

Disrupted Realities: Heinrich von Kleist's Familial Fantastic

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To my family

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Introduction

Two centuries after Heinrich von Kleist's death, scholars still contend with the problem of the fantastic in his short stories and dramas. Kleist's fantastic often takes the form of characters who may or may not possess supernatural power or manifests during strange events which defy rational explanation. What makes these fantastic elements different from those found in works more widely considered to belong to the fantastic genre is their eruption into seemingly ordinary fictional worlds. More precisely, these instances of the fantastic contradict the rules of the fictional worlds they interrupt and cast doubt on the version of reality perceived by the characters. Though Kleist certainly transgresses the boundaries of reality in multiple works, the method and meaning behind these fantastic elements often remains ignored or misunderstood. Scholars widely accept that Kleist's fantastic differs from that of other authors, but the precise differences that set Kleist apart have not been extensively investigated. This does not mean that the question of reality in Kleist's works has been ignored.

Recent Kleist scholarship has tended to focus on Kleist's manipulations of reality rather than address the structural question of genre. Carol Jacobs's "The Style of Kleist" and Nancy Nobile's "'Sein Nahen ist ein Wehen aus der Ferne:' Ottokar's Leap in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*" each explore Kleist's tendency to obscure reality through careful selection and omission of detail. To Jacobs, Kleist wields his style like a scribe wields a stylus for both the creation and erasure of meaning. The author's tendency to create diversions or omit detail at critical moments is, Jacobs argues, a conscious stylistic choice.¹ Jacobs investigates Kleist's

¹ Carol Jacobs, "The Style of Kleist," *Diacritics* 9, no. 4 (1979): 47, accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464913>.

obscuring of cause and effect and seeks to understand the role that language plays in these manipulations. Nobile's piece reconciles the grotesque fifth act of *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, in which a witch brings about an improbable resolution, with the play as a whole. Nobile argues that the play's structure reveals an author conscious of the theater's artifice and willing to expose illusions of reality.² The piece does not directly deal with the fantastic, but Nobile goes against the grain of earlier scholars and critics who dismissed or ignored Kleist's sudden shifts away from the accepted reality of the fictional world.

Other recent research has focused on the role in Kleist's works of such markers of identity as gender, class, and race. These motifs are not the focus of this thesis, but their emergence as areas of interest for Kleist scholars points to a fascination with the way characters fit into the social reality of their fictional world. Stephen Howe's *Kleist and Rousseau* presents Kleist as an author who engaged with social and political philosophy.³ The two categories of research mentioned here represent investigations into Kleist's manipulation of fictional reality as well as evaluations of identity and social order in his works.

This project will unite these two seemingly disparate areas of research by examining interactions between motifs of language and social structure, chiefly family and religion, in order to understand an alternative vision of the fantastic. The Kleist stories examined here, *Der Findling*, *Die heilige Cäcilie, oder die Gewalt der Musik*, and *Michael Kohlhaas*, present families as critical points where socially or culturally imposed structures of reality fail. *Der*

² Nancy Nobile, "'Sein Nahen ist ein Wehen aus der Ferne': Ottokar's Leap in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*," *Heinrich von Kleist and Modernity*, comp. Bernd Fischer and Timothy J. Mehigan. (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), 23-40, accessed November 5, 2014, Google Books.

³ Steven Howe, *Heinrich Von Kleist and Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Violence, Identity, Nation*, (Rochester: Camden House, 2012).

Findling and *Die heilige Cäcilie* each explicitly challenge constructed families, and in all three stories a preoccupation with blood families and their survival exists against backdrops of widespread spiritual crisis.

This paper will examine Kleist's fantastic with the aid of the definition of the genre provided by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov claims that readers of the fantastic must hesitate alongside the characters between a supernatural and natural explanation of events and reject any allegorical or poetic reading of fantastic occurrences.⁴ Todorov's definition applies more surely to the works of authors like E.T.A. Hoffmann, in which uncanny elements do not enter the text as abruptly or unexpectedly as they do in Kleist's works. This approach to the fantastic offers a model of the genre as a literary mode which arises out of points of hesitation. Although Todorov's model falls short when applied to Kleist, its basis in a conflict between two interpretations of reality will serve as a point of departure for this project.

Neither the story of a sixteenth century rebellion found in *Michael Kohlhaas* nor the reinterpretation of the Achilles myth offered by *Penthesilea*, to name two examples, are expected backdrops for fantastic events, especially not when compared to the more typical works of gothicism and fantasy which Todorov examines. Kleist's fantastic cannot be best understood along the axis of natural and supernatural. Readers encountering mysterious old women and communication from beyond the grave may be tempted to read Kleist's fiction through this lens, but Kleist's concerns remain in the realm of everyday life and his disrupted realities highlight

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 33.

family struggles. Only through a new conception of the fantastic can these strange elements in Kleist's works be appreciated and understood.

Todorov's vision of the fantastic falls short when applied to a version of the fantastic rooted in tensions between family structure and social norms. Distinctions between natural and supernatural matters have little bearing on Kleist's families, who must navigate a divide between personal and social realities in order to survive. The definition of the fantastic as a point of hesitation between natural and unnatural explanations of events simply fails to capture the subtlety of Kleist's fantastic, which finds expression more through hesitation between individual and collective constructions of reality. The inclusion of religious life in these family dramas should not be understood as a variation on the theme of the supernatural, but as a demonstration of a collectively accepted reality which allows for belief beyond perception.

Kleist's chosen motifs in these stories of family survival emphasize both the widely accepted perceptions of reality and spiritual beliefs present in the characters' social milieus. Kleist's families in crisis, so often at odds with these assumptions, do not just experience disorientation within their realities. Characters encounter objects which promise significance but whose meaning cannot be read or deciphered. These illegible, inaccessible carriers of significance invariably help determine whether or not the family can survive and the uncertainty they produce echoes the disorientation faced by characters at odds with their social reality. Kleist's characters must project meaning onto these objects the way external forces have shaped their families. In these stories, the possibility of reality beyond perception does not point to a supernatural world but to a way out of crisis.

Kleist's fantastic centers around subtle aberrations in the otherwise stable order provided by family as well as the institutions of religion and social class. Within Kleist's fantastic works, these aberrations intrude on stable categories and undermine the people and institutions tasked with maintaining order. In this way, Kleist's fantastic is political, but its characteristic concern with family life points to more immediately personal and metaphysical questions. Kleist's fantastic works often feature transgressions of boundaries within families and across social and religious lines, but lasting changes to a fictional world beyond the characters are less certain. *Michael Kohlhaas* ends with the ascendance of an ordinary family to the Prussian nobility, an outcome which contrasts with the class rebellion carried out by the hero and highlights his inability to affect change on a larger scale. Kohlhaas's failure hardly matters, for his family's survival and prosperity has been guaranteed. Kleist concerns himself with the way individuals live within larger systems, disruptions of which can dramatically alter the structure of reality as characters perceive it.

The narratives of disrupted family life examined here each feature a variation on a motif Kleist employed frequently. Throughout Kleist's plays and stories, silences matter and often accompany inexplicable or unexpected events, even events as far removed from the supernatural as the rape in *Die Marquise von O*. Characters lose consciousness and narration stops at key moments. The unintelligible carrier of significance represents another form of silence. These objects accompany fantastic events and tease the characters and reader by promising insight into the mysterious forces at work. A carrier of significance will be defined as any object which suggests the presence of information. Kleist denies readers and characters alike access to the significance of these objects. Attempts by characters to do so define the significance of the carrier object more than that of the actual but obscured content within. Kleist's works offer

numerous examples of withheld information and silences, but the form of silence examined here distinguishes itself through a connection to fantastic events which place the survival of families at stake.

Kleist's first drama, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, seems to announce this preoccupation with family survival both through the title and through the story of a family's blood feud. This paper will investigate three Kleist stories in depth, but the vision of family which unites them seems to have first been expressed in dramatic form. Kleist's families experience tension when externally imposed notions of family structure clash with the reality of blood ties. Nowhere is this tension more literally demonstrated than in *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. The houses of Warwand and Rossitz bear two different names, but this distinction belies their shared blood. Beyond the names of the houses, an inheritance contract provides another inscribed dividing line.

As a Kirchenvogt explains to neutral family member Jeronimus, "Seit alten Zeiten/Gibts zwischen unsern beiden Grafenhäusern,/Von Rossitz und von Warwand einen Erbvertrag,/Kraft dessen nach dem gänzlichen Aussterben/Des einen Stamms, der gänzliche Besitztum/Desselben an den andern fallen sollte."⁵ The Erbvertrag has made the extinction of one house the condition for the other house's financial prosperity. The circumstances surrounding the contract's creation remain mysterious, but the introduction of a legally bound financial incentive gives each house a great stake in the other's destruction.

The division of the family into two houses obscures their kinship and distracts from the self-destructive nature of the feud. The family's eventual reunion brings a grotesque close to the

⁵ Heinrich von Kleist, "Die Familie Schroffenstein," In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. 1, rev. ed. Helmut Sembdner (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 57.

drama. Scions Agnes and Ottokar, disguised as one another as part of a reconciliation plan, are murdered by their own fathers, who each believe that they have eliminated the other house's heir.⁶ The scene illustrates the intensity of the family's self-destructive urge, a murderous drive extinguished at the play's very end by a witch. The severed finger produced by Ursula becomes the focal point of a newly constructed reality which frees Warwand and Rossitz from the reality constructed by the Erbvertrag. Under the old rules, the family interprets the finger as evidence that Warwand has murdered Rossitz heir Peter. At the play's opening, Rossitz mourns Peter,⁷ found missing a finger, and vows revenge. By the play's closing Ursula has used the finger to reunite the family, telling Warwand and Rossitz that the dead child she found was not murdered, but rather accidentally drowned. When Johann, the dead boy's illegitimate half-brother, questions Ursula's motives, she answers: "s ist abgetan, mein Püppchen./Wenn ihr euch totschiägt ist es ein Versehen."⁸ Ursula creates a new narrative around the finger. The object no longer stands at the center of a deadly feud, but at the heart of a "Versehen," a blunder with grotesquely tragic consequences.

The ease with which the family's tragedy becomes a grotesque spectacle does not contradict the great stakes which have been raised by their feud. Ursula seems well aware of this when she explains why she cut off Peter's finger: "Ich wollt ihn unter meine Schwelle legen/Er wehrt dem Teufel. Gnade!"⁹ Under Ursula's threshold, the finger that justified murder becomes a talisman against the devil. Ursula's explanation functions on figurative and literal levels to

⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁹ Ibid.

equate the feud with the devil and to justify her interference and use of the finger as necessary steps to ward off this great evil. For the Schroffenstein family, the terms of the inheritance contract are so reality-defining that Rupert cannot see any other explanation for his son's death, but the missing finger, an earlier instance of Kleist's silent carrier of significance, supports another view of reality.

Throughout Kleist's works with fantastic elements, carriers of significance like the Kindesfinger promise information that could help both the character and the reader judge the strange situation at hand. Ursula's meddling aside, the Schroffenstein family gives up a bloody legal dispute when confronted with a tangible representation of their self-destruction. Ultimately, each house abandons a perceived reality built on legal and financial contracts and accepts a new reality in which family is the principal institution. In three later works by Kleist, the carriers of significance appear as texts which cannot be parsed but whose forms and positions within fixed orders reveal something about the constructed reality experienced by the characters. The silence of these texts for both character and reader offers an unreadable text within a text describing inexplicable events, echoing the structure of the fictional world itself. More significant, however, is the intersection of these objects and associated crises of reality with family crises. For Kleist, family is the fixed point of reality, the locus where all illusions arise and dissipate.

