discoveries, a woman might write in order to popularize the discoveries of men, but only for other women, and "must not appear in her writings as a badly disguised man."⁴⁰ In other words, women should not present themselves as having

original ideas or display too much abstract reasoning. This widespread attitude contributed to the relative lack of philosophical treatises by women of this time. As a result, if we want to benefit from the insights of women of this period, we must look outside the expected systematic or traditional philosophical forms, for example, in poems, novels, letters, diaries, and memoirs.

A number of scholars have explored how attitudes to women's thinking and writing influenced G nderrode's work and its reception. Some take G nderrode as a case study in "gender censorship," that is, the systematic suppression and obscuring of women's perspectives and their attempts to speak or write.⁴¹ Such censorship takes many forms, both overt and covert, including imposing explicit or implicit rules and norms for the styles, genres, and subject matter of "women's writing," failing to publish women's writing or take women's writing seriously, sanctioning women who publish by violence or stigmatization, and the internalization of these norms, rejections, threats, and expectations by women, which affects their speech and writing.

Gabriele D rbeck identifies eight tendencies that have marginalized the writings of female Romantic authors in particular: (1) a focus on the author at the expense of considering her work; (2) mythologization/degradation (e.g., casting an author as "Prophetess," "Sybil," or other mythic figure); (3) a characterization of the author as immoral or morally weak; (4) a denial of the author's originality, for example by focusing on her dependence on other works (by men); (5) a denial of the author's creativity, for example by focusing on a biographical interpretation of her writings; (6) accusations of inauthenticity, for example claiming that an author's work is artificial, fantastical, or narcissistic; (7) claims that an author's work is nonpolitical or that her attempts at political engagement are ineffective, thus restricting the scope of her work to the private sphere; and (8) the exclusion from the literary canon of marginal genres such as letters, autobiographies, and memoirs, which were more accessible to women.⁴²

Most of these tendencies are evident in the reception of G nderrode's work. I mentioned above the focus of the secondary literature on G nderrode's biography and psychology at the expense of her work (point 1) and on biographical interpretations of her writings (point 5), as well as the emergence of a "G nderrode mythos" (point 2), which has characterized G nderrode as a "German Sappho,"⁴³ prophetess,⁴⁴ and priestess.⁴⁵ Dormann and Licher note G nderrode's image as a

nonpolitical writer (point 7), which endured until the late twentieth century⁴⁶ despite the overtly political themes of many of Günderrode's pieces, including *Hildgund*, *Prophet of Mecca*, and most of her other dramas. Dormann has also criticized efforts to situate Günderrode in the canons of philosophy and literature by relating her ideas to the work of more famous male philosophers and writers, such as Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, which Dormann claims often present Günderrode's ideas as derivative of these thinkers (point 4).⁴⁷ Instead of investigating parallels between Günderrode's ideas and those of her male contemporaries and predecessors, Dormann suggests scholars investigate how Günderrode modified and added to their work.

The Günderrode reception also shows gender censorship in the general neglect of her work by critics and scholars and, where it has received attention, reviews and commentary that reflect sexist norms for women writers. This tendency has been well established in the secondary literature⁴⁸ and therefore will not be discussed in detail here, but as an example, consider the following excerpt from a review of *Poetic Fragments* in the *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* in 1807, a year after Günderrode died. The reviewer describes the pieces in *Poetic Fragments* as “children of a lovely fantasy, that play with images of human life and with ideas of science like flowers, without other purpose and other joys than to place them in a wreath, and in the fleeting connection of the gently molten colors to prepare them as a jewel for her head.”⁴⁹ Not only is the review dismissive of Günderrode's work, but the particular criticisms it levels at her writing are based on gender stereotypes. The reviewer suggests that the pieces of *Poetic Fragments* are superficial, decorative, and lack genuine understanding of the “ideas of science” with which they are concerned, and that their writer is motivated by vanity—all consistent with the stereotype of women as appropriately interested in the charming and pleasant and lacking the ability for profound intellectual engagement. The reviewer subsequently states that “[w]e have clarified above our opinion of the limits of feminine fantasy”—no wonder, then, that he did not perceive any philosophical value in the works of *Poetic Fragments*.

