

Anna Löhn-Siegel's Interpretation of *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn* and the Modern Women's Movement

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on Anna Löhn-Siegel (1825–1902), a 19th century actress and a leader in the women's movement after her retirement. It analyzes Löhn-Siegel's interpretation of the main protagonists of Heinrich von Kleist's (1777–1811) famous 1810 drama *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn oder der Feuerprobe* [*Katie of Heilbronn or The Trial by Fire*] (hereafter *Käthchen* or KH) within the context of her involvement in the women's movement. *Käthchen*, the eponymous protagonist of this drama, was central to her career as it was her most famous role. For this analysis, it will primarily refer to Löhn-Siegel's lengthy memoir, *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde: aus den Anfängen meiner Theaterlaufbahn* [*How I Became an Actress: From the Beginnings of My Theater Career*, 1881] (hereafter *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde* or WS), in which she reflects on her theatrical life.

Löhn-Siegel was born in Naundorf, near Freiberg, a small city far from her future home, the metropolis of Dresden. Her father was a Protestant pastor and her mother “came from a distinguished family and had received a sophisticated education” (WS, 36). The Löhn-Siegel family was

patriarchal with strict discipline, and she received an “almost academic education [eine fast gelehrte Erziehung]” (Oelsner 1894, 149) and was a dedicated language learner. Löhn-Siegel’s family was also devoted to musical and artistic education. However, she grew tired of this strict educational atmosphere and began looking for a way to free herself from it.

In 1845, at the age of 20, she made her acting debut in the small city of Posen, Poland, despite opposition from some of her relatives. Thereafter, she began working at the National Theater in Leipzig and the Court Theater in Dresden, where she became one of the most famous German actresses of her time. In addition to her acting skills, she also excelled in Latin, Greek, and French and showed a talent for writing plays that were appreciated by the fellow playwrights of her time.

Löhn-Siegel was passionate about improving the social position of women and became a leading figure in the women’s movement. She worked hard to free women from their oppressive positions and promote their professional independence in society. In her memoir, there are numerous criticisms of the inequality between men and women in both society and the theatrical field. She also wrote an essay titled *Unweiblich: Ein Wort zur Bekämpfung eines Vorurtheils unter einem großen Theile der Frauenwelt* [*Unfeminine: A Word to Counter a Prejudice Among a Large Part of the Female World*] in 1870, which criticized social prejudice against newly professional women and spoke of women’s emancipation.

Löhn-Siegel’s *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde* reflects her high awareness of women’s rights issues in the late 19th century. This memoir also includes her personal reflections on *Käthchen*, a well-staged play of the same era. It is noteworthy that the actress who was so famous for portraying Käthchen had such harsh criticisms to make about the characters. Through these criticisms, one can see how Löhn-Siegel’s

understandings of the characters diverged from that of the wider public, her progressive views of the ways women should exist, and her instructive and enlightened position compared to the general appraisal of dramatic works at the time.

Actors' analyses of the dramatic works in which they appear is limited to the case of a few well-known actors who have left biographies. For this reason, the study of Lohn-Siegel discussed in this paper is significant. As this paper will indicate, the actor is not merely a bridge between the work and audience but also a medium that reproduces the ideas in the work. While understanding the traditional interpretations expected by the public, actors, however, also create their own new interpretations, which in turn influence the ways the works and characters are presented. This contributes to embodiments and characterizations that may be ahead of their time.

This study first examines Lohn-Siegel's decision to perform in this play despite the public's negative image of *Käthchen*. It also analyzes this actress's evaluation of the leading character, Käthchen, who is a "manly" woman. Next, it explores Lohn-Siegel's discomfort with Käthchen's character, based on her awareness of women's issues. Further, this study examines her negative interpretation of the aristocratic spirit of the medieval knight Count, in the context of the de-classified and democratic trends of the modern era. Finally, from the perspective of a figure of independent woman, the study analyzes how Lohn-Siegel sympathized with Käthchen's rival, Kunigunde, the aristocratic princess with an artificial body.

2. Käthchen as a “manly woman”: negative public perceptions of Käthchen and Lohn-Siegel’s contrasting view

Kleist’s *Käthchen* is the romanticized tale of a knight told in five acts and set in an idealized version of the medieval period. The main characters are Count Wetter vom Strahle, the village girl Käthchen, and the princess Kunigunde. Käthchen loves the Count and pursues him with all her heart. Although she is sometimes scorned, she continues to hold on to her absolute devotion for the Count. However, the Count becomes engaged to Princess Kunigunde. The Count and Käthchen then experience the same prophetic dream, including the same details and symbolism. Over the course of the play, it is revealed that Kunigunde is in fact a synthesized human who has been trying to poison Käthchen. Kunigunde is an artificial human created by technologically assembling various beautiful body parts obtained from across the world. Finally, the characters learn that Käthchen is the secret illegitimate daughter of the emperor. The story ends with the Count dissolving his engagement to Kunigunde and marrying Käthchen, who is now officially recognized by her father.