Der Findling: The Uncanny Family

Kleist's unsettling 1811 short story *Der Findling*, set in Roman mansions and monasteries and charged with forbidden sexual passion, could be the author's most conventionally fantastic work, even if the strange occurrence at the center of the story falls short of the wonder induced by Kohlhaas's gypsy. Kleist's readers and characters are taunted with incest and Doppelgänger, but the story's strange power has more subtle sources. Todorov includes in his definition of the fantastic the reader's (and, often at the same time, a character's) hesitation between supernatural and natural explanations for the events of the text.¹⁰ The eerie resemblance between *Der Findling* himself and his foster mother's dead first love seems out of the ordinary and puzzles the characters as much as the reader, but the story becomes richer when the equally uncanny familial and social relationships behind this resemblance are examined. Bridging foundling Nicolo's uncertain relationship to the dead marquise and his uncertain place in the Piachi household and Roman society is an anagram, a piece of text presented partway through the story that tempts both Nicolo and the reader by seeming to offer a solution to the mysteries of the story. This chapter will argue that the Nicolo/Colino anagram cannot be read for information in and of itself but that the structure of the names formed from rearrangeable letters merely echoes the bizarre structure of the Piachi family.

Der Findling unsettles more through off-kilter family dynamics than through any suggestion of the supernatural. Todorov discusses at length the role of taboo sexual desire as a "social uncanny" present in the fantastic genre and notes that "incest constitutes one of the most

¹⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 33.

frequent varieties.”¹¹ The incest described in *Der Findling* only counts as such in this socially uncanny sense. A foster son’s determination to seduce his adoptive mother breaks a taboo, but Kleist’s story presents a social sphere full of equally odd relationships, from the chaste marriage of the Piachis to Xaviera Tartini’s affairs with clergymen. Strangest of all are Elvire Piachi’s undying love for the Genoese knight who rescued her as a young woman¹² and Nicolo’s desire for Elvire. In this discussion of taboo sexuality and the fantastic, Todorov names both incest and “supernumerary love” as “transformations of desire” typical of the genre.¹³ Elvire’s shocking sighting of Colino is nothing more than the sighting of her foster son in costume, but this close resemblance between two unrelated men would still feel uncanny even if Kleist had chosen not to provide a second affinity between the men in the form of an anagram. The chaste wife has not seen a ghost, but she has experienced an attraction that transgresses boundaries of propriety and virtue. Elvire serves as the locus of much of the sexual desire and denial of the story. Her love for a dead man introduces a sort of forbidden, if tolerated, love into the story early on, but at no point do any of her three would-be lovers, Colino, Piachi, and Nicolo, have the opportunity to consummate their passions. The charged atmosphere of strong yet continually denied passion is hardly reined in by the social institution of marriage and contrasts starkly with the licentious Carmelite order. Nicolo meets his mistress Xaviera through the Church, but his marriage fails to put an end to the affair. No social institution within the story is strong enough to defend the standards of appropriate sexuality that Piachi and his young wife like to think they abide.

¹¹ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 131.

¹² Heinrich von Kleist, “Der Findling,” In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*. vol 2., rev. ed. Helmut Sembdner (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 202.

¹³ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 131.

Happy marriages do not exist in *Der Findling*. The Piachis' sexless union is no match for Elvire's erotically charged fantasies of Colino, just as Nicolo's marriage to Constanze resembles a business arrangement when contrasted with the passion of his affair with Xaviera. Nicolo impersonates Colino because he resents his arranged marriage and wants to continue his passionate, if not monogamous, affair. Elvire is susceptible to the deception because her husband cannot fulfill her sexual needs. Both foster mother and foster son have been disappointed by an institution of marriage that fails to accommodate sexuality. Personal tragedy has limited their access to an ideal family. Elvire replaces Piachi's first wife and Paolo's mother¹⁴ and Nicolo in turn replaces Paolo.¹⁵ Marriages in the story merely unite incompatible men and women, and the structure of the family in turn serves as an equally bloodless template. Elvire and Nicolo are mere surrogates for the blood family Antonio Piachi lost, and neither of them shares with Piachi the bonds that held together the first Piachi household. Elvire can never bear Antonio's child, and Nicolo, who appears "so fremd und steif" upon his adoption,¹⁶ merely fills the empty seat in Piachi's wagon. The society Kleist describes in *Der Findling* is itself uncanny, and the "socially uncanny" relationships that arise follow logically from the strangely lifeless institutions of marriage and family. The clergymen who inhabit this story are perhaps the happiest men of all, enjoying Xaviera's company without the burden of family that Antonio bears. The Church offers an alternative to structured family life with its institutionalized sexual freedom. Interestingly, while Constanze and her legitimately born child die shortly after the birth,¹⁷ Xaviera enjoys

¹⁴ Kleist, "Der Findling," 199.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

motherhood with her illegitimate daughter, the bright and observant Klara.¹⁸

Nicolo's attempted substitution of Colino echoes his socially sanctioned adoption of Paolo's role. The orphan receives the dead boy's possessions and the couple legally adopts him. This adoption, as well as Piachi's generous signing over of assets to the foster son, hinges on the existence of documents which replace Paolo in writing with Nicolo. In this society, legal documents as much as the physical substitution of one person for another define the family. Unfortunately for Antonio Piachi, the foundling fails to meet the expectations of family life. His comfortable upbringing and education given do nothing to prevent his seduction at age fifteen by the bishop's mistress Xaviera and the continued womanizing that precludes any happiness in a monogamous marriage. Nicolo's unrestrained sexuality defines his failure to be a good son within the social institution Antonio and Elvire see as his future. Piachi's reconstituted family offers a socially sanctioned role for a boy without a family, but Elvire's secret desires open a vacancy within the Piachi household for a young and passionate lover. Only Piachi has the legal and social approval to recast the loved ones he lost.

Kleist's narration augments the uncanny atmosphere of the story as much as the odd relationships within it. When Nicolo first learns the name of his lookalike, he experiences a strange feeling. The sound of the name Colino, heard through a locked door, "sein Herz, er wusste nicht warum, in süße Träume wiegte."¹⁹ This emotional turn is a stark contrast to the intense feelings that Nicolo has lately felt towards his mother figure: "Der Gedanke, die Leidenschaft dieser, als ein Muster der Tugend umwandelnden Frau erweckt zu haben,

¹⁸ Kleist, "Der Findling," 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

schmeichelte ihn fast eben so sehr, als die Begierde, sich an ihr zu rächen.”²⁰ Nicolo’s quest to avenge himself takes a dark, quasi-incestuous turn with the discovery of Colino, yet in the midst of these evil urges the foster son still finds himself, according to the narrator, in the emotional space of sweet dreams. This peaceful feeling could simply stem from the premonition of a successful plan, or it could mean the recognition of an extraordinary spiritual bond. The narrator’s language suggests a shift in Nicolo’s emotions without ever explaining why this might happen. Nicolo himself does not know. What is certain is the pleasure that the foundling takes not only in revenge, but in the awakening of sexual passion in a virtuous wife. Revenge is Nicolo’s first goal, but the quest for revenge opens the door to a strange kind of sexual conquest, an echo of the first sexual obsession to unfold behind locked doors in Piachi’s house.

Cruelty, matching incest and supernumerary love in excess and taboo, often plays a role in fantastic depictions of sexuality.²¹ Todorov cites examples of cruelty in several fantastic works. In *The Saragossa Manuscript*, he identifies not only “tortures which afford pleasure to those who inflict them” but notes that these examples of extreme sexuality can be instigated by humans rather than by supernatural forces. *Der Findling* does not belong as definitively to the fantastic genre as a work like *The Saragossa Manuscript*, but Todorov’s removal of sexual themes from an explicitly marvelous mode brings his analysis in line with Kleist’s story. Nicolo’s family bonds, though they are legal and social rather than sanguine, make his “satanischer Plan” for Elvire all the more transgressive, especially when sexuality is considered as a socially regulated phenomenon. According to Todorov, mothers exist in contrast to sexually

²⁰ Kleist, “Der Findling,” 209.

²¹ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 132.

desirable women and a character's encounter with or memory of his mother can induce sexual restraint in the face of intense desire for a woman.²² If Kleist's story is read along these lines, then Elvire's "motherhood" is a mere legal fiction with no power against Nicolo's passion for Xaviera. The woman given the task of taming Nicolo's desires, Constanze, is none other than a blood relative of his "mother" handpicked by his parents. The choice of the mother's blood relative makes sense on a practical level, but it also suggests, on the part of Antonio and Elvire, a subtle acknowledgement of the precariousness of their family. If Nicolo marries into the family, then at least Piachi's grandchildren could be blood relatives of Elvire.

Because of the engagement, "so schien wenigstens das letzte Übel damit an der Quelle verstopft."²³ Nicolo's rights to Piachi's estate accompany the betrothal: "er überließ ihm, auf gerichtlichen Weise...das ganze Vermögen, das seinem Güterhandel zum Grunde lag."²⁴ Through the lens of Todorov's structural analysis of the fantastic, the betrothal represents, perhaps, a failed attempt to legally create a mother where none exists for the purpose of sexual restraint. The Piachis' belief that marriage will spell the end of Nicolo's excessive womanizing illustrates the weakness of marriage in their society. Elvire married when sexual union with Colino became impossible, so Nicolo is expected to marry to end all possibility of a sexual relationship with Xaviera. This idea of marriage as the end of desire becomes laughable in light of Elvire's barely restrained extramarital passion for Colino. The Piachis intend for the arranged marriage and transfer of capital to sever Nicolo's ties with the sexual freedom of the Church so that he can begin a family along the same conventional lines his foster parents chose. The amount of legal

²² Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 130.

²³ Kleist, "Der Findling," 202.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

procedures required to finally bring Nicolo into the family betray the impossibility, within the universe of *Der Findling*, of creating a family without sexual passion or the blood descendants this passion can bring into existence.

Nicolo's name legally replaces that of Paolo when the boy is adopted, and later his name replaces Antonio's as the owner of the Piachi estate. The ease of replacement of one identity for another within the world of *Der Findling* accounts for the air of significance surrounding the anagram Kleist presents to Nicolo and the reader. The physical resemblance between Nicolo and Colino pointed out by little Klara could easily be dismissed as an uncanny coincidence, but Kleist provides a second connection that intensifies the identification between the two men. This written connection binding Nicolo to Colino – the anagrammatical relationship between their names – exists outside of the social framework that allows for the transformation of the names “Paolo” or “Antonio” into “Nicolo.” Nicolo discovers the logograph while playing with a set of ivory letters from his childhood. Over time, the pieces that do not spell the foundling's name have perhaps “ihrer geringeren Beziehung auf den Knaben wegen”²⁵ been thrown away. The letters spelling “NICOLO” remained more appealing to the boy than any others, but at the same time so did the letters spelling “COLINO.”

