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Of Mothers and Lovers: Social and Maternal Conflict in Kleist’s *Penthesilea*

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Whether familial or erotic, normative cultural assessments of love identify it as a ubiquitous, typically positive, emotion. One need only look at the primacy of the mother-child bond in most psychoanalytic theories of development, as well as many anthropological studies of kinship, to understand the centrality of maternal love. Moreover, the longing to experience erotic love seems to permeate every aspect of social interaction outside the nuclear family. The social construction of appropriate partners and appropriate modes of «loving» pervade discussions of literature, culture, and the interpersonal. However, love is culturally specific and takes on greater or lesser importance depending on its value within a specific culture. Such is the case that we encounter in Heinrich von Kleist’s *Penthesilea*, when we begin to consider the differences in the conceptions of love between the Greeks and the Amazons. Kleist establishes a rich and complex set of cultural values for the Amazons, in which the significance of motherhood and love may be located in customs and mythology. We cannot read *Penthesilea* through the lens of normative conceptions of love, because they are fundamentally different from love as constructed in Kleist’s Amazon culture, which is deeply tied to the origins of their society. In creating such a culture with a profoundly foreign worldview, Kleist emphasizes the construction of meaning and modes of social control and the difficult role of the individual to assert him/herself within society.

Analyses of *Penthesilea* often depict the drama’s central conflict as the title character’s attempt to come to terms with her erotic and romantic love for Achilles, a love that ultimately leads to their mutual destruction. These analyses fail to account for the social construction of love within Amazon culture and the role that motherhood plays in Penthesilea’s desires for Achilles. Additionally, while the importance of war in Amazon culture has been a significant focus of scholarly attention, the role of motherhood in this society has been either taken for granted or considered with a less critical eye. Feminist readings of the drama have tended towards an absolute veneration of Amazon culture and Penthesilea herself as representative of feminine strength in opposition to the masculine tyranny of the Greeks. Most no-
tably, Hélène Cixous’s reading of the play suggests that Penthesilea’s love for Achilles is indicative of the purity and strength of Amazon emotion and its triumph over the domination that the Greek culture represents (Cixous 114). However, by conflating feminine utopia with Kleist’s Amazon culture, Cixous and many other scholars fail to account for some of the culturally specific values of the Amazons, ones that align with their mythology as constructed in the drama. While these scholars ascribe a nascent feminism to Kleist, a characterization that Ricarda Schmidt has pointed out is unwarranted (Schmidt 374–75), they do not take into account all aspects of cultural construction of subjectivity in Amazon culture, specifically the difference in their construction of love and the value placed on motherhood, thereby imposing their own conceptions of motherhood and love onto Penthesilea, both the drama and the character.

As I will demonstrate, the cultural values of the Amazons cannot be viewed through the lens of the cultural norms of the reader or those of Greek culture; rather, they must be considered on their own terms through an examination of the founding myths of the Amazons. First, through his modifications to the established mythology Kleist has Amazon cultural values identify motherhood as significant to the lives of the Amazons. This is most evident in his emphasis on the concept of motherhood as represented by the breast that the Amazons retain as well as the Rosenfest, a celebration of conception and future motherhood. Second, in Kleist’s play the Amazon concept of love varies significantly from that of the Greeks, as evidenced by the way that love and terms of endearment are used both amongst the Amazons and with outsiders. Third, when viewed in light of Amazon connotations of motherhood and love, specifically the emotions Penthesilea feels for her recently deceased mother and the conflict between her social and maternal obligations, we can better understand Penthesilea’s desire, her feelings of «love» for Achilles. Indeed, Otrere’s deathbed message to Penthesilea, when read against the background of Amazon constructions of motherhood and love, provides a powerful context for understanding Penthesilea’s actions throughout the drama. Ultimately, her supposed attraction to Achilles can be seen as a desire to reestablish the mother-daughter bond through transference of emotion rather than a simple case of infatuation.

