

This paper analyzes a literary text, Heinrich von Kleist's story "Der Findling," which features keys prominently. More specifically, this paper focuses on a single key scene. On a theoretical level, it analyzes the ambiguity of the word "key"—the conditions under which its sense can glide from nominal to adjectival, how its presence as a tool relates to its force as a signifier of central or crucial things and how its heterogeneous meanings inform and transform literary language. The keys in Kleist's text entangle architectural structures and technical operations with practices of interpretation. Reading a story like "Der Findling" involves following the logic of this entanglement.

The interpretive choice to focus on doors and keys in a story involving pandemic disease, the loss and adoption of sons, oedipal and non-oedipal familial triangles, legal and clerical institutions and numerous acts of violence in Rome around the 15th century may seem counter-intuitive. On the one hand, doors are immutable. The functioning of doors and gates allows Kleist and his readers to organize narrative events according to binary distinctions, such as inside and outside; the use of keys and keyholes in the story localizes concrete procedures, such as opening and closing, at the border of this distinction. Keys and locks facilitate the movement of characters and symbols between discrete binary states: closed or open, locked or unlocked. On the other hand, the functions of a given door are context-specific and unpredictable. Doors are locked and unlocked, closed and opened, but on a poetic level, they do not perform standardized functions or fulfill consistent roles. They are operationalized in order to form or collapse spatial and symbolic distinctions. Jacques Lacan has expressed this transformability of doors pithily: "Please give this a thought—a door isn't entirely real. To take it for such would result in strange misunderstandings. If you observe a door, and you observe from that that it produces draughts, you'd take it under your arm to the desert to cool you down"

(Lacan 301). The possibilities for use, misuse and meaning of a door result from its immediate context.

Doors and keys operate as fundamental poetic infrastructures in “Der Findling” (as well as in other texts by Kleist). The emergency measures implemented to control pandemic disease deploy gates, doors and locking procedures as techniques of control, as do other legal structures which Kleist consistently thematizes. Likewise, subjective interiority, asymmetries of knowledge and scenes of voyeuristic observation—that is, many standard protocols of dramatic narrative action—are mediated by these structures and techniques of enclosure. “Mediation” here denotes a reciprocal interdependency of symbolic forms and architectural or technical procedures: locked doors and closed gates make interiority into a physically secured reality, and psychological interiority charges doors, locks and keys with a symbolic purposiveness. The appearance of doors and keys is made necessary by—or rather, fulfills the promise of—subjective and hermeneutic interiority, but interiority hinges on the functions of doors and can struggle to sustain itself without them.

The key becomes a figure of intersubjective interiority, i.e., one character’s key to the hidden inner life of another, in “Der Findling” when the key becomes textual. The protagonist of the story posits a hypothesis about his stepmother’s desire on the basis of a textual key, and designs a strategy to test his hypothesis. The key Nicolo finds is a code, through which his name contains the name of Elvire’s childhood savior and idol, Colino. Nicolo’s plot initiates the emergence of a new kind of key, namely one that consists of the materiality of letters rather than metal, and whose turning is designed to move affectively rather than physically. In “Der Findling,” the key takes on a new, rhetorical function, which the protagonist understands as the legible form of the law of maternal desire.

The emergence of this rhetorical key and the varieties of action it makes possible make interpretation into a motivating force for the plot. Interpretive violence is not uncommon in Kleist's stories. "Der Findling" deserves particular attention in the context of literary theory because it demonstrates the violence of rhetorical interpretation, insofar as the hermeneutical key is a metaphor for tropological functions in general. Nicolo's implementation of physical and symbolically encoded keys in order to seduce his step-mother sets off a catastrophic chain of violence. Nicolo shocks Elvire, and her shock appears to indicate a strategic victory for Nicolo, but she succumbs to the stress and dies; Nicolo manipulates his clerical connections to divest Piachi of his property, and Piachi kills Nicolo in retaliation; Piachi is executed by Roman municipal and papal authorities for his filicide. The scenes of violence with which "Der Findling" concludes demonstrate how rhetorical interpretation triggers social and anti-social power dynamics which take place outside of the structures of meaning established in tropological frameworks. "Der Findling" differentiates between acts of violence with an immanent relationship to meaning, such as Nicolo's attempted rape of Elvire, and acts of violence which destroy meaning, such as Piachi's filicide and refusal of papal absolution. Kleist's text functions as an experiment in the association of meaning with violence, and in interpretation's questionable ability to modify their relationship to each other.

The outbreak of a plague and the onset of legal measures designed to control the spread of pandemic disease initiate the story's action. Piachi, a Roman merchant, brings his son Paolo on a commercial visit to Ragusa. The city limits are heavily policed in order to protect the city from the plague. After stopping upon hearing reports of the arrival controls at the city's borders, Piachi meets a boy, Nicolo, who has escaped Ragusa's quarantine and who asks Piachi to protect him

from the police. Piachi agrees to do so, but they are soon discovered and all three are taken into quarantine, where Paolo is infected and dies of the plague. Piachi takes Nicolo back to Rome and legally adopts him, raising him with his second wife Elvire in Paolo's place.

The historical significance of the locations of arrival and destination in this brief opening sequence can hardly be overstated; as of 1377, Ragusa was the first city to implement arrival controls and precautionary quarantine for all people and things entering the city from areas known to be "plague infested" (Tomić-Blažina and Blažina 106-107).¹ Arrivals deemed at-risk (including apparently healthy people) were diverted to off-shore island locations for a twenty-day period. Insofar as quarantine (and arrival controls more generally) functions on the basis of policing a border which may not be traversed by certain people and things, this encounter is framed and made possible by gates and doors.

A paradoxical set of procedures for opening and closing the gates of Ragusa initiate the exposure of Piachi and Paolo to the plague. The travelers from Rome are obligated to enter the city and undergo a deadly quarantine because of a leak in the closed gates. The opening in the *cordon sanitaire* which has allowed Nicolo to escape briefly may only be closed when Piachi and Paolo re-enter with him. Cornelia Zumbusch has identified this logic of self-destructive immunization and protection procedures as a dominant narrative characteristic of "Der Findling" (Zumbusch, 495). The policing procedures meant to prevent the spread of the plague lead directly to the Paolo's fatal infection.

