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# Pushing the "Scented Envelope": Elisa von der Recke at the Cultural Crossroads

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Pushing the “Scented Envelope”: Elisa von der Recke at the Cultural Crossroads

Carrie L. Cox

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Pushing the “Scented Envelope”: Elisa von der Recke at the Cultural Crossroads

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Master of Arts

This thesis serves as an introduction to the 5-volume electronic edition of the collected works of the influential German-language author Elisa von der Recke to be published by the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages at Brigham Young University. The compilation presents a modern edition of Recke’s published writings and letters in German, with an extensive critical apparatus in English, including introductions to the edition, author and individual sections, biographical information, a complete bibliography of primary and secondary works, a photo/portrait gallery, and critical annotations.

During her life as an author, traveler, social luminary, and salonnière, Elisa von der Recke (1754-1833) stood at the crossroads of European history and culture. Born into a German-speaking noble family in the Duchy of Courland (now Lithuania), Recke was positioned between the conflicting intellectual discourses of religion and rational Enlightenment; between intellect and sentiment; between the noble class, to which she belonged, and the bourgeoisie, which she preferred; between traditional views of a woman’s role, and her own ceaseless intellectual striving.

This essay examines the way Recke creatively asserted herself as an individual in spite of the limitations of her time in three main areas. First, it discusses the way that Elisa writes her memoir in an expertly layered style, utilizing her author’s voice alternately as both character and narrator. Second, it examines her unconventional education and why it allowed for exceptional opportunities for a woman at her time. Finally, it considers Elisa’s lifelong search for affection that led her to uniquely constructive avenues atypical of someone so deprived of consistent affection as Elisa had been in her childhood and marriage.

Because of Recke’s central position in the culture of her time, her writings provide a wealth of insight relevant to gender roles, political, religious and philosophical history, as well as travel and culture. What was unique about Elisa von der Recke, was her quiet refusal to remain within the borders set for her by society, her social status and her gender. Where many women might never have questioned the role they were assigned and its restrictions, and others never found a way to escape them, against all odds, Elisa burst politely through the “scented envelope” that contained her, and literally created herself, her education, her role in society, and her reputation, becoming in the process a truly remarkable woman.

Keywords: German, Elisa von der Recke, women’s literature, epistolary novel, Sophie project

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature .....	2
Biographical Sketch .....	4
The Author’s Voice: Turning Facts and Memories into Layered, Instructive Literature.....	9
The Search for Education: Embracing Literature and Learning Across Social Barriers .....	20
The Search for Affection: Finding Love through Selfless Nurturing .....	27
Conclusion: Pushing the Scented Envelope.....	38
Bibliography: .....	42

# Pushing the “Scented Envelope”: Elisa von der Recke at the Cultural Crossroads

Carrie Cox

## Introduction

During her life as an author, traveler, social luminary, and salonnière, Elisa<sup>1</sup> von der Recke (1754-1833) stood at the crossroads of European history and culture. Born in the Duchy of Courland (now Lithuania) to one of the oldest German-speaking noble families in that area, Elisa was positioned between the conflicting intellectual discourses of religion and rational Enlightenment; between intellect and sentiment; between the noble class, to which she belonged, and the bourgeoisie, which she preferred; between her German cultural heritage and the political heritage of Courland, linked as it was to Poland and then Russia; between traditional views of a woman’s role and her own endless intellectual striving.

Because of Elisa’s central position in the culture of her time, her writings provide a wealth of insight relevant to gender, political history, religious history, philosophical history, travel, and culture. In silent evidence of her almost celebrity status in her time, portraits and busts of Recke by Anton Graff, Bertel Thorvaldsen, Johann Christian Reinhardt and others are scattered throughout museums, libraries and private collections across Europe. Elisa’s extensive correspondence included people as varied as J.W. Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Beethoven, Giacomo Casanova, Friedrich Nicolai, and Johanna Schopenhauer. Indeed, as an adult, Elisa was

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the author as “Elisa” rather than Recke throughout this introduction as will be explained in the biographical sketch on page 4.

acquainted with almost everyone who was anyone in Europe at the time and she filled volumes of travel journals, books of poetry, and memoirs documenting and analyzing the world she knew.

Unfortunately, as the decades have passed, Elisa's published writings have become as scattered and difficult to access as her portraits, which is hard to fathom once one understands the tremendous notoriety and far-reaching influence that her works had in her time. As Janet Besserer Holmgren has observed:

Widely recognized in her own day, Recke has all but disappeared from the literary landscape. Acclaimed by critics such as Samuel Baur in Deutschlands Schriftstellerinnen in 1790 and Carl von Schindel in Die deutschen Schriftstellerinnen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in the early 1820's, Recke could travel across Europe and expect to be received as a distinguished writer. Today, Recke is generally forgotten, and if mentioned, then mainly by scholars interested in women's epistolary writing and autobiography (149).

Although Elisa did achieve considerable recognition in her lifetime, since the nineteenth century, very little academic literature has been focused on her work and her life. As Holmgren stated, in the last several decades, if Elisa is mentioned as an author at all, it is typically just in a passing reference to her epistolary style of writing, with few exceptions. The most significant examples of this scholarly work are included in the following review of literature.

## **Review of Literature**

Of what little contemporary writing exists about Elisa, most of what has been written

focuses on her writing style or biography, as Holmgren points out in her 2000 Ph.D. dissertation, "*Die Horen haben jetzo wie es scheint ihr weibliches Zeitalter ...*" : *The Women Writers in Schiller's Horen : Louise Brachmann, Friederike Brun, Amalie von Imhoff, Sophie Mereau, Elisa von der Recke, and Caroline von Wolzogen*. Holmgren briefly discusses Elisa's professional relationship with Friedrich Schiller, including the fact that she was an accomplished writer independent of him, and that she functioned in literary society at the time much as an equal with men, despite her position as an aristocratic, divorced woman. With a different focus, Erich Donnert writes about Elisa as a participant in the European transition from spiritualism to enlightenment in his 2010 book, *Schwärmerei und Aufklärung: Die Kurländische Freifrau Elisa von der Recke (1754-1833) in den Geisteskämpfen ihrer Zeit*. His extensive introduction, based on Christoph August Tiedge's biography of Elisa, and supplemented through research within her own memoirs, through which he has constructed a fairly detailed biographical sketch, may be interesting to readers looking for more insight into the factual events of her life than is offered in her memoirs. Helen Fronius' 2007 *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era, 1770—1820: Determined Dilettantes*, mentions Elisa anecdotally in her discussion of a women's "reading revolution" as a form of emancipation from ignorance. In addition, Elisa's biography is superficially discussed in a Master's thesis, *Selbständigkeit in the Life of Elisa von der Recke*, 1996, by Emilee Dolberg Ellis, and her writing style is examined in Bernadette H. Hyner's 2001 Dissertation, *Exploring 'I's : Relocation and the Self in Works by Sophie von La Roche and Elisabeth von der Recke*.

In contrast to these existing texts, which seem to focus on either Elisa's epistolary writing style, or her life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is my purpose in writing this introduction that readers will get a more vivid sense of the value of her surprising and influential



life, and her distinctive talent as an author that manifested itself in her outstanding ability to artistically express in words the tapestry of trials and triumphs that shape our human experience. Through the discussion of several significant themes, I will explore the way Elisa pushed the “scented envelope” that enclosed her. By “scented envelope” I mean the extensive restrictions that were simply the reality of the role of femininity assigned to a woman’s life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will examine the way Elisa creatively asserted herself as an individual in spite of the limitations of her time in three main areas. First, I will demonstrate to readers the way that Elisa writes her memoir in an expertly layered style, utilizing her author’s voice alternately as both character and narrator. Second, I will discuss her unconventional education and why it allowed for exceptional opportunities for a woman at her time, and thirdly, I will discuss Elisa’s lifelong search for affection that led her to uniquely constructive avenues atypical of someone so deprived of consistent affection as Elisa had been in her childhood and marriage.

