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When Men Give Birth: Ambiguities of Gender Roles in Kleist's Works

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Abstract

This article examines Heinrich von Kleist's sustained destabilization of conventional gender roles, showing how his works repeatedly uncouple masculinity and femininity from biological sex. Female figures such as Käthchen, Lisbeth, Penthesilea, and Thusnelda assume forms of rational, heroic, or excessively violent agency, while male figures falter, display emotional vulnerability, or perform behaviors traditionally coded as feminine. At the same time, Kleist's fathers reveal the fragility of paternal identity through emotional absence, cruelty, and the exchangeability of sons. Against this backdrop, the article develops a new reading of Kleist's metaphor of "male birth" as it appears in Das Erdbeben in Chile, Der Findling, and Die heilige Cäcilie. These works depict men—and male-led institutions—forming maternal-like bonds to children through acts structurally analogous to childbirth. The metaphor allows Kleist to reconfigure kinship and expose gender as unstable, performative, and permeable, in keeping with his broader skepticism toward fixed truths.

1. INTRODUCTION

Heinrich von Kleist repeatedly depicts deeply disturbed relationships within the family and, more broadly, between men and women. *Käthchen von Heilbronn, Die Familie Schroffenstein, Das Erdbeben in Chile, Der Findling,* and *Die heilige Cäcilie* each stage forms of familial or inter-gender behavior that appear strange, excessive, or morally troubling. Kleist's female characters frequently act in ways traditionally coded as masculine—rational, courageous, or violently assertive—while his male figures often behave in ways more typically associated with feminine care or emotional responsiveness. One interpretive thread that helps illuminate these reversals is the metaphor of birth, which Kleist repeatedly invokes both explicitly and obliquely.

Fathers in Kleist often maintain relationships with their children that are marked by emotional distance, inconsistency, or outright cruelty. Some send their sons into dangerous situations with little concern for their welfare; others kill their children—accidentally or deliberately—without any sustained expression of paternal affection. Male characters also behave strangely toward women: they may exploit them, neglect them, or act in ways that contradict the idealized image of the honorable protector. These depictions point to a recurring instability within the masculine role itself.

At the same time, Kleist's works feature male figures who exhibit traits associated with traditional femininity. Graf von Strahl, for example, stands helpless before the burning castle, confused and incapable of decisive action, while Käthchen intervenes with clarity and courage (Kleist, 1987). Such moments suggest not a simple inversion of gender norms but a more

complex fluidity. Gendered behavior in these texts is not anchored in the body; it emerges as a set of performative scripts that characters may fail or refuse to inhabit.

This permeability permits what I argue is one of Kleist's more radical narrative gestures: the metaphorical "birth" of children by men. In several works, male figures come to love and claim children through acts that structurally resemble childbirth—risking their lives, shedding blood, or undergoing transformative emotional trials. Don Fernando and Piachi, for example, experience intense, maternal-like attachments to children they save, while in *Die heilige Cäcilie*, the church fathers function as agents of spiritual rebirth (Kleist, 1987). These moments demonstrate that, in Kleist's narrative universe, gendered capacities are not fixed properties, but contingent performances shaped by circumstance, danger, and emotional vulnerability.

Conversely, Kleist's female figures also transgress conventional norms. Some act with rational clarity; others wield destructive violence. Their behaviors underscore that femininity, too, is permeable and unstable. Kleist's literature thus repeatedly troubles any neat division between masculine and feminine spheres, revealing a world in which gendered identities are fluid, provisional, and often contradictory.