¹ Two details in Kleist's "Findling" suggest a historical setting for the narrative after 1377. First, the role played by an efficient pandemic police force, which pursues and quarantines Nicolo and which was expanded to this degree of activity only around 1500, when Ottoman aggression in the Adriatic region became a threat to commerce (Tomić-Blažina and Blažina, 138-141). Secondly, the presence of Carmelite nuns in Rome would be anachronistic before the late 15th century; the Carmelite nuns were formally recognized by Pope Nicholas V in 1452 and the first monastery was founded by Françoise d'Amboise in Nantes in 1463 (Booton 147).

The epidemiological paradox of Ragusan quarantine procedures—in which the measures implemented to protect the population from the plague trigger events of infection—does not belong exclusively to the political and historical formations of pandemic disease; the relationship of doors to the enclosure of political territory introduces paradoxical structures into legal systems. Not only Ragusan emergency measures, but also the *lex Romana* organizes itself around the exceptional formation of the gate or door. Carl Schmitt has argued that, according to the “*nomos* of the earth” in Greek antiquity, ancient legal systems and territories were originally organized around the construction of walls as architectural means of making borders both visible and secure. Rome and Ragusa represent two simultaneous but differing paradigms of the relationship of the law to the door, insofar as “*der Nomos als eine Mauer bezeichnet werden kann*” (Schmitt, 40). The door is a literal, physical gap in the *nomos*. The principles of opening and closing territorial gates maintain a unique status in the context of legal codes valid only *within* these territories. Bernhard Siegert has noted how this opening in the law-as-wall constitutes an internal difference within legal codification, which does not undermine or threaten the law but rather constitutes it. “*Eine Tür ist demnach eine Öffnung im Nomos, ein Ort, an dem die das Gesetz konstituierende Differenz sich negieren muss, um sich zu erschließen*” (Siegert 2010, 154).² In Roman law and nearly all legal systems in Europe, the law constitutes the regulation of a series of gaps in the *nomos*. Cornelia Vismann has demonstrated how the gate gives form to both Roman law and urban space.

In Roman antiquity a plough was dragged around the yet-to-be-built city to mark the spot where the gate was to be. The portal, whose name derives from the movement of the drawn plough (*portare*), paves the way into the future city. It opens up the space behind and frames the unbounded fields. The gate creates the *ager Romanus*, the urban area of Rome. With the city the law comes into being. City and law are coextensive. (Vismann, 15)

² Siegert’s article, to which my argument owes a great debt of gratitude, can also be found in modified form in English (Siegert 2015, 192-206).

In this sense, Ragusa's plague law can almost be considered as a nomological wish-fulfillment fantasy: a city in which legal codes and *nomos* are unified without exception. The *cordon sanitaire* functions as a law truly in the form of a wall, without opening. The police force that brings the escapee and his Roman accomplices back within the city limits enforces the *nomos*, not the Roman law of the gate qua nomological exception.

The role played by the law in Kleist's texts is a constant focus of the secondary research on his work; an analytical focus on doors in these texts reveals their complex relationship to legal institutions. Doors in "Der Findling" make unencoded functions of the law concrete and legible, like the doors in "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo," which carry military mandates on their insides. These doors also facilitate the abuse of the law, like the manipulation of tariffs at the gates of Dresden in "Michael Kohlhaas." As noted, "Der Findling" thematizes the functions of keys as well as doors, which gives it a unique distinction among Kleist's many uses of doors. A brief survey of Kleist's doors can demonstrate the interrelationship between architectural forms and legal codes in these texts, and provide the background against which the keys of "Der Findling" stand out.

Gates and doors often frame and initiate narrative action in Kleist's stories. They contain a compendium of interactions between doors and legal codes. In "Der Findling," Piachi and Nicolo can only depart through the city's reopened gates with police permission. "Die Tore wurden nun wieder geöffnet und Piachi, nachdem er seinen Sohn begraben hatte, erhielt von der Polizei Erlaubnis, zu reisen" (Kleist 2005, 266). In "Michael Kohlhaas," the narrative, juridical and spatial point of departure is a door (Kleist 2005, 78). The gate through which Michael Kohlhaas routinely passes in order to conduct his horse trading around Dresden unites geographical space with the symbolic space of the law, into both of which Kohlhaas enters. But

the exceptional tariff to which Kohlhaas is subjected upon entry lacks a basis in codified law. There is a glitch between the passage through the door and the arrival at the law. The incongruence of the legal order provided on-demand to Kohlhaas at the urban chancellery and the improvisational tax law imposed on him at the fringes of the state's territory (i.e., at the door) establish the opacity of a legal door logic to the interiority of the law (to which the door should be the mere entrance). Kohlhaas is thrown into the aporia of these two legal orders, i.e., into a lawless violence internal to the territory of the state but in between the cracks of its legal framework. This violence within the law refigures the opposition between law and barbarism that would otherwise be constituted by the boundary of the *nomos*. Kohlhaas's unauthorized violence originates within the law. Kleist's doors lead his characters to the law's other scenes, where non-standard, lawless forms of power and violence proliferate.

The door through which Gustav von der Ried enters the estate in "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" is both a militarized trap door and an escape passage, and it bears on its inside a mandate prohibiting the black population of Haiti from granting protection to its white population (Kleist 2005, 242). The doors in the house are on the one hand encoded as *devices*: they can be locked by key holders in order to turn rooms into holding cells; the presence of certain persons (e.g., Toni) on one side or the other of certain doors (e.g., the door to Gustav's room) at certain times can be read (e.g., by Babekan) as a marker of her racial-military allegiance; and they function as reminders of the law for their inhabitants. On the other hand, the openness and closure of doors and characters are themselves modified by changing circumstances. Opening the door appears initially as openness to racial difference. But the plots that unfold in the story—first to trap Gustav and his family, then to save them—retroactively reorient the openness of the mulatto woman's door to the Swiss escapee. What begins as a

deceptive technique of racialized warfare becomes an act of political rebellion or even betrayal of an ethnic allegiance. Toni's counter-plot adds another turn of the screw: the open door not as the European man's trap or safe haven but as the mestiza's opportunity for defection to Europe with the persecuted whites. One might call these *yellow* doors: like Gustav's story of the bio-terroristic weaponization of yellow fever in Haiti, they can be implemented in order to stabilize racial-military loyalties; at the same time however, like Toni's yellow complexion, they cannot be firmly aligned with regards to a bilateral war between races.