*“Women are never stronger than when they arm themselves with their weaknesses”<sup>2</sup>*

*–Madame Marie du Deffand*

### **Biographical Sketch**

To begin, I will share a brief biography of Elisa in order to familiarize readers with the general scope of her life and give them a context for understanding the points I will be making about her as an outstanding woman and social pioneer ahead of her time. In the interest of clarity, I will refer to the author throughout as “Elisa” rather than “Recke” for two reasons: first,

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<sup>2</sup> Gross 151

as a matter of practicality in order to avoid confusion with her husband, Georg von der Recke, whom I will refer to as Georg within this essay, and secondly, because this seems to have been the author's preference, as explained in the following observation by Janet Holmgren:

Recke was a prolific writer and published frequently... From the time of her second publication, Recke assumed the abbreviated form of her first name as a type of pen name. Soon known to everyone as "Elisa," Recke could still expect to be widely recognized even by signing her contributions with this one name alone (148).

In fact, it seems appropriate, in accordance with her preference, to refer to Elisa using her pseudonym.

Elisa was born Elisabeth Charlotte Constanzia von Medem on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1754<sup>3</sup>. Her mother, Louise Dorothea von Korff, died from complications during the birth of Elisa's younger brother, Fritz, when Elisa was just two years old. Although her father, Graf Friedrich von Medem remarried, Elisa was sent to live with her grandmother, aunt and cousins where she remained until her adolescence. In her grandmother's house, Elisa was seen by her aunt and cousins as a threat to their future claims on family wealth and property and she was marginalized and oppressed by them. She felt consistently isolated and abused, invisible and insignificant. She

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<sup>3</sup> A search through all biographical accounts of Elisa von der Recke, indicates that her birth year is most often listed as either 1754 or 1756, with a few outliers listing it as 1751. There has been some critical debate about which date is correct, with no clear resolution. However, because of plentiful evidence within her own memoir that confirms that she was in fact 17 years old at the time of her marriage and not 15, as the 1756 birth date would suggest, I will accept Elisa's birth date as 1754 and will use this date in this essay.

longed desperately for the motherly affection she missed and fixated on substitutions and daydreams (Recke, Jugendtage 30).

After the death of his second wife in 1767, Graf von Medem again remarried, and Elisa was brought back into his house at the insistence of her new stepmother, Agnes Elisabeth von Brucken, to be raised there with her younger brother and half-siblings. Here, Elisa finally found what she saw as a stable and loving family circle, and she and her younger sister, Anna Dorothea, were groomed for prudent marriages to wealthy men.

In 1771, following a few years of charming men with her beauty, dancing, and poise and after several unsuccessful requests for her hand in marriage, Elisa was relishing the hope of a happy marriage filled with love and affection. There were a few young men whom she admired, but they were not approved as matches for her by her parents. While Elisa wished secretly to marry a man she loved, her stepmother warned her against this “risky” decision, and in the end, it was the stepmother’s will that prevailed in Elisa’s choice of a marriage partner. She was married to Georg von der Recke, the thirty-one year old nephew of her stepmother’s previous husband, at the age of just seventeen.

Thoroughly unhappy in her marriage to Georg, who, by all accounts, was also miserable in the mismatched pairing, Elisa struggled for years to find some comfort in her obedience to her parents and husband, despite his often cruel treatment of her. The little cordiality in their relationship that at times made Elisa’s isolation bearable all but disappeared, and the two eventually separated. After the death of their only child, they divorced in 1781.

Elisa's attempts to find comfort and meaning in her despair led her to the Spiritualist movement which proved to be yet another disappointment for her. However, instead of breaking her spirit, the experience ultimately led Elisa to her role as an author of talent and purpose. Her widely published essay exposing the false and dangerous exploits of the infamous Spiritualist, the so-called "Count" Calgiostro<sup>4</sup>, garnered Elisa respect and notoriety throughout Europe's intellectual and artistic communities.

In addition, the financial security provided through the gift of a working estate from Catherine the Great allowed Elisa an unusual amount of freedom and independence. She soon established a pattern of traveling throughout Europe, balancing her role as a noblewoman with connections at court and as an intellectually engaged author in the sitting rooms of Europe's thriving intellectual community, where she passed her days involved in and hosting thoughtful debate and explorative discussion of the philosophies of the Enlightenment. It was during these independent decades of her life that Elisa was finally able to fully embrace a lifestyle of intellectual exploration. She established and maintained meaningful relationships with members of the intellectual bourgeoisie, in whose company she was far more comfortable than in the strict and stifling culture of life at court, while still managing to maintain her connections with the noble class.

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<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Balsamo (1743-1795), who went by the name of Count Cagliostro, was an Italian mystic, chemist, alchemist, forger, and adventurer. Working throughout Europe, he was an active participant in the Freemason and Spiritualist movements and engaged in a series of fraudulent and criminal exploits. Eventually convicted in 1789, he remained a popular figure in European folklore. See Volume III of this collected works and McCalman's biography for more information.

In 1798, Elisa settled in Dresden, and from 1804 until her death in 1833, the poet Christoph August Tiedge, her long-time companion and protégé, lived there with her. She cared for numerous foster daughters and ensured the education of several young men as well, all while continuing to write and engage in intellectual discourse.

Although Elisa's public face was that of a traditional woman in the mainstream of European noble life, I assert that in fact she pushed the borders of the "scented envelope" on all sides. The role that tradition demanded was namely that she would be groomed as a child of nobility to look refined, participate in polite conversations, marry a wealthy man in a position of power, have children, and in turn, groom those children to carry on the traditions of nobility. Her education and life experiences would be limited to those directly advantageous to fulfilling this role, to reinforcing this "envelope" society had set up for her. Michelle Stott, in her article, *"...How Insignificant I Would Be as A Man" Gender as Destiny For 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century German Women*, points out how directly dependent a woman in Elisa's lifetime was on the way the men who governed her life valued, or rather, did not value education for the women in their charge. She states, "As a general rule, a girl's opportunities for learning were determined by the dominant male in her life: at first her father or brother, later her male acquaintances, fiancé, or husband" (Stott 204).

In the example of Elisa's life, that will be discussed in this introduction, she demonstrates a gradual, but consistent emancipation from those restrictions that would limit the development and expression of her intellect, and shows an innovative way of slicing through those stifling borders. One truly remarkable aspect of her unconventional education was that she documented it, so that through her writings, others could benefit from her experience. It is this fact, even

more than her overt accomplishments, which makes her stand out, and imbues her life and writings with particular significance.

*“The unexamined life is not worth living.” –Socrates<sup>5</sup>*

### **The Author’s Voice: Turning Facts and Memories into Layered, Instructive Literature**

I would like now to point readers to the first of three themes that one can glean from studying the life and works of this remarkable woman and her talent as a writer. Elisa doesn’t simply document her life, but writes about it in a way that sculpts the text into what we perceive as a brightly lit portrait of a woman’s life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among the Recke texts we have available to us is Elisa’s autobiography, which is written in two parts. The first section is a memoir that begins with her earliest memories, and which includes highly detailed descriptions of events from her childhood from as early as age four, including a sort of prelude in which Elisa retells stories about the lives of her mother and grandmother. It concludes when she prepares to leave her parents’ house to marry Georg. The second part consists of a collection of letters addressed primarily to Mademoiselle Caroline Stoltz, a caretaker for Elisa’s younger sister, Dorothea, and to Elisa’s cousin, Elisabeth “Lisette” von Medem. The letters begin a few months before Elisa’s marriage and end in 1778, after her separation from Georg.