Encountering the name “Colino” awakens intense feelings in Nicolo. As he plays with the letters he finds the connection “zufällig,” yet “er erstaunte darüber, wie er noch in seinem Leben nicht getan.”²⁶ Zufällig is the same adjective that Kleist uses to describe Nicolo's fateful choice of costume.²⁷ The narrator's insistent use of this adjective suggests that the same forces that

²⁵ Kleist, “Der Findling,” 210.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 204.

attracted Nicolo to the costume have caused his fingers to arrange Colino's name, whether they represent Zufall or something else that merely appears zufällig. Here is a sort of written confirmation of a relationship that physical appearance and emotional intuition have implied, and indeed "die Übereinstimmung, die sich zwischen beiden Wörtern angeordnet fand, schien ihm mehr als ein bloßer Zufall." The sight of the letters has an even stronger effect on Elvire, whose "innerlichen Bewegungen" are eagerly observed by her foster son and compel her to return to the bedroom where a large portrait of Colino hangs.

Nicolo's anagram seems to suggest that the letters, artifacts of Piachi's best effort to educate and raise a suitable replacement for Paolo, always contained the name of the second man the foundling would try to replace, and were never immune to the forces that draw the foundling to Colino. The suggestion of a written connection between the two men tempts the reader with hints of the supernatural, but the question of the anagram's significance remains. In her essay "The Style of Kleist," Carol Jacobs questions what this logograph can really tell the reader or Nicolo. She describes the relationship between Nicolo and Colino as governed by enigma.²⁸ To Jacobs, "the logograph breaks the integrity of the word," and "while *Colino* may be the logographic answer to the enigma *Nicolo* it offers no ultimate unriddling." Jacobs's evaluation of the anagram demonstrates the impossibility of reading Nicolo's name for any definitive confirmation of a connection Colino. If the "ultimate password" of the logograph proves a dead end, then a supernatural explanation for Nicolo and Colino's physical and anagrammatical resemblance slips further out of Nicolo and the reader's grasp.

²⁸ Jacobs, "The Style of Kleist," 51.

The anagram and accompanying physical resemblance puzzle Nicolo and shock Elvire, but if either character believes that they are having a distinctly spiritual experience, such as visitation or possession by a ghost, the narrator does not give the reader access to these thoughts. The story presents all of the uncanny sexuality of the fantastic without a clear access point to the marvelous. Kleist's narrator never mentions a supernatural world. The logograph which seems to sign over Colino's identity to Nicolo appears to be worlds apart from the legal documents which give Nicolo the right to identities previously belonging to Paolo and Antonio Piachi. The anagram remains an unsolvable riddle within Nicolo's social context, leading him to attempt to seduce, with disastrous results, his foster mother. Meanwhile, the legal documents are perfectly intelligible because they transfer identities in a way that makes sense for their social context, where businesslike family relations routinely require the adoption of a dead person's identity.

The Rome of Kleist's imagination is defined by a large gulf between the marital and clerical spheres. Sexual desire reaches a dead end within chaste, sexually moral marriages but flourishes where it is forbidden. The Catholic Church of the text can be seen as a repository for the baser urges the bourgeois merchant class has tried to suppress, an outlet for the sexuality buried by marriage, its counterpart social institution. The world of the story is imbalanced socially, to the point where normal desire has been driven out of marriages where it belongs and into the church where it can only exist as an inappropriate diversion. The sacrament of confession becomes, in Kleist's story, a window into the lurid inner world of the confessor. Xaviera, who stands "in engsten Verbindung" with the Carmelite monks thanks to her liaison with the bishop, has no trouble uncovering the secret which confirms Nicolo's "unnatürlichen

Hoffnungen.”²⁹ Xaviera’s unrestrained sexuality gives Nicolo access to secret knowledge of his foster mother’s repressed desires.

Der Findling is not a fantastic story in the traditional sense, but the novella is set in a world of excess, an out of line society where families resemble cuckoo’s nests and matters of the flesh keep clergymen from their spiritual duties. The uncanny events of the story unfold from an uncanny social order. Neither the character nor the reader needs to consider the possibility of ghostly interference for the story to unsettle. Elvire and Nicolo are ghosts on a figurative level, two souls doomed to inhabit lives that do not belong to them. At the end of the story, Piachi rejects last rites and vows to battle Nicolo in hell.³⁰ Piachi recognizes the inefficacy of the Church, but his vow acknowledges the significant amount of power he wielded within his family. The merchant assembled his household by assigning a childless young woman the role of mother and a “fremd und steif” orphan the role of son and heir. In this spiritually bankrupt setting, Piachi, who transformed the identities of two people, naturally chooses to take divine justice into his own hands.

Kleist makes no simple connection between Nicolo and Colino. The similarities between the two men fall short of marvelous, and indeed the story most resembles the fantastic genre when it describes bizarre sexual proclivities. Examined within the context of the strange social order of the story, the anagram emerges as a tantalizing clue. Jacobs dismisses the possibility of reading meaning *into* the anagram, but her description of the anagram’s function illustrates why the logogriph nevertheless provides insight into the story: “riddle and solution perpetually

²⁹ Kleist, “Der Findling,” 211.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

producing one another, with no word more one than the other.”³¹ When Nicolo discovers the anagram, he errs by reading his own name within that of Colino and vice versa. The anagram cannot be read for content, but the ease with which one name can become another mirrors the effects of spiritual emptiness in Nicolo’s world. Without the love that should bind a family, Kleist’s characters view themselves as interchangeable parts within a family structure. Nicolo’s belief in his interchangeability is the genesis of his sexual cruelty towards Elvire. As a boy, Nicolo becomes Piachi’s son legally, and neither receives nor learns to give filial love. The lack of family ties makes the unthinkable act of seducing Elvire, his own foster mother, an appealing possibility for revenge. Sexual perversion and the social uncanny define the “satanischer Plan,” but Nicolo’s scheming can hardly be considered out of the ordinary considering the couple who raised him and the church to which his spiritual growth was entrusted. The story is perhaps so troubling because the exceptional attempted seduction at its heart is not an exception at all.

Nicolo never successfully steps into Colino’s role. When the foundling attempts to seduce Elvire in the guise of Colino, his foster father, the family’s highest authority, stops him. Jacobs sees the failure of the seduction less as a matter of Piachi’s fatefully-timed return and more as the painting’s reassertion of Colino’s separate identity.³² Caught in the act of seducing the woman who only belongs to Piachi legally, Nicolo invokes the law to defend himself. When Piachi tells his foster son to leave, Nicolo “erklärte: an ihm, dem Alten, sei es, das Haus zu räumen, denn er durch vollgültige Dokumente eingesetzt, sei der Besitzer und werde sein Recht, gegen wen immer auf der Welt es sei, zu behaupten wissen!”³³ No legal procedures exist by

³¹ Jacobs, “The Style of Kleist,” 51.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kleist, “Der Findling,” 213.

which Nicolo can adopt Colino's identity. Let down by the promise of the anagram, Nicolo turns to a more conventional written source whose legitimacy Piachi recognizes.

In his attempted seduction, Nicolo attempts a transfer of identity that follows the same logic of the laws that govern family and inheritance but receives none of the same legal or social recognition. If, as Jacobs surmises, Colino's identity is non-transferrable, then Nicolo has an alternative in mind when his first plan fails. Like the anagram that transforms Nicolo into Colino, the "vollgültige Dokumente" transform Nicolo into Piachi, owner of the great Piachi house. What Nicolo does not have is a document that transforms himself into Piachi, husband of Elvire. Nicolo's loveless union with Constanze demonstrates his aversion to the empty social institution marriage represents in the story. What Nicolo does desire is a transformation into Colino, the virtuous Elvire's only weakness. Nicolo learns as a child that any identity is available to him. Unfortunately for Nicolo, the cuckoo's nest can only be entered with the proper paperwork.

The strange web of legally defined identities that constitutes family life in *Der Findling* is shadowed by an alternate web of identities defined by desire. Impotent Antonio Piachi stands with both feet firmly in the conventional world of family and business, while his second wife wavers between her legal commitment to one man and the unfulfilled desire that ties her to another. Nicolo sees his marriage to Constanze as nothing more than a social obligation and devotes himself to a mistress. The roles implied by these counterpart modes differ in that one is determined from without by "vollgültige Dokumente" and the other is determined from within, by the emotions that send Elvire into her bedroom and guide Nicolo to the discovery of Colino. One of these modes exists in the open, the other only in secret. Only the existence of legally and socially recognized procedures and documents legitimizes Antonio's marriage to Elvire, but Elvire's lasting commitment to Colino can never be verified in this way. Kleist describes a

fictional world in which laws and conventions are completely divorced from human feelings and no institution exists to offer spiritual guidance. Piachi's wish to keep his son and heir is as much a fantasy as Elvire's wish to keep her first love, but no adoption or transfer of capital can really fulfill it. Nicolo's upbringing in this world perhaps explains his willingness to interpret the anagram as a "Bestätigung" rather than a mere coincidence. The logograph echoes the structure of the legal procedures that first transfer Paolo's and then Piachi's identity to Nicolo, but just as surely as Nicolo cannot replace either of the Piachis to, he cannot replace Colino. The anagram's promise remains as empty as the promise of Piachi's legal documents, suggesting but never actually providing a way to keep a loved one alive.

Geheimnisvolle Kunst: Family Life and Religious Fervor in *Die heilige Cäcilie, oder die Gewalt der Musik*

The text at the center of Heinrich von Kleist's *Die heilige Cäcilie, oder die Gewalt der Musik*, a story featuring an important letter and the oral testimonies of various characters, is not a text in the sense that Kohlhaas's prophecies or Nicolo's anagram are. A piece of music serves as the unreadable text within a text, tantalizing a mother with a possible spiritual path back to her lost sons. Throughout the story of a mother searching for her devout sons, family life and religious devotion remain at odds. Meanwhile, the seemingly supernatural piece of music and its transformative performance do not provide a glimpse into the supernatural but serve to reunify a fragmented family under one church. Todorov's criteria do not adequately characterize an event which, for the characters, counts as an act of God. Kleist's reader may find reason to hesitate before calling the events miraculous, but the religious motifs of the story create an atmosphere of faith rather than one of hesitation as far as the characters are concerned. The investigation into this strange occurrence becomes more compelling when viewed as a mother's search for her sons than as an investigation into the supernatural. As a carrier of significance, the music accompanies not a simple intrusion of the supernatural but an episode which challenges the boundary between two models of family life.

The disconnect between the realities of family life and religious devotion seems to find physical and artistic expression in the mass powerful enough to end contact between a mother and her children. Whether or not Kleist's "uralte Messe" contains knowledge for the musician clever enough to detect it remains unclear, as does the readability of music itself. The art follows a complex set of rules and rewards technical proficiency just as much as language, but its perceived ability to express emotion and thought beyond words has long bewildered and

intrigued artists and philosophers. The musicologist Lawrence Kramer claims that music is at least discursive and contains meanings which are “definite enough to support critical interpretations comparable in depth, exactness, and density of connection to interpretations of literary texts.” The meanings produced by music are bound up in the music’s culture of origin and can be closely related to cultural practice.³⁴ With Kramer’s thesis in mind, the piece’s potential to reveal meaning, especially in matters of religious conversion and miracles, comes into focus. The composition functions as a carrier of significance just like the anagram in *Der Findling* or the prophecies in *Michael Kohlhaas*.