Kleist’s Amazon mythology draws on a number of sources, but the modifications he makes to these sources are of particular importance to my analysis, especially his alterations to the conclusion of the battle between the Amazons and the Greeks and the origin of Amazon society. Michael Chaouli emphasizes that Kleist’s intervention in the mythology is located in the modifications he makes to the ending: Benjamin Hederich’s *Gründli-
ches mythologisches Lexikon (1770), like the ancient texts upon which it is based, shows Penthesilea being defeated at Achilles’s hands – an outcome that Kleist reverses (Chaouli 126). This reversal of Penthesilea’s fate is critical as it is bound up – as we shall see later – with her relationship to Achilles. Doris Borelbach’s research on mythology in the works of Kleist identifies a French source as the origin of the Amazon society; a source which describes Scythian women killing their conquerors. Borelbach notes that this version of the Amazon mythology does not depict Tanaïs’s rise to prominence, her self-mutilation through the removal of her right breast, and her subsequent naming of their society (Borelbach 54). Instead, this is another detail specific to Kleist’s (re)constructed Amazon mythology. Tanaïs baptizes the society in the name of a lack: «Die Amazonen oder Busenlosen» (15.1989), a detail emphasized by both Chaouli and Simon Richter. Richter posits that the «mastectomy at the origin of the Amazon state, the elaborate myth of Kleist’s invention» is ultimately central to this understanding of Kleist’s drama (Richter 228). He further argues that «[t]he dilemma is posed in terms of their breasts: full breasts – arguably a sign of maternity – crowd the movement of their arms and prevent the effective spanning of the bow» (230). By naming their society around their lack of breasts, the Amazons construct an identity characterized by only half of their social values. Richter’s focus on the missing breast, however, ignores the remaining breast which presumably continues to stand as a sign of maternity. Though he argues that the Amazon stands for a longing for her breast and maternity, I submit instead that she is an embodiment of both the lack and the full maternal breast. Amazons are warriors, but they are also female warriors who know that they must continue to procreate in order to maintain their culture. Their name seems to serve as a signifier for how they wish to be perceived by their enemies, but within their community they preserve the breast which supports their role as mothers, just as many of their rites revolve around motherhood and fertility.

Their battles and cultural ceremonies are bound up with their rites of procreation in order to replenish their population. First, the Rosenfest and the rites that surround it represent a transition in the life of an Amazon woman. Prior to the Rosenfest, the virgins are selected for the «blühnden Jungfraun Fest.» Penthesilea describes the women selected for the rite:

Marsbräute werden sie begrüßt, die Jungfrau,  
Beschenkt mit Waffen, von der Mütter Hand,  
Mit Pfeil’ und Dolch, und allen Gliedern fliegt,  
Von ems’gen Händen jauchzend rings bedient,  
Das erzene Gewand der Hochzeit an. (15.2056 –60)
These women go from being anonymous Amazon virgins to becoming brides of Mars, the god of war, complete with bridal dress, which simultaneously serves as battle armor. This is not a wedding ceremony familiar to Kleist’s readers or their Greek opponents, but rather a preparation for battle. Once they defeat their mates, they bring them to the temple of Diana to begin the Rosenfest, which, by penalty of death, only the participating virgins may see. Thereafter, the women celebrate the «Fest der reifen Mütter» (15.2081) and send the men home. Each ritual aligns with milestones familiar to the reader, but the meaning constructed by the Amazons is in keeping with their social goals and their cultural origins: the transition from adolescence to adulthood, from virginity to maternity, and from flower-gathering initiate to full Amazon warrior.

Just as these rites and social values are foreign to the reader of Kleist’s drama, so too does the Amazon identity seem impenetrable to the Greeks within the text. In the first scene, Antilochus asks what the Amazons want and why they are attacking the Greeks (1.13). Though he receives several answers, none of them has anything to do with the mythology of the Amazons. Instead the Greeks impose their own cultural meanings on the actions of Penthesilea, suggesting either that she is completely irrational, or that she holds a personal hatred toward Achilles (1.160–62). They appear to be unaware of the Amazon social rites and values. This is confirmed later in scene fifteen when Penthesilea describes Amazon cultural rites, historical tradition, and law to Achilles.

