

## Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* and the Classics

In 1939, Thomas Mann wrote a novel on the renewed acquaintance of the great German writer (and much else) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the woman with whom he had fallen in love in 1772 in Wetzlar, Charlotte Buff. Marriage was out of the question since she was already engaged, but she, her husband-to-be, Johann Christian Kestner, and Goethe became very close friends. Goethe's misfortune in love was the basis of his short novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Suffering of Young Werther*), which took Europe by storm and won for Goethe an international reputation.

He was soon afterward invited by Duke Carl August, ruler of the Duchy of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, to come to Weimar and live there. Goethe found the city, its people, and his responsibilities so satisfying that he stayed for the next fifty-seven years, until his death in 1832.

The dramatic year of the novel is 1816, the first year of European peace after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Lotte's visit to Weimar did actually occur; she had never been in the city before. She had long been a widow. In her younger years she had given birth to eleven children, of whom nine survived to adulthood. Her reason in coming to Weimar was to visit her sister and the latter's family.

She is accompanied by an elder daughter, also named Charlotte and called Lottchen by the family. They check into the Hotel Elephant, located in the center of the city and still in existence today. A large crowd of curious folk has assembled in the square opposite the hotel's entry. Word has gotten out that the real woman upon whom Goethe's heroine is based will visit the city.

Several of the local inhabitants are able to engage her in conversation, in her room, before she ever exits the hotel. It surprised me how frequently Mann mentioned classical matters,

which caused me to wonder how likely readers would be to identify them. The first – and most significant – is Friedrich August Wolf. Among her visitors was Goethe's son August, who had been a Latin student, and who died before his father, while in Rome, where he is buried in the Protestant Cemetery.

Mann does not bring Goethe and Frau Kestner together until very late in the novel. He decides to host a small dinner party for Lotte, her daughter, her family, and some few others. When on that occasion all the guests have assembled and have become acquainted with each other, the great man makes his long-anticipated entry and, at last, the originals of Werther and Lotte gaze upon each other, after a gap of forty-four years!

Lotte stayed in Weimer for about three weeks all told, but there was no further contact with Goethe. May a reader suspect that each might well have thought, "What might have been"?