In this climate, women had to struggle against gender censorship to publish their work. Not only did they run a high risk of censure if they strayed outside norms for women's writing, but the decision to publish at all was often seen as a questionable one for women, exposing them

to inappropriate public attention and possibly revealing vanity. Günderrode's friend Clemens Brentano, himself an aspiring writer, wrote to her after she published *Poems and Fantasies* to warn her that the publication of this work "must be an epoch in your life that you cannot well rescind" and that she had "authorized the world to make demands" of her because of her "audacity" in publishing her poems.⁵⁰ This kind of censure formed a strong social stigma for women writers. In response, women used various strategies to legitimate their writing and its publication and evade criticism of their character. Many female authors published anonymously or used pseudonyms. Many enlisted men to help publish and justify their writing. For example, La Roche had her 1771 novel *The Story of the Lady Sternheim* edited and introduced by her friend Christoph Martin Wieland, while Varnhagen's husband Karl August Varnhagen edited and published her letters, establishing her as a writer after her death.⁵¹ Some women carefully attended to gender norms for women writers, creating lyric poetry, letters detailing everyday events, or novels intended for the moral improvement of women and/or featuring heroines embodying, at least overtly, stereotypes of female virtues.⁵² Others rejected these norms to varying degrees. For example, von Arnim wrote social and political criticism in *This Book Belongs to the King*, Huber wrote travel reports and essays, and Mereau engaged with Fichte's philosophy in her writing.⁵³ Another strategy was to subvert male norms, creating new forms of writing. French argues that Varnhagen, Günderrode, and Mereau used techniques such as silence (e.g., ellipses), imitations of classical patriarchal forms, new systems of syntax and vocabulary, new genres, and an emphasis on subjective and personal elements to convey experiences that were excluded from the male canon or that women were not permitted to express.⁵⁴ The use of such techniques by women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has led a number of commentators to study their writings, including the work of Günderrode, as sources for the development of both new literary styles and new forms of self-awareness and self-construction.⁵⁵

Günderrode had several advantages in her efforts to become a published author. She came from an intellectual and literary family that encouraged reading works of high literature and philosophy, and was given a relatively good education by a house tutor.⁵⁶ Her father, Hektor Wilhelm von Günderrode, wrote historical biographies and "idylls" that were read at home,⁵⁷ and her mother, Luise von Günderrode, read philosophy, including Fichte's work, and wrote poetry and several

novels.⁵⁸ Günderrode's mother was friends with La Roche, who was the grandmother of Bettina Brentano/von Arnim. La Roche published Günderrode's "Story of a Brahmin" in her 1805 *Herbsttage*. Günderrode included among her friends many other educated, wealthy individuals, including several members of the Brentano family, Lisette and Christian Nees von Esenbeck, Creuzer, and Savigny, who provided her with reading materials, feedback on her work, and access to publishers. Creuzer also edited a journal, the Heidelberg *Studien*, with his friend Carl Daub, in which Günderrode published her plays *Udohla* and *Magic and Destiny* in 1805.

Nonetheless, Günderrode faced similar barriers to other female writers of the time in navigating the male-controlled publishing process. To help overcome these, she published under pseudonyms that hid her gender and used male third parties to negotiate with publishers. Nees von Esenbeck edited and helped publish *Poems and Fantasies* and wrote a largely positive review of the collection for the *Jenaer Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*.⁵⁹ Both Nees and Creuzer provided editorial advice and helped Günderrode search for a publisher for *Poetic Fragments*, which was eventually published with the help of an unknown mediator.⁶⁰ Creuzer also worked on and agreed to help publish the collection *Melete*, which had not yet appeared at the time of Günderrode's death.