In the *Robert Guiskard* fragment, war likewise circulates around a door, namely the door to the Norman general's battlefield tent. The hilltop tent, raised above and set behind the plain occupied by the Norman troops, extends the spatial dimensions of the stage upwards and backwards: the tent both represents the heightened space of sovereign power and the background from which the person and the decision of the sovereign emerge. The scenario is historical; Kleist lifts it from a historiographical text on Guiscard and the 11th-century Norman invasion of the Byzantine Empire published in Friedrich Schiller's journal *Die Horen* in 1797 by Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand von Funck (Kleist 1998, 39-98). Juliane Vogel has demonstrated how Guiscard's siege of Durazzo is symbolically encoded in order to establish a parallel with Napoleon's siege of Jaffa in 1799, where a plague broke out as well (Vogel 2017, 203-225). The siege of the city of Durazzo has stalled after the destruction of the Norman fleet. Guiscard's forces are cut off from resupply coming across the Adriatic Sea from Italy and are effectively themselves under siege when a pandemic breaks out among the starving troops. A group of soldiers has approached the general's tent in order to plead with him to return home, and in so doing must make attempts to ascertain his health status.

Battlefield sovereignty in times of pandemic disease involves a carefully controlled play of appearances conducted through the tent's entrance. The fragment dramatizes two functions of the door: to frame the sovereign and to make him accessible to his troops. The entire fragment takes place in close proximity to this tent—close enough that its thin walls betray sounds of the events taking place behind the door, which is nevertheless out of sight. The maintenance of the facade of sovereignty involves a play of masks and tight control over the exits and entries, since the general has been infected and is obliged nevertheless to project control over the situation: the doctor is disguised as a woman when he enters the tent; Robert's daughter, nephew and son are sent out from the tent to speak to the soldiers as emissaries on their father's behalf. The opening of the tent is met each time with anticipation and then with disappointment. “‘Schaut, horcht!’ / ‘Das Guiskardszelt eröffnet sich—’”(Kleist 1998, 13). When Robert finally appears at the end of the fragment, his (not unambiguous) glorification is limited to the teichoscopic description of the scene witnessed through the open door by a boy.

Ein Knabe (halb auf den Hügel gestiegen):

Seht her, seht her! Sie öffnen schon das Zelt!

Der Greis:

O du geliebter Knabe, siehst du ihn?

Sprich, siehst du ihn?

Der Knabe:

Wohl, Vater, seh' ich ihn!

Frei in des Zeltes Mitte sehe ich ihn!

Der hohen Brust legt er den Panzer um!

Dem breiten Schulternpaar des Gnadekettlein!

Dem weitgewölbten Haupt drückt er, mit Kraft,

den mächtig-wankend-hohen Helmbusch auf!

Jetzt seht, oh seht doch her!—Da ist er selbst! (Kleist 1998, 29-30)

In concealing him and revealing Guiscard, the door helps to produce sovereignty. Framed by the doorway, the *camera obscura* of the wartime sovereign projects something of the power and the glory of authority; once arrived onstage, however, the weakened general needs a drum to sit on,

nearly loses consciousness and soon returns, with the help of his daughter, to his tent. The politics of the image of the battlefield commander depend on the door.

The heterogeneous functions of gates and doors in “Der Findling” achieve the highest level of differentiation among Kleist’s texts involving doors. Not only urban gates operated according to legal codes but also domestic doors motivate its narrative sequences. Like the entrance to the tent in the *Guiskard* fragment, doors in “Der Findling” frame the appearance of characters. The desire which motivates Nicolo’s plans to investigate and seduce Elvire is triggered by the sudden opening and closing of a door: Elvire finds Nicolo alone in his room with his mistress, shortly after the death of his wife.

Zugleich war ihm Elvire niemals schöner vorgekommen, als in dem Augenblick, da sie, zu seiner Vernichtung, das Zimmer, in welchem sich das Mädchen befand, öffnete und wieder schloß. Der Unwille, der sich mit sanfter Glut auf ihren Wangen entzündete, goß einen unendlichen Reiz über ihr mildes, von Affekten nur selten bewegtes Antlitz[.]
(Kleist 2005, 273)

The quick succession of emotions which become visible on Elvire’s face deviate greatly from her typical emotionless calm. Elvire’s affectivity has been analyzed by both Cornelia Zumbusch, who thematizes immunity as an emotional stage of invulnerability in the story (Zumbusch 495-510), and Sigrid Weigel, who analyzes the drastic transitions between emotionless and moved affective states with the Derridean notion of the supplement (Weigel 120-134). Doors thus stage and frame emotional encounters which cannot be immediately internalized and hidden; the opening of a door triggers affective openness. This sudden access to Elvire’s emotions immediately disappears, and Nicolo’s desire to re-open this channel triggers his desire to shame or seduce her. “[E]s schien ihm unglaublich, daß sie, bei soviel Lockungen dazu, nicht selbst zuweilen auf dem Wege wandeln sollte, dessen Blumen zu brechen er eben so schmachlich von ihr gestraft worden war. Er glühte vor Begierde, ihr, falls dies der Fall sein sollte, bei dem Alten denselben Dienst zu erweisen, als sie ihm, und bedurfte und suchte nichts, als die

Gelegenheit, diesen Vorsatz ins Werk zu richten” (Kleist 2005, 273). Elvire opens a door onto Nicolo’s lust as well as onto her own affective life, and his revenge plot seeks to identify the key that unlocks this door from the other side.

Nicolo’s frustration and desire for revenge emerges due to asymmetries of access in his family life and home: Elvire and Piachi keep keys to themselves and can walk in on Nicolo whenever and wherever, while he is dependent on them for freedom of movement. His scheme becomes operational only when he can fabricate his own key, not out of metal, but out of letters which spell out Elvire’s desire.