One of the most interesting characteristics of this two-part memoir is that it reads more like a novel than a journal or simple collection of letters. We know from Elisa’s will that she aggressively edited her journals that she intended to be left for publication after her death,

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<sup>5</sup> Roorbach 19

because she desired them to be instructive to readers, stating in her will, “Jedesmal wenn ich meine Tagebücher wieder las, schnitt ich Blätter heraus” (Rachel, Testament 236). It appears on careful reading that this same process of editing may apply to the content of her memoirs, and that they may be, to some extent, manipulated. In her introduction to the collection of letters, Elisa herself says:

Meine Briefe von 1771 bis 1780... sind treue Gemälde des jedesmaligen Zustandes meiner Seele und meines Schicksals. Unbekannt mit Welt und Menschen stelle ich meiner vertrautesten Freundin meine Gedanken und Empfindungen in diesen Briefen so treulich dar, wie meine Gestalt sich in einem trauen Spiegel abbildet (Recke, Jugendtage 158).

It is noteworthy that Elisa describes her memoir in this way, as a true “Gemälde” or portrait of the condition of her soul and her life experiences. As will be argued, it is clear that the memoir is not simply a recounting of her childhood and adolescent experiences. In fact, the memoir is an artistically rendered narrative formed by Elisa as the skillful artist, much in the same way that a portrait is an image inevitably altered, not only by the artist’s eye and hand, but also by the medium, and finally by the eye of the beholder. I would suggest that in this quote, although Elisa is representing her efforts to relate her experiences as accurate and true, she is, in fact, subtly describing the poetic license she has taken with her autobiography as she shaped it into the picture she wanted the reader to see.

Although the facts laid out by Elisa as she describes the emotional trauma and heartache of her married life seem legitimate and verifiable, there is actually little evidence to suggest that she really did carry on such an extensive correspondence with the two women to whom the

letters are mainly addressed, or that she would have confided in either of them such personal and potentially scandalous details about her family and her home life with Georg. When reading this collection of letters, readers will notice a clearly developed message supported by a narrative storyline. Upon careful study of Elisa's other letters, it becomes clear that the memoir collection is lacking in informal pleasantries, discussion of cultural events and travels, or everyday content that would be natural to include in an authentic correspondence with a good friend. The story stays focused on the challenges Elisa faces relevant to her married life and her development as a woman, and does not often wander in a natural way to other topics of interest to the author or to the women to whom they are addressed.

In her article "Poetry and Truth" Katharine Goodman explains that the collection could hardly be one of actual letters, since both the form and content suggest a deliberate adaptation of story into literary style:

... [I]n my view, their authenticity as letters is somewhat suspect, and the form itself therefore suggests the conscious adaptation of the conventions of epistolary novels for autobiography. It is questionable whether the relationship of Elisa von der Recke to Caroline Stoltz was actually as intimate as these letters suggest...[T]he form... suggests the conscious adaptation of the conventions of epistolary novels for autobiography. These letters relate the events of Recke's marriage in far too connected a fashion to have been genuine missives to a friend (118-19).

I agree with Goodman's well-expressed assertion that Elisa has consciously edited the letters in a way that would conform to the established stylized form of the epistolary novel. This view is also indirectly supported by Estelle Jelinek, in her writings about the tradition of women's



autobiography. Jelinek points out that the epistolary writing style was accepted by society and available to eighteenth century women as a sort of template into which they could pour their ideas and engage in reflective discussion. She then explains that in an “artistically selective life study”, such as a memoir, authors typically omit much of the detail that fills the hours and days of life in favor of a thematically streamlined narrative:

Although most critics no longer expect autobiographies to adhere stylistically to a precise progressive narrative, nonetheless a unified shaping is considered ideal. That unity should be achieved by concentrating on one period of the autobiographer’s life, the development of his life according to one theme, or the analysis of his character in terms of an important aspect of it (5).

It seems clear that Elisa was taking advantage of this poetic license in sculpting her memoir. She keeps the focus of the letters on her relationship with Georg and her family, building the dramatic narrative around her evolution from a miserable, ignorant, though obedient young woman desperate for an escape from the stifling restrictions placed on her, through the tragic events of her early adult life, and ultimately to her independence.

Thus, although it may seem dishonest to a modern audience for Elisa to present her life to us in this transparently edited way, her style of autobiography fits within the writing conventions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly for women. The development of this tradition can be traced from what is recognized as the first German novel by a woman, Sophie von la Roche’s *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, to its highpoint in the example of Bettine von Arnim’s extensive epistolary volumes: *Die Gündlerode*, *Goethe’s Briefwechsel mit*

*einem Kinde* and *Clemens Brentano's Frühlingskranz*<sup>6</sup>. In their correspondence, women were not simply writing in order to exchange gossip with friends and relatives; rather, published letters were reflections on their experiences and crafted texts that would express thoughtful examinations of their lives<sup>7</sup>.

Though it may not have been acceptable for women to engage in explicitly philosophical debate, they were writing about their everyday lives with an underlying reference to philosophy, building a script of cordial discussions with their real or imagined intimates and acquaintances, and fictionalizing when necessary in order to allow the trivial factual details to be subjugated to the real truth of what they had to say about life and their places in the world. As Goodman eloquently states:

To read an autobiography, one must know the fictions it engages. But successful autobiographers have also broken with those fictions, manipulated and altered them, thus revealing important and genuine experiences from their lives. Just because an author speaks through conventional imagery does not mean that it has been adopted uninventively or even that it does not express some genuine experience. While the genres autobiography and novel may be more closely allied than we have liked to admit in the past, watching an author manipulate conventions reveals a great deal about a real life and its author (118).

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<sup>6</sup> See Growe

<sup>7</sup> This topic is discussed in depth in Fronius' *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era*, cited in the bibliography

In other words, whatever the limitations an author has imposed upon her story in order to shape it into an instructive text, that is, into literature that is accessible to a reader, it still contains the essential truth about the author's life. In my view, it is from Elisa's memoirs, however manipulated, that we get a vivid sense of her personality and voice, and are led by her through a penetrating assessment of her formative years. Elisa does this, not with an excess of detail, and not simply through the effusive, romantic style of writing which was typical of her time. What is unique about Elisa is the way she describes the events of her life, building them up for the readers so that we live the experience with her in a vividly painful way.

Possibly more important than the form, is the uniquely layered voicing of the memoirs and letters. In these writings, as Goodman points out, Elisa seems to describe herself as a character, the heroine of her own sentimental novel, modeled after the heroines in the stories she had read, "Indeed, not infrequently, Elisa describes herself in a scene which seems more appropriate for a sentimental novel than a letter or even autobiography" (120). However, I assert that at the same time, it is clear that Elisa's authorial voice is what guides and shapes the narrative, which adds depth to the voice of her character. For example, Elisa includes at the beginning of her memoirs a brief introduction, in which she addresses us as an adult, speaking to her potential audience. In this introduction, Elisa's voice is tempered and mature. We find long, eloquent sentences, moderate use of adjectives, including gentle descriptions even of her husband, Georg, who is clearly written as a villain within the memoir. In this thoughtful, reflective introduction, she even includes a sort of apology for the vanity and light-mindedness that shows up frequently within the memoir, particularly in her younger years. As she says, "Wo ich für dies Leben den Zweck meiner Bestimmung vielleicht verfehlte, da werde ich nach meinem besten Wissen zum Nutzen derer, die diese Blätter lesen, mit treuer Wahrheit die

Irrthümer meines Verstandes aufzeichnen” (Recke, Jugendtage 5). There is something that feels quite honest and endearing about an author who promises to do her best to present herself as imperfectly as possible, despite having a maturity and understanding well beyond that of herself as the character that will show up on the page. In the following quote taken from the introduction, typical of Elisa’s adult voice, she considers the significance of life’s trials as an opportunity for growth and wisdom, and the responsibility to use that growth to better oneself:

Wir leben nicht nur, um die holden Träume einer schöpferischen, alles verschönernden Einbildungskraft in Erfüllung zu bringen: wir leben vielmehr, um uns in die Verhältnisse fügen zu lernen, die das Schicksal für jeden webt ... Auf dem Standort, wo wir stehen, müssen wir so nützlich und glücklich als möglich zu sein suchen; dies ist Zweck unres irdischen Daseins, durch den wir, wenn wir dies Leben weise benutzen, zu höherer Glückseligkeit emporklimmen (Recke, Jugendtage 5).