The music’s exact discursive function within the religiously divided world of the story remains unclear, but the music can be said with more certainty to function as the language of matters beyond the grasp of the characters. The musical masters, after all, are the nuns who have devoted their lives to worship and contemplation of God away from a society increasingly divided by uncertainty regarding the proper path to the divine. In this story of an abandoned mother and lost sons, the nuns’ distance from motherhood and family life takes on more significance. Like *Der Findling*, *Die heilige Cäcilie* emphasizes the power of the religious order as an institution which shapes reality within society and threatens the position of the family. In contrast, however, *Die heilige Cäcilie* presents die Gewalt der Musik rather than sexuality as the dark specter hiding within the Church. This is not a tale of family life destroyed by misplaced desires and miscast family members but a story of family life subverted by poorly understood spiritual urges.

³⁴ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

The brothers' madness involves complete silence interrupted only by the singing of the gloria in excelsis. The words of the gloria could, with Kramer's view in mind, be considered part of the music's attachment to cultural practice. The brothers have lost all use for language, making an exception when words serve the purposes of music's discourse. Music, however, is not a stable category. In the case of the brothers' singing, Kunst seems to become Unkunst³⁵ in the service of the brothers' madness. The separation of music's functions into distinct religious and artistic categories in the gloria is puzzling considering the narrator's suggestion that the nuns' music is charged with the divine. With his subtitle "die Gewalt der Musik," Kleist creates an expectation of violence, and the term "Gewalt" applies just as surely to the brothers' midnight gloria as it does to the beauty of the nuns' mass. Kleist's narrator emphasizes the mystery of music when he describes the artistry of the Kloster der heiligen Cäcilie:

In den Nonnenklöstern führen, auf das Spiel jeder Art der Instrumente geübt, die Nonnen, wie bekannt, ihre Musiken selber auf; oft mit einer Präzision, einem Verstand und einer Empfindung, die man in männlichen Orchestern (vielleicht wegen der weiblichen Geschlechtsart dieser geheimnisvollen Kunst) vermisst.³⁶

The mystery of music is associated, according to the narrator, with femininity, an association that brings to mind the saint of music herself, Cäcilie. *Präzision* und *Verstand* are deemed optimal qualities for a musician to possess, technical qualities that, it should be noted, seem at odds with a "geheimnisvolle Kunst." Women, the narrator suggests, not only approach music with precision and understanding but apprehend some mysterious quality within their art. The story that follows the mass is a woman's quest to understand a miracle of music and consists

³⁵ Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen, "Natur und Widernatur bei Kleist," *Neohelicon* 25, no. 2 (1998): 134, accessed November 19, 2014, ProQuest.

³⁶ Heinrich von Kleist, "Die Heilige Cäcilie, oder die Gewalt der Musik (Eine Legende), In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. 2. Rev. ed. Helmut Sembdner. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 217.

of masculine and feminine accounts which generally corroborate each other. The mother's search seems to dramatize a struggle between the mysterious, immaterial violence of that "uralte," "von einem unbekanntem Meister herrührende, italienische Messe"³⁷ and the bond of flesh and blood she shares with her sons. The divine explanations given to the mother by eyewitnesses assume the existence of a world beyond human perception, and in that sense corroborate the narrator's claim of music's mystery. These accounts are colored by the religious leanings of the eyewitnesses. Notably, the mother interviews two heads of families, albeit two different kinds – one secular and one religious. While Veit Gotthelf presides over his Protestant family, the Abbess wields power over a group of women who have chosen to call themselves sisters in the service of God. In a story so concerned with Protestant and Catholic divisions, the degree to which the versions of events provided by Veit Gotthelf and the Abbess resemble and contradict each other should reveal something about how each type of family regards music.

The axes of male and female, Protestant and Catholic repeat themselves throughout the text, tempting the reader to associate masculinity with Protestantism and femininity with Catholicism. Protestant textile dealer Gotthelf tells the mother that "der Himmel selbst scheint das Kloster der frommen Frauen in seinen heiligen Schutz genommen zu haben."³⁸ The Abbess tells the mother that "Gott selbst hat das Kloster an jenem wunderbaren Tage, gegen den Übermut Eurer schwer verirrten Söhne beschirmt."³⁹ Each witness gives the mother different details, but each agrees that divine intervention saved the cloister.

³⁷ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 217.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁹ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 227.

Complicating these firsthand accounts is the uncertain causality between the two miracles of the story. Schwester Antonia awakes from a “gänzlich bewußtlosem Zustande” to conduct a mass.⁴⁰ Kleist’s narrator specifically notes that her last-minute appearance prevents the nuns from performing a more common piece and goes on to describe “ein wunderbarer, himmlischer Trost”⁴¹ among the nuns and the way “die Beklemmung selbst, in der sie sich befanden, kam hinzu, um ihre Seelen, wie auf Schwingen, durch alle Himmel des Wohlklangs zu führen.” The music’s violent quality does not escape the audience. The narrator notes that “es war als ob die ganze Bevölkerung der Kirche tot sei.” This strange description challenges the notion of the performance as a typical miracle. The music neither enlivens nor inspires the congregation. The death-like state produced by music written for seekers of eternal life casts doubt on the interpretations of the event offered by Gotthelf and the Abbess. The violence of the music takes the audience out of the world of the living, but the connection between Schwester Antonia’s sudden healing and the strange effects of the music remains indeterminate.

The performance of the mass may or may not be a miracle in its own right, but the question of the music’s power is something separate that, even within the religious context of the story, eludes familiar narratives. The veneration of St. Cäcilie, an embodiment of music itself, perhaps explains the ease with which the Catholic Church accepts the circumstances of the brothers’ downfall as a unified miracle. Cäcilie’s intervention could cause any piece of the miracle, and a female Catholic saint devoted to music makes an apt rescuer for the nuns so devoted to her art. In this light, the cloister’s destruction during the Thirty Years’ War, a religious conflict dwarfing the destruction of the brothers’ isolated attack, seems puzzling.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 218.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Kleist's inclusion of this detail casts doubt on the given explanations that attribute the miracle to an omniscient, benevolent force. This glimpse into the future of the cloister also sheds light on the religious divisions of the story, suggesting that the agreement between textile dealer and the Abbess might represent a rare moment of understanding between a Protestant and a Catholic. The narrator describes in equally vague terms the rescue of the abbey, noting only that the brothers do not even disturb one speck of dust but never explaining the way the music moves them with the same detail used to describe its effect on the nuns.⁴²

Of the two possible instances of the supernatural in the text, the conversion of the brothers is more likely a direct effect of the music, although the first possible miracle causes the brothers to hear the mass, which like Antonia's appearance, may or may not be the true miracle of the story. The powers that cause the first miracle do not necessarily cause the second, despite the linking of the two events by the Catholic Church, and the uncertain causality of the events adds to the mystery for both the mother and the reader. In *Der Findling* Kleist tells a story of ghosts and incest without either; *Die heilige Cäcilie* is a miracle story that could feature one miracle, multiple miracles, or no miracles at all. Whether St. Cäcilie herself or a Sister Antonia awakened from her deathbed by the power of music conducts the mass, "die Gewalt der Musik" embedded in the sheet music on the abbess's desk and the mad singing of the brothers hints at the possibility of some kind of explanation beyond the mothers' interviews, an explanation which cannot be explained through the shared perception of eyewitnesses or placed within a familiar religious narrative.

⁴² Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 219.

The mother's search marks a shift in perspective and follows the masculine/Protestant, feminine/Catholic pattern begun by the Protestant brothers' opposition to the Catholic nuns. The narrator provides the first account of the fateful mass, but the information gained by the mother makes up the bulk of the story. The mother's search begins with another physical trace, the last letter her predicant son sent before attempting to execute his plan. The letter describes with "viele Heiterkeit oder vielmehr Ausgelassenheit"⁴³ the coming destruction of the cloister. The letter, written in her son's own hand in a language that is perfectly intelligible to her, sets the investigation off on the right foot but lands at the end of the investigation on the Abbess's desk beside its unintelligible counterpart, the sheet music. The mother can rely on the letter to lead her to her sons, but ultimately the letter starts off a path of inquiry which dead ends with the music responsible for their madness.

If the sons experience a miracle, then it is not the same kind of miracle that graces the nuns with beautiful music and rescues them from the *Ausgelassenheit* of the Protestant mob. The miracle robs the sons of any mooring in reality. After six years of madness and estrangement from their mother, they are described as "vier junge Leute, deren Vaterland und Herkunft unbekannt sei."⁴⁴ The miracle completely separates the brothers from their life before the mass, to the extent that even *Vaterland und Herkunft*, markers of identity and personal history, are erased. The brothers cannot be identified as Dutch Protestants, such is the extent of their transformation. Their existence in the *Irrenhaus* resembles a parody of monastic life. Above all else, the brothers' transformation involves a separation from any familial or social ties. Through music, the brothers become cloistered and silent. Language and music emerge as modes of

⁴³ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

expression on either end of a spectrum, with language fostering connection among families and music rewarding isolation and religious devotion. The nuns, sisters only in their religious devotion, exist near the middle of the spectrum. Though they live cut off from society with neither worldly comforts nor family relationships, they are not so isolated that their music cannot move laypeople. With their devotion to God and commitment to a different sort of family life, the women of the Kloster are perhaps just as disconnected from Vaterland und Herkunft as the brothers. The brothers represent a mode of existence that takes the sisters' monastic life to an extreme and create music that cannot be appreciated by human ears. The brothers' transcendence of human norms becomes apparent in Gotthelf's description of their first midnight performance: "So mögen sich Leoparden und Wölfe anhören lassen, wenn sie zur eisigen Winterzeit, das Firmament anbrüllen."⁴⁵ Religious devotion and music reach such extremes in the brothers that they resemble the cries of leopards and wolves.

Interestingly, Kleist's narration provides one hint at continuity between the brothers whose religious fervor inspired the attempted destruction of a cloister and the brothers whose religious fervor must be expressed within a cell in the Irrenhaus. The brothers' caretakers note "daß man ihnen sogar eine gewisse, obschon sehr ernste und feierliche, Heiterkeit nicht absprechen könnte."⁴⁶ The same Heiterkeit present in the planning of the cloister's destruction remains a part of the brothers' religious devotion, influencing the performances of the Gloria in excelsis "welche die Fenster des Hauses bersten machte."⁴⁷ This characteristic Heiterkeit is observed first by the mother, then by the superintendents of the madhouse, but only the narrator

⁴⁵ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 223.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁷ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 220.

actually uses the word. The brothers have changed their method of worship and lost all ties to their mother and their homeland, but one quality remains essential. Even the brothers' monastically inclined madness contains a related destructive element. Music prevents the brothers from storming the cloister, but the brothers' music threatens to shatter the windows of the madhouse that has become their own monastery. Has any transformation occurred at all? The miracle has not so much converted the brothers to good Catholics as it has channeled the destructive energy of their religious fervor into an exaggerated performance of Catholicism, complete with "schwarzen Talaren," a large crucifix, and days of silence punctuated by a frightening rendition of the gloria in excelsis. Bennholdt-Thomsen sees in the ferocity of the brothers' singing a desire to destroy the gloria of the same intensity as the planned storming of the cathedral.⁴⁸ The paradoxical expression and destruction of religious sentiment echoes the paradoxical comparison between the brothers' singing to the glory of God and the cries of animals.