After the initial events on the story—the original trip to Rome, the encounter with Nicolo, the quarantine, Paolo’s death and the return of Piachi and Nicolo to Rome, all of which takes place in the textual span of five paragraphs—the gates of urban political territories are replaced by the interior doors of Piachi’s house in Rome. This transition domesticates the door logics of the narrative in two ways. Firstly, the procedures of opening and closing are executed using keys, which belong primarily to certain characters but also circulate independently. Secondly, the use and possession of keys becomes constitutive for parental authority. The key functions as a unique and paradoxical *oikos*, insofar as it is both in the care and under the control of the father (and mother), but also constitutes parental authority as such.

Poetically, the key occupies an uncomfortable position between symbol, plot device and object. There is scholarly consensus about the expressive potential of keys in the text, but not regarding their function. Joachim Müller mentions the “nüchternen und zugleich gegenstandssymbolischen Motiv des Schlüssels”—a phrase which both emphasizes and minimizes the symbolic character of the key (thus its “sobriety”) (Müller, 434). Cornelia

Zumbusch sees a heavy-handed narrative turn in “das ostentative Hantieren mit Schlüsseln,” which accompanies each crucial event in the plot, but she does not address why the key should play such a prominent, if apparently shallow role (Zumbusch, 498). Seen in the theoretical context of Kleist scholarship, keys in “Der Findling” are both shallow and symbolic, prominent in their appearance but merely preliminary in their relationship to narrative meaning. I would like to reverse this contextualization, and see how Kleist’s texts appear in the context of the poetic and narrative dynamics of the key. Nicolo’s revenge plot demonstrates the transformation of the key: while initially the key only triggers events, unlocks openings and makes meaning accessible, by the end of the plot, the key has become meaning, the legible form of Elvire’s desire and the organizing principle of Nicolo’s scheme.

The first key scene—in both senses of being narratively crucial and involving door logics—establishes a link between Nicolo and Elvire’s mysterious internal life. Shortly following a narrative aside in which the reader learns that Elvire’s nervous condition resulted from a childhood trauma in which “ein junger Genueser, vom Geschlecht der Patrizier” had saved her from a burning building and then slowly and painfully died, Nicolo comes home late from a carnival, “in der Maske eines genuesischen Ritters, die er zufällig gewählt hatte,” “mit Federhut, Mantel und Degen” (Kleist 2005, 270). The reader is capable of recognizing here the psycho-symbolic potential of an encounter between Nicolo and Elvire, which would trigger a flashback-like recognition in Elvire. When Nicolo enters the house, Elvire is standing on a stool, searching for something in an upper cabinet for her sick husband. The initial set-up allows Nicolo to pass by Elvire without either of them noting the presence of the other, but keys and doors interrupt this peaceful discharge of potential energy: “Harmlos, ohne Elviren zu sehen, trat er an die Tür, die in sein Schlafgemach führte, und bemerkte eben mit Bestürzung, daß sie

verschlossen war” (Kleist 2005, 270). The locked door, which is never narratively explained or justified, assures dramatic contact. Nicolo’s attempt to open the door to his bedroom brings Elvire’s attention to him: “als Elvire hinter ihm, mit Flaschen und Gläsern, die sie in der Hand hielt, wie durch einen unsichtbaren Blitz getroffen, bei seinem Anblick von dem Schemel, auf welchem sie stand, auf das Getäfel des Bodens niederfiel” (Kleist 2005, 270). Nicolo’s concerns for Elvire’s wellbeing are trumped by his worries that Piachi will immediately come and react negatively (either to Nicolo’s costume, which will betray his adulterous lifestyle, or to the scene with Elvire, which he may misinterpret). He decides to hide both his whereabouts and his role in Elvire’s fall, which he can do with the help of the right key: “er riß ihr, mit verstörter Beeiferung, ein Bund Schlüssel von der Hüfte, das sie bei sich trug, und einen gefunden, der paßte, warf er den Bund in den Saal zurück und verschwand” (Kleist 2005, 271). Piachi arrives as expected, and Nicolo steps out from his bedroom in his pajamas, as if he has just been suddenly awakened by the noise. Elvire tells no one about the cause of her fall. “[D]och da Elvire, starr vor Entsetzen, wie ihre Zunge war, nicht sprechen konnte, und außer ihr nur er selbst noch Auskunft auf diese Frage geben konnte, so blieb der Zusammenhang der Sache in ein ewiges Geheimnis gehüllt” (Kleist 2005, 271). The circulation of keys in the scene loosely reflects the asymmetries of knowledge: Piachi sees and knows nothing; all the keys and secrets lie with Elvire, who knows that she has had a vision of her dead beloved but cannot communicate it; Nicolo takes away only the knowledge that he has triggered a calamity and that, for some reason, Elvire has kept it to herself.

The second key scene likewise crucially involves Nicolo not having a key. It features a classic door- and key-logical topography, namely the use of a key hole for voyeuristic purposes (provided that the key is not resting in the keyhole). The manipulation of the key hole allows the

voyeur to reverse the distinction between inside and outside, since the person who has gained unilateral privacy by entering and locking the door from within now becomes the unwitting object of unilateral observation from without. Nicolo sees and hears Elvire in a pose of worship before the figure of a person, speaking the name which will later become the first part of the key to his scheme.

Einst ging er, zu einer Zeit, da gerade Piachi außer dem Hause war, an Elvirens Zimmer vorbei, und hörte, zu seinem Befremden, daß man darin sprach. Von raschen, heimtückischen Hoffnungen durchzuckt, beugte er sich mit Augen und Ohren gegen das Schloß nieder, und – Himmel! was erblickte er? Da lag sie, in der Stellung der Verückung, zu jemandes Füßen, und ob er gleich die Person nicht erkennen konnte, so vernahm er doch ganz deutlich, recht mit dem Akzent der Liebe ausgesprochen, das geflüsterte Wort: Colino. (Kleist 2005, 273)

Readers of Kleist's stories can recognize a similarity between this scene and one of the more enigmatic and potentially disturbing scenes from "Die Marquise von O," in which, after an intense argument, the eponymous marquise's mother witnesses the reconciliation of father and daughter through a keyhole.