Elisa’s references to the purpose of life, the workings of fate on our lives, and the responsibility we have as beings to search for happiness whatever our circumstances are clearly the reflective expressions of a mature woman.

What I find particularly remarkable is that Elisa is writing the memoirs and editing the letters as an experienced, educated middle-aged woman, but she still expertly captures the energetic, innocent voice of a child in her earliest memories. In these earlier sections, the villains are large and dark, their dealings cruel. Those who are kind to her are devoted and loving, innocent victims sharing the burden of Elisa’s persecution at the hands of her tormentors. For example, consider the immaturity demonstrated in this next quote from Elisa’s childhood memories in which she describes her feelings toward the women in power in her life. She

describes them using naïve terms of black and white, ascribing love and reverence to the memory of her mother and fear and hate to the everyday threat of her cousin and grandmother. "... das Andenken meiner Mutter und deren schlecht gemaltes Bild wurden von mir im Stillen geliebt, wie Großschwester gehaßt und Großmama gefürchtet wurde" (Recke Jugendtage 25). The descriptions reinforce the simplicity and naïveté of a child's fears and loyalty, not an adult's understanding of the complexities of life and the people we sometimes see as villains in it.

In the following quotes, the reader actually catches both voices as Elisa interrupts her narrative about attending an opulent wedding as a young girl and inserts herself as author to comment on the unfortunately hectic and overcrowded state of modern social schedules. She states:

Über ein Vierteljahrhundert ist seitdem entflohen... Die heutige Art, sich gedankenlos allen sinnlichen Freuden zu überlassen, von einem rauschenden Vergnügen zum anderen hinüberzutaumeln... wird *in der heutigen Jugend* keine solche Erinnerungen in der Folge des Lebens hervorrufen... Die echte Freude ist eine so zarte Blume, daß nur eine sanfte Hand sie mit Vorsicht brechen muß, wenn sie nicht entblättert werden soll, ohne wohlthätigen Duft um sich her zu verbreiten (Recke, Jugendtage 88-89 emphasis added).

Elisa's authorial voice is thoughtful, almost melancholic in tone as she contemplates the delicacy of true joy in contrast to the "thoughtless" social noise she saw surrounding "the youth of today" and what subtleties they must be hurrying past.

At the close of her meditation in her mature voice, Elisa returns quite abruptly to her teenage character voice, describing her attempts to catch the eye of a young man she had become

fascinated with at the wedding. She writes of relishing the rush of activity surrounding her at the festivities, the excitement of young love, and her eagerness to engage with the young man, referred to as “Brinck”<sup>8</sup>:

Der Tag, an welchem alle Hochzeitgäste erwartet wurden, den erwartete auch ich im Stillen mit Sehnsucht und dem Gedanken: Ach, wenn Brinck mich doch lieben würde, wie Schlippenbach seine Braut liebt! ... Ich wurde wieder bald unter allen die Lieblingspuppe; nur der, von welchem ich ausgezeichnet zu werden wünschte, gab mir auch nicht den kleinsten Vorzug ... und wenn sein forschender Blick mit Wohlwollen auf mir ruhte, dann wurde meinem Herzen wohl... (Recke, Jugendtage 90-91).

Readers will notice the young character’s focus on romantic love, her desire to be seen as a doll, and her insistence that her happiness is dependent upon whether or not Brinck would notice her.

Elisa’s narrative voice continues to mature with time as her character ages as demonstrated in the following example taken from her account of her impending engagement to Georg von der Recke at age sixteen or seventeen. Notice the use of the phrase “zum ersten Male” which suggests a new experience for Elisa, as she gradually moves from the stark contrasts of good and evil and the impulsiveness of a child into the complicated, grey world of adulthood where even people we do not like have value and many more layers than we can, at first, understand. This idea leads her to consider both Georg’s future potential and the positive consequences that might come through marrying him out of obedience to her parents:

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<sup>8</sup> Records contain no first name for this young man, listing him only as „Herr von Brinck auf Rönne“

Zum ersten Male gab ich dem Gedanken Raum, daß meine Stiefmutter doch wohl Recht haben könne, und daß an Recke nur die äußere Schale rauh, der Kern aber mild und gut sein mag...meine Ehe würde gesegnet sein, weil ich als ein gutes, folgsames Kind den Wünschen meiner Eltern Gehör gegeben hätte (Recke, Jugendtage 153-54).

Elisa's hope and expectation that her marriage would be blessed because of her obedience, her use of the seed metaphor, as well as her hope for Georg's potential internal value all demonstrate a developing maturity, both in how she views the world, and in her ability to express what she is understanding.

Throughout Elisa's account of the entire process of courtship leading to her marriage, including her description of finally succumbing to her parents' desires for her to marry Georg, she expresses not just a child's will bending to that of her parents, or a woman fulfilling her duty to marry well. Rather, Elisa's authentic voice draws readers into the pain she felt, and shows just what it means to give up a dream or hope of love for the sake of duty, and readers feel torn with her between loyalty to her stepmother and the anguish she feels as she longs to remain true to her own desires.

Within the collection of letters, the voice of Elisa's persona develops as she matures, so that by the time she appears as an adult, pregnant woman, the character's voice more closely matches Elisa the author's more sophisticated style seen in the introductions and in her later writings. This becomes clear, for example, in the following passage from one of her later letters:

Mein Herz ist ruhig, eine stille Zufriedenheit hat sich meiner bemeistert, aber meine Augen weinen, wenn ich daran denke, daß ich ohne meine Schuld eine Plage für den

Vater meines Kindes bin. –Aber meine Thränen werden zu fließen aufhören — dies verspreche ich Ihnen! (Recke, Jugendtage 309).

Though only four years had passed since the beginning of her marriage, there is a marked development in Elisa's tone and style of expression. She speaks of self-reflection and resigning herself to the pain of her fate as the mother of Georg's child. There is hopelessness here, despite her promise that her tears would end. This change seems to demonstrate that the ongoing heartache of her marriage has aged her, transforming the effusive and passionate voice of a girl into that of a pensive, serious woman.

This is a fascinating ability, for an author to write in this layered way: at once both innocent and knowing, both childlike in its expression, yet pointing the reader in a competent and effective way to life's lessons contained within the story. Elisa's stated goal in writing this memoir was that it might be instructive to girls and young wives. Indeed, she found a way to express herself within an established genre, that of the sentimental, epistolary novel, and yet she did not limit herself strictly to its confines. As Goodman states:

It is a startling innovation on the form [of women's epistolary novel] to imagine the husband in the role of the villain. Writing in that genre, but explicitly rejecting its weak heroines, Recke reached outside it and found a model in public life which she adapted for her quiet domestic rebellion (127).

Elisa's creativity and gift for crafting language into literature show in her ability to take the truths of her experience and subtly form them into constructed text that is nevertheless believable as an autobiography. In this way, I believe, she pushes her story and style beyond the boundaries



or “envelope” of the epistolary novel that defined the limits of women’s literature at the time, and creates something uniquely her own.

*“Go to your bosom; Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know.” –Shakespeare<sup>9</sup>*

### **The Search for Education: Embracing Literature and Learning Across Social Barriers**

When reading and studying Elisa’s memoirs, readers will be struck by how unusual her education was. The question could be asked, how does a woman with little formal education become one of the most prolific and popular literary figures during the nineteenth century? This next section will examine the way that Elisa once again pushed the “scented envelope” that enclosed her by transforming herself from an educationally disadvantaged girl, limited by circumstance, into a young woman who broadened and expanded her world through tenacity and creativity. In this way, she moved well beyond the expectations for women in her day, and ultimately became a woman who was clearly an intellectual, a poet, and an author.