However, Günderrode's dependence on these male contacts for the publication of her work also subjected her to their oversight and control. Becker-Cantarino and Clausen argue that this was a common obstacle for women writers at the time and reflected "something like a genuine political 'men's movement' with the goal of checking the influence of women and ladies on the state and in society."⁶¹ They claim that, although men such as the Early German Romantics, who coached the women writers in their circle, often hoped to help women writers, they wanted "even more to watch over and control, that is, to act as mentors, guardians, and tutors, to 'speak for [the women].'"⁶² Not only did Günderrode's contemporaries tend to believe that women's writing should be guided by the opinions of men, but they also believed that a central goal of this guidance was to ensure that women's writing adhered to gender norms. Becker-Cantarino and Clausen cite Goethe in support of this claim: "Shouldn't sophisticated and talented women be able to win sophisticated and talented male friends to whom they would submit their manuscripts? Then all unfeminine aspects could be obliterated and nothing would remain in their work that could attach itself like

an annoying counter weight to the natural feeling, the charming disposition, the romantic, heartfelt opinions, the graceful representation, and all the goodness that female writings possess in such abundance.”⁶³

Several commentators have analyzed Günderröde’s correspondence in order to reveal the extent to which Nees, Creuzer, and others exerted pressure on Günderröde to modify her work, including in order to fit gender-specific norms.⁶⁴ Creuzer often extolled the “mythic” or “mystic” quality of Günderröde’s writing, guiding her away from clear, dramatic, epic, or historical writing toward more “feminine” lyrical forms. The most striking example of this is his exhortation, “Your poetry is *mystic* . . . —and for that reason it is *not plastic*. Therefore everything is alien to you that by its nature demands productive systematic form, therefore the *real systematic Drama*. . . [A]void that drama that has a *historical* ground; especially the *occidental* with its *wholly clear history*. If it is generally awkward to try to surpass the documents that speak distinctly of a great man, then it is doubly awkward for a woman.”⁶⁵ Nees provided detailed and sometimes harsh editorial comments on Günderröde’s writings, for example arguing that a prophet could not be the subject of a drama and that *Prophet of Mecca* was instead more of a “dialogicized history.”⁶⁶ Stephanie Hilger notes that, in response to Nees’s criticisms, Günderröde proposed categorizing the piece as a “dramatic fragment,” thus acknowledging Nees’s authority while maintaining the status of the piece as belonging to the dramatic genre.⁶⁷

The objections of Günderröde’s friends to her dramatic and epic writing reflect social conceptions of what were appropriate styles, genres, and subject matters for women writers. Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer, and Patricia Herminhouse point out that, in western Europe at the time Günderröde was writing, the association of women with the stage was considered inappropriate at a number of levels, including performing, viewing, and writing.⁶⁸ Günderröde’s plays were designed as *Lesedramen* or plays for reading (also sometimes translated, revealingly, as “closet dramas” or “closet plays”), which were considered more acceptable for a woman writer than plays that were intended to be performed on the stage. Nonetheless, as Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer, and Herminhouse state, drama “dealt with issues of political and historical power; it also ordered communication and introduced a temporal order. This structure was in clear contrast to what was understood as a feminine form of writing.”⁶⁹

As the existence of *Hildgund*, *Prophet of Mecca*, and other of her epic and dramatic works shows, Günderröde resisted pressure to avoid

writing dramas or considering political or historical topics. However, in other respects Günderrode either acquiesced to or was unable to circumvent the demands of her male editors, as several commentators have explored.⁷⁰ Most drastically, Creuzer's control over the manuscript for *Melete* resulted in his withdrawal of the collection from publication after Günderrode's death, and it was not published until a century later. Creuzer claimed that Daub had persuaded him that "the suppression of this text is thoroughly necessary" and that another friend and Günderrode's brother were of the same opinion.⁷¹ These individuals hoped that by suppressing this text, and also destroying most of Creuzer's correspondence with Günderrode, they could avoid public scrutiny and scandal associated with Creuzer's affair with Günderrode and her suicide. They obviously viewed the protection of Creuzer's (and Günderrode's) reputation as more important than Günderrode's ambitions to have her work published.

