

# Research Note: Weber, Goethe, and William Penn: Themes of Marital Love\*

Stephen A. Kent

University of Alberta

*Having argued in a previous study that Weber was deeply moved by both Nietzsche's Übermensch concept and Goethe's embodiment of it, this research note demonstrates that Weber interpreted his own ascetic marriage with Marriane in part through impressions that he held of William Penn's marital relationship and Goethe's presumably chaste relationship with Frau von Stein. Despite, however, the extent to which Weber lauded the ethical dimensions of marriage, his own life and writings contrasted them with an appreciation of the erotic aspects of love. He came to cherish these aspects through an extended affair with, ironically, his wife's lifelong friend.*

In a recent examination of Max Weber's use of Quaker material in his 'Protestant ethic' thesis, I argued that Weber's idealization of Puritans was historically inaccurate because he viewed them through a literary and philosophical conception of inner worldly *Übermenschen* (overmen or supermen) suggested in the works of Nietzsche and Goethe (Kent, 1983). The most interesting aspect of the argument dealt with Weber's use of Goethe in crucial essays on various sociological topics, an important example of which occurred at the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Kent, 1983: 302-305, 308-309). Behind these uses of Goethe in his academic writing was the deep impression that Goethe had made on the Weber private man—the youthful Weber had secretly read Goethe's *Works* while sitting at his school desk (Marianne Weber, 1926: 47-48); and the adult Weber relaxed with his wife by returning to *Faust* for enjoyment (Marianne Weber, 1926: 454).<sup>1</sup>

Given the profound impact that Goethe had on Weber, I was not surprised to learn that Goethe apparently provided a model through which the famous sociologist interpreted his emotionally complex marriage with Marianne. Much of what we know about the marriage's complexity, including its apparent unconsummation (Mitzman, 1970: 276-277; Green, 1974: 118, 127) and Weber's two affairs (Mitzman, 1970: 287, 290, 291; Green, 1974: 129, 163-164, 165, 107, 130), comes from the psychohistorical study of the

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<sup>1</sup>For another example of Weber's use of Goethe in his scholarly writing, see Scaff, 1984:208-209, 210 n.72, referring to the section subtitled, "Daemon," in Goethe's 1817-18 poem, *Urworte. Orphisch (Primal Words)*. See the text and translation in Goethe, 1983:230, 231. Particularly interesting is the light that Scaff's find throws on the final phrase of Weber's 1919 publication, "Science as a Vocation," which insists that each person must find and obey "the demon (*Dämon*) who holds the fibres of his very life" (Weber, 1946:156; 1947:32; Scaff, 1984:214n.64), especially because the sentence previous to the one in which this phrase appears also contains a phrase from Goethe's *Maxims and Reflections*, no. 442 and 443 (see Kent, 1983:305). For additional examples of Goethe's use of "the demonic" concept, see Goethe, 1964:98-102, and the comprehensive listing in Dobel, 1968:col. 105-107.

man by Arthur Mitzman (1970) and a complementary psychocultural analysis by Martin Green (1974). Mitzman's work was uniquely related to my own analysis on Quakerism, since the author claimed that toward the end of his life Weber interpreted his marriage through "the ethic of Quakerism" (1970: 219, 291 & n.).<sup>2</sup> I, in turn, insisted that the "linkage of marriage with the thought of ethical responsibility for one another" (Weber, 1946: 350; 1920a: 653) was most likely inspired by Goethe's life, even though Weber also believed that he saw it in William Penn's letters (sic) to his wife (Kent, 1983: 310–312). At the time that I offered this interpretation, however, I was unable to identify the specific incident or aspect of Goethe's life that demonstrated "a mutual granting of oneself to another and the becoming indebted to each other" that Weber attributed to this towering German cultural figure (Weber, 1946: 350; 1920a: 653). Only later, when looking through an essay that Weber published in 1906,<sup>3</sup> did his allusion to Goethe become clear: he had in mind Goethe's presumably ascetic but nonetheless passionate relationship with Frau von Stein, and saw his own marriage in this same light.