As noted in the biographical sketch, after her mother died when Elisa was just two years old, she was sent to live with her grandmother and aunt. Her grandmother was a hard, stern woman who showed the young child little affection or warmth. Elisa’s aunt and cousins were jealous of and threatened by her and the memory of her mother, who had been the favorite daughter in the family. They worried that if the grandmother showed Elisa any favoritism, money and property would go to her that could otherwise have been theirs, and therefore, they spent a tremendous amount of time and energy in demeaning and marginalizing the young girl.

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare 127-128

Elisa vividly recounts these tortured years when she desperately searched for love and affection, but was tormented, particularly by her aunt, Tante Kleist, and her teenage cousin, Constanzchen Kleist:

Ich wurde dieser Cousine ein Dorn im Auge, denn sie fürchtete, meine Großmutter würde mir ihre Liebe schenken, und so konnten in der Folge nicht nur die Geschenke für sie vermindert, sondern ihr Einfluß könne auch geschwächt werden, wenn meine Großmutter mich lieb gewönne. (Recke, Jugendtage 24).

As part of their efforts to discredit Elisa, her aunt and cousin convinced the grandmother that Elisa was weak-minded, and insured her haphazard, erratic education by replacing her tutors every few months. In this way, the young girl was deprived of any consistent or thorough education, other than being instructed and trained in how to behave at court. Isolation, corporal punishment, insults and vicious scolding were her education. She learned to stand still at her grandmother's side, look pretty, dance and make polite conversation. Since it was agreed upon by her elders that Elisa was not intelligent, the focus shifted to her outward appearance, and her physical beauty became her only perceived value.

Elisa was given minimal portions of food to keep her slender and delicate, and was required to stay indoors nearly all of the time in order to protect her fine, fair skin from the sunlight, since pale skin was a sign of delicacy, and of a life of leisure and nobility. At a ball, her grandmother once remarked with great pride in Elisa's pale complexion, "Lottens [Elisa's] Hals und Brust ist weißer als ihr Kleid." (Recke, Jugendtage 53). When traveling, she was covered with hats and veils to such an extent that she could not see and had to be carried by servants. She was thus deprived of any real contact with the beauty of nature and the outdoors, something she

would later find to be invaluable in uplifting her mind and spirit. We see in this yet another example of the “scented envelope” that entrapped her, in this case, limiting her education and understanding of the natural world, restricting her development to a level below even that of a peasant girl her age, who would have had a working knowledge of the seasonal rhythm of nature, of animals and of plant life.

One unusual and interesting period in Elisa’s unconventional education came when she finally had the opportunity to practice reading and writing in secret. Elisa’s dressing maid, a Lithuanian peasant named Sappe, who could not read or write, had a boyfriend who was a German Jäger<sup>10</sup>. Since the grandmother did not allow them to marry, the two carried on a clandestine correspondence for over a year, and Sappe bribed Elisa with food to get her to help with reading and writing the love letters. Elisa would steal into Sappe’s room late at night and struggle to slowly decipher the boyfriend’s letters for her. Then she would take dictation and painstakingly fight to write down the responses. “Ich konnte nur mit Mühe lesen und so auch schreiben...Mein erster Versuch dauerte volle drei Stunden.” (Recke, Jugendtage 49-50). Elisa carried out this secret secretarial exercise for an entire year, in what turned out to be a prophetic experience, when readers consider that Elisa’s first real development of literacy included reading sentimental novels and writing correspondence with a distinctly histrionic style.

In the midst of her childhood deprivation, Elisa’s writings show that she seemed to thirst deeply for more knowledge, even from a young age. However, her true education began when she moved back to live with her father and new stepmother at age thirteen, and the overly

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<sup>10</sup> A Jäger, or huntsman, was part of the staff of a noble estate employed to supply the household with meat.

oppressive restrictions that had been long fixed on her body, mind, and spirit were lifted. This can be seen even in the first moments of the carriage ride leaving her grandmother's house, as Elisa attempted to steal a glance out the window. Her father asked what she was doing and she checked herself, apologizing profusely to her parents. When they expressed confusion at her behavior, Elisa explained how her grandmother had never allowed her to expose her skin to direct sunlight since it would harm her complexion. At this, her feisty stepmother dismissed what had been her entire educational background at her grandmother's house when she responded, "Sanfte Luft thut der Haut nicht Schaden; sieh nur, so viel du immer willst, aus Fenster hinaus und nimm die häßliche Kalesche ganz ab!" (Recke, Jugendtage 59). Elisa's reaction to this emancipation from darkness is profound:

Mir ging ein neuer Himmel auf; freudig sah ich nun zum Fenster hinaus... und zum ersten Male in meinem Leben sah ich mit unverhülltem Angesichte eine der schönsten Landschaften meines Vaterlandes. –Ich konnte mich der Freudenthränen nicht enthalten und rief mehr als einmal aus: "O Gott! Wie schön ist es!" (Recke Jugendtage 59-60).

Her joyful expression of relief and awe is genuine and moving; we hear her crying out to the heavens as she drinks deeply from the refreshing, expansive, unobstructed openness before her, an early foreshadowing of the freedom she would soon find to expand intellectually.

Once at her stepmother's house, Elisa was encouraged to read novels, and realized for the first time that she was intelligent. "Ich habe ein Gedächtnis!" (Recke Jugendtage 62), she cried with joy when discovering that she could make sense of a text, and went on to describe the gradual increase in understanding and confidence she found in reading, "... allmählich bakam

ich mehr Geläufigkeit im Lesen und mit dieser auch Neigung zum Lesen.” (Recke, Jugendtage 62). Elisa then began to read eagerly and was given access to a ready supply of popular novels.

A few years later, when Elisa found herself married and living in Georg’s house, she attempted to continue to educate herself through literature, though her access to books was, at times, limited by family members who were fearful that reading would distract Elisa from her obligations to her husband and household. Fronius explains:

Elisa von der Recke’s life is paradigmatic of the changes in women’s reading in the second half of the eighteenth century... Recke benefited from much greater access to reading matter, and enjoyed reading a greater number of books than her female counterparts half a century earlier... But whilst these changes do indicate a watershed in the history of women’s reading, the limits of this ‘reading revolution’ are also clearly evident. They are the same limits placed on women throughout the culture of the time. Women’s reading did not enjoy a uniformly high status. Fears and concerns, based on the idea that reading was inimical to femininity, are expressed in numerous books and articles. And despite the desire to read, physical access to books (and friends) was often regulated and curtailed (146).

During her marriage, reading was for Elisa a space of refuge and comfort in what was for her an intellectual and emotional desert in her husband’s company, and yet, this restriction that Fronius describes was both figurative and literal for Elisa. She lived with Georg on his estate in physical isolation that echoed and reinforced the intellectual isolation she felt there, and she was largely dependant upon him for access to literature. Georg was predominately focused on managing his farm and he was not a man who valued reading, and certainly not for his wife, when he would

have preferred that she focus her energies on running the household. It actually became a point of contention in her marriage that she insisted on reading quite extensively, broadening her scope to include not just novels, but also religious and philosophical publications.

When Elisa refused to bear a child because of her fear of Georg, her family misinterpreted this apparent barrenness to be a direct result of her intellectual interests. Elisa's grandmother, when seeing the shelves full of books in their home, attributed the lack of children directly to Elisa's reading, and admonished Georg:

Lieber Recke, ich bedauere Sie recht sehr, daß sie solch eine alberne Närrin zur Frau haben. Sie müssen sie kurz halten und alle die verfluchten Bücher ins Feuer werfen. Die alberne Stiefmutter hat das sonst gute Kind ganz verrückt gemacht. Ich werde es nimmermehr zugeben, daß meine Großtochter sich durch Gelehrsamkeit zum Spectakel macht und die Plage eines so guten Mannes wird (Recke, Jugendtage 252).

