

Scholars reject allegations of Goethe love affair

Monday, July 28, 2008
By Jean-Baptiste Piggin, dpa

BERLIN -- Allegations of a secret love affair between a dowager duchess and Germany's greatest writer, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, have been hotly rejected this week by German literary scholars.

The claims were advanced in a 2003 book by literary sleuth Ettore Ghibellino who lives in Weimar, the city that Goethe (1749-1832) made his home. Till this month, the academic establishment had frostily ignored the book, *Goethe and Anna Amalia: A Forbidden Love?*

Ghibellino who was born in Germany, but raised from the age of 3 till 14 in Italy, contends there was an intense and prolonged love relationship between the author and Anna Amalia (1739-1807), 10 years his senior and the former ruler of the tiny state of Saxe-Weimar.

The debate is not so much about whether, but rather with whom. Forbidden love was Goethe's topic. He gained European fame with a short novel about reckless, self-destructive romantic love, "The Sorrows of Young Werther."

All German children are obliged to learn some Goethe poetry at school and Germans are taught that Goethe had a long platonic love affair with Charlotte von Stein (1742-1827), wife of a Weimar official.

But Ghibellino insists this was just a smokescreen for a torrid relationship with the literature-loving widow, Anna Amalia who made Goethe librarian of the renowned library which most recently gained attention when it was badly damaged by a fire in 2004.

Now the Weimar Classicism Foundation has replied to Ghibellino, slapping down the claim as a "legend" inconsistent with the historical evidence.

"His obsessively biographical approach to literature and his shallow, selective use of sources permits no serious scholarly debate about this," the guardians of Goethe's memory announced. "He is pandering to a voyeuristic urge among the public."

Heike Spies, of the Goethe Museum in the city of Dusseldorf, joined the debate, saying Ghibellino offered half-truths, using literary evidence in an "isolated" way, out of context, to back his claims.

Ghibellino is not a literary scholar, but a lawyer. He intends to produce fresh documentary evidence which he said backs his case. Explaining his background, he said he was descended from a Roman family. His parents were in Germany at the time he was born. He obtained his doctorate in law from the University of Bayreuth, Germany and a masters degree in law from the University of Oxford in England.

The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* said this week Ghibellino had assiduously

advanced his case. His supporters have formed the Anna Amalia and Goethe Society. The dissidents have held a conference to hear papers on the claim that Goethe's patron was also his lover.

The evidence for a relationship is circumstantial, and there is no evidence whatever of sexual contact between Goethe and either woman. That allows readers of the Goethe books and letters to enjoy speculating about it all, based on their gut feelings. What is at issue is which woman was the intended recipient of a stream of hundreds of affectionate letters written between 1776 and 1789 which are addressed to "you, angel of heaven" and "unique among women."

The establishment says that Anna Amalia, who had ruled Weimar till her son Carl August was old enough to take over, was too cranky to attract Goethe romantically and merely helped him as the brightest star in her son's realm.

Spies said anyone who knows the full life stories of both would realize they could not possibly have been a couple. Nor is it plausible that Charlotte von Stein, who venerated Goethe, would have arranged for another woman to have trysts with him.

However, Ghibellino says Anna Amalia was his soulmate, but kept it all a secret because she knew a public affair would have rocked the principality to its political foundations. He claims contemporaries suspected something was up and alluded to this in letters.

Copyright © 2008 The China Post.

[Back to Story](#)