These paradoxes echo Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, which positions human beings between animals and the divine. At the extreme end of the religious spectrum, the brothers simultaneously resemble devotees of God and fearsome animals. Music, too, is taken to an extreme. The relative isolation of the nuns produces harmonies which generally please human ears (the Schwester Antonia incident makes a notable exception), but the total devotion of the brothers consistently creates music capable of tearing away at the material of human society, in a literal sense by cracking windows and in a figurative sense by cutting them off from homeland and family. The brothers' clockwork routine recalls Kleist's marionettes, their fearsome yet routinely scheduled singing his trained fencing bear. More than this, the last lines of the

⁴⁸ Bennholdt-Thomsen, "Natur und Widernatur bei Kleist," 135.

Marionettentheater essay seem to explain their condition: “Mithin... müßten wir wieder von dem Baum der Erkenntnis essen, um in den Stand der Unschuld zurückzufallen.”⁴⁹ Whether the brothers lose their senses or become receptive to a higher truth matters little. According to Kleist, the furthest limits of human knowledge form a circle rather than a spectrum. In *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, foolish Johann is wise enough to both recognize that Ursula is lying to his family and understand that her lie creates a preferable version of the truth. The four brothers similarly reach a point where distinctions between higher truth and loss of sense matter little. Their adoption of the music that isolated them from reality blurs the lines between destruction and expression, just as this music both destroys and rebuilds their lives.

Within Kleist’s works, disturbances in reality become not points of hesitation between the natural and the supernatural but points of hesitation between creation and destruction of structures that define reality for the characters. For the brothers at the center of *Die heilige Cäcilie*, both the family and the church serve as loci for this disturbance. While they abandon both their mother and the chance to become fathers like Gotthelf, they adopt the same family structure used by the nuns. The brothers belong to a society which has created outlets for a contemplative, studious version of religious life but has failed to contain the more violent strain of faith which will define the Thirty Years’ War and cause the destruction of the abbey.

The brothers’ religious activities represent something far removed from the conventional conversion of their mother and even from the monastic life of the nuns, two experiences which are permitted and contained by existing structures of religious life. To become the ascetic residents of the Irrenhaus, the brothers have lost aspects of their identities which tied them to

⁴⁹ Heinrich von Kleist, “Über das Marionettentheater,” In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol. 2, rev. ed. Helmut Sembdner (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 345.

other people living within the same structures of reality, all the while retaining a tendency towards destruction. The brother's transformation is less of a complete metamorphosis than a shift into a different mode of being or a newly found reception to a higher power. This semi-changed state recalls the "pan-determinism" observed by Todorov in fantastic literature which "signifies that the limit between the physical and the mental, between matter and spirit, between word and thing, ceases to be impervious."⁵⁰ Todorov's pan-determinism, closely related to motifs of metamorphosis, implies a collapsed limit between mind and matter but does not quite capture what has happened to the brothers. The inapplicability of Todorov's fantastic model of collapsed boundaries and transformation is confirmed by his assertion that this principle involves a transition from mind to matter whereby ideas become concrete.⁵¹ Although the brothers' minds have been penetrated by the music, the only concrete expressions of this broken boundary involve a performance of conventional monastic rituals. If the brothers have been transformed, then they have been transformed mentally and spiritually into channels for the expression of a religious attitude. Their physical bodies remain unchanged vessels. External markers of identity, all of them determined by reality-defining social structures, have fallen away. The brothers have lost their identities as Dutchmen, sons, and Protestants as they have tuned out of a reality shaped by political, filial, and even religious structures and in to the spiritual current produced by the nuns' music. The brothers do not transform physically but become sensitive to a reality beyond the institutions which once shaped their perceptions.

English Romantic poetry offers a more applicable literary model by which the brothers' madness becomes easier to understand. Lawrence Kramer notes in Romantic poetry an

⁵⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 113.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

association between transits of identity and music.⁵² He quotes Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind:"

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!⁵³

Kramer's analysis of these lines might illuminate the change seen in the brothers. "To be made the West Wind's lyre is to become, both literally and figuratively, the "instrument" of transcendental power," according to Kramer.⁵⁴ If a miracle has indeed occurred, then the brothers have been made instruments of God's transcendental power, but they are hardly producing a "sweet" or even "deep, autumnal tone." If some kind of Aeolian wind blows through the brothers, then they produce tones unrecognizable as music to human ears. If the brothers have taken on the spirit of St. Cäcilie or even "die Gewalt der Musik," then it seems to emerge distorted. The nuns of the Kloster der heiligen Cäcilie seem to relay these powers on a more accessible frequency.

The transit Kramer imagines involves the adoption of a heightened version of the original identity. This the brothers have certainly achieved, but to an extent that denies Shelley's vision of a harmonious union with natural forces. What separates Kleist from this Romantic depiction

⁵² Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 95.

⁵³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ode to the West Wind," *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Nathan Haskell Dole (London: Virtue and Company, 1905), 6:108, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101036033965;view=1up;seq=134>

⁵⁴ Kramer, *Music and Poetry*, 95.

of music is the ugliness with which the brothers channel the mysterious force that has transformed them. With Kleist's circular model of human descent and ascent to states of innocence and enlightenment in mind, the brothers appear to have gone far beyond any state which members of their society could recognize as a harmonious absorption of the power of music into their being but have nevertheless become lyres to channel a power higher than themselves. Samuel Taylor Coleridge expresses a similar idea:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?⁵⁵

Shelley's poem sheds some light on changes in identity, but Coleridge's 1795 poem makes more explicit this link between music and a channeling of the divine. Kleist's works, particularly the ones with fantastic elements, frequently feature the blurring of figurative language and literal events or states of being. The Amazon queen *Penthesilea*, for example, loves Achilles so much she literally devours him and dies of a broken heart after vividly describing the dagger she would use to end her life. The relationship between levels of figurative and literal modes of language is exemplified by the finger which plays equally significant roles in the actual series of events following Peter's death and the fictional sequence offered by Ursula. Kleist borrows figurative expressions from his cultural context to intensify his works, as exemplified by *Der zerbrochene Krug*. These usages draw poetry into the phenomenal worlds of the characters, often with comical or bizarre consequences. Penthesilea's defeat of Achilles and suicide represent the transformation of her poetic language into deed, but the words lose their beauty and

⁵⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. James Dykes Campbell (London: MacMillan and Company, 1905), 49, accessed April 8, 2015, <http://babel.hathitrust.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00533059q;view=1up;seq=153>.

become grotesque actions as soon as they leave language behind. This tendency of Kleist's is not in the same metamorphic spirit of Todorov's pan-determinism. Rather than break down boundaries to show a unity of imagination and perception, these bizarre and quasi-fantastic physical expressions of thought emphasize differences between mind and external reality.

The Aeolian harp may have associations with English romantic poetry, but Kleist's one-time iconoclasts experience an extreme version of the transformation only intended in figurative terms by the Romantics. Like Shelley, who shares the West Wind with the forest and gains the Wind's autumnal tones, the brothers gain special abilities through the spirit that possesses them. Coleridge's poem links the "Soul of each, and God of all" with the channeling of music in a way that feels equally appropriate to Kleist's story. Kleist has, of course, chosen a much darker outcome of this divine channeling and used his literal depiction of "organic Harps" to convey an unsettling loss of subjectivity which does not produce the same lovely, trembling tones of the Aeolian harp of the dreamlike state inhabited by a fantastic hero. Whether Kleist has created a scenario of "organic Harps" touched at precisely the right (or wrong) moment to create discord is uncertain, but here the paradoxical and circular nature of the brothers' conversion should be kept in mind. The brothers, infected with religious fervor from the start of the story, may have been struck by a particularly strong gust of divine wind that leaves them on a frequency far beyond that of any other "organic Harp." What might seem to the brothers like a sweet tone or worthy emulation of the divine presence they felt during the mass could be completely unrecognizable as such to their caretakers and mother. The brothers who have jointly committed themselves to God are, paradoxically, lost to the external worlds of family and religion.

The effects of the brothers' transit are recognizable as both religious fervor and madness, but the cause remains mysterious. When the mother visits the abbess to learn more about her

sons, she hands off the letter that set her journey in motion and encounters the document that ends it. The very sight of the physical trace of the music responsible for the sons' madness triggers a strong reaction:

Sie betrachtete die unbekanntes zauberischen Zeichen, womit sich ein fürchterlicher Geist geheimnisvoll den Kreis abzustecken schien, und meinte, in die Erde zu sinken, da sie grade das gloria in excelsis aufgeschlagen fand. Es war ihr, als ob das ganze Schrecken der Tonkunst, das ihre Söhne verderbt hatte, über ihrem Haupte rauschend daherzöge; sie glaubte, bei dem bloßen Anblick ihre Sinne zu verlieren, und nachdem sie schnell, mit einer unendlichen Regung von Demut und Unterwerfung unter die göttliche Allmacht, das Blatt an ihre Lippen gedrückt hatte, setzte sie sich wieder auf ihren Stuhl zurück.⁵⁶

Here, at the end of an investigation into the effects of music bookended by two written documents, the mother encounters a physical trace of the great power which has robbed her sons of their senses. The sheet music poses the same question that the four mad brothers do. The extent to which the paper printed with "zauberische Zeichen" channels the power that so deeply moved the brothers remains impossible for the mother to determine. Kleist has made the music completely inaccessible, almost nonexistent, to the reader by merely describing it in words. The story, written for Kleist's *Berliner Abendblätter* rather than as accompaniment for an actual piece of music, denies music any place in its structure. *Die heilige Cäcilie, oder die Gewalt der Musik* ironically becomes the name of a piece that obscures through language both the role of the saint and the extent of the music's power. Gordon Birrell argues that "the two elements of the title point to a fundamental, irreducible ambiguity at the heart of the story,"⁵⁷ an assertion that brings to mind Coleridge's comparison of the divine with the music of the Aeolian harp. The uncertain origin of the miracles notwithstanding, the titular elements remain inaccessible thanks to the

⁵⁶ Kleist, "Die heilige Cäcilie," 226.

⁵⁷ Gordon Birrell, "Kleist's 'St. Cecilie' and the Power of Electricity," *The German Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (1989). Accessed November 14, 2015 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/407037>.

power of language. The music, which can never be heard by the reader, remains unread and unknown even as its effects channel through the brothers. To the mother, the musical notes are “unbekannte zauberische Zeichen,” and by making a musically illiterate woman the observer of the sheet music, Kleist has denied the reader even the slightest insight into the music’s power.

Whether access to the contents of the sheet music could adequately capture what the brothers heard is debatable, especially when Kleist establishes early on in the story the importance of a piece’s performers. The music of the text can only be known by the way it changes the brothers, but the mechanism for this change is never explained. Curiously, the “weibliche Geschlechtsart” of music does not give the mother any advantage in understanding from a technical standpoint what she sees written on the page, but her strange reaction to the very *sight* of the page echoes the reactions her sons had to its audible expression. Perhaps this is evidence that the feminine art has reached her at some level. Kleist uses the constructions “Es war ihr als ob” and “sie glaubte” to further obscure how much of this feeling is produced by the music and how much comes from the imagination of a woman faced with the illness of her sons. The uncertain role of the mass in the brothers’ insanity lends a mysterious quality that is only intensified by the music’s inaccessibility.