There is nothing ambiguous about the grandmother's opinion that Elisa's reading is to blame for the problems in her marriage, and her childlessness. She does not forget to extend this blame to Elisa's stepmother for having started Elisa reading. Harking back to Elisa's childhood, the grandmother completes her tirade with a pointed insult, asking Elisa, "Sage mir, bist du albern genug, zu glauben, daß du die Bücher, die du liest, verstehst?" (Recke, Jugendtage 252).

Consequently, the family confiscated Elisa's books and would not allow her to read until she produced a child, though Georg, seeing how miserable Elisa was at this deprivation, occasionally softened on this point, allowing and even encouraging her to resume her literary pursuits.

The truly revolutionary aspect of Elisa's education seems to have begun after her divorce, when she was finally able to create for herself the education she so desired. Elisa spent much of her time traveling through Europe, initially as an escort to her sister, Dorothea Duchess of Courland, and her nieces, maintaining her position in society as a noblewoman. However, Elisa's letters and travel journals from this period frequently express frustration with the emptiness and the endless restrictions imposed on her by noble society, and her eagerness to fully embrace a lifestyle of intellectual exploration. Gradually Elisa acquired other traveling companions and began to consciously and carefully surround herself with the best-known authors, intellectuals and luminaries in European society. This allowed her access to their debates and explorations of the philosophies, literature and discourse of the day.

Despite some criticism from her family and other nobles, Elisa established and maintained meaningful relationships with an impressive number of intellectual members of the bourgeoisie, whose company she much preferred. She was particularly close to the enlightenment philosopher Friedrich Nicolai and his family<sup>11</sup>.

From her beginnings at a level even lower than what could usually be expected for children of nobility, from a childhood education that only showed her the weaknesses of society, Elisa patiently and politely refused to succumb to restraints that were placed upon her, the "scented envelope" that limited her access to the world. Finally, as a woman of independent means, she was able to quite literally create an education for herself. Because she was mobile, she could travel to places where there were groups of authors and thinkers, spend time with them

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Paul Rachel notes in his biography of Elisa: "Im Winter 1802/1803 hat Elisa in Berlin, in enger Verbindung mit der Familie Nicolai gelebt." (Rachel, Beziehungen 139)

and learn from them. In this sense, her education was actually a cutting edge experience, since she was involved with the people who were shaping European culture as they were creating it. Elisa, never satisfied to rest from her learning, continued to forge paths for learning into her final years, taking care to pass on all she could of her enlightened mind and spirit. In a final act of intellectual generosity, Elisa outlined in her will that her edited letters and journals would be left to libraries where they might be accessible to readers in the future.<sup>12</sup> “Even after her death, Recke left readers with new work to read and her posthumously published journals and diaries offer insight into the exceptional life of an eighteenth-century aristocratic woman” (Holmgren 149). Underlining that Elisa’s educational endeavors succeeded in transcending even the limitations of her lifetime.

*“Have love! Not love alone for one,  
But man as man thy brother call,  
And scatter like the circling sun,  
Thy charities on all.” –Friedrich Schiller<sup>13</sup>*

### **The Search for Affection: Finding Love through Selfless Nurturing**

As readers consider the way that Elisa’s lifelong search for affection motivated her creative endeavors, it may be useful first to discuss Abraham Maslow’s *Theory of Human Motivation*, which creates a context for examining and understanding many of Elisa’s unconventional friendships and relationships.

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<sup>12</sup> Rachel, Testament 22-3

<sup>13</sup> Saunders 157-158



In his well-known examination of the motivations that drive human behavior, Maslow defined a hierarchy of human needs that manifest themselves fairly universally in our lives. These are, that we first seek to satisfy our baser, physiological needs such as freedom from pain and hunger, followed by safety needs such as shelter. Once these are satisfied, we reach beyond the physical to emotional needs such as “love/belonging” and then to “esteem” needs, such as acceptance by a group, and respect. Finally, we seek to satisfy our more intellectual appetites through creativity and morality in the stage of “self-actualization” (373-383). In the following quote, Maslow describes this hierarchy of the emotional and intellectual needs and their emergence once the baser, physiological needs have been met:

At once other (and 'higher') needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still 'higher') needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency (376).

In this hierarchy, there is a subjective preference acknowledged for behaviors that are generous and ethical, over those seen as coarse and common, more basic needs.

Adding an interesting dimension to the discussion is John Rowan’s article *Ascent and Descent in Maslow's Theory*, which further clarifies these ideas as he introduces the concepts of the motivations of abundance versus deprivation. By abundance and deprivation, he means that at any level within Maslow’s theory, our behavior may be motivated either by the deprivation of something that we need or want but lack, or in the case of abundance motivation, by the desire for something we seek more of. “[A]bundance motivation... is the kind of motivation in which we are not trying to relieve some discomfort but are actively seeking fresh stimulation and new

experiences” (128). Characteristic of deprivation would be selfish, compulsive and fearful behaviors. Those characteristic of abundance motivation, on the other hand, would be described as open, spontaneous and outgoing.

Having established a basis in these theoretical concepts, I now turn back to Elisa, using these ideas to help readers to better understand her life. It seems clear when reading her memoir, that most of Elisa’s early childhood was dominated by a deprivation of affection, although she did not want for any basic physical comforts. Even as a very young girl, Elisa had a keen sense of being misplaced, and of being seen as a threat to her female relatives, rather than being cherished by them. She was aware of motherly affection that was missing from her life, and of being denied the love and acceptance that is so essential to human development. Though she found this affection, to some degree, among her nannies to whom she became very attached, even this attachment was broken as soon as it was realized by her grandmother and aunt. This left Elisa very vulnerable emotionally, which was one reason that she later was drawn into Spiritualism and Cagliostro’s empty promises.

One reason, it seems, that Elisa was absolutely devoted to her stepmother, was that she received, largely, the kind of emotional nourishment that she had so craved and had been denied as a child. As Maslow has shown, this need for social belonging can be so powerful, especially in children, that it can actually override the need for physical safety and comfort as witnessed in children who cling to abusive parents. Maslow explains:

Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children... He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general,

namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world (382).

This acute hunger for belonging and love would explain why Elisa took risks and sacrificed her own desires in order to exercise loyalty to a parent figure in her life, such as her stepmother, as demonstrated in the following quote in which Elisa essentially dedicates herself to the woman, attributing her entire happiness and well-being to her:

Auch versicherte sie mir die glücklichsten Tage, wenn ich mich ganz von ihr würde leiten lassen. Ich stürzte auf meine Knie, legte die Hände meiner Stiefmutter an mein Herz, küßte diese und versprach sie als eine wohlthätige Gottheit, als mein besseres Gewissen zu betrachten... Meine liebliche Mutter hat mir das Leben, diese Mutter aber hat mir eine Seele und Lebensglück gegeben (Recke, Jugendtage 72).

Although for several years Elisa fully relished this relationship with her stepmother, and seemed to thrive as never before in her life, the relationship became complicated as Elisa reached marriageable age. Her stepmother had differing ideas about love and affection than the teenage girl who yearned for a romantic love, that is, a mutual affection and devotion to the comfort and happiness of the other person. "Inner Herzensbund unter guten, gleichgestimmten Seelen war früh das Bedürfniß meines Herzens, die Freude meines Lebens!" (Recke, Jugendtage 87). Elisa's stepmother, however, understood the practical concerns that must be considered for a woman of the time: that she must marry a man who, above all, was wealthy and respectable. She also tried to ingrain in Elisa her own most fundamental philosophy about marriage relationships. In the memoirs, Elisa recounts her stepmother's admonishments to her about practicality and purpose

in choosing a husband, and the advantage of marrying a man who is more in love with his wife than she with him:

Dann sagte sie mir wieder welche Obergewalt eine Frau habe, die mehr geliebt würde, als sie liebe; die könne dann ihren Mann ganz beherrschen. Wann ich dagegen mit Wehmuth versicherte, daß ich nicht herrschen, sondern einen klugen Mann lieben und ehren, auch von ihm wieder geliebt werden möchte, dann versicherte sie mir, daß sich dies in Romanen und Schauspielen gut lesen ließe, aber in der wirklichen Welt wären die Ehen anders beschaffen., (Recke, Jugendtage 152).