Poetic Fragments was created in an environment that strongly emphasized rigid norms for women writers and established obstacles to the publication and reception of women's intellectual work. As Hoff, Friedrichsmeyer, and Herminhouse point out, "If one looks carefully at the interventions, good advice, recommendations, and comments of [Günderrode's] friends, and the utterly destructive criticism and reviews to which Günderrode's writing was subjected, then it is clear how very difficult her task was made. Only when one listens to the voices of the censors does one become aware of the atmosphere of repression that characterized the literary public sphere in Frankfurt at that time."⁷² It is therefore not surprising that in order to discover what women at this time thought and wrote about the historical, political, and philosophical ideas of their day, scholars must look outside the usual forms of writing on these topics, which were effectively reserved for the exclusive use of men. *Poetic Fragments* is one such alternative source.

Philosophical Topics in Günderrode's Writing

Günderrode's writings are a source of insight into the intellectual culture to which she hoped to contribute, including German Idealism and Romanticism. At the same time, her writings develop original responses to the philosophical problems addressed by these movements. This section considers Günderrode's social and political thought, metaphysics,

conceptions of free will and selfhood, approaches to love and death, understanding of prophecy, and view of religion, all of which feature in the pieces in *Poetic Fragments*.

One significant philosophical contribution of Günderrode's writings is their attention to the effects of oppression and marginalization on the emergence of agency and personhood. These issues are central to the pieces in *Poetic Fragments*, particularly *Hildgund* and *Prophet of Mecca*, as the introductory essays to these pieces explore. Some scholars have interpreted Günderrode's work as suggesting feminist alternatives to patriarchal models of self, society, agency, and the human-nature relationship, including models of these found in Early German Romanticism⁷³ and the work of Immanuel Kant.⁷⁴ A number of scholars have investigated the relationship between Günderrode's life and work in order to explore the difficulties for self-determination faced by eighteenth and nineteenth-century women, as well as the possibilities these women developed for creating new forms of literary identities in response to these constraints. For example, Gisela Dischner investigates the relationship between Günderrode and Bettina von Arnim in the context of the social and intellectual environment in which they worked, and particularly of Early German Romantic attempts to question gender norms and define a new feminine culture. Dischner argues that Günderrode and von Arnim developed a strong female self-consciousness that could have founded an alternative Early German Romantic image of women.⁷⁵ Karen Daubert argues that Günderrode explores the possibility of a poetic, female self as one who transcends cultural and gender boundaries, and that she suggests the possibility for relationships based on friendship and giving rather than possession.⁷⁶ French maintains that Günderrode, as well as Mereau and Varnhagen, used their writing to resist the construction of their selves by a male-centered discourse, rejecting a model of the self as stable or consistent.⁷⁷

Günderrode's attention to the problems of female selfhood and agency reflects a perspective that may have been shaped in part by her own marginalization. As a woman of her time, Günderrode often encountered limitations on her freedom and self-expression, which likely added to differences of perspective from her male contemporaries on issues of politics, social arrangements, agency, gender roles, and ethics. Commentators often draw attention to the frustration Günderrode expressed in her letters over her unfulfilled desires to travel, participate in great events, and perform acts of heroism.⁷⁸ Some have suggested that these frustrations underlie a wish-fulfilling identification

on G nderrode's part with both her female and male heroic characters, through whom they claim she lived out her fantasies.⁷⁹ Others point to those of G nderrode's works in which female characters act heroically, or to those in which her female characters are passive and lack agency, as revealing G nderrode's experience, as a woman, of exclusion from the political sphere.⁸⁰ Yet others have suggested that G nderrode's writing and suicide were complementary forms of self-expression or self-constitution in a social environment that strictly limited women's options for expressing themselves and for ways of life.⁸¹