Käthchen was a highly successful and frequently performed dramatic work in its time. However, it was rarely staged as originally written in the first half of the 19th century, and it was in the second half of the 19th century that the operatic adaptation achieved great success (Bremer 2012, 204–205). Compared to Kleist’s other works, this play focuses on its protagonist’s devotion and purity, as well as a destined romantic connection. In the story’s dualistic logic of good versus evil, Princess Kunigunde, who has a synthesized body and is called “Poisoner [Giftmischerin]” (KH, 434), becomes a symbol of evil, whereas Käthchen, who wins the Count’s affection through divine blessing, becomes a symbol

of good. Compared to Kleist's heroic military play *Die Hermannsschlacht* [*Hermann's Battle*, 1808], *Käthchen* is a nonpolitical story (Bremer 2012, 204).

According to Löhn-Siegel's *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde*, she did not know about *Käthchen* while growing up. She knew of Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* [*The Prince of Homburg*, 1821], which her cultured father had read to her, and *Der zerbrochne Krug* [*The Broken Jug*, 1808] but not *Käthchen* (WS, 81). Löhn-Siegel believed that this was because, at the time, fathers refused to bring their daughters to see a play featuring a "mannish woman" ["das mannstolle Frauenzimmer"] (ibid.). This is confirmed in the following statement:

My father had read *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* and *Der zerbrochne Krug* to us, but he had passed over the *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn* in silence. As it happened, I hadn't come across the book anywhere, and what else I had heard about *Käthchen* didn't exactly arouse my curiosity to make its acquaintance. In the refined, but not literary circles, I visited in Dresden, fathers refused to allow their daughters to see the play in which, as they said rather dismissively, "the manly woman" appeared. That was the common view of the delicate little *Käthchen* at the time. But the memory of this Dresden family judgment did not influence me now. (WS, 81)

This statement reflects the conservative public's views of the women at the time. Among the female characters shaped by Kleist, there are women who are violent and free-spirited and who overwhelm men, such as the female protagonist *Penthesilea*, an Amazon in a drama of the same name (1808), which was based on Greek mythology. Contrary to these rough-and-

tumble warrior women, Käthchen is a humble peasant girl devoted to the man she loves. Kleist himself described Penthesilea and Käthchen as two sides of the same coin (Huff 1992, 222; Tokita 2021, 91). Nevertheless, the public at the time saw Käthchen as belonging to a similar “manly woman” archetype.

According to Schaser (2020, 24), there was a general acceptance of the idea that men and women complemented each other, and audiences projecting a bourgeois self-image onto characters that educated men and women differently. To the bourgeois educated classes who attended the Dresden theater with their families, “manly” women, even as fictional characters, were inappropriate for children because of their problematic potential for shaking the socio-cultural boundaries between the two genders. Käthchen is a woman of action who relentlessly pursues the object of her love. This characteristic of Käthchen is likely to be considered “manly.”

In *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde*, Löhn-Siegel recounts a heated discussion along similar lines that she had with a tailor in Salzburn about the state of young women and their attitudes toward men, using Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* as an example. She also recalled her own father’s statements on the matter:

My father said: “The theater should be a great educational institution. Well, let’s just send the young girls and women to *The Taming of the Shrew*, where they will learn how to make themselves pleasing to men. Through flattery and hypocrisy.” (WS, 288)

Meanwhile, Löhn-Siegel laments the position of women, who are subordinate to men and trained to do their will in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and instead sympathizes with the female protagonist who is

punitively treated for speaking honestly with men. This 19th century actress clearly resented the position of women in previous eras.

In Löhn-Siegel's time, it was still considered ideal for men to be active in the public sphere and for women to take care of domestic affairs at home. It is no wonder that seeing active, engaged women encroaching on the public sphere of men was considered inappropriate for the education of children. Käthchen, a woman who actively pursues Count Wetter, a political subject, disrupts the male public sphere.

