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I Want to Break Free:

The Constraints of Gender Expectations in Gina Kaus' *Gefängnis Ohne Gitter*

1. Introduction

The origins of the proverb “Children should be seen and not heard” lie in a 15th century English saying which specifically referred to young women, stating “A mayde schuld be seen, but not herd.” In Gina Kaus’ play *Gefängnis ohne Gitter*, unruly young women are neither seen nor heard. Instead, they are sent to the titular prison, a female juvenile correctional facility nestled in the French countryside. I argue that Kaus’ use of a female-dominated space first allows contesting notions of femininity to play out amongst the characters. Ultimately, however, the repressiveness of traditional gender roles is such that the characters struggling to break the mold are unable to do so. I propose a comparative reading of the play and the 1937 French film version of the story, focusing on the use of language and the performance of gender in the work. This reading is grounded in Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, and in the cultural production of masculine domination put forward by Pierre Bourdieu. I give particular attention to the use of animal imagery in order to reveal how gender is constructed and reproduced through language.

2. The Erziehungsheim: A female-dominated space?

Like other works in Kaus' repertoire, *Gefängnis ohne Gitter* explores gender performance in a female-dominated space (Range 79, 93). The space in question in *Gefängnis Ohne Gitter* is an Erziehungsheim, a home where wayward girls are forcibly confined (Kaus 5). In Kaus' novel *Die Überfahrt*, "Kaus creates a microcosm of Weimar society," where every character is "a representative of the various discourses" (Range 43-44). Similarly, the confined space of *Gefängnis Ohne Gitter* enables the use of its characters as representations of gender discourses.

The home is populated almost entirely by women - from the director, to the employees charged with supervising the girls (hereafter referred to as guardians) and, of course, the wards themselves. This initial appearance of feminine domination gives the characters the opportunity to play out contesting notions of femininity amongst each other. However, the home remains what Bourdieu saw as a "central ideological and cultural site of socialization." As such, the space cannot free itself from, and instead reproduces, "social inequality in the state." (Dillabough 490)

Kaus' play begins with a group scene within the Erziehungsheim. Three girls, Mary, Baby, and Alice, are complaining about the home and bragging of their attempts to escape. Alice recounts how she escaped the home by jumping into the river at night and swam "wie ein Fisch" to freedom (6). This feat is an act of resilience and determination, in direct contrast to her description in the stage directions as the prettiest. By inserting a physical description of Alice before directly contradicting it, Kaus emphasizes how Alice subverts traditional gender expectations by being strong and resourceful.

Upon escaping, Alice impersonates the widow of a wealthy Lord in order to gain access to a luxurious hotel, where she remains until the hotel manager discovers her ruse (7). In *Performative Acts*, Judith Butler advances the concept of gender performativity, writing: "Gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"

(Butler in Range 16). Alice's impersonation of a wealthy widow is a literal act of performance, where her gender-conforming looks allow her to pass as an older, wealthy lady. Fifteen-year-old Baby is impressed by the story, saying: "Aber du bist auch so wunderschön, dass man dir alles glauben muss..." (7). Baby attributes Alice's near-successful escape with her beauty, and her stay in the hotel is dwelled upon much longer than her daring swim through the river. That feat is rendered a footnote in the story, while the act of "passing" as a rich widow at the luxurious hotel is emphasized.

In the French adaptation, the conversation, now taking place between girls named Renee, Mary and Alice, does not end there. Renee accuses Mary of being jealous of Alice. Mary scoffs and says "Jalouse? Elle n'a même pas de seins!" (Jealous? She doesn't even have breasts!") (*Prison Sans Barreaux*) The competition here shifts from a gender-neutrally-coded one of daring feats and escapism to a feminine-coded one – competing to see who is the most feminine. That turn in the conversation suggests a certain internalization of the patriarchal value of "feminine" beauty. Mary and Alice have "embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation." (Bourdieu 5)

3. Animal Imagery and the Importance of A Name

The main character, Nellie, at first appears to resist this dominance of the masculine order. In scene two of the play, she is waiting to be examined by Dr. Marshall, the lone male character in the work. "Und dabei hab ich doch auf Arzt studiert und nicht auf Tierbändiger," he says as he enters the scene, drawing an underlying comparison between women and animals (16). Nellie picks up on the significance of the statement, replying: "Sie!!! Ich bin kein Tier!" (16). In his examination of animal film imagery, Jonathan Burt writes that the animal is "a

writing effect that latches onto a more generalized, and inflated, concept of otherness.” (159)

Nellie’s sharp retort, then, could be seen as her resistance to depiction as “Other.”