Descriptions of Amazon tradition can be read both as a means of educating others about Amazons, as well as a means of socialization. Penthesilea begins her explanation of the Rosenfest by detailing the annual census that precedes it: «So oft, nach jährlichen Berechnungen,/ Die Königin, was ihr der Tod entrafft,/ Dem Staat ersetzen will,/ ruft sie die blüh’ndsten/ Der Frau, […]» (15.2033–36). Distracted by Achilles, she interrupts the story but then resumes, repeating these lines word for word. Achilles seems unfamiliar with the precise history of the Amazons or their rites, reinforcing the Greeks’ earlier confusion and unfamiliarity with the Amazon Rosenfest. The anonymous Greek men assume that they are being lead to the «Schlachtbank» but when they are informed that they will be lead to Artemis’s temple where «Entzücken ohne Maß und Ordnung wartet,» they are dumbfounded and think they must be dreaming (6.980–85). When she mentions the requirement that she must defeat him on the battlefield, he inquires: «Und woher quillt, von wannen ein Gesetz, / unweiblich, du vergiebst mir, unnatürlich, / Dem übrigen Geschlecht der Menschen fremd?» (15.1902–1904). He also confesses that though he has heard stories of the Amazon origins and
breastlessness, he has taken the stories to be myths. Only through learning the history and laws of the culture from an Amazon or personally experiencing the Amazon rites do these sagas assume an air of authenticity for the Greeks. It is critical that Penthesilea, a perceived voice of authority within Amazon culture, introduces both the audience and Achilles to the foundation myths about the Amazons. By presenting the myth of Amazon origins through an Amazon character, and the queen no less, this mythology is not tainted by the Greek view of the Amazons, except by Achilles's interjections. The authenticity is, however, ambivalent, particularly when one considers the tone of Penthesilea's recitation. It is as though Penthesilea has had to learn the history by rote. This careful construction of the story shows its importance in Amazon socialization, a socialization that Penthesilea is in the process of undergoing. In some ways, though she is the best source of information about the Amazons, as their queen, she is also an unreliable source because she has not yet been fully initiated into her society and, never having participated in the Rosenfest, she is only able to describe it as it has been described to her. However, such is the case with all of the social values and descriptions of the Amazon origins told by Penthesilea.

Penthesilea's descriptions of the importance of war and battle to the Amazons show fundamental differences between Greek and Amazon society and social values. We learn from the stories Penthesilea tells Achilles that Amazon society was founded through an act of violence in response to the atrocities of war. This does not seem to indicate a significant difference between Greek and Amazon culture, since both seek conquest in their victories. The Greeks, however, appear to primarily focus on waging war, expanding their territory, or seeking revenge. The Trojan War, fought by the Greeks and Trojans, is a war of revenge; even Achilles's attack on and dismemberment of Hector, which Penthesilea mentions and of which Achilles boasts, is an attack of revenge. The Amazons, too, are described as taking revenge at the foundation of their society. As Kleist appropriates the French source identified by Borel Bach, he describes how they sharpened their bracelets into knives and murdered their captors. Thereafter, however, they take up arms to protect themselves and to ensure the continuing existence of the society as evidenced by the Rosenfest. This key difference explains why the Greeks do not comprehend the Amazons, and it is critical to understanding the difference between the external perception of the Amazons and their internal values. While the Greeks perceive the Amazons as breastless warriors, focusing on the lack to which Richter draws attention, the Amazons know that their breastless bellicosity is but one half of their social identity which protects their dual identity as mothers.
In her psychoanalytic approach to Penthesilea, Ursula Mahlendorf points to the breast imagery throughout the play as proof that the «fears and needs» addressed in the play «are those generated in the infant’s development before he/she has attained a clearly delimited sense of self and is still bound in symbiotic relationship to the mother» (Mahlendorf 257). Indeed, though many critics point to the metaphors of eating, hunting, and battle that recur in the story, the words «Brust,» «Busen» or «Brüste» are used over seventy times in the play in various contexts. Given that Kleist’s work depicts his version of the Amazon culture and that his specific contribution to the Amazon foundational myths is the violent mastectomy by Tanaïs, it is not surprising that breasts are a focal point to the story. The breasts – both the one that remains, and the absence or lack of the other – can be mapped to the dual responsibilities of the Amazon: that of warrior and mother. For Penthesilea, the only Amazon who seems to maintain a bond with her biological mother, this connection with the remaining breast is particularly strong.