However, Löhn-Siegel's decision to take on the role was not influenced by the public's negative reaction to the characterization of the "manly" Käthchen. This decision reflected her progressive views of professional women entering public society during her time. Nevertheless, despite the negative public reaction to Käthchen, the play became popular because of the happy ending of the pure love story.

3. Problematizing the unconscious Käthchen: Löhn-Siegel's discomfort from the modern feminine perspective

This section will first analyze *Käthchen* and discuss the figuration of its eponymous protagonist. It will then explore Löhn-Siegel's interpretation of the character to demonstrate her feminist and emancipatory approach to the story and its roots in her wider views on women's rights.

In the story, Käthchen often falls into a trance and acts like a sleepwalker. For instance, when she sees Count Wetter, she is driven to throw herself at his feet. When he leaves, she jumps out of a window and breaks her leg while attempting to chase after him. Käthchen moves unconsciously, driven by a higher power. As others have suggested, this seems to reflect Kleist's belief in animal magnetism (Huff 1992; Schmitt

2009; Bremer 2012; Tokita 2021).

Although Käthchen seems to be the ideal of the obedient, good, and chaste daughter, she also radically pursues Count Wetter with a fierce, nearly deranged determination (Bremer 2012, 206). Käthchen is a helpless young woman in the face of greater supernatural forces, unable to reason her way out of her own violent behavior.

Käthchen's pathological clinginess and obedience is described in Kleist's narrative as "Like a dog that has tasted its master's sweat, she strides after him [wie ein Hund, der von seines Herren Schweiß gekostet, schreitet sie hinter ihm]" (KH, 329). Käthchen follows her love for the Count uncontrollably like a dog, obedient and obsequious even when she is estranged from her beloved. Despite some seeing Käthchen's behavior as overly manly, Löhn-Siegel was quite critical of the female protagonist she played:

The lack of maidenly pride, the servility in Käthchen was repugnant to me. I could not understand how a girl could be capable of making herself contemptible to the man she loved and adored by pursuing him with her affections against his will. (WS, 81)

Löhn-Siegel criticizes Käthchen's slavish affection. This contrast of a woman's irrational and bestial behavior against a man's calmness and intelligence is intended to be theatrical and dramatic in its effect. However, Löhn-Siegel believed Käthchen was not given any human dignity or pride in the narrative.

Löhn-Siegel's doubts about Käthchen's role can be tied to wider images of women of her time: after the July Revolution in France in 1830, a women's empowerment movement developed in Germany. Leading the

movement were Catholic and Protestant religious groups, who criticized the domestic and social conditions that had kept women ignorant and instead advocated a break from women's dependence on men (Briatte 2020, 45–46). The failed German revolutions of 1845–1846 fostered the momentum for increased educational and paid employment opportunities for women (ibid., 46–47). There was a strong awareness of the need to improve the situation whereby women were placed in a state of ignorance and illiteracy. This state of ignorance had created women's dependent condition toward men.

Käthchen, meanwhile, is kept in a state of ignorance as to what she desires and why she is driven by uncontrollable impulses. Her actions are driven by the logic of a male-centered political marriage, and she is dependent on a man's decisions. Although Käthchen and the Count are united in the end, they were unable to achieve this on their own. Instead, it is an event of divine providence beyond their will, in which the truth is revealed and love is fulfilled when they both dream the same dream. Käthchen embodies a passive, repressed, and weak gender that remains ignorant and foolishly waits for things to turn around.

Bremer (2012, 210) suggests that the oppositional relation between dream and reality in the story presents a highly romanticized image of *Käthchen* in the Middle Ages that is intentionally rendered obsolete. Even Löhn-Siegel, who lived in a later period than the creation of this work, would likely have seen such an ignorant and male-dependent woman—albeit unconscious and “manly” in some ways—as an antiquated concept by the mid-19th century, when the women's movement was developing. It also becomes clear through the eyes of this actress that Käthchen had become a cultural tool for projecting the retro-romanticism of authors and readers.

4. Löhn-Siegel's antipathy to Count Wetter and his aristocratic political character

Wolfgang Menzel (1798–1873), a German literary contemporary of Kleist, praised *Käthchen* and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* and said that they were “wonderful works between the noblest simplicity and sincerity of the Middle Ages and the highest refinement of the present age” (Schmitt 2009, 151). Due to the re-evaluation of medieval literature during the Romantic era and the veneration of knightly culture, Count Wetter, a knight and aristocrat in *Käthchen*, is portrayed as sober and politically determined, not losing his heroic pride.