Dr. Marshall then orders her to “Zieh dich aus Kleine!” for the examination, (Kaus 16). Nellie does not obey, saying: “Ich weiss schon, was Ihr alle wollt... Ihr Schweine...!” (16). Here, Nellie makes a generalizing statement, whereby Marshall stands in for all (male) doctors. By explicitly referring them as pigs, she is making an attempt to restore the already imbalanced power relation of the patient/doctor, girl/man relationship. Dr. Marshall later contests his masculine domination in the play, however, when Mary II, expressing how happy she is to see him again, says to him: ““Sie sind doch wenigstens ein Mann.” (18) Marshall replies: “Irrtum. Ich bin ein Arzt.” In doing so, he denies the privilege and power he carries as a male in a patriarchal society, instead attributing his power to his status as a doctor, and disavowing any way in which he could be suspected of sexual misconduct or improprieties.

In the fourth scene in the play, Nellie and Mary I aid in the birthing of a male calf to the home’s cow, Margaret (39). Mary I comments, “Eine Kuh wäre besser gewesen als ein Stierl.” (40). Here she implicitly acknowledges the usefulness of female animals in the animal kingdom. Even in the case of a domesticated animal such as a cow, the female provides the milk which nourishes her young and the humans who own her. Nellie is marked by her experience, but seems unsure as to whether the experience has been positive or negative. She asks the director of the institution, Evelyne, “Ob sie sich richtig über das Kälbchen freuen kann, wenn es ihr so viele Schmerzen bereitet hat.” (41). Evelyne replies that “die Margaret ist im Augenblick das glücklichste Wesen im ganzen Haus.” She continues: “Die Natur hat das schon ganz vernünftig eingerichtet.” (41). This exchange illustrates the subtle nuances in Evelyne’s character thus far in the story: as the director, she is focused on her goal of implementing reforms at the home and is

passionately dedicated to her work. However, she is also engaged to be married to Dr. Marshall. Her statement about Margaret's happiness could hint at Evelyne's desire to have children of her own. Then again, while she does refer to giving birth as a natural course for women, she also refers to Nellie as "my child" (42) in the exchange. Evelyne's answers expose her belief that a woman's role in society could be accomplished – and happiness reached – through her work and not through the traditional role of procreation.

In the French adaptation, a version of this conversation takes place between the Doctor and Nellie. When the Doctor is called to take care of the birth of Marguerite's calf, Nellie is present despite not being called because, as she says, "Je suis piquée de vaches" ("I love cows") (Prison Sans Barreaux). She assists in the birth and, afterwards, lays down in the hay in the stable with her arms open. Referring to the birth, she says: "Moi, je trouve ca merveilleux." ("Me, I think it's wonderful.") (Prison Sans Barreaux) She is clearly more enchanted by the process of labour and giving birth than in the play. The Doctor then pronounces the lines that Evelyne says in the play: "La nature fait bien les choses." ("Nature does things well.") (Prison Sans Barreaux) He then crouches down to caress Nellie's face, and they kiss. But, the next day, the Doctor tells Nellie to forget what happened between them. She replies acerbically: "Bien sûr. J'avais oublié que je n'étais qu'une détenue." ("Of course. I had forgotten that I was only a detainee.") He has restored the uneven power relations between the doctor and detainee. (Prison Sans Barreaux)

In the same scene in the play, Nellie is described in the stage directions as having "changed to her advantage." ("hat sich sehr zu ihren Gunsten verändert.") (40). Dr. Marshall also comments on her changed appearance, noting that Nellie has resembled a tiger when they had first met, but that she is no longer as wild and ill-mannered. Nellie replies that her transformation does not matter – that for the rest of the life, her stay in the home will follow her. "Wenn ich

einmal einen Mann Lieb habe... da kann ich es doch nicht geheim halten," she explains (49).