Despite her stepmother's insistent attempts to persuade Elisa to see marriage as an arrangement of opportunity rather than a romantic endeavor, Elisa yearned for a love that met her own expectations for marriage. Though attracted to several men she encountered in her social circle, both older and younger, Elisa seemed to consistently desire a nurturing type of love. I will demonstrate this through a few specific examples in her relationships with men who stood out enough for her to include notable accounts of her interactions with them in her memoirs.

Herr von Brinck, referred to by Elisa simply as "Brinck", was a teenage boy whom she met through family friends at a wedding. He seems to have been appealing to Elisa because he was delicate, intelligent, and in poor health. Elisa loved his voice, his fine features, and fragile physical nature. "In allen seinen Zügen war Ebenmaß, nur Fülle der Gesundheit fehlte dieser interessanten Gestalt, die durch seelenvollen Ausdruck mehr noch dem Herzen, als den Augen gefiel" (Recke, Jugendtage 91). In fact, as her stepmother had warned her, Brinck's health quickly declined and he died a few years later, shortly before Elisa married Georg von der

Recke. This inclination towards Brinck provides a clear example of her longing to nurture and play the role of caretaker to a gentle, intellectual companion in her idea of a happy married life.

At the opposite extreme, was Igelströhm<sup>14</sup>, a seventy-two year old man whom Elisa loved deeply because he was one of the first adults to show her kindness in her grandmother's house. A family friend and neighbor, he had visited there and shared Bible stories with her, using the pictures hanging in the parlor. He spoke softly to her and she often confided in him.

Dieser Greis baute mir Kartenhäuser und erklärte mir einige biblische Geschichten ...  
Diesem guten Alten sagte ich alles, was ich dachte, weil ich sicher war, daß er nichts wieder wieder erzählte, und weil er mich immer ein liebes, gutes, recht unterhaltendes Kind hieß (Recke, Jugendtage 27).

Several years later, around the time Elisa was fifteen years old and had begun to receive marriage proposals, Igelströhm's young wife died, and her family actually discussed the possibility of a marriage with him. Elisa, they rationalized, would need to care for him in his old age for a decade or two until his death, but then she could marry whomever she wanted as a rich, young widow (Recke, Jugendtage 96). Although Elisa's affection for the old man was deep and sincere, it clearly had nothing to do with a sexual or romantic connection; rather, he was a type of grandfather figure to her, and once again was someone she could nurture, potentially filling the void of familial intimacy that Elisa felt in her life.

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<sup>14</sup> Starost Baron von Igelströhm

This pattern shows up in Elisa's relationships with her eventual foster children, and in particular, in her relationship with the poet Tiedge<sup>15</sup>, who seemed content to be supported, encouraged, and cared for by Elisa in exchange for his companionship. What she seems most to have wanted was conversation, compassion, and above all, to be needed, apparently as a contrived need to fill the void left in her life by her own mother.

In spite of Elisa's consistent aspirations to a protective, maternal type of marital relationship, through the manipulations of her stepmother, at the age of seventeen, Elisa was married to Georg von der Recke, the thirty-one year old nephew of her stepmother's previous husband. Elisa's stepmother seemed to be genuinely fond of Georg, particularly as she was nostalgic for her late husband, whom Georg reportedly resembled both physically and in his manner. Elisa's father was also eager for the match, since he found a type of kindred spirit and a hunting companion in Georg, who was a former soldier who had grown up in relative isolation and was rough and unpolished in his manners and appearance. Georg seems to have been seeking a sturdy farm wife and felt betrayed after their marriage to find that Elisa was a delicate hothouse flower, more inclined to intellectual activity and dancing than to running a country household. Elisa, for her part, was thoroughly disgusted by Georg's appearance and repelled by his gruff personality, describing her impressions of him as, "...nie war mir das Aeußere eines Menschen so zuwider gewesen...weil Recke durchaus nichts Mildes und Gefälliges in seinem Wesen hatte..." (Recke, *Jugendtage* 125, 128). In spite of her deep repulsion, Elisa struggled to make her

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<sup>15</sup> Christoph August Tiedge (1752-1841) was a popular and active German poet. The well-educated son of a rector, Tiedge, a widower, worked and traveled with his friend, Elisa, from 1805 on. They are buried side by side in Dresden, where they shared a household from 1819 until her death in 1833. See Mendheim's biography.

conscience overrule her heart, in that she prayed and searched for ways to feel love for her husband and to feel loved by him, even when she was mocked and wounded by his rough manner and dismissive attitude toward her intense sensitivities. Unable to reconcile their disparate expectations, Elisa and Georg separated, divorcing in 1781 after the death of their infant daughter, and Elisa once again found herself tragically deprived of the natural, familial affection so vital to our emotional security and development.

The death of Elisa's daughter and that of her brother Fritz compounded her ongoing grief over her deceased mother, and Elisa fell into a deep depression. She wandered through cemeteries, hoping to find comfort through some connection to her dead loved ones. During this time, she became acquainted with a supposed mystic, Calgiostro, who traveled throughout Europe, preying on the hopes of grieving people willing to pay for his help, deceitfully promising that he could commune with the spirits of the dead. After months of empty promises, Elisa saw the trickster Cagliostro for who he was, a duplicitous opportunist, and rather than deepen her despair, this revelation seemed to help clear her mind and jolt her out of her despondency, so that she could focus her energies on more productive avenues of healing. She describes her frustrating experience with the "superstitious" Spiritualist movement, and her rededication to the lasting and reliable comfort she found in Christian religious practice based in scripture as follows:

Ehemals war ich von Aberglauben und schwärmerischen Ideen bezaubert. Durch gesunde und vernünftige Religion bin ich aus diesem unseligen Zustande zurückgebracht worden und werde, solange ich lebe, der Lehre des Apostels folgen: „Prüfet alles, und das Gute behaltet!“ (Nadler 60).

For the next several years, Elisa spent her time primarily traveling in a diplomatic capacity with her sister, Dorothea, now the Duchess of Courland, and her nieces. It is during this period that Elisa began to write. As Cagliostro was being investigated and tried in Paris for his numerous crimes, he attempted to implicate the Duchess, Dorothea, as his supporter. Elisa took the opportunity to describe her own experience with him, publishing an expose in 1787, which helped reveal him to the world as not just a nuisance, but rather as a dangerous predator. As evidence of Cagliostro's infamy and Elisa's heroic act, Alan Corkhill, in his essay, *Charlatanism in Goethe's Faust I and Tieck's William Lovell*, describes the way Elisa's candid and expressive essay, *Nachricht von des berühmten Cagliostro Aufenthalt in Mitau im Jahre 1779 und dessen magischen Operationen*, validated and articulated Goethe's suspicions about the supposed count, "... Cagliostro's charlatanesque practices were to be confirmed by the publication in 1787 of Elisa von der Recke's timely, if partly vindictive, critique of his innumerable pseudo-scientific hoaxes in the Duchy of Courland" (81). Elisa's essay was widely published throughout Europe and won her a place among Europe's influential intellectuals.

Elisa was fortunate to gain her financial independence shortly after she published her exposé of Cagliostro, through the gift of a working estate in Courland from Catharine the Great in gratitude for the effects of Elisa's writings in breaking Cagliostro's spell in Russia. Catharine described Elisa as demonstrating a "...für die Wahrheit tief fühlendes Herzen, und zugleich ein aufgeklärten und viel umfassendes Geist..." (Katharina 130, original spelling)

The debates surrounding Elisa's Cagliostro writings made possible her bold first steps out of the parlor and into the public forum. As Maslow would agree, Elisa had begun to self-actualize. He explains:



...[A] new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization... It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. It is not necessarily a creative urge although in people who have any capacities for creation it will take this form (383-384).