However, Löhn-Siegel expresses antipathy toward Wetter:

I downright hated the ancestor-proud Count, who insists on his bare shield of honor and only finds the lover worthy of marriage when she turns out to be an emperor's daughter, albeit an illegitimate one. (WS, 81)

It is interesting to note that Löhn-Siegel, the lead actress playing the role of Käthchen in the successful play of the time, had a dislike for Count Wetter, the love interest of the role. Tokita (2021, 107) analyzes Count Wetter's political decision to advance himself, wherein he initially decides to give up Käthchen and marry Kunigunde, a descendant of the former emperor, to raise the status of his territory and gain political advantages. The Count is attempting to create and cement alliances through an aristocratic marriage, thereby expanding his own family's control and reproducing power.

Reeve (1991) analyzes Kleist's aristocratic family origins and the

reflection of aristocratic thought and logic in this work. He indicates (ibid., 8) that even in the 18th century, there survived an “aristocratic spirit” in which nobles were willing to sacrifice “lower things” (such as another person or personal possessions) in order to obtain “higher ones” (such as political goals), and a classist system, an “aristocratic superiority” that publicly favored this class, remained strong in Germany until the end of World War I. In *Käthchen*, the aristocratic logic and political prioritizing of the survival of the traditional medieval aristocratic family is central to the story, and Count Wetter is portrayed as existing fully within this value system.

However, Löhn-Siegel rejected the aristocratic perspective of Count Wetter—who initially gave up the fulfillment of his love for Käthchen (believed to be a commoner by birth)—and detested his classist political orientation. The actress did not idealize a premodern marriage between houses of the same social class as a political and social device in favor of a more human and affection-based form of bonding.

Similarly, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the traditional family system comprising male dominance and female subordination, in which family reproduction was achieved through patriarchal rule, was crumbling. According to Luhmann ([c1982] 2005, 198), during the reform movement in England, society slowly began to recognize married couples as being equal on principle and that their life ought to be based on love, reason, and mutual respect. The transition from a traditional model of arranged marriages between families to one based on the personal affections of two people also began entering into the wider social structure due to the increase in individualistic value of sentimental, romantic love (ibid., 222).

Thus, this was a time in which civic values centered on romantic love, even between members of different classes, were coming into full play.

Because Lohn-Siegel supported this new approach to love, she expressed her dislike for Count Wetter with his traditionalist values of territorial expansion, economic prosperity, and a strong patriarchal rule at home.

However, others have challenged this view of Count Wetter as being bound by the old family system and an aristocratic way of thinking. According to Schmitt (2009, 162), the Count himself acts following the rules of unconscious mental desire, is completely obsessed with his own erotic proclivities, and refers to himself as a sad “shepherd” [“Schäfer”] (KH, 348) in the second act in the vein of Greek-Roman classical lyric laments. The Count is aware of his inability to control his impulses, through which he ironically parodies himself.

Kleist seems to portray Count Wetter as a weak man who is troubled by his intuitive and irrational love toward Käthchen. As a result, one can argue that the Count is not entirely political and aristocratic in his thinking. Instead, he exists as a modern man torn between his own modern, civic, sentimental, and inner love-oriented values and the medieval, conservative, sociopolitical logic of the traditional family system and its emphasis on economic prosperity.

Lohn-Siegel does not comment further on this aspect of the Count. However, compared to the Count, who has a choice about marriage, Käthchen provides a striking contrast: she is elevated from commoner to aristocrat and chosen by the Count for marriage. As a result, she is a passive entity with no choice until the very end.

On this subject, Lohn-Siegel was harshly critical of the inequality of the sexes and the oppression of female characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* (WS, 283). She hoped that the theater could portray situations in which men and women were presented on an equal footing and liberate women from their oppression in both the real and fictional worlds.

Bremer (2012, 208) notes that “the Count takes advantage of Käthchen’s simplicity to enjoy the pleasures of thievery at her expense.” Lohn-Siegel’s interpretation of Count Wetter’s political strategy due to his high status, as well as his cunning wife-swapping using his rational intellect, within the foundation of an unequally gendered narrative, was a similarly negative one.

5. The independent, desiring woman: Lohn-Siegel’s sympathy for Kunigunde

Although Käthchen is portrayed as being in a dreamy state of magnetic hypnosis, symbolizing the unconscious, her rival Kunigunde is a symbol of the rational realm that uses technology and discourse (Huff 1992, 233). Princess Kunigunde is an artificial human being, technologically created by assembling various beautiful body parts taken from the world. She seduces and ensnares Count Wetter with her intellectual wiles and accomplishes her betrothal to him.