We can learn a certain amount from these kinds of analysis about the relationship of G nderrode's writings to her psychology and more generally about the situation of women at the start of the nineteenth century. However, several commentators have pointed out that the tendency of G nderrode's readers to focus on the relationship of G nderrode's work to her life and psychology has had the unfortunate effect of sidelining, obscuring, or denying the philosophical significance of her thought and her contributions to German literature and philosophy.⁸² This tendency repeats a sexist tradition of viewing women's work as less intellectually valuable and less creative than men's writing, reducing women's creative efforts to expressions of their authors' emotions and inner conflicts. Whatever the relationship between G nderrode's life and her writing may be, here we will consider her writings in their own right as making serious and original points about metaphysics, ethics, politics, death, love, freedom, and the nature of the self.

One of the dominant themes in *Poetic Fragments* is the question of agency, particularly how an individual's agency is facilitated or impeded by the behavior of other people. Characters in *Hildgund* and *Prophet of Mecca* question the denial of agency and personhood to women in societies that confer power largely on men. In both plays, G nderrode's consideration of this issue with respect to particular individuals or groups questions the nature and conditions of possibility of agency and personhood in general, as the introductory essays to these plays explore. The introductions also investigate G nderrode's response to the metaphysical question whether it is possible to truly be an agent at all, that is, whether free will is possible or whether events are determined. G nderrode addressed this issue in *Hildgund* and *Prophet of Mecca*, as well as other works such as *Magic and Destiny* and *Udohla*.

Another philosophical problem of interest to G nderrode was the nature of knowledge. Her work often features prophets, sorcerers, and priests with access to secret knowledge. These characters, including

Muhammad in *Prophet of Mecca*, encounter a hidden inner truth to the world, which is very different from how the world appears to everyday eyes, and which has a profound spiritual significance. In *Prophet of Mecca*, as well as *Magic and Destiny*, "An Apocalyptic Fragment," "Once I Lived Sweet Life," "The Manes," "A Dream," and other pieces, Günderrode describes a world of chaotic elements that exists outside our usual experiences of time and space, which her prophetic figures experience in dreams and visions.

The revelation of the real, secret nature of the universe often demands of Günderrode's characters that they separate themselves from ordinary life and social norms, either through isolation or, as in Muhammad's case, by undergoing spiritual change. In many of her works, including those in *Poetic Fragments*, Günderrode presents concern with day-to-day matters, as opposed to spiritual matters, as a distraction from obtaining knowledge of the self and the universe, drawing the individual into the superficial hustle and bustle of commerce and away from her connections with the spiritual nature of things. This is a prominent and explicit theme in *Prophet of Mecca*, as well as in Günderrode's fragments "Excellence is a Whole . . ." and "Story of a Brahmin." The protagonists of these works are led by their search for knowledge to abandon the everyday world of personal desires and obligations in search of a higher meaning.

Themes of revolution, cultural renewal, and power are also important in *Hildgund* and *Prophet of Mecca*. In *Hildgund*, Attila is represented as a vital and powerful force in contrast to the "enervated" empires of Rome and "the Orient." Similarly, in *Prophet of Mecca*, the Prophet and his followers are contrasted to the fading Roman and Persian empires and the fragmented Christian and Jewish religions. Muhammad features as a revolutionary figure who will unify and revitalize a flagging Arabia. As such, Muhammad acts as a metaphor for the figures of Luther and Napoleon Bonaparte and his story as an analogy for a hoped-for revitalization of Europe. Günderrode's play thus provides, among other things, a commentary on European politics and society.