The music, entangled as it is with religious experience, is unknowable because Kleist refuses to provide access to it. Kleist neither describes the music by any basic characteristics such as key or time signature nor elaborates on what kind of distinctive features, such as an unusual chord progression, the mass might have. A sufficiently technical description of the music could give a musically literate reader a fairly good idea of what stirs the brothers. Music, after all, is not necessarily unknowable to those who cannot hear it. The missing music haunts the mother as well as the reader, who can only guess what it sounds like from vague evidence

given in mere words. Music, of course, can be described perfectly by marks on a page – not by language but by itself. Kleist's silence on the page mimics the silence that greets the mother and pushes the reader into her position of uncertainty.

The story's very structure obscures music in a way that resembles the channeling of the brothers' religious devotion. Neither the filial Protestantism nor the cloistered Catholicism condoned by the brothers' society allows for a productive expression of their fervent faith. Unheard music becomes a terrible and mysterious force in the story, just as faith expressed through an unsuitable mode of religious life produces inappropriately destructive rituals.

The mother's ultimate decision to convert represents the acceptance of a suspiciously cohesive narrative, but more importantly represents an attempt to reunite her family in a spiritual sense by choosing commitment to the institution whose rituals most closely resemble those of her sons. Having gathered all possible information and heard varying accounts, the mother resigns herself to the most fantastic explanation possible. This choice counts as a leap of faith not only because the mother puts her trust into the Catholic Church but because she proceeds without ever hearing what might be the most important clue to her sons' madness. With her conversion, the family is, if not united under one denomination, at least completely removed from the sphere of social and family life.

Given the story's attention to the delineations between men and women, Protestants and Catholics, the congruence of the witness's explanations (the differences in their narratives notwithstanding) contradicts the narrator's constructed divisions. Equally suspicious is the brother's extreme sensitivity to a piece of music whose feminine associations have been meticulously established and adoption of an existence so strongly associated with women in the

story. The divisions of the story collapse easily. An entire Protestant family becomes Catholic and men as well as women can serve as vessels for the power of music. Protestants and Catholics and men and women alike agree that God saved the Kloster. These collapsible divisions mirror the loss of the brother's subjectivity when they become objects of the music and point to the inadequacy of reality-structuring institutions within the story. In a world of constructed boundaries, music, or another power operating through it, is set apart by an ability to penetrate them, like Coleridge's vast intellectual breeze touching all of nature. Even the unheard music convinces the mother to follow her sons away from the family life they once shared and into the Church. As conventional boundaries fall away, the violence of music emerges as a truth beyond their grasp.

Just as the mother relies on Aachen's city officials and eyewitnesses to tell her the story of her sons, the reader relies on the narrator to accurately report both the story of the sons and the story of the investigation. The narrator's eccentricities are apparent from his designation of a story concerned with the gathering of information as "[e]ine Legende," a subtitle befitting the first summary of the miracles but not the subsequent investigation. Most troubling of all, though entirely permissible for a work of short fiction, is the narrator's refusal to provide any access to the music. The mother's investigation begins with a letter, includes oral interviews, and ends with another written text. Language, the medium of both the story and of every piece of evidence that is intelligible to the mother, plays a suppressive role, strictly controlling which pieces of evidence are and are not supplied to the mother and reader.

The piece of music, unreadable to the musically illiterate mother and practically non-existent for the reader of Kleist's short story, bears more responsibility for the story's air of mystery than do the miracles and religious experiences. The mother's understanding of her sons'

madness hinges on her ability to understand the piece of music so strongly associated with the nuns. In the end, she is “tief bewegt”⁵⁸ by her investigation. The mother’s religious conversion in the year after her trip to Aachen shows a desire to follow her sons, an action which paradoxically both saves and finally destroys the family. The former Protestants are reunited in the Catholic faith, at least in the mother’s mind, but are forever cut off from the familial and social institutions they once knew.

⁵⁸ Kleist, “Die heilige Cäcilie,” 228.

Michael Kohlhaas: Lutheran Fatherhood and Familial Salvation

The first thing Kleist's readers learn about *Michael Kohlhaas* is that the hero lives "[a]n den Ufern der Havel,"⁵⁹ a geographic detail which sets the scene for the novella in more ways than one. Aside from geographically orienting the reader, this detail positions Kohlhaas on a natural threshold. Water, which among other attributes can both impede and enable movement, has carried countless symbolic meanings. Rivers are dynamic formations which can flood or change course. With the first five words of the novella, Kleist has set the stage for a story about boundaries which may not be boundaries after all and brought a carrier of significance with uncertain meaning right to his hero's doorstep. Kleist describes his protagonist in similarly ambiguous terms. The schoolmaster's son and horse dealer counts as "einer der rechtsschaffensten zugleich und entsetzlichsten Menschen seiner Zeit." Kohlhaas's "Rechtsgefühl aber machte ihn zum Räuber und Mörder."⁶⁰ The robber and murderer who shows his neighbors "Wohltätigkeit" and "Gerechtigkeit" is just as resistant to characterization as the river flowing past his house and land.

The ambiguity suggested by this opening lies at the heart of Kleist's fantastic. Kohlhaas's contradictions reflect the instability of the social, political, and religious forces which shape the life of his family. Kleist does not concern himself with the natural or supernatural causes of the novella's more fantastic events, which cannot be best understood by Todorov's criteria. While critics have faulted Kleist for interrupting his tale of justice with a seemingly misplaced gypsy, this fantastic intrusion actually expresses the disorientation felt by the Kohlhaas family. Against

⁵⁹ Heinrich von Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," In *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, vol 2. Rev. ed. Helmut Sembdner (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008), 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

the backdrop of shifting religious attitudes, Kohlhaas calls reality-forming institutions into question. The existence of the gypsy, an ambiguous figure unattached to any social, legal, or religious institution, becomes just as real as the destruction of these kinds of institutions by revolutionary figures like Kohlhaas and Luther. Ultimately, family remains the stable point when these power structures are challenged.

Kleist draws attention early on to the motifs of names, titles, and heredity which, I will argue, characterize the Kohlhaas family's struggle to flourish in a society which only favors noble families. Kohlhaas does not share his father's occupation and has somehow secured a piece of land in a place "das noch von ihm den Namen führt."⁶¹ Kohlhaas has, perhaps, secured land which formerly did not belong to his family, land which will bear the family's name after the horse dealer's death. The Kohlhaas name's survival is further insured by the children Kohlhaas raises "in der Furcht Gottes, zur Arbeitsamkeit und Treue." The family has already achieved a modest ascension through Kohlhaas's own *Arbeitsamkeit*.

With *Michael Kohlhaas*, Kleist presents a revolutionary whose actions fail to significantly alter society but succeed in elevating his family's position within that society. By the end of the novella, the Kohlhaas children have lost both of their parents but have been guaranteed positions of power by the elector of Brandenburg.⁶² The family's survival through time, rather than as an intact unit, is the goal. Kleist's hero, introduced as both a just and unjust man, is perhaps less than a hero. Here is a revolutionary whose revolution changes little and a devoted father whose rashness causes his children to become orphans.

⁶¹ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 103.

Complicating the tale of failed revolution and successful family ascendancy are fantastic intrusions on reality, most notable among them an old woman bearing a prophecy sealed inside a capsule and a strange resemblance to Kohlhaas's dead wife. Though these elements are typical of Todorov's fantastic genre, they are better understood in comparison to similarly employed and similarly incomprehensible elements in the story. Kohlhaas's horses, for example, inspire revenge and revolution when they are undernourished in the care of Wenzel von Tronka, but the extent of the animals' significance has long puzzled critics. Koelb's "Incorporating the Text" describes the story's carriers of significance as a succession of documents beginning with the missing Paßschein and the horses put up as collateral against it and ending with the ingested prophecy. Koelb makes a strong case for the eating of the prophecy as a literal enactment of Christian rhetoric.⁶³ Like *Der Findling* and *Die heilige Cäcilie*, *Michael Kohlhaas* pits a family against a social reality strongly influenced by religious institutions, and indeed the horse dealer applies (in a strangely literal way) a distinctly Lutheran logic to his dealings.

Kohlhaas's world is structured by a rigid social hierarchy which grants a Junker's family privileges unavailable to that of a horse dealer. The heritability of privilege and rank within this system underscores the supreme importance of family for the people living under it. The modest Kohlhaas family cannot turn to highly ranked relatives for legal help, let alone invoke any special legal privileges which they themselves have inherited. The condition of the horses is not the only problem which Kohlhaas seeks to correct. Beyond the horses lies the issue of the Kohlhaas family's rights. Kohlhaas's reaction to the mistreatment of his horses may seem out of proportion, but his actions result in the ennobling of his sons and the guarantee that no Kohlhaas

⁶³ Clayton Koelb, "Incorporating the Text: Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas,'" *PMLA* 105 no. 5 (1990). Accessed September 4, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462737>.

will suffer the same indignity of confiscated horses. Kohlhaas's solution illuminates the real problem at hand. Kohlhaas's solution does not result in lasting changes to any social hierarchy (not every horse dealer's son becomes a squire at the end of the novella), nor does it improve his position as an individual. The revolutionary Kohlhaas pays for his sons' reversals of fortune with his life, ironically invoking the heritability of privilege which organizes his society. The privileges of the nobility are transferred to the Kohlhaas boys upon their father's death, mirroring the process by which generations of Tronkas received their fortunes.

Blood and family are the organizing principles of this world, but the outcome for Kohlhaas's family also represents an aberration in the way these principles structure society. The anomalous inheritance passed down by Kohlhaas can perhaps be better explained in terms of the novella's religious context. Lutheranism is vital to Kleist's *alte Chronik* and the structure of Kohlhaas's world. Under the new religious principles set forth by Martin Luther, Kohlhaas can be his own religious authority, deciding for himself how he should interpret the Bible and worship God. Luther emphasizes in "An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung" that every Christian is himself a priest. Luther's tract undermines the spiritual and worldly authority of the Church while acknowledging the power that even a peasant like Kohlhaas wields. The Pope could just as easily be a true or a false Christian, just as it is possible that "ein geringer Mensch das rechte Verständnis habe."⁶⁴ According to Luther, God can speak through anyone. The Reformer asks, "Wer sollte der Christenheit helfen, so der Papst irret, wo nicht einem andern, der die Schrift für sich hätte, mehr

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, *An den Christlichen Adel Deutscher Nation von des Christlichen Standes Besserung*, ed. Karl Benrath (Halle: Verein für Reformationgeschichte, 1884): 12. Accessed March 17, 2015 <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x030492088>.

als ihm geglaubt würde?“⁶⁵ The historical Luther believed that access to Scripture could transform any ordinary Christian into a spiritual authority to rival the Pope.

Kohlhaas takes Luther’s message to heart and couches his rebellion in religious language. Luther has given Kohlhaas personal access to the divine through a text, the Bible. Kohlhaas, no theologian, has come to believe in a divinity behind words, a belief that becomes significant in light of the novella’s many legal documents and edicts and the central written prophecy. Kohlhaas carries out a secular rebellion that seems to follow logically from Luther’s theology, but Kleist’s Luther, disrupter of a centuries-old ecclesiastic hierarchy, does not yet realize what implications his teaching could have on social hierarchies.