Sie vernahm, da sie mit sanft an die Tür gelegtem Ohr horchte, ein leises, eben verhallendes Gelispel, das, wie es ihr schien, von der Marquise kam; und, wie sie durchs Schlüsselloch bemerkte, saß sie auch auf des Kommandanten Schoß, was er sonst in seinem Leben nicht zugegeben hatte. (Kleist 2005, 180-181)

The description of the incestuous intimacy between father and daughter—the "heiße und lechzende Küsse" he gives her, "gerade wie ein Verliebter!," as if she were his first love—is framed positively, so that the obscenity of the scene disappears in the dramatic reconstitution of family happiness. "Die Mutter fühlte sich, wie eine Selige." The voyeurism of the keyhole becomes particularly artificial—and thus poetically ostentatious—when the mother reveals that the door is in fact unlocked and opens it, without disturbing "die Lust der himmelfrohen Versöhnung." In "Der Findling," however, the reader is already primed to view the locked door as the trigger of narrative action. We do not overlook the frame of the keyhole here, as in the "Marquise"— Michel Chaouli notes that this scene only appeared in the scholarly literature on

the story in the 1970s, in analyses from American academics (Chaouli, 59-60)—and in so doing we cannot ignore the obscenity of the gaze we share with Nicolo. Our following of the story's narrative plot cannot be disentangled from Nicolo's revenge plot as we peep through the keyhole with him, trying to ascertain Elvire's hidden inner life.

The meaning of these key scenes and the meaning of the key in general dramatically change after Nicolo gains this as yet still enigmatic secretive intelligence of Elvire's private life. After having witnessed Elvire kneeling before a human figure in her room and whispering the name "Colino," Nicolo gains entry to her room alongside a mistress and discovers a hidden life-sized portrait of a knight at whose feet Elvire had knelt. The young daughter of the mistress points out that the knight bears a close physical resemblance to Nicolo himself. These three pieces of information—Elvire's stunned fall after seeing Nicolo dressed as a knight for a carnival, her worshipful practice with a knight's portrait and the portrait's remarkable similarity to Nicolo—form the background for the transformation of the key into a rhetorical figure of interpretation.

The scene of this transformation is initiated, apparently accidentally, by the introduction of an object into the household life of Nicolo's adoptive family which is both new and old, namely a set of ivory blocks bearing inscriptions of letters that were once used as a pedagogical tool during Nicolo's early childhood education. "Es traf sich, daß Piachi, wenige Tage zuvor, nach einer Schachtel mit kleinen, elfenbeinernen Buchstaben gefragt hatte, vermittelt welcher Nicolo in seiner Kindheit unterrichtet worden" (Kleist 2005, 277). In the scene, these block letters are lying about in the living room. Piachi intends to give them to a family with a small child in the neighborhood. The maid, however, has been able to locate only those letters which appear in the name *Nicolo*, "wahrscheinlich weil die andern, ihrer geringeren Beziehung auf den

Knaben wegen, minder in Acht genommen und, bei welcher Gelegenheit es sei, verschleudert worden waren.” While broodingly and absent-mindedly playing with the letters, and thereby repeating a scene of his boyhood narcissism, Nicolo discovers a surprising combinatoric quality of this small set of letters: “[er] fand [...]– zufällig, in der Tat, selbst, denn er erstaunte darüber, wie er noch in seinem Leben nicht getan – die Verbindung heraus, welche den Namen: *Colino* bildet.” Nicolo and Colino—i.e., the name Elvire had whispered in a loving tone while kneeling before the secret portrait of the knight in her room—have all the same letters. Nicolo is fascinated by this connection. “Die Übereinstimmung, die sich zwischen beiden Wörtern angeordnet fand, schien ihm mehr als ein bloßer Zufall.”

Nicolo’s key emerges in the conversion of these accidents into meaningful signs. Joachim Müller sees the distinction between “Vorfall” and “Zufall” as a guiding narrative principle in the story (Müller 427-438); “Zufall” is also a crucial concept for Werner Hamacher’s analysis of Kleist’s “Erdbeben in Chili” (Hamacher 149-173). In order to judge the level of contingency in the agreement between the two names, Nicolo immediately looks to see what impression the presence of the name *Colino* makes on Elvire, as she sits quietly knitting on the other side of the room. He is not disappointed; upon reading the name, Elvire’s face shows a similar sudden affective attack, similar to the one Nicolo found so intriguing when she discovered him alone with a mistress.

Die Erwartung, in der er stand, täuschte ihn auch keineswegs; denn kaum hatte Elvire, in einem müßigen Moment, die Aufstellung der Buchstaben bemerkt, und harmlos und gedankenlos, weil sie ein wenig kurzsichtig war, sich näher darüber hingebeugt, um sie zu lesen: als sie schon Nicolos Antlitz, der in scheinbarer Gleichgültigkeit darauf niedersah, mit einem sonderbar beklommenen Blick überflog, ihre Arbeit, mit einer Wehmut, die man nicht beschreiben kann, wieder aufnahm, und, unbemerkt wie sie sich glaubte, eine Träne nach der anderen, unter sanftem Erröten, auf ihren Schoß fallen ließ. (Kleist 2005, 277-278)

This emotional display convinces Nicolo that Elvire is using the name *Colino* as a place-holder for his own name, in order to express openly her repressed and taboo desire for him. “Nicolo, der alle diese innerlichen Bewegungen, ohne sie anzusehen, beobachtete, zweifelte gar nicht mehr, daß sie unter dieser Versetzung der Buchstaben nur seinen eignen Namen verberge.” Elvire mixes the ivory letters up to hide the name and departs for her room, calmly but in tears. When Piachi later tells Nicolo that Elvire will not be coming to dinner but mentions nothing of the incident with the letters, Nicolo is assured of his discovery: “so glaubte Nicolo den Schlüssel zu allen rätselhaften Auftritten dieser Art, die er erlebt hatte, gefunden zu haben” (Kleist 2005, 278). All the key scenes leading up to this discovery remain unlocked, until a new key made of letters is identified which can open them all.