Günderrode's treatment of the topic of death has received some attention in the secondary literature. Commentators have generally viewed Günderrode's approach as conforming to a stereotyped "Romantic" attitude toward death, that is, as a morbid longing for death,⁸³ and often consider this theme in terms of its relationship to her suicide. There has been a tendency to highlight the eroticization of death in

many of Günderrode's works and to interpret her writings as an expression of a desire for death, or as a positive reevaluation of death that was part of her trajectory toward suicide. For example, one commentator states that "Günderrode killed her self in her 'work'"⁸⁴ and another that Günderrode had a "fascination, if not obsession, with death and sacrificial love" and that "[m]yth and death are at the center of the poetic works of Karoline von Günderrode."⁸⁵

The three poems included in *Poetic Fragments* all give death a central place, and all present death in erotic terms. *Hildgund* may also hint at a heroic death for its protagonist in the near future. However, as my introductory essay to the poems of *Poetic Fragments* considers in more detail, the concept of death held various meanings for Günderrode, not all of which can be adequately understood with reference to her biography. Death for Günderrode could represent a period of rejuvenation and release, a state of altered consciousness, the possibility of union with loved ones, or a metamorphosis of the individual. Günderrode's consideration of death was also important for her conceptualizations of the self and the world, which involve the continuation of the self in an altered form after death.

Elsewhere in her writing, Günderrode develops a cosmology that informs her unique conception of the self and her understanding of death. This model underlies the political and social thought presented in *Poetic Fragments* and Günderrode's idea of prophecy. Günderrode's metaphysics were influenced by Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* as well as Christian, Hindu, and Zoroastrian mythology. The model that emerges, however, is not an incoherent or derivative agglomeration of incommensurate philosophies, nor a literary rendering of a philosophical system created by someone else, but an original cosmology that, while not fully developed, is carefully thought out in relation to Günderrode's political and philosophical commitments. This cosmology must be pieced together from short fragments and pieces of information scattered throughout Günderrode's writings, including the works of *Poetic Fragments*. Outside this collection, key texts for understanding this model include the philosophical fragment "Idea of the Earth" (written in 1805), the prose poem "An Apocalyptic Fragment" and the short dialogue "The Manes" (both part of the 1804 collection *Poems and Fantasies*), the poem "Once I Lived Sweet Life" (probably written in 1802–03 and completed by 1804), and the play *Udohla* (first published in 1805). There has as yet been no systematic investigation of

Günderrode's metaphysics and it remains to be seen whether her fragmentary considerations of the nature of the cosmos can (or should) be pulled together into a coherent system. However, we can indicate some characteristics of Günderrode's model.

Günderrode views the universe as monistic, that is, as a single universe with no incommensurable separation between spiritual (or divine, intellectual, rational, or mental) and physical realms or attributes. Instead, she maintains that there is a spiritual component to the physical universe itself. In "Idea of the Earth," Günderrode describes the universe as formed from myriad "elements" that over time more or less temporarily combine, fall apart, and recombine to form objects and entities. In the process, the elements ideally become more harmonious (although they may instead become less harmonious).⁸⁶ The notion of vigor is important to this model: over time, particular forms of organization lose energy and begin to collapse and decay. Consequently, these forms must be reborn: they are destroyed and new forms emerge from the old. This idea is prominent in *Prophet of Mecca*, which describes the enervation of Persia and Arabia and prophesies the destruction and recreation of the world. Similarly, the play *Udohla* calls for a political revolution in order to revitalize India, and "An Apocalyptic Fragment" depicts individuals dissolving in a great ocean and emerging again in new forms. The introductory essay to *Prophet of Mecca* explores this process in more detail. The introductory essay to the poems of *Poetic Fragments* discusses the role of Günderrode's theory of love in this process. For Günderrode, love is the subjective experience of attraction between elements, and therefore an important motor for the constitution of new forms of being and the emergence of a more harmonious world.

Günderrode approaches the question of what it is to be a human being in the light of this cosmology. She considers the individual person to be radically mutable, made up, like the rest of the world, from many "elements" that are unified only contingently in any given individual. After death, these separate and recombine with other elements to create new individuals.⁸⁷ Günderrode links this idea to a form of reincarnation in which the new entities that emerge can retain traces of memory from their previous existences. As Bohrer points out, Günderrode's letters suggest that she views the individual as changing radically not only after death, but also while alive, from one moment to the next.⁸⁸ I have argued elsewhere that Günderrode saw the changes that an individual undergoes while alive as similar to those she experiences