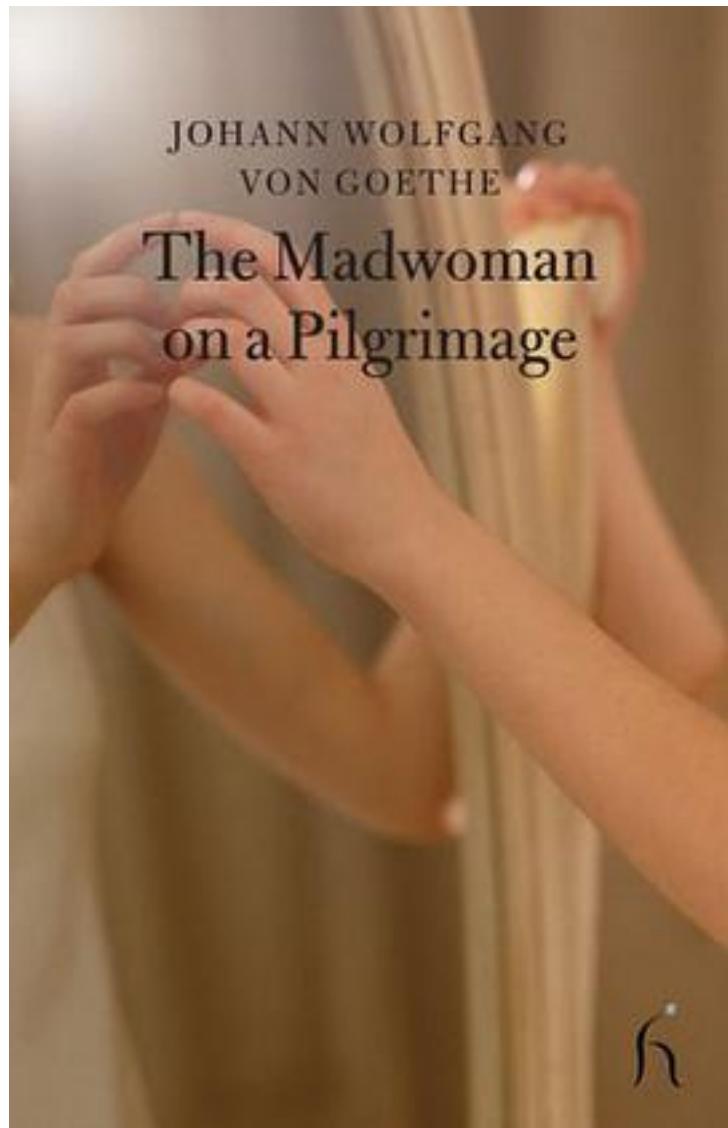


# The Madwoman on a Pilgrimage



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A beautiful and mysterious woman arrives by accident at a country house, settles down and enacts a bizarre punishment on the father and son, owners of the estate, who both set out to woo her. A young man, embroiled in romantic confusion, betrays his thoughts in his sleep. A coach accident and an encounter in a country inn awaken old and complicated passions and resentments.

In these three stories, all taken from his last great work *The Wanderjahre of Wilhelm Meister*, the high priest of German Romanticism explores betrayal and frustrated sexual desire. Understated, oblique and always lacking in an easy moral conclusion, these strange little parables are every bit as penetrating and unsettling as the best short stories of Chekhov, James Joyce and Katharine Mansfield.

However, while the tales' conclusions are often chilly or ambiguous, Goethe's strikingly playful narration keeps the reader both entertained and on their toes, while his ever-present sense of humour swings from tragic irony to farce. All this, too, without ever losing a sense of human empathy: when a character comments that "...the ground burned beneath my feet; I lost all understanding of myself, and nothing remained for me but to flee, so at least to ride out those next moments", you feel for him to the extent that you cannot help hoping everything will be alright in the end. But more often than not, in these bleakly wonderful proto-modernist fables, it won't be.

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