Throughout this article, references to gender as "performative" are meant to capture the sense in which masculine and feminine roles in Kleist's works emerge through action rather than through any stable essence tied to the body. In this respect, the argument runs parallel to later accounts of gender as enacted rather than given, most prominently associated with Judith Butler. At the same time, Kleist's texts tend to emphasize not the stabilization of gender through repetition but its vulnerability to disruption—moments when roles falter, collapse, or are taken up only temporarily. Seen from this angle, Kleist repeatedly draws attention to the fragility of gendered behavior itself, revealing it as contingent on circumstance, danger, and emotional strain rather than as a coherent or enduring identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical approaches to Heinrich von Kleist have consistently stressed instability—as an epistemological, ethical, and social condition—particularly within structures of family and authority. Influential studies by Anthony Stephens (1988; 1999) show that paternal power in Kleist is not grounded in affective kinship but must be continually enforced through coercion and sacrifice, rendering fatherhood a fragile symbolic role. Gender-oriented readings, most notably Ruth Klüger's (1993), interpret Kleist's female figures as projections of male desire and anxiety, while formal accounts by Dyer (1981) emphasize paradox and affective extremity as structural principles. Ethical readings by Fischer (1988) and Schulte (1988) focus on misrecognition and mediation, and Ellis (1979) situates adoption within patterns of loss and substitution. Building on this scholarship, the present article shifts attention to the metaphor of male birth, arguing that Kleist reconfigures kinship and gender as performative, contingent, and experientially produced rather than biologically fixed.

Strong Women and the Collapse of Masculine Performance

Kleist frequently presents women who exceed the expectations of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century femininity. The effect is not simply to invert a gender hierarchy but to show how that hierarchy depends on fragile performances. Again and again, his female figures step into roles conventionally reserved for men—leadership, rational judgment, physical courage, or even brutal violence—precisely at moments when male figures fail to embody the ideals associated with masculinity. These scenes do not affirm women as essentially stronger; rather, they expose the performative instability of the masculine role itself. In Kleist, gender is less a stable identity than a script that can be misperformed, abandoned, or momentarily appropriated by others.

At the same time, these strong women are not uniformly heroic in the moral sense. Kleist allows them to occupy both positive and troubling forms of agency. Their rational interventions can

prevent catastrophe, but their violent capacities can also unleash destruction. The ambiguity is significant: Kleist neither romanticizes nor demonizes female agency. Instead, he treats it as a structural pressure on gender categories themselves, revealing how easily the boundaries between masculine and feminine collapse.

In *Käthchen von Heilbronn*, the gender hierarchy dramatically falters when Graf von Strahl fails the test of decisive action. Strahl's instinctive response to danger—calling for shield and lance—reveals both his training and his limitations. The tools he invokes are emblems of knightly masculinity, yet they are useless in the face of a burning building. The moment exposes a gap between the symbolic performance of masculinity and the practical demands of the situation.

Käthchen, by contrast, recognizes what must actually be done. She enters the burning house without hesitation, displaying the calm assessment and decisive courage conventionally associated with male heroism. As Klüger observes, she appears "holding the props of lordly masculinity," resembling not a frightened girl but a confident squire (Klüger, 1993, p. 109). Strahl, meanwhile, clumsily attempts to climb a ladder that is too long. His gestures parody the heroic role even as Käthchen fulfills it.

The scene does not masculinize Käthchen in any essential sense. Rather, it reveals that gendered authority depends on situational competence rather than on biological sex. Käthchen is able to act because the script of masculinity is available to her in that moment, and because Strahl's own performance of it collapses. The instability is crucial: masculinity, in Kleist, is not a stable identity secured by anatomy but a role one may fail to inhabit.

A similar dynamic emerges in *Michael Kohlhaas*. When Kohlhaas becomes paralyzed by the injustice committed against him—unable either to accept the wrong or to seek redress legally—Lisbeth assumes the role of rational actor. Her intervention is not framed as defiance but as necessity. She undertakes the mission to petition the Elector because Kohlhaas himself cannot move beyond his wounded sense of honor. He grants permission but remains at home, immobilized by the very autocratic certainty he displays elsewhere.

Lisbeth's attempt to resolve the crisis ends in her death, underscoring the high stakes of acting rationally in a world structured by male pride and political rigidity. As Klüger notes, "Michael Kohlhaas … stays at home with his hands folded in his lap" (Klüger, 1993, p. 105).