This new key combines two logics of symbolic substitution or *Verschlüsselung* in the story. The first is the combinatoric elements of letters, the second the structures of replacement in the symbolic roles of characters. One specific relative clause in this scene, which takes place in characteristic Kleistian fashion in the space of one paragraph, has occupied extraordinary attention in the secondary literature on “Der Findling,” namely the description of the combinatoric quality of the two names as “logogriphic” (Weigel, 120; Marx, 88-91; Müller-Salget, 876; Rösch, 217-226). “Nicolo, dem diese logogriphische Eigenschaft seines Namens fremd war, warf, von rasenden Hoffnungen von neuem getroffen, einen ungewissen und scheuen Blick auf die ihm zur Seite sitzende Elvire” (Kleist 2005, 277). With clear self-awareness, Sigrid Weigel writes of the story: “Die Szene mit dem ‘logogriphischen’ Buchstabenspiel scheint die Schlüsselszene der Erzählung zu sein” (Weigel, 120). Duden defines the “Logogriph” as a “Buchstabenrätsel, bei dem durch Wegnehmen, Hinzufügen oder Ändern eines Buchstabens ein neues Wort entsteht” (Duden, 457). Hans Christoph Gottsched describes

the form as a “Scherzgedicht” or “Worthrätsel” (Handlexicon, 1062). On the level of character networks, the secondary literature on “Der Findling” has reached a similar consensus regarding the nearly ubiquitous logic of substitution at play between the characters in the story: not only does Nicolo replace Paolo, but Elvire replaces Piachi’s first deceased wife, Piachi replaces Elvire’s childhood savior and beloved, and both of them replace Nicolo’s dead parents (Schröder, 43). This logic of substitution adopts the masking of identities typical of early modern *Schlüsselliteratur*, in which factual personages are carefully fictionalized so that readers can recognize the objects of literary satire and so that authors can maintain plausible deniability regarding the mimetic gesture (Kohlschmidt and Mohr, 646-665). But the logic of substitution mobilized in “Der Findling” does not disguise a mimetic mode of representation. Nicolo’s key—the key to all the scenes involving keys, i.e., the keyword as rhetorical master trope—combines these two logics of substitution (the logograph and the network of disguised characters) in an interpretive framework. Nicolo reads the Nicolo/Colino logograph as a conscious manipulation undertaken by Elvire and, on the basis of this interpretation, aspires to fill the paternal role of his stepmother’s lover.

Keys in “Der Findling” both construct a space of meaning and in turn become the form of the meaning they disclose. This becoming-symbolic of the key provides a potentially comprehensive logic to the interpretation driving the narrative, from Nicolo’s point of view. His interpretation of textual keys and technical use of real ones allows the protagonist to shift the symbolic alignment of his somewhat artificial family and to open new channels for desire between characters. Before turning to how this interpretive strategy plays out for Nicolo, some theoretically inclined attention should be paid to the trajectory followed by the keys in the story.

“[S]o glaubte Nicolo den Schlüssel zu allen rätselhaften Auftritten dieser Art, die er erlebt hatte, gefunden zu haben.” This sentence can be understood as a description of interpretation on a completely abstract level. Finding the key allows the reader to serialize past events and to find the pattern uniting them. And with the key, an interpretation can be formed, perhaps provisionally, in order to unify these events under a single unifying principle or logic, just as a key passes with a prefabricated fit into a warded lock. Two elements of this association of key with interpretation stand out with regards to “Der Findling.” The first is the transition discussed directly above of the key from a mimetic, literal status to a symbolic-figurative status, its becoming-meaning. The second is the act of interpretation, which in this story does not obey the standard division of labor between reader and text, with reader as interpreter and text as interpreted object. In “Der Findling,” the protagonist advances the plot on the basis of his interpretation of events, an interpretation he advances by means of the “logogriphic” key. These elements make a self-reflexive relationship of literary-critical interpretation to itself possible in “Der Findling”; the plot unfolds according to the achievements and failures of the protagonist’s understanding of the encoded meaning of his domestic situation.

The general symbolic status attained by the key by the end of the story and the status of Nicolo’s interpretation result from the use of rhetorical tropes, specifically an unclear mix of metaphor and metonymy. The question of what kind of trope the key becomes (after Nicolo’s logogriphic epiphany) is not at all ornamental, but rather concerns the essence of interpretation, ours and Nicolo’s. Nicolo’s insight may be metaphorical, that is, it may be the realization of an essential link between the code of written proper names and the psycho-symbolic world of his stepmother; or it may be metonymic, that is, dependent on a relation of contiguous association. A metaphor claims to identify a homology or deep underlying similarity between heterogenous

codes, while a metonymy borrows model of an image from an object simply lying ready to hand. Paul de Man has claimed that reading itself, in literary studies, often devolves into a metaphor based on an inside/outside model. Inside the text are rhetorical forms, outside lies a meaning or connection to non-literary discourses. “By reading we get, as we say, inside a text that was first something alien to us and which we now make our own by an act of understanding. But this understanding becomes at once the representation of an extra-textual meaning; [...] Does the metaphor of reading really unite outer meaning with inner understanding, action with reflection, into one single totality?” (De Man 1973, 30).

De Man considers this metaphor of reading not only nefarious and misleading, but also constitutive of a fundamental distinction in postwar literary studies.

The attraction of reconciliation [of form and meaning, DG] is the elective breeding-ground of false models and metaphors; it accounts for the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside. It matters little whether we call the inside of the box the content or the form, the outside the meaning or the appearance. The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned. (De Man 1973, 28)

I am of the opinion that Kleist’s story indeed seriously questions this trope, without fully dismissing it. “Der Findling”—with its extraordinarily complicated network of implacable characters, its abnormally sparse dialogue, its highly artificial narrative movement—does not so much contain an internal extra-literary meaning as De Man describes, but rather narrates the emergence of this kind of meaning for one of its characters. The story also narrates the unravelling of this constructed system of meaning. “Der Findling” builds and destroys a structure in which objects can take on the function of symbolic decisiveness, i.e., become symbolic keys. This breakdown of a symbolic construct necessarily begs the question of what a narrative which escapes or leaks out of its own structure of meaning might look like, or what a claim of this sort

might imply. In order to pose this question properly, more attention must be paid to the rhetorical form of the symbolic key in the text.