Kunigunde is not motivated by any unconscious or irrational impulses but acts with an understanding of her own beauty and eroticism for the sole purpose of marrying Count Wetter. As a descendant of the former emperor, she has an aristocratic desire to expand her own territory. Therefore, she has the ruthless judgment to evaluate the courtship of many other knights and to quickly reject them if she finds them unworthy of a political marriage. She is also an evil woman who is willing to eliminate anyone who would hinder her goals, such as her attempt to poison her rival, Käthchen.

In general, the audience’s sympathy is never aroused for Kunigunde because she is Käthchen’s rival. Instead, she is a figure that attracts

feelings of disgust from the public. However, Lohn-Siegel shows more sympathy for Kunigunde as a human being than Käthchen:

The only naturally sentient character in Kleist's play seemed to me to be the despised Kunigunde. She was not dreamy and hazy; she knew what she wanted and sought to achieve her purpose through thick and thin. If the Count could woo her, even though he secretly loved the burgher's daughter and found her desirable, then he—a servant of knightly prejudices—was completely worthy of this lady knight, who felt and acted so genuinely in a robber-knightly manner.

When, after several years, I was given the opportunity to play *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn* at the Dresden Court Theater, I was curious to see whether my feelings would still be the same as in Sprottau. And lo and behold: It had not changed in the least. (WS, 82)

Kunigunde is fully aware of her own desire to marry the Count, and she is proactive and capable of working toward its realization in a congruent manner. She appears before the Count not in a state of unconsciousness, but as an awake, rational, lustful, and ambitious noblewoman. She is not subordinate to men but exercises as a subject her power of choice without demeaning herself. Similarly, Lohn-Siegel was also a modern professional woman who overcame opposition from her family to realize her own desire to become an actor. It is not surprising that she appreciated and sympathized with the strong-willed Kunigunde.

Schmitt (2009, 177) notes that Kunigunde is a “mosaic work” [“mosaische Arbeit”], a precisely constructed erotic and hopeful image that, at the same time, reveals demonic characteristics. This researcher also interprets her as an immensely beautiful woman, with an idealized, erotic

body that men desire but which “come[s] to nothing because her body either does not exist at all or exists only as a dazzling symbol” (ibid.). Although Kunigunde arouses men and stirs their desire for possession, she has an artificial body. It is a body of ideal beauty, created by rational science, for the purpose of being desired.

This reflects the profession of actors themselves, who have multiple personas and present artificial beauty through costumes and makeup. They physicalize and visualize their roles and present a desired, idealized body on stage. After the performance, however, they return to their own identities and stop embodying their theatrical roles. On stage, actors expand and control the desires of the audience, and at the end, they make the decision to erase the object of that desire. Thus, it is not surprising that Löhn-Siegel saw Kunigunde—a strong woman with an artificial body who appears before people as a symbol of beauty and pursues her own goals—as a modern image of femininity in relation to her own professional life as an actor.

In the same period, during and after the Dresden Revolution, Louise Otto-Peters (1819–1895), a famous leader of the women's movement, founded a women's newspaper. She used this paper to promote women's participation in the political sphere, their independent status in society, their educational opportunities, their independence in labor, and the dissolution of hierarchies among women. These values would serve as the basis for various women's movements (Schaser 2020, 30–31). In an era of the “politicization of women” (ibid., 31), Löhn-Siegel found a pioneering female figure for Kunigunde, a politicized woman who is as much a political subject as the Count and actively participates in public space.

6. Conclusion

Löhn-Siegel was a leading theatrical figure in her acclaimed performance of the role of the eponymous protagonist in Kleist's *Käthchen*, which was a great success in its time. Alongside this, however, the actress's critical interpretation of the role in the context of the women's movement developing throughout the 19th century reflected a progressive critical interpretation of the oppression of women. Moreover, Löhn-Siegel offered a unique interpretation of the other major characters in *Käthchen*. Her perspective of Kunigunde, a demonic princess, as an independent woman was progressive. These progressive views would have influenced the roles she played.

Actors are not only a bridge between the work and the audience but also present the ideas and concepts of the work in the present time. Therefore, even for traditional and old works with outdated ideas, actors may provide new perspectives and meaning to them through their interpretation and performances to match the values of their time. In this way, the old work is updated and acquires a new meaning that is ahead of its time.

Löhn-Siegel struggled with the great discrepancy between the audience's willingness to accept the stage representations of female characters who endure oppression and misery and her own rejection of these representations. This point will be discussed further in the author's next paper.

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