After Kohlhaas and his men threaten the city of Leipzig, Luther intervenes, hoping that “durch die Kraft beschwichtigender Worte, von dem Ansehn, das ihm seine Stellung in der Welt gab,” he can convince Kohlhaas “in den Damm der menschlichen Ordnung zurückzudrücken.”⁶⁶ This Luther may be a spiritual authority, but he is also heavily invested in the worldly order that has given him power. The spiritual rebel reminds the horse dealer that Tronka “deinen Namen nicht kennt,” meaning he can tell God in good faith that “diesem Mann, Herr, tat ich kein Unrecht, denn sein Dasein ist meiner Seele fremd.”⁶⁷ Kohlhaas has no legal recourse on earth, and, if Luther is correct, none in heaven. Here, knowledge of Kohlhaas’s name is equated with knowledge of his very existence. Luther protects a hierarchy in which certain names (and the families who bear them) carry more weight than others. God himself, in Luther’s view, could not blame a Tronka for failing to recognize a Kohlhaas. Luther’s thinking replicates the collective

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *An den Christlichen Adel Deutscher Nation von des Christlichen Standes Besserung*, 12.

⁶⁶ Kleist, “Michael Kohlhaas,” 42.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

thinking of a political and social order which grants certain rights to certain family names. The name of a family acts as a carrier of significance at the level of social institutions. Before the law, the name Kohlhaas signifies less worth than the name Tronka. Kleist's Luther firmly believes that this hierarchy of names exists in heaven as well, adding a spiritual dimension to Kohlhaas's struggle for family recognition.

The reformer who imagines and promotes spirituality without the apparatus of the Church cannot imagine justice without the apparatus of nobility. Tronka may claim before God that Kohlhaas is no one to him, but Kohlhaas, in Luther's mind, may not claim that he sought justice. Luther undermines the authority that his own doctrine has given Kohlhaas, writing "ein Rebell bist du und kein Krieger des gerechten Gottes, und dein Ziel auf Erden ist Rad und Galgen, und jenseits die Verdammnis, die über die Missetat und die Gottlosigkeit verhängt ist."⁶⁸ Luther's words equate rebellion on earth with rebellion against heavenly order. A rebel cannot be a "warrior of a just God," just as eternal damnation must follow his execution at the hands of men. Luther closes the letter with a final equation of misdeed with godlessness. Kleist's Luther does not represent a spiritual doctrine which transcends earthly reality but rather embodies the union of social and religious structures which serves the interests of a hierarchy by denying justice to those at the bottom. In December of 1534, the historical Luther wrote to Hans Kohlhase imploring him to choose peace rather than violently pursue justice,⁶⁹ a response more befitting of a reformer who believed that ordinary Christians could rival the Pope in faith and goodness.

⁶⁸ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 43.

⁶⁹ Martin Luther, *Die Briefe*, ed. Kurt Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 242-243, accessed .March 17, 2015, Google Books.

The historical Luther's message finds echo not only in Kohlhaas's revolutionary language but in the horse dealer's ultimate goal. Luther's concern with family life extended beyond his aversion to a celibate priesthood. The fourteenth point of "Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen" asks Christians to contemplate family structure in order to better understand their faith.⁷⁰ Luther explains that God made the first birth special for animals and humans alike. The firstborn has traditionally been granted privileges of "Herrschaft und Priesterschaft." The authority of the firstborn over his siblings in secular and spiritual matters, and Jesus, firstborn of God and the Virgin is "ein König und ein Priester, aber geistlich." Christ's power can be understood in terms of birth order. Luther's fifteenth point, however, presents a family structure subverted for a higher purpose: "So wie nun Christus die Erstgeburt mit ihrer Ehre und Würde besitzt, teilt er sie auch mit all seinen Christen, dass sie durch den Glauben auch alle mit Christus Könige und Priester sein müssen."⁷¹ Each and every Christian shares the spiritual privileges of a firstborn. For Luther, family is a point where an earthly structure like family breaks down in the face of a higher truth. Kohlhaas's campaign to secure power and longevity for his family does not reflect a purely spiritual goal, but follows the logic of Luther's teachings. Luther writes that the spiritual authority of a Christian requires that "der Leib unterdrückt wird" and that "auch der Tod und Leiden mir zur Seligkeit dienen und nützlich sein müssen." Kohlhaas's rebellion puts his life in jeopardy, but as Luther writes, death and suffering lend themselves to higher purposes. Kohlhaas secures everlasting life for his family line through his own suffering and death.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther, *Von Der Freiheit Eines Christenmenschen*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974), 170.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

Luther's transformation in Kleist's hands into a stern advocate for the nobility contradicts the novella's claim to come "aus einer alten Chronik," but this is not the only liberty Kleist takes with the historical events behind the novella. The sixteenth century avenger who inspired Kleist was named *Hans Kohlhas*. The changed first name and altered spelling of the last name bring to mind the title of *Das Erdbeben in Chili*. Though that story is set in a country resembling Chile, Kleist's misspelling seems to indicate a deliberate separation of a fictional place from its real-world counterpart. The Kohlhas of actual old chronicles becomes the Kohlhaas of Kleist's invented history, emphasizing the power of even the slightest manipulation to alter reality, or at least call reality into question. The new name "Michael" is in itself a carrier of significance. Kohlhaas offers one possible meaning. During the burning of Leipzig, he declares himself "einen Statthalter Michaels, des Erzengels, der gekommen sei, an allen, die in dieser Streitsache des Junkers Partei ergreifen würden, mit Feuer und Schwert die Arglis, in welcher die ganze Welt versunken sei, zu bestreifen."⁷² Though Luther later reminds Kohlhaas how little his name matters to Tronka, Michael is certainly a name known to God, and the horse dealer's emphasis of this name shows a shrewd understanding of the power and privilege a name can bestow. Failed by his surname, Kohlhaas turns to his first name, invoking its divinity to gain earthly support.

The rains that save Leipzig from destruction perhaps contradict Kohlhaas's claim to be a divine emissary, but the horse dealer's identification with the archangel is noteworthy. Kohlhaas's complaint has to do with a secular matter of justice, but in seeking justice Kohlhaas has turned to the logic and language of his religion. In a turn that brings to mind *Der Findling*, Kohlhaas sees the shared name as evidence of an affinity. The German word "Statthalter" is used to describe a governor, an official appointed to represent the interests of a ruling body, but the

⁷² Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 41.

two parts of this compound word suggest more generally a place holder. Kohlhaas, by his own admission, appears in Michael's stead.

Kohlhaas's own name functions as a carrier of significance. The horse dealer cannot know for certain that his name confirms an affinity with the archangel, but Luther's teachings have encouraged him to seek higher truth in words and the structure of his society has taught him that certain names carry certain values. Kohlhaas's edicts invoke angels and call on "jeden guten Christen"⁷³ to take up arms against the "Feind aller Christen" Junker von Tronka. Kohlhaas accesses other carriers of significance in order to ennoble his surname. The horses become a catalyst for the quest, but, perhaps more importantly, so does a prophecy. Like Kohlhaas's given name, these carriers of significance are used by Kohlhaas to cement his family's prominence in ways that echo the logic of ennoblement while subverting social and religious order.

Aristocratic families prove their status through words and documents. Family names and historical records of ancestors as well as documents proving possession of land and capital confirm the status of an aristocratic family. Kohlhaas works outside this system to ensure a better life for his sons, but the ascent of his family is legitimized by documents like any other noble family. The prophecy enters the novella when the Elector of Saxony humors a friend with a visit to the "wunderlicher Mann."⁷⁴ Kohlhaas is found feeding milk and rolls to his sick child, a simple gesture which emphasizes the horse dealer's investment in family survival. The narrator makes no mention of the prophecy until the characters ask Kohlhaas about the "kleine bleierne Kapsel" he wears on a thread around his neck. The prophecy is thus introduced not by Kohlhaas the notorious criminal but by a father nursing his child back to health. By this point in the

⁷³ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 36.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

novella, Kohlhaas has ended his revolutionary activities and sworn off the band of rebels now under another man's leadership. The father wishes "mit seinen fünf Kindern nach Hamburg zu gehen, und sich von dort nach der Levante oder nach Ostindien, oder so weit der Himmel über andere Menschen, als die er kannte, blau war, einzuschiffen."⁷⁵ The horses' nourishment has ceased to be a priority, but Kohlhaas would gladly set sail for a strange land where he can nourish his family away from the world as he knows it. The exotic locations Kohlhaas has in mind are far outside the grasp of the institutions which shape life in Saxony and Brandenburg, suggesting a strong belief that the family could flourish outside of these structures.

Fortunately for Kohlhaas, an anomaly in the fixed order of his society creates a more secure place for his family within it. Kohlhaas introduces his visitors to both the gypsy and the prophecies long maligned by critics for disrupting Kleist's tale of justice. The fortuneteller's appearance may be the strangest turn the novella takes, but without her appearance Kohlhaas's triumph over the Saxon elector would be impossible. The presence of a gypsy fortuneteller is a seemingly strange development for a fictional world in which order hinges on mundane matters like Paßscheine, and Kleist subtly emphasizes her reality-disrupting power by allowing Kohlhaas to introduce her both to his guests and to the reader. Despite her strangeness, the gypsy bearing prophecies belongs very much to this fictional world where documentation matters.

The old woman's appearance is fantastic, but not exactly along Todorov's lines. She shows affinities with Kohlhaas in her resemblance to his dead wife and affection for his children⁷⁶ as well as to the reality of the social order that Kohlhaas challenges. The old woman

⁷⁵ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

has access to the fate of the Saxon elector's house⁷⁷ and ultimately her prediction about the end of that family line becomes the document which indirectly transfers power and privilege to the Kohlhaas family. Straddling the small world of the horse dealer's family and the document-obsessed world governed by Electors, the old woman embodies Kleist's ambiguous positioning of the family within collectively accepted reality.

From Kohlhaas, the Elector and the reader learn that the encounter with the gypsy occurred in Jüterbock "genau am Tage nach dem Begräbnis meiner Frau"⁷⁸ and that Kohlhaas witnessed the Electors of Saxony and Brandenburg speaking with the strange old woman. The old woman, according to Kohlhaas, found him in the crowd to give him the capsule, calling to him: "ein Amulett, Kohlhaas, der Roßhändler; verwahr es wohl, es wird dir dereinst das Leben retten!"⁷⁹ Part of Kohlhaas's account is later confirmed when the event is described from the Saxon elector's perspective,⁸⁰ but only Kohlhaas gives the details that make the fortuneteller more than a thorn in the side of his noble rival.

The significance of the meeting seems to come from its occurrence the day after Lisbeth's burial, the detail which Kohlhaas gives before all others. The old woman's affinity with the family hints at supernatural intervention but her appearance follows the logic of her fictional world. Margarete Landwehr interprets the old woman as an embodiment of the novella's transgressed boundaries, particularly in the way her appearance interrupts the narrative

⁷⁷ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 92.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

and calls the narrator's credibility into question.⁸¹ Landwehr asserts that the gypsy does not merely transgress a boundary between natural and supernatural worlds but that she points to the limited ability of law and language to draw meaningful distinctions.⁸² The gypsy, like Kohlhaas, the prophecies, the horses, and the word of God, carries a significance that eludes discovery.