In November, 1775, Goethe met Frau Charlotte von Stein in Weimar. Already a wife for eleven years and the mother of three children (having lost four others), Stein entered into an intimate friendship with the bachelor Goethe that lasted for well over a decade. A remarkable record of the relationship exists in the copies of Goethe's letters to Stein, around 2,000 of which survive (without, unfortunately, copies of Stein's correspondence with him).<sup>4</sup> Just *how* intimate was the friendship has been the subject of much debate, with the central issue being whether the two people were sexually involved. Soon after Goethe's correspondence with Stein was published (1848–51), for example, speculation abounded as to whether their relationship had been adulterous (Leppmann, 1961: 81). As a modern psychoanalytic study of Goethe states about the issue of their physical intimacy, "Much ink has been spilled on this controversy and neither side has been able to prove its point beyond doubt" (Eissler I, 1963: 200). Most significant for this essay,

<sup>2</sup>"But despite his growing distaste for the ascetic way of life, the side of Weber which had struggled for decades to develop some kind of autonomous sense of rational responsibility could not unconditionally accept the rejection of consequences, the ultimate irresponsibility, that both the purely erotic and the purely mystic positions entailed. He found in the ethic of Quakerism a sense of responsibility and respect for the personality which did not exclude modified forms of either the mystical or the erotic sense of communion and which moreover reproduced, for the individual if not the social order, the sense of a meaningful life cycle whose destruction at the hands of modernity was one of Weber's deepest concerns in his last years. . ." (Mitzman, 1970: 219). Later, on the same theme, Mitzman claimed, "[Weber's] unconsummated love for Marianne at times appears similar to the acosmic mystical love he mentioned in 1910 and analyzed at length in his sociology of religion. In 1908, he speaks of such love (in a letter to Marianne) in terms of Tolstoy, and shortly before the end of his life, of Quakerism." Mitzman then noted that, "The dedication of *Religionssoziologie I* to Marianne is a quote from this presentation of the Quaker ethic: '*bis ins Pianissimo des höchsten Alters.*' It suggests that in Quakerism Weber found a meeting point between, on the one side, the mystic sense of acosmic love and of a meaningful life cycle, and on the other, the sense of mutual responsibility demanded by the ethical rationalism that drew from his ascetic heritage and Kantian training" (1970:291 & n.). On my skepticism of dedicatory phrase having anything to do with Quakerism, see Kent, 1983:312.

<sup>3</sup>Some confusion appears over this essay's publication date. Edward Shills dated the original German article, "Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik," from 1905 (in Weber, 1949:iv), but its reprinted version (in 1922:215) correctly dated the essay from 1906.

<sup>4</sup>After the relationship broke down in 1789, Stein demanded that Goethe return her letters, just as she returned his. Subsequently she destroyed them (Crawford, 1911:168 & n.). The most extensive interpretation of the letters, which to my knowledge never have been translated completely into English, is Essler, 1963.

however, is what Weber believed about the nature of this relationship, and on it he was very clear: their relationship was ascetic.

In his 1906 attack on the historian, Eduard Meyer, Weber used Goethe's letters to Frau von Stein to illustrate "the various logical standpoints from which the 'facts' of cultural life may be scientifically considered" (Weber, 1949: 138, see 138–148; 1922: 241). Referring to the time that Goethe and Stein spent together, he insisted that "the ascetic restraint of those years which was bound up with a passion of unheard of force obviously left profound traces in Goethe's development which were not extinguished even when he was transformed under the Southern skies [of Italy, presumably]" (Weber, 1949: 139; 1922: 241). Weber, then, was certain that Goethe's relationship with Stein had not included a sexual affair, and it is to this ascetic relationship that Weber alluded in his 1915 essay, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions."

The allusion appeared in a passage in which Weber was discussing various beliefs regarding sex and marriage. While he was critical of the attitudes held by Lutherans and Calvinistic Puritans,<sup>5</sup> he praised the attitude that he believed was held by the early Quakers. "The ethic of the Quakers (as it is displayed in William Penn's letters [sic] to his wife) may well have achieved a genuinely humane interpretation of the inner and religious values of marriage. In this respect the Quaker ethic went beyond the rather gross Lutheran interpretation of the meaning of marriage" (Weber, 1946:350; 1920a:563; retrans. in Mitzman, 1970:219). Here Weber had in mind a letter (not letters) that Penn sent to his wife and children in 1682, and which Weber probably discovered in a multi-volumed collection of Quaker material while researching the group for his *Protestant Ethic* essay.<sup>6</sup> Penn wrote the lengthy and tender letter to his family before departing on one of his (dangerous) voyages from England to the American colonies, and in it enclosed a host of suggestions concerning worship, business affairs, personal comportment, and the quality of lifestyles. The letter is too long to quote in full, but its introduction sets the tone for much of what is contained in it.