Once again, Kleist does not simply invert the gender binary. Lisbeth's action is not portrayed as masculine; rather, her rationality exposes the fragility of Kohlhaas's masculine self-conception. Masculinity is revealed as a posture that can break under the pressure of injury, uncertainty, or wounded honor. Lisbeth's intervention reveals the contingency of the role her husband believes himself destined to play.

Kleist also imagines women who transgress boundaries in the opposite direction—not by assuming rational control but by embodying forms of violence typically coded as masculine. Penthesilea's brutal killing of Achilles and Thusnelda's execution of Ventidius exceed contemporary understandings of feminine weakness. These women do not merely adopt male behaviors; they stretch the category of femininity beyond recognition.

Klüger's suggestion that such figures may operate as projections of male anxieties illuminates the psychological dimension of these characters: Käthchen becomes the wish-dream, Penthesilea the nightmare of castration anxiety (Klüger, 1993, p. 106). Whether one interprets these depictions psychologically or structurally, the effect is consistent: these women unsettle the symbolic order.

Their actions do not simply place them within the masculine sphere; instead, they erode the very conditions that make the masculine and feminine spheres intelligible. Their violence is excessive, overflowing the categories meant to contain it. What emerges is a landscape in which gender boundaries are permeable, momentarily recognizable but never secure. Kleist's women do not invert gender norms; they destabilize the framework that produces them.

Kleist's Strange Fathers

If Kleist's women often exceed or disrupt the expectations of traditional femininity, his fathers frequently fail to embody even the minimal emotional or ethical commitments associated with paternal authority. Their behavior exposes an instability at the core of fatherhood itself. Sons appear exchangeable, expendable, or peripheral to the preservation of paternal power. Many of Kleist's fathers maintain relationships with their children marked by emotional coldness, inconsistency, or even brutality. The cumulative effect is not simply the portrayal of bad fathers but a sustained interrogation of fatherhood as a symbolic role—one dependent on recognition, control, and performance rather than on natural affection or biological bond.

Kleist's narratives present fathers who either deny their children emotional care or treat them as instruments within political or familial conflicts. The absence of paternal feeling becomes not an exception but a recurring structural feature. The fathers' actions suggest that patriarchal authority must be continually enacted and reaffirmed because it lacks any inherent grounding in biological paternity. When this authority is threatened, strained, or questioned, violence often emerges as its last available stabilizing force (Stephens, 1999, p. 237; Stephens, 1988, p. 31).

In *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, the Elector's relationship to the Prince—who is not his biological son yet is treated symbolically as one—reveals the conditional nature of paternal love within Kleist's political imagination. The Elector's mercy is contingent upon Friedrich's renewed submission to patriarchal order. The Prince's pleas for clemency have no effect until he accepts the legitimacy of the sentence against him. Only then does the Elector bestow forgiveness and restore the paternal bond.

This dynamic exposes paternal authority as a regulatory mechanism rather than an emotional bond. "Fatherly love" in this context is granted only upon the successful performance of obedience. In other words, kinship is produced through hierarchy, not affection (Stephens, 1999, p. 237). Anthony Stephens's argument that sacrifice in Kleist functions to reinforce paternal power is particularly illuminating here: cruelty becomes pedagogical, and violence or its threat sustains order (Stephens, 1988, p. 31).

In *Die Hermannsschlacht*, paternal coldness is even more pronounced. Hermann sends his sons Reinhold and Adelhart on a mission that clearly endangers their lives, treating them as pieces in a strategic calculus rather than as individuals for whom he feels affection. His confidence that the mission will ultimately benefit him, regardless of his sons' fate, reveals an unsettling detachment from paternal responsibility. The emotional costs of such decisions are never acknowledged; what matters is the preservation of authority and the success of political stratagem (Kleist, 1987).