Elisa had become known as an intellectual and a writer, and once she had access to that identity for herself, she embraced it fully, filling volumes of travelogues and journals, maintaining extensive correspondence, and actively creating fiction and poetry, including sacred poems that were set to music and used regularly in church services<sup>16</sup>. In addition to educating herself, she used her position very creatively to reach out and find the affection that she still desired, expanding opportunities and advantages to countless others, typical of a person no longer primarily consumed with her own wants. As Rowan expressed, “Now it seems certainly and obviously true that we do find abundance motivation at the level of self-actualization” (129). Elisa was no longer seeking only to fill a void, but rather to fill her own life and ultimately the lives of others with wholesome affection and education through abundance behaviors as part of her self-actualization.

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<sup>16</sup> See Volumes II and IV of this collection for Elisa’s journals and poetry.

Indeed, throughout her adulthood, Elisa turned her own painful trials into abundance-motivated self-actualization, in three main ways. One, as we have already discussed, is that she sought out associations with people who strengthened her intellectually and emotionally, and with whom she could share friendship in return.

Next, and most important in breaking the cycle of emotional deprivation that could have crippled her, is that she took in thirteen foster daughters over several years, and cared for their education and upbringing at a higher level than would have been possible in their own families. She also provided for the education of several young men, including the sons of her steward, who were able to ultimately rise from the serving class into respectable professions, such as that of a physician<sup>17</sup>.

Third, and most unexpectedly, Elisa reached beyond traditional expectations in her friendship with the poet Tiedge. At first he merely accompanied her as a traveling companion, but their friendship deepened, and by 1804 he had settled with her in Dresden where they shared a household until her death in 1833. The nature of this relationship is not entirely clear, but it seems that Elisa was once again acting the part of the nurturing mother. This is particularly clear in her will as she makes provisions for Tiedge's care after her death (Rachel, Testament 230). All contemporary reports seem to agree that this was a purely platonic relationship, and what is truly surprising, is that her contemporaries never seemed to question it, at least not publicly. Whatever their relationship, it was still extremely unconventional for a woman of Elisa's social position to

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<sup>17</sup> See Elisa's will sections 11 and 12 for more detailed information about her ongoing sponsorship, including the names of several of her foster daughters as well as the sons of her steward, Pappermann (Rachel, Testament 233).

live with a man she was not married to. This therefore is yet another way in which she pushed the traditional role of women, the scented envelope that enclosed her, and by doing so, found a way to “self-actualize”, creating the life experiences that she most desired.

*“And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” -Esther 4:14<sup>18</sup>*

### **Conclusion: Pushing the Scented Envelope**

It is my assertion that it is not enough to simply describe Elisa von der Recke as an unusual or unconventional woman. Having seriously considered her life and works and their value to modern readers, I can confidently suggest that there is educational value not only in examining the way that she lived her life, but also in the way she chose to share her experiences. In many aspects of her life, in her search for education, for affection, and for expression, Elisa took what was available to her and, like Esther, politely found access to the fulfillment of her desires beyond it. At the same time, she humbly recognized that others might look to her as an example, writing, “Was Wahrheit und Tugend befördern kann, dahin suche ich jede Zeile zu richten, die ich schreibe, und die Beobachter meines Lebens mögen entscheiden, ob meine Handlungen meinen Worten widersprechen” (Nadler 60). As she wrote, she carefully prepared her works as a testament to the life she lived and the boundaries she struggled to transcend in order to best share her newfound freedom with others through her extensive writings and generous lifestyle.

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<sup>18</sup> King James Bible, Old Testament, Esther 4:14

Unlike other prominent women such as George Sand or Virginia Woolf, who were openly rebellious toward society's norms, Elisa lived much of her public life within the "scented envelope" that was a woman's sphere. All the while, she pushed that envelope on all sides, expanding it in ways that made it possible for her to self-actualize, to reach beyond the limitations of her day and fulfill many of the desires that she had for her own life. At the same time, she touched the lives of those people whom she could influence through her openness, her intellectual curiosity, her insightful and instructive literary contributions, and her immense generosity.

It is important to note that not all impressions of Elisa were positive. Though she became known throughout Europe as a profoundly kind and giving woman who had suffered tremendous heartache in her past, she was not universally adored. In fact, she had a few notable critics including Goethe, who seemed to question her authenticity, and wrote dismissively of her popularity, persona, and fashion sense, despite having only met her once. He stated:

Jederman behauptet aber Sie würden nach Ihrer Zurückkunft der Dame [Elisa] die Cour machen (um mich dieses trivialen Ausdrucks zu bedienen) und die Dame würde nicht abgeneigt seyn galantfürstliche Gesinnungen zu erwiedern. Denn ob sie gleich ein Muster der Tugend und (ohngeachtet einer manchmal seltsam scheinenden Bekleidung, durch welche selbst Wieland zu viel vom Nackten gewahr wird) ein Muster der Erbarkeit ist; so hat sie doch gestanden daß ihr Herz ihr schon einigemal Streiche gespielt habe, und daß sie eine besondere Freundinn und Verehrerinn von Fürsten sey die ihre Menschheit nicht ausgezogen haben. (Goethe 418-19).

Goethe's eloquent disapproval of her is apparent, though he later maintained a respectful

correspondence with her. Likewise, Elisa's one time friend and frequent correspondent, Lavater, with whom she had a falling out after she turned from Spiritualism, subsequently criticized her openly, voicing his resentment in a series of published letters. One example is the following remark, "Heute wieder einen impertinenten Brief von der Recke, den ich nur mit zwei Worten beantwortete... Mich bringt sie gewiß nicht aus der Fassung" (Nadler 62). Both of these quotes show the way Elisa's openness way of approaching the world won her enmity as well as friends.

Elisa's character was also viewed by some as more of a role, a public persona that she had created for herself. Another contemporary and acquaintance, Jens Baggesen, wrote of his impression of her:

Frau von der Recke...ist eine in vielerlei Rücksichten interessante Frau...Sie hält das Ideal ihres Selbstes um so unbefangener für ihr wirkliches Selbst...Dies Ideal nun stellt sie in ihrem Umgange unaufhörlich dar... Daher fühlt man sich wechselsweise von dieser außerordentlichen Frau abgestoßen und angezogen, kann nicht wohl mit ihr und nicht wohl ohne sie sein (348-349).

Despite Baggesen's critical tone, Elisa, like many eighteenth and nineteenth century women, in a sense had to live a public persona. The roles available to women were so narrowly defined, so tightly constricted, they did not always correspond to a woman's own inclinations, opportunities, interests, desires or talents, and frequently did not provide the avenues of expression and fulfillment, of self-actualization, that the woman herself sought, since the public woman had to be the socially acceptable woman. Elisa's found a way to reach outside of the narrow envelope that enclosed and restricted her. She drew enough positive attention to herself that she was able to achieve a position of relative power within society, stretching the limits of the restrictions

placed on women without breaking through them entirely. This allowed her friends to remain her friends, and her admirers to continue admiring her. “Although she led an unconventional life, Elisa’s dynamic personality, wit, and charm made her admired by many—both in her own aristocratic circle and among her friends in the enlightened middle class” (Holmgren 148). As Holmgren states, Elisa did this in such a way that, even though she made some people uncomfortable, she still was fully accepted in both noble and bourgeois society, an amazingly creative balancing act.

What was unique about Elisa von der Recke then, was her quiet refusal to remain within the borders set for her by society, her social status and her gender. Where many women might never have questioned the role they were assigned and its restrictions, and others never found a way to escape them, against all odds, Elisa burst politely through the “scented envelope” that contained her, and literally created herself, her education, her role in society, and her reputation, becoming in the process a truly remarkable woman.

## Pushing the “Scented Envelope”: Elisa von der Recke at the Cultural Crossroads

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