The law's failure is exemplified by a tendency to favor the powerful and ignore distinctions among commoners. Kohlhaas declares himself an outcast to Luther, explaining "Verstoßen...nenne ich den, dem der Schutz der Gesetze versagt ist!"⁸³ This denial of legal protection goes hand in hand with the indistinguishability of the peasants as perceived by the nobility. The Saxon elector's account of the meeting at the Jahrmart differs significantly from Kohlhaas's. Interestingly, Kohlhaas witnesses the gypsy throughout his entire encounter, but the Saxon elector loses sight of her when "mischt sie sich, ohne daß ich weiter bemerken könnte, was sie tut, unter den Haufen des uns umringenden Volks."⁸⁴ This description of the gypsy echoes her movements throughout the rest of the story. The gypsy slips irretrievably from the elector's grasp and into Kohlhaas's sphere, before her final message to Kohlhaas is lost in a crowd. The image of the woman disappearing is an image of lost boundaries and failure of recognition. Like Tronka on Judgment Day, the elector has difficulty distinguishing this lowly person from any other face in the crowd. The gypsy appears to the Saxon elector just long enough to make him understand how much he needs the prophecy and fades out of his grasp and

⁸¹ Margarete Landwehr, "The Mysterious Gypsy in Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas: The Disintegration of Legal and Linguistic Boundaries,'" *Monatshefte* 84, no. 4 (1992): 438, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30153212>.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 441.

⁸³ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 45.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

into Kohlhaas's. The gypsy shares an affinity with Kohlhaas, who can also elude the notice of the nobility while threatening their power. For the elector, the gypsy is an uncanny figure. Her apparent lack of name and status make her an almost ghostly figure, so low in status as to be impossible to locate. In a world based on names, rankings, and laws, the most uncanny carrier of significance is a nameless vagrant who creates authoritative documents on her own.

Kleist reintroduces the old woman into *Michael Kohlhaas* through the Saxon elector's attempted sleight of hand. The Kämmerer tasked with obtaining the prophecies from Kohlhaas decides to trick the horse dealer by finding a double for the woman who gave him the mysterious capsule, "in der Voraussetzung, der Kohlhaas werde sich die Züge derjenigen, die ihm in einer flüchtigen Erscheinung den Zettel überreicht hatte, nicht eben tief eingepägt haben."⁸⁵ The plan relies on Kohlhaas's inability to distinguish one old woman from another. The chamberlain hopes "bei Kohlhaas, wenn es sich tun ließe, die Rolle, als ob sie die Zigeunerin wäre, spielen zu lassen." The chamberlain's belief in his plan hinges on a callous belief that any old peddler can be exchanged for another and prioritizes the *role* of the old woman above her identity. As the Piachi family demonstrates, the business of doubling and replacing human beings is dangerous and seldom goes as planned. The chamberlain's plan fails when the old woman's identity proves less malleable than he believed and the gypsy reasserts her existence. The narrator explains:

Wie denn die Wahrscheinlichkeit nicht immer auf Seiten der Wahrheit ist, so traf es sich, daß hier etwas geschehen war, das wir zwar berichten: die Freiheit aber, daran zu zweifeln, demjenigen, dem es wohlgefällt, zugestehen müssen: der Kämmerer hatte den ungeheuersten Mißgriff begangen, und in dem alten Trödelweib, das er in den Straßen von Berlin aufgriff, um die Zigeunerin nachzuahmen, die geheimnisreiche Zigeunerin selbst getroffen, die er nachgeahmt wissen wollte.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," 95.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

The coincidental rediscovery of the same woman takes the story into the realm of the conventionally uncanny, but her detachment from any social, legal, or religious order is the true source of her unsettling nature. The character's reappearance at just the right moment seems unbelievable, but at the same time the re-entry of such an implausible character into the story actually seems to ground her in the reality of the characters. Despite her namelessness and detachment from the institutions of this world, she exists. Kohlhaas is indeed greeted with a double, but, unfortunately for the elector, a double of Lisbeth. The horse dealer notices first that the woman must be the same one he encountered months before because of her jewelry, a coral necklace and a seal ring.⁸⁷ The gypsy's first action is to lovingly stroke the cheeks of Kohlhaas's children and confirm her identity as the one and only fortuneteller from the Jahrmarkt, but this time Kohlhaas notices something remarkable, "eine sonderbare Ähnlichkeit zwischen ihr und seinem verstorbenen Weibe Lisbeth."⁸⁸ This physical resemblance is noted for the first time when the old woman visits the "ritterliches Gefängnis" where Kohlhaas is imprisoned and his children live "so bequem als es sich tun ließ."⁸⁹ Here in this well-appointed Berlin prison, the Kohlhaas children receive their first glimpse of the privilege offered by the Brandenburg elite. The old woman enters at a moment of crisis, for Kohlhaas's fate still hangs in the balance, but the father has already begun securing special allowances for his children.

Kohlhaas has begun his family's transgression across boundaries of caste and wealth, and at the same time the old woman appears to cross a boundary into the family itself, filling the vacant motherly role. The Kämmerer's cynical assignment of any old woman to the role of this

⁸⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 94.

very particular woman failed, but in the bosom of the Kohlhaas family, transformations are possible. Where the elector and his associates see a face disappearing into a crowd, Kohlhaas sees the face of Lisbeth so clearly

...daß er sie hätte fragen können, ob sie ihre Großmutter sei: denn nicht nur, daß die Züge ihres Gesichts, ihre Hände, auch in ihrem knöchernen Bau noch schön, und besonders der Gebrauch, den sie davon im Reden machte, ihn aufs lebhafteste an sie erinnerten: auch ein Mal, womit seiner Frauen Hals bezeichnet war, bemerkte er an dem ihrigen.⁹⁰

The old woman is not Lisbeth, but she is not *not* Lisbeth, either. Her advice to Kohlhaas is the advice of a mother. When Kohlhaas assures her that he will not give up the prophecies “um die Welt,” she corrects him: “nicht um die Welt, Kohlhaas, der Roßhändler; aber um diesen hübschen, kleinen, blonden Jungen!”⁹¹ Her words draw a distinction between the wider world and the small world of the family at the end of a novella about a man carving a place for his family within the order of the world. The children represent a higher purpose to Kohlhaas than his own life. The old woman’s visit strengthens Kohlhaas’s resolve to hold onto the prophecies for the sake of his descendants, even if this means death. The task Kohlhaas completes upon his death brings the world at large in line with the world of the Kohlhaas family. The family earns a place in chronicles while the elector’s disappears,⁹² echoing the story’s motif of role-filling and replacement.

Kohlhaas lives to cross barriers. The Brandenburger with business in Saxony makes his home on water, a medium as likely to obstruct as it is to conduct. The carriers of significance found throughout *Michael Kohlhaas* function similarly, helping or hindering Kohlhaas as he

⁹⁰ Kleist, “Michael Kohlhaas,” 96.

⁹¹ Ibid., 97.

⁹² Ibid., 103.

chooses. The horse dealer sees these carriers as ways forward where others might see boundaries, and in this way pieces of socially and religiously constructed reality are subverted to ensure family survival. Ambiguity and loss of boundaries are essential because Kohlhaas exploits these points of uncertainty to advance his family's interests. The horses become burdens to Junker von Tronka rather than signs of his power over Kohlhaas. The name "Michael Kohlhaas" becomes a sign of righteousness when it could have been a marker of low birth. Like a good Lutheran, Kohlhaas turns mysterious bearers of meaning into instruments of his family's salvation. The old woman, any supernatural connection to Lisbeth aside, becomes a mother figure to both Kohlhaas and his children when she offers to ensure the continued life of the family. The father's paradoxical destruction and preservation of his family in one act of sacrifice demonstrates the dual nature of family for Kleist.

Conclusion

The carriers of significance which accompany Kleist's families in crisis arise along disintegrating boundaries. The presence of Doppelgänger in both *Der Findling* and *Michael Kohlhaas* is no accident. The uncertain boundary between Colino and Nicolo symbolized by the anagram points to the inadequacy of the law to define love and family. Both Colino, the dead would-be lover, and Nicolo, the adopted son, serve to undermine the virginal Elvire's legal designations as wife and mother. The pair's blurring of the line between living and dead, natural and supernatural is less significant and bears fewer disturbing implications than the pair's disruption of legally designated family roles. Similarly, the brothers of *Die heilige Cäcilie*, whose madness so resembles monastic life, call into question both the divides between madness and piousness, between natural and religious families, and even between human minds and higher truth. The accepted boundaries distinguishing subjects and objects within the universe might be both arbitrarily drawn and damaging to our perception of the truth beneath them.

The source of the uncanny in these works is the suggestion that institutions and roles which structure social reality might not have any relationship to reality at all. The grotesque but legally acceptable family structure of *Der Findling* disturbs in a way that *Michael Kohlhaas* cannot, but the gypsy and her prophecies share the anagram's ability to call into question the legal procedures which shape daily life. The legalistic, orderly Lutheranism which serves the nobility in *Kohlhaas* echoes the bizarre forms of religion seen in *Der Findling* and *Die heilige Cäcilie* in its disinterest in the spiritual and secular needs of a family.

For the characters of *Der Findling*, *Die heilige Cäcilie*, and *Michael Kohlhaas*, family defines reality. Todorov's hesitation between the natural and the supernatural becomes less

relevant than the matter of individual disorientation within collective constructions of reality. Kleist's families contend, not always successfully, with legal systems and social mores which do not recognize the power of blood ties. In Kleist's fiction, competing structures of reality imitate the family, none more so than religion. In *Der Findling*, a corrupt Carmelite order has usurped the family as an institution built on loving relationships. The failed family of *Die heilige Cäcilie* reunites, in a spiritual sense, when the mother sacrifices her secular life to adopt the monasticism of her sons, a change which prevents the continuation of the blood family but draws the mother and her sons back into one spiritual family. *Michael Kohlhaas* presents a father who applies the logic of Lutheran theology to his struggle for the social and political rights of his family. Religion plays a crucial role in each of these negotiations of family life and survival, providing in *Der Findling* and *Die heilige Cäcilie* alternative solutions to family relationships and in *Michael Kohlhaas* an alternative means of securing family status and privilege. While family and religion remain distinctly separate institutions in these works, their similarities highlight the almost spiritual significance Kleist gives to kinship.

For Kleist, family is the institution most deeply rooted in reality, a fact demonstrated by the carriers of significance which perplex his characters and readers. Nicolo's anagram mocks the legal documents that make him Antonio's son and highlight the uncomfortable reality of Elvire's attraction to her legal son. Where social structures have subverted the family, reality appears to reassert itself through carriers of significance. Kohlhaas's challenge to the institutions which shape his reality results in the collapse of this reality and the appearance, seemingly out of thin air, of a document securing wealth and status for his sons. When falsely constructed realities are challenged, truth reasserts itself to correct errors in family structure. The brothers' miracle cannot be undone, so their mother rejoins them spiritually. Despite the family's position as a

fixed point of reality, Kleist's fictional families are prone to tragedy. None of the families examined here really survives. The fathers of the Piachi and Kohlhaas families go willingly to their deaths, in Piachi's case to pursue his son's impostor in hell and in Kohlhaas's to ensure the ennobling of his sons. The mother of the mad brothers has no choice but to sacrifice her worldly existence to become her sons' sister in religious devotion. Kleist's vision of family tragedy as a means of family survival echoes the child sacrifice of *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. In that early work, the family's legitimate heirs die to reconcile their fathers. Through their inadvertent sacrifice, Rupert and Sylvester recognize the danger of the inheritance contract. In later works, Kleist's families in crisis are saved in some sense by parental sacrifice, a bleak vision of family life that paradoxically requires the destruction of the family in one sense to ensure its survival in another. If family lies at the center of reality for Kleist, then so does loss.

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