In *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, a father kills his own children in the darkness of a cave, failing to recognize them. The scene dramatizes a double blindness—literal and emotional. The fathers' inability to perceive their children parallels their broader lack of insight and paternal feeling. It is the blind Sylvius who "sees" the truth, announcing that "that is not Agnes," and it is the mother who recognizes the mistaken identity (Kleist, 1987, p. 149). Their insight arises not from sight but from emotional attunement. The fathers must rely on empirical evidence before they grasp the truth, for they lack the affective bond that might have alerted them earlier.

In *Das Erdbeben in Chile*, Jeronimo's father kills his son publicly, driven by religious outrage and moral panic; blood proves weaker than doctrine (Kleist, 1987).

In *Der Findling*, Piachi's paternal behavior oscillates between compassion and violence. He rescues Nicolo out of pity, risking exposure to the plague, yet ultimately murders him. As Dyer notes, Kleist's figures often swing between emotional extremes (Dyer, 1981, p. 211). His early devotion to Nicolo does not prevent him from killing the boy when circumstances shift. The instability of his paternal identity underscores the fragility and contingency of masculinity as Kleist portrays it.

These examples suggest that family relationships in Kleist are often grotesque, shaped by cruelty rather than affection. Stephens observes that the very arenas traditionally associated with protective benevolence—love and kinship—become scenes of cruelty in Kleist's works

(Stephens, 1999, p. 21). This cruelty is neither incidental nor aberrant; it emerges as a structural feature of paternal authority itself. Fathers use violence to sustain roles that are internally unstable and emotionally ungrounded. What appears as paternal identity is revealed to be an elaborate performance that can collapse at any moment.

In this light, masculinity becomes not a natural state but a precarious regulatory structure, vulnerable to fracture whenever paternal authority fails or is challenged. Kleist's fathers do not simply fail to love their sons; they expose the limits of patriarchal power and the emotional void at its center.

Men Who "Give Birth"

Before turning to individual examples, it is worth clarifying what "birth" means in Kleist's metaphorical usage. In these texts, birth is neither biological reproduction nor simply a general image for creativity. Instead, it names a recognizable experiential pattern: a male figure is exposed to mortal danger or extreme suffering, passes through an extended ordeal that resembles a form of labor, and emerges affectively transformed, bound to a child with unusual intensity or exclusivity. By contrast, acts of care or adoption that involve no danger, trial, or transformation remain marginal to the metaphor and do not carry the same narrative weight as these moments of figurative birth.

Romantic discourse frequently invokes metaphors of male creation. Schlegel famously distinguishes between biological and intellectual reproduction, claiming that women give birth to children while men give birth to works of art (Schlegel, 1985, p. 108). Within this tradition, Kleist develops his own metaphor of male "pregnancy" or "birth," most notably in Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden, where he describes thinking as a form of "midwifery" (Kleist, 1987, p. 324). Knowledge, he suggests, emerges through the labor of articulation, assisted by a dialogic partner who functions like a midwife.

What Kleist adds—distinctively and radically—is the application of this birth metaphor to emotional and familial bonds. In several narratives, fathers acquire children not through biological reproduction but through acts structurally analogous to childbirth: they risk their lives, shed blood, and undergo intense trials. These moments allow Kleist to redistribute maternal affect into fatherhood, troubling the assumption that maternal attachment is uniquely grounded in the physical experience of pregnancy or labor. Male characters, through their own form of metaphorical birth, come to feel maternal-like love for children who are not biologically theirs.

In *Das Erdbeben in Chile*, Don Fernando's attachment to Philipp emerges directly from the danger he endures to protect him. During the mob's attack, Fernando fights to defend both children—his biological son Juan and the rescued infant Philipp. Juan is killed; Philipp survives. One account sees Fernando's identity ethically transformed by his act (Schulte, 1988, p. 199). Yet the specificity of his emotional response becomes clearer when read through the metaphor of birth. By risking his life and suffering trauma, Fernando undergoes an experience structurally akin to childbirth. The child he saves is the child to whom he forms the strongest attachment.