The key, like the Proustian bee and the flower for Charlus and any other literary image, can be read metaphorically or metonymically (De Man 1979, 919-930). A metaphorical status of the key understands Elvire's psychological interiority as a spatial enclosure with a door, which can be opened by anyone with the proper key; a metonymic status understands Nicolo's association of the logogriph with keys as a figurative but inessential reflex. The metaphorical potential of the key in "Der Findling" concerns the possibility of textual openness and closedness, and thus of interpretation, tout court. The story builds its own textual interiority within the network of its characters, and this interiority is modeled on door-logical distinctions between inside and outside. The reliability of this metaphorical construction of meaning is at play in Nicolo's plot and in any reading of "Der Findling" which takes keys and doors into consideration. Paul de Man's understanding of metaphor is particularly useful for the purposes of analyzing "Der Findling," because Nicolo's plot so strongly relies on his understanding of the key as metaphor and because de Man consistently questions the reliability of rhetorical formations within literary texts (De Man 1978, 11-28, Johnson 1985).

The stability of the metaphor of the key in "Der Findling" depends on the code of action, really the dirty scheme, of the story's protagonist. If Nicolo is right about Nicolo/Colino, then Elvire's desire can be accessed the same way as the door to his or her bedroom, and he needs only to obtain the key from her to get inside. Nicolo's "satanic plan" for revenge and seduction is a bet on the metaphor of the key, i.e., that the logogriph contains the secret of her desire. His plot becomes the plot of the story and likewise becomes decisive for the determination of the key's tropological status. Nicolo organizes his strategy around the mis-en-scene of a shock for Elvire,

when she finds him dressed once more as a knight in the place of her beloved's portrait. "Er besorgte sich genau denselben Anzug wieder, in welchem er, vor wenig Monaten, da er zur Nachtzeit heimlich vom Karneval zurückkehrte, Elviren erschienen war; und Mantel, Kollett und Federhut, genuesischen Zuschnitts, genau so, wie sie das Bild trug, umgeworfen, schlich er sich, kurz vor dem Schlafengehen, in Elvirens Zimmer, hing ein schwarzes Tuch über das in der Nische stehende Bild, und wartete, einen Stab in der Hand, ganz in der Stellung des gemalten jungen Patriziers, Elvirens Vergötterung ab" (Kleist 2005, 279). Remarkably, the narrative voice notes the correctness of Nicolo's calculation as Elvire collapses.

Er hatte auch, im Scharfsinn seiner schändlichen Leidenschaft, ganz richtig gerechnet; denn kaum hatte Elvire, die bald darauf eintrat, nach einer stillen und ruhigen Entkleidung, wie sie gewöhnlich zu tun pflegte, den seidnen Vorhang, der die Nische bedeckte, eröffnet und ihn erblickt: als sie schon: Colino! Mein Geliebter! rief und ohnmächtig auf das Getäfel des Bodens niedersank. (Kleist 2005, 279-280; emphasis added)

This sentence proclaiming Nicolo's insightfulness does not contain the same "so glaubte Nicolo" clause as the one in which the key becomes metaphorical. Nor does it seem to show any signs of free indirect style which would slyly import the thoughts of a character into the seemingly objective flow of narrative prose. The "denn" preceding the description of Elvire's fainting likewise marks the correspondence of Nicolo's inferences with the effect of his coup. After securing this initial positive result, Nicolo makes sure he is behind a locked door and then sets about with the seduction, or more accurately rape, portion of his scheme. "Dies abgetan, ging er, die Tür zu verriegeln, fand aber, daß sie schon verschlossen war; und sicher, daß sie auch nach Wiederkehr ihrer verstörten Sinne, seiner phantastischen, dem Ansehen nach überirdischen Erscheinung keinen Widerstand leisten würde, kehrte er jetzt zu dem Lager zurück, bemüht, sie mit heißen Küssen auf Brust und Lippen aufzuwecken" (Kleist 2005, 280). This door-logical enclosure should lead to psychological and narrative closure for Nicolo. But Piachi returns

unexpectedly and, using his key, both discovers Nicolo's deed and denies this closure. “[L]eise, da er [Piachi, DG] Elviren schon schlafen glaubte, schlich er durch den Korridor heran, und da er immer den Schlüssel bei sich trug, so gelang es ihm, plötzlich, ohne daß irgend ein Geräusch ihn angekündigt hätte, in das Zimmer einzutreten” (Kleist 2005, 280). Literal keys dissolve Nicolo's strategy and make the decision regarding his interpretation of the tropological status of the key impossible.

The poeology of interpretation in “Der Findling” thematizes the failure of closure. The *pater familias* opens all the doors closed by the son and spoils his plan. The nature of Elvire's worship, her collapse at the sight of Nicolo dressed as a knight and her tears at seeing Colino's name spelled out with the ivory letters are all doomed to remain uncertain when Piachi unlocks the door Nicolo had locked (even if certainty were not inevitable an outcome of Nicolo's plot). Nicolo's scheme and of the metaphor of the key both face their demise in a door, opened by Piachi in order to usher Nicolo out of the house for good. “Und in der Tat war der Alte auch geneigt, die Sache still abzumachen; sprachlos, wie ihn einige Worte Elvirens gemacht hatten, [...] nahm er bloß, [...] die Peitsche von der Wand, öffnete ihm die Tür und zeigte ihm den Weg, den er unmittelbar wandern sollte” (Kleist 2005, 280). The real key of the father trumps the symbolic key of the son, and the whip enforces Piachi's reclamation of paternal authority. The open door facilitates exile, exactly the opposite function of the closed gates of Ragusa that facilitate quarantine at the beginning of the story.