One final aspect of Kleist’s construction of Amazon mythology that demonstrates the importance of this dual identity is the centrality of the high priestess of Diana, the goddess of both the hunt and childbirth, to their cultural rites. The Rosenfest, held as an offering to Diana, serves as a central point in the drama and as a festival celebrating the coming of age for Amazon women. Though one might assume that Athena, the goddess of wisdom and warfare, would be critical to Amazon culture, she does not appear to be central to Amazon rites and is mentioned only three times in the drama: by Odysseus in the first scene (1.48); as a «Schwester» goddess to Diana and Medea in the sixth scene (6.948); and by Achilles in a comparison between Penthesilea and Athena (15.1878). If women, marriage, and birth were meant as the core of the Rosenfest, then Hera, the goddess of the hearth, might have been a more suitable patron for such a rite, but Kleist’s ceremony is dedicated entirely to Diana, who represents both sides of the Amazon society equally. Just like the goddess of the hunt, the Amazons take pleasure in the spoils of their battles at the Rosenfest, but the double meaning of Diana’s aspects as a goddess cannot be ignored. As the goddess of childbirth, the dedication of the Rosenfest to Diana is suggestive of the importance of procreation and childbirth. By inventing these origins for the Amazons, and thereby drawing a connection between the original «mother» of the Amazons and the goddess of the hunt and childbirth, Kleist constructs a culture that is equally dedicated to birth and the hunt.

Fundamental to our understanding of the social constructedness of Penthesilea’s actions is the significance of motherhood to the Amazons as portrayed by Kleist. Reflecting on the Amazon foundation myths and the cen-
tral rites, like the *Rosenfest*, one sees that it is not enough to just be a woman, nor even to be a great warrior, for full membership in Amazon society; motherhood is essential to completing one’s transition into full membership within the community as well as to ensure its future. But while Penthesilea strives to obtain this level of participation in her state, her attempts to fulfill her multiple roles as queen, daughter, and mother lead to both her personal destruction and the collapse of the state.

While cultural value is placed on childbirth as a means of procreation and an additional means of protecting their society and the Amazons retain one breast to symbolize the importance of the breast in feeding and raising children, the only mother-daughter bond that seems to matter in Kleist’s drama is the one between Otrere and Penthesilea. The fact that this is the only mother-daughter bond of note indicates its significance in the conflict between Penthesilea’s social and personal obligations as well as her culturally constructed and biologically determined identities and emotions. There are certainly other mothers mentioned in the drama. The first is the high priestess of Diana, for whom the *Rosenfest* is offered (6.881). The second is Tanaïs, who is described as the «Völkermutter» by Penthesilea in her explanation of the Amazon origins (15.2047). In addition, various Amazons refer to the high priestess as «heilige Mutter,» – Prothoe even falling into the high priestess’s breast exclaiming «O meine Mutter!» (24.2711), and throughout the sixth scene the high priestess mentions the collective mothers of the young women preparing for the *Rosenfest* as «Mütter.» The priestess does not mention any of these mothers by name and never in the singular. The final mother mentioned in the drama is Otrere, who, while she was the Queen of the Amazons, was also Penthesilea’s biological mother. Moreover, all references by Penthesilea to her mother are to Otrere, not to the priestess as is the case with the other Amazons. While the other Amazons place value on the mother of their people, and revere the queen of the Amazons for her position, they do not maintain the kind of relationship with their mothers that Penthesilea and Otrere share.