In this light, Fernando's displacement of grief over Juan by tenderness toward Philipp becomes intelligible. His tears fall not for the child he has lost but for the child he has, in a metaphorical sense, brought into being. The ending's excess—its mingling of joy and incomprehension—derives from this symbolic birth experience, crystallized in the final line that he "must rejoice" (Kleist, 1987, p. 145). Kleist reinforces the metaphor when Josephe hands both children to Fernando—"Save your two children"—a gesture that functions like conception (Kleist, 1987, p. 143). By contrast, Fischer speaks of an "ethical self-deception of the classical hero" (Fischer, 1988, pp. 30, 33), but the birth metaphor offers a different account of Fernando's paradoxical feelings.

A similar structure appears in *Der Findling*, though with greater volatility. Piachi rescues the plague-stricken Nicolo, exposing himself to infection; his biological son Paolo dies, while Nicolo survives (Kleist, 1987, p. 182). If Piachi's rescue is read as a metaphorical birth, the logic of his later attachment becomes clearer. When he lifts the unconscious boy into the wagon "in a great movement," the phrase marks both physical effort and emotional surge (Kleist, 1987, p. 183). Later, the narrator explains that he decides to adopt Nicolo "because he had come to love the boy more and more the more he had cost him" (Kleist, 1987, p. 184). Schulte denies that Piachi acquires Nicolo through a life-risking deed (Schulte, 1988, p. 199), but this view underestimates the danger of plague. Ellis likewise emphasizes the role of loss and replacement (Ellis, 1979, p. 5).

A third instance appears in *Die heilige Cäcilie*, where the birthing agent is institutional: the Catholic Church. The mother of the three brothers returns "to the bosom of the Church," and the brothers undergo a spiritual rebirth (Kleist, 1987, p. 208). In this narrative, men—priests, bishops, church fathers—preside over new life, extending Kleist's exploration of male birth beyond the individual to the institutional.

3. CONCLUSION

Across his dramas and narratives, Kleist persistently unsettles the categories of masculine and feminine. Women act with rationality, decisiveness, and at times brutal violence, while men display hesitation, emotional vulnerability, or forms of care conventionally coded as maternal. Neither gender retains a stable set of attributes; instead, each becomes a site of performance shaped by circumstance, crisis, and emotional intensity. Kleist's literature does not merely invert gender norms but reveals their fundamental instability. Masculinity and femininity emerge as permeable, contingent, and susceptible to collapse.

The metaphor of male birth offers a particularly illuminating lens for understanding this instability. In *Das Erdbeben in Chile*, *Der Findling*, and *Die heilige Cäcilie*, the capacity to "give birth" is transferred from women to men—or even to institutions—under conditions of danger, suffering, or spiritual transformation (Kleist, 1987). Through such metaphorical births, men form maternal-like bonds with children to whom they are not biologically related. These attachments overturn conventional assumptions about paternal and maternal feeling, suggesting that emotional bonds arise not from biological processes but from lived experience, risk, and affective intensity.

At the same time, Kleist's fathers repeatedly reveal the fragility of paternal authority. Their cruelty, blindness, or emotional absence demonstrates that fatherhood, far from being a natural or stable identity, depends on the continual performance of authority. When this performance falters, violence often emerges as the compensatory mechanism (Stephens, 1999, p. 21; Stephens, 1988, p. 31). Kleist thus exposes a paradox: the very figures charged with protection and guidance frequently become agents of harm.

This broader skepticism toward fixed identity resonates with Kleist's philosophical doubts about truth. In his letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, he writes that "there is no truth to be found on earth," and that what we call truth may only appear so (Kleist, 1987, p. 634). In light of this epistemological uncertainty, it is unsurprising that gender too appears unfixed, elusive, and perpetually unsettled. Kleist offers no final answers to what constitutes a man or a woman. Instead, he sustains ambiguity—about gender, identity, and truth itself—inviting readers to inhabit the unresolved spaces where meaning remains contested.

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Note: All translations were done by the author.

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