However, even this failure of closure is undermined in “Der Findling.” Nicolo responds to the collapse of his strategy, the undecidability of his interpretation of the key and the re-establishment of paternal order with a shameless appeal to the documentary evidence of the

law. Before retiring, Piachi had bequeathed the house to Nicolo, and he therefore cannot banish Nicolo from it. “Doch dieser [Nicolo, DG], eines Tartüffe völlig würdig, sah nicht sobald, daß auf diesem Wege nichts auszurichten war, als er plötzlich vom Fußboden erstand und 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!” (Kleist 2005, 280-281). Nicolo’s failure to enter the inner chambers of Elvire’s body and mind leads him to stake a combative and exclusive claim to interiority in the law and in his father’s house. The collapse of the key as revelation leads to a power struggle between father and adopted son for legal advantage. Nicolo seeks aid from the bishop and the Carmelite monks, while Piachi consults an old legal advisor. Piachi’s “machtlose[] Hebel” prove inferior to Nicolo’s ability to corrupt a church official and Nicolo returns with “ein Dekret, in welchem Nicolo in den Besitz bestätigt und dem Piachi aufgegeben ward, ihn nicht darin zu belästigen” (Kleist 2005, 281).

The dissolution of the domestic struggle over the key and control of doors leads to a legal conflict, and the corrupt resolution of the legal dispute leads, in characteristic Kleistian fashion, to violence. Piachi’s response to the death of his wife following the shock of Nicolo’s attack and his legal dispossession of his house is described in breathless and laconic rapidity.

Piachi hatte gerade Tags zuvor die unglückliche Elvire begraben, die an den Folgen eines hitzigen Fiebers, das ihr jener Vorfall zugezogen hatte, gestorben war. Durch diesen doppelten Schmerz gereizt, ging er, das Dekret in der Tasche, in das Haus, und stark, wie die Wut ihn machte, warf er den von Natur schwächeren Nicolo nieder und drückte ihm das Gehirn an der Wand ein. (Kleist 2005, 281)

Piachi’s revenge relies on natural strength in the face of institutional impotence (Weineck 2003).

Murdering Nicolo does not complete the act; Piachi goes on to stuff the bishop’s decree into Nicolo’s lifeless mouth. “Die Leute die im Hause waren, bemerkten ihn nicht eher, als bis die Tat geschehen war; sie fanden ihn noch, da er den Nicolo zwischen den Knien hielt, und ihm das

Dekret in den Mund stopfte.” Afterwards, Piachi peacefully turns himself in, but refuses the church’s absolution which is legally required as a condition of his execution. He intends to follow Nicolo to hell in order to continue his revenge there, in “an infinite act of murder that cannot end even in death” (Weineck 2003, 84).

Piachi’s extralegal filicide has been interpreted in the secondary research on the story in various ways. Cornelia Zumbusch has seen in the act of stuffing Nicolo’s mouth with a legal document a continuation of the logic of entry and closure which applies to city gates and doors in the text; Andreas Gailus has read the smashing of Nicolo’s skull and brain against the wall as discursively analogous to Hegel’s phrase “Spirit is a bone,” and interpreted the act as an apotheosis of the war between language as assertive force and language as content of communication in Kleist’s works (Gailus 2011). As an alternative to these attempts to interpret the violent end of Kleist’s story, I would like to place emphasis rather on the violence of interpretation operative in the story. From the perspective of plot narratology, the entire chain of events constituting the story’s denouement—Elvire’s death, Nicolo’s legal victory over Piachi, Piachi’s revenge and execution by the state without absolution—are set off from the story’s climax by Piachi’s interference with Nicolo’s theatrical ploy to unlock Elvire’s desire. This foiling of Nicolo’s plot dissolves both the family as well as the encoding of meaning in the actions of characters. The turn to the law compensates for this collapse of meaning and failure to ascertain the nature of the key. As noted above, this legalization of the conflict between Nicolo and Piachi is choreographed around the figure of the door as exile. The refusal to leave through this door marks the end of the narrative force of interpretation in the story; after this point, the figure of encoding and decoding represented by the key (in the sense of the German word *Verschlüsselung*) gives way to a kind of decoding which destroys the possibility of symbolically

encoded meaning and makes the figural force of the act of stuffing or of the mouth in Piachi's filicide into undecidable or floating signifiers.

The end of "Der Findling" does not so much pose the question of the interpretation of violence, but rather the question of the violence triggered by interpretation itself. Piachi's revenge is shocking not only because of the smeared brains on the wall or because of the obscenity of the decree stuffed in Nicolo's mouth but because of his refusal of meaning. Moral comeuppance and just desserts appear on some level to characterize Nicolo's demise, but Piachi undermines them through his refusal of absolution and his stated ambition to continue his revenge on Nicolo in hell (Kleist 2005, 282-283). The obscene character of Piachi stuffing the decree into Nicolo's throat reverses, figuratively, the legal judgment granting Nicolo ownership of the estate, but also rejects legality as a measure of justice. The denouement of Kleist's story takes place in the absence of the key, that is, in the absence of a means of encoding and decoding events and language within a set of symbolic coordinates. Nicolo's refusal to leave through the door Piachi shows him, with the whip in his hand, ultimately leads to a general exile for all characters involved from the possibility of meaning. The narrative of doors and keys, which entertained briefly the possibility of interior meaning, ends before the story itself ends. The closest analog of which I am aware in German literature to this failure of a narrative text's immanent structures of meaning to determine an act of violence can be found at the end of Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony," when the apparatus which inscribes the law into the skin of the perpetrator destroys its caretaker and itself in a final act of illegible and self-effacing punishment. Violence and the law form infrastructures in Kleist's text within which rhetorical and poetic meaning can be formed and made legible, e.g., through the creation of spatial distinctions such as doors and through the control of access to them by means of keys. Violence

and the law, however, do not guarantee the creation and flow of textual meaning. They also contain the possibility for unencoded, meaningless events of violence.

The innovative and counter-intuitive movement of “Der Findling” results from the paradoxical linkage between the search for meaning and the collapse of meaning, rather than their separation. Nicolo bases his plot to impersonate Elvire’s beloved and rape her in an interpretation of the key of his own name; this plot, however, remains unresolved and leads to the reversal of his adoption when Piachi bids him to leave the house for good. The possibility of meaning—not its actuality—triggers the legal and extralegal cycle of violence. Interpretation structures Nicolo’s plot to rape his step-mother, but fails to structure the plot of “Der Findling” in a thorough-going manner. Kleist’s story poses the question of how literature creates the distinction between meaningful and meaningless acts of violence, and how interpretation, like the law, can be complicit in this distinction and potentially limited in its ability to redraw it.

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