My dear wife, remember thou wast the love of my youth, and much joy of my life; the most beloved, as well as most worthy of all my earthly comforts: and the reason of that love was more thy inward than thy outward excellencies, which yet were many. God knows, and thou knowest it, I can say it was a match of Providence's making; and God's image in us both was the first thing, and the most amiable and engaging ornament in our eyes (Penn in Evans and Evans, ed. 1841:166).

<sup>5</sup>Weber also was critical of the sex therapists of his day, a point which I discussed in the article upon which this research note is commenting (Kent, 1983:310 & n.22). In his 1906 attack against Meyer he made a veiled reference either to them or to the sexual antinomians whom he associated with them (see Green, 1974:43–75). In much the same way that Weber scorned his sexual libertarian contemporaries for not being able to understand "the powerful sway of human passions" between Margaret and Faust (Weber, 1920b:263–264; 1920a: 170n.1; 1905:80n), so too "in the case of Goethe's relations with Frau von Stein, the usual modern sexual philistine, for example, as well as, let us say, a Catholic moralist, would take an essentially negative attitude, if at all an 'understanding' one" (Weber, 1949:143–144). A few sentences later he spoke of "that mixture—contained in our example of the letters to Frau von Stein—of glowing passion on the one side, asceticism on the other," and then added that these were part of "those flowers of emotional life which are so superlatively fine from our standpoint" (Weber, 1949:144).

<sup>6</sup>Penn's letter appeared in the fifth volume of a collection of Quaker documents (Evans and Evans, 1841: 166–169, and Weber referred to the first volume of the same collection in 1920b:266 n.35; 1905:84 n.29; 1920a:1920a:174 n.2).

Immediately following his reference to “the Quaker ethic” toward marriage as exemplified in Penn’s letter to his wife, Weber concluded his discussion of love and marriage by referring to Goethe.

From a purely inner-worldly point of view, only the linkage of marriage with the thought of ethical responsibility for one another—hence a category heterogeneous to the purely erotic sphere—can carry the sentiment that something unique and supreme might be embodied in marriage; that it might be the transformation of the feeling of a love which is conscious of responsibility throughout all the nuances of the organic life process, ‘up to the pianissimo of old age,’ and a mutual granting of oneself to another and the becoming indebted to each other (in Goethe’s sense). Rarely does life grant such value in pure form. He to whom it is given may speak of fate’s fortune and grace—not of his own merit (Weber, 1946:350; 1920a:563).<sup>7</sup>

Weber’s mention of “Goethe’s sense” regarding the mutual indebtedness in marriage now becomes clear: it refers to Goethe’s emotionally intimate and presumably ascetic relationship with Frau von Stein. True, the couple was never married, but one of Goethe’s letters to Stein, that Weber in all likelihood read,<sup>8</sup> demonstrates that Goethe felt a spiritual bond between them to such an extent that they had a marriage of souls. “My soul has grown fast to thine,” Goethe exclaimed to Stein, “I do not care to waste words; thou knowest that I am inseparably bound to thee and that no power above or beneath can part me from thee. I would there were some vow or sacrament that could make me openly and legally thine, how much it would mean to me!” (quoted in Bielschowsky I: 1905:305). This letter appeared in Albert Bielschowsky’s biography of Goethe (about which Weber was familiar [Weber, 1905:108 n. 84; 1920a:203 n.1; 1920b: 283 n.113]), and Bielschowsky asserted that Goethe’s relationship with Stein “gave [Goethe] a foretaste of the noblest happiness of wedded life” (1905:308). Thus, Weber probably saw that Goethe and Stein shared a deep love and an abiding ethical responsibility to one another, despite the fact that they were not sexually involved.<sup>9</sup>

Weber’s comments on marriage, as Martin Green has shown (1974:170–173; see Mitzman, 1970:290–292), were not mere intellectual musings: they reflected personal insights and feelings that Weber held as the result of his ascetic relationship with Marianne and

<sup>7</sup>The familiarity with which Weber discussed Goethe’s letters to Stein certainly suggests that he had read them (a point which I cannot verify, however), yet even if he had not he nevertheless may have read this particular letter in Bielschowsky. See also Marianne Weber, 1926:308.