Here, Nellie seems to be buying into the societal convention that a happy life for a woman means making a good match. However, when Marshall seemingly speaks ill of the director, Evelyne, Nellie is upset. "Aber ich will keinen Kerl! Ich will keinen!" she says, continuing to say that she wants to learn and study to become a teacher, just like Evelyne (50). Laughingly, Marshall tells her that she is not like Evelyne. He then grabs her by the shoulders and kisses her. In this scene, Marshall is acting as a reinforcer of traditional gender roles. Despite the variation between these two scenes in the play and film, it becomes clear here that Nellie is being pulled in two directions – her love and admiration for Evelyne and her attraction to Marshall.

Naming and names are used in a similar fashion as animal imagery in order to make the power imbalance between men and women even clearer. The cow, Margaret, has a feminine first name, which puts her on the same semiotic level as the girls. The implicit message here : The residents of the home, as young wayward girls mostly of low-class background, have about as much power as the cow. This point is driven home in the French film, when Margaret's name is the source of a case of mistaken identity : When Dr. Maréchal is called to the home to take care of an emergency with "Marguerite," he assumes that the caller is referring to one of the girls. It is only upon his arrival that he realizes that Marguerite is in fact the cow. This confusion emphasizes how the imbalance in gendered power is perpetuated through linguistic means.

4. Conclusion: Women can't have it all

In the end, *Gefängnis ohne Gitter* is yet another example of Kaus' continuous concern with the inadequacy of female education. The previous explorations of gender power imbalance reproduced through education and language in the works lead to one conclusion: That women

cannot have it all. Nellie and Evelyne/Yvonne are unwillingly pitted throughout the narrative against one another in order to compete for Dr. Marshall/Maréchal's affections. While Nellie is at first very much touched first by the director's kindness to her ("Je vous aime bien", she tells Yvonne in the film) and then by her resolve and her dedication to her work, she distances herself unwittingly as she begins her relationship with the Doctor (Prison Sans Barreaux). Evelyne notes this in the play, after Nellie calls the Doctor to warn him of a danger to him. "Sie hat uns doch gewarnt!" the doctor tells Evelyne. Sadly, she replies: "Uns-? Nein. Dich hat sie gewarnt. Nur dich." (Kaus 81) Meanwhile, as an independent, working woman, Evelyne/Yvonne is eventually forced to choose between her job and her relationship with the doctor. As she becomes more and more engrossed in her work at the home in the film, the Doctor confronts her and presents her with an ultimatum: "Il faut choisir – être une sainte ou une femme," ("You must make a choice – whether to be a saint or a woman"), a statement which starkly presents Yvonne's choice between the traditional madonna/whore binary often used to classify female behavior (Smith 451, Prison Sans Barreaux). Dr. Maréchal continues: "On n'épouse pas les saintes." ("One does not marry saints.") In the end, Evelyne/Yvonne stays on as director, giving Nellie her freedom so that she may travel with the Doctor to Pondicherry.

While Nellie and Evelyne/Yvonne are each confronted with the binary choice that women often have to make – either work or marriage, a vocation or children – the Doctor is not bound by that dichotomy. He travels to India to take up a good position as doctor, where Nellie will join him.

As they leave, Evelyne tells a former resident that she has lost her freedom: “Es ist mir bloss heute zum ersten Mal klar geworden, dass ich meine Freiheit verloren habe...” (106). The former resident replies that “Sie sind doch gar nicht eingesperrt wie die Mädchen” (106) but Evelyne is insistent –while the girls eventually leave, she has made an irreversible choice between “saint” and “woman”. The last line of the play, “Ich bin die einzige wirkliche Gefangene”, drives home Judith Butler’s idea that “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.” (*Gender Trouble* 191 in Range 89)

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