Amazon social values of procreation and battle, as presented in Kleist’s drama, come into conflict with the authority represented by Penthesilea’s mother. As queen of the Amazons, Otrere represents the social order of Amazon society but is also Penthesilea’s biological mother. Her parting message to her daughter serves as the impetus for all of Penthesilea’s actions, even if the readers are unaware of this motivation until well into drama. Penthesilea explains her mother’s expectations for her future:
Doch sie, die würd’ge Königinn, die längst
Mich schon ins Feld gewünscht – denn ohne Erben
War, wenn sie starb, der Thron und eines andern
Ehrgeiz’gen Nebenstammes Augenmerk –
Sie sagte: «geh, mein süßes Kind! Mars ruft dich!
Du wirst den Peleïden dir bekränzen:
Werd’ eine Mutter, stolz und froh, wie ich –»
Und drückte sanft die Hand mir, und verschied. (15.2133–40).

Otrere’s will serves simultaneously as the voice of the queen, the law of the Amazon state, and the desire of the protagonist’s mother to maintain her royal lineage. This produces conflicts between the authority of mother and queen; that is, between the biologically maternal and the social state, played out through Penthesilea as she becomes queen and must reconcile her duties to her mother and her people. Examining this pivotal struggle between Penthesilea’s relationship to her people and her mother through the lens of the socially specific notions of love and family sheds new light on Penthesilea’s interaction with Achilles.³

Penthesilea’s relationship to her mother provides the reader with the best motivator for her actions. As mentioned earlier, Otrere is the only biological mother of importance in the drama. Penthesilea’s relationship with her mother is exceptional in a society that mentions no other «actual» mothers but is centered on birth and procreation, consistently evoking the mother of the nation in its mythology. On her deathbed, in the above quoted lines, Otrere conveys her final requests for her daughter. Penthesilea describes her mother having long wished for her daughter to go onto the battlefield. Kleist’s choice of the past participle of «wünschen» shows that this was an ongoing desire, not something which was coming to light on her deathbed. This statement, properly understood by Penthesilea, is a typical desire for Amazons and would likely have been Penthesilea’s future regardless of her mother’s wishes. Her second statement, that Penthesilea would crown Achilles, seems almost like a prophecy rather than a command that Penthesilea should undertake. The use of the future tense expresses that this is something that will happen, not that she simply desires it to happen, thereby reinforcing the prophetic meaning. Finally, Otrere tells her daughter to become a mother using the imperative of «werden» to articulate her desire, thus suggesting that her final wish for her daughter is that she become a mother and bear a child, in keeping with aspects of Amazon culture critical to their future. She is not commanding her daughter to love and rise to the throne with Achilles by her side. Accepting Achilles as a sort of heteronormative lover and king is a fundamental misunderstanding of Otrere’s words. Though romantic
love is something Penthesilea understands, she appreciates that, in her role as Amazon queen, romantic love is not an acceptable emotion. Otrere does not indicate that Penthesilea should seek out Achilles, in contravention of Amazon law, but that he will be the one whom she would defeat, and thus would be the father of her child, thereby carrying on her lineage and the future of her people. Why then, if Penthesilea seems to understand the laws, mores, and culture of her people, and wants to follow through with her mother’s desires, does she distort these desires so fully throughout the course of the drama?

Penthesilea holds her mother and her mother’s commands in high esteem in a society where the women are all described as sisters, and where no one mother appears to be valued over another. She does this not because Otrere is queen, but because she is Penthesilea’s biological mother. In asserting her subject position to seek out Achilles as her partner on the battlefield, rather than mate with one of the many men she defeated, Penthesilea simultaneously defies and reinforces the Amazon state: by defying the letter of the law and following the spoken commands of her own mother. The two laws seem to be at odds in what Clayton Koelb posits is a desire to «conform to the script written by her dying mother.» He goes on to suggest that «[t]he authority of all maternal speech is, from Penthesilea’s point of view, the source of all the state’s authority to begin with» (Koelb 74). By following her mother’s wishes, Penthesilea is not only abiding by the authority of the state as represented by her mother as queen, but also fulfilling the dying wishes of her mother by defeating Achilles.

Only once does Penthesilea explicitly declare her love for any individual. After describing her mother’s death, Penthesilea says to both Prothoe and Achilles «Ich liebte sie» (15.2172). Though