<sup>8</sup>A structural consideration of the passage mentioning Penn and Goethe also suggests that Weber had in mind Goethe’s relation to Stein. Weber first referred, inaccurately, to “William Penn’s letters to his wife,” when in fact he only had seen one letter from Penn to his wife *and children*. If was through letters, however, that we know of Goethe and Stein’s relationship, so I suspect that Weber mistakenly transferred the characteristics of the Goethe-Stein correspondence to Penn and his wife.

<sup>9</sup>Worth noting is that fact that, in 1898, Weber used an image very similar to “cold skeleton hands” to express his perceived release from the need to work excessively. To Marianne he quoted from an 1896 play by Henrik Ibsen, in which the main character, John Gabriel Borkmann, said, “. . . ‘An icy hand has let go of me,’ for in the past years my sickly disposition expressed itself in a convulsive clinging to scholarly work as to a talisman, without my being able to say what it was supposed to ward off. As I look back upon it this is quite clear to me, and I know that, sick or healthy, I shall never be like that again. The *need* to feel myself succumbing to the load of work is extinguished” (Marianne Weber, 1926:236). Green, however, expresses the opinion that “what changed in him was that he had acquired the ability to distance himself from, and *sometimes* to escape, that need. Enjoyment, especially in mindless shared enjoyment, always remained difficult for him” (1974:118–119).

his erotic, but secret, relationship with her friend, Else Jaffe. Earlier in the same essay, for example, Weber 'confessed' that the erotic sphere:

collided with the unavoidably ascetic trait of the vocational specialist type of man. Under this tension between the erotic sphere and rational everyday life, specifically extramarital sexual life, which had been removed from everyday affairs, could appear as the only tie which still linked man with the natural fountain of all life" (1946:346; 1920a:560).

Further on in the same piece Weber admitted that the erotic:

relation seems to offer the unsurpassable peak of fulfillment of the request for love in the direct fusion of the souls of one to the other. This boundless giving of oneself is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality. . . . The lover realizes himself to be rooted in the kernel of the truly living, which is eternally inaccessible to any rational endeavor. He knows himself to be freed from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine (Weber, 1946:347; 1920a:560-561).

Finally, in another passage in which Green suggests that Weber perhaps was contrasting his love of Marianne to his love of Else (1974:347), Weber claimed that:

As the knowing love of the mature man stands to the passionate enthusiasm of youth, so stands the deadly earnestness of this eroticism of intellectualism to chivalrous love. In contrast to chivalrous love, this mature love of intellectualism reaffirms the natural quality of the sexual sphere, but it does so consciously, as an embodied and creative power (Weber, 1946:347; 1920a:561).

So strong, indeed, so tragically strong, was Weber's love for Else that when he lay dying he called out for her, not Marianne, in his delirious moments (Green, 1974:165). Yet it was for the ethically responsible but erotically empty relationship with his wife that he, through Goethe and Stein, praised as "a mutual granting of oneself to another and the becoming indebted to each other." Using a touchingly sentimental phrase, Weber insisted that such a relationship could be maintained " 'up to the pianissimo of old age' " (Weber, 1946:350)—and repeated the phrase in his 1920 dedication of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* to his emotionally and intellectually dependent spouse. Nonetheless Marianne seemed to sense, in 1919, that her husband might have been considering the prospect of leaving her for her best friend (Green, 1974:164-165).

Goethe's ethical responsibility toward Frau von Stein, his reputed asceticism toward the woman he loved, may have given Weber a romantic image through which to interpret his chaste, 'inner-worldly' relationship with Marianne, but the image held sway only when Weber was intellectually grappling with it. When the reality of his own mortality made inner-worldly asceticism irrelevant, it was for his woman of passion that he cried out.

The ultimate ironies of Weber's wife and cherished lover, however, played themselves out well after his death. Marianne continued to publish and speak on the topic of marriage, and in the biography of her husband portrayed their union in exemplary terms. Remarkably, when she expired in 1954, "it was Else's hand that she held and Else's name [that] she whispered as she died" (Green, 1974:224, see 218-225). She apparently took her own idealized impression of her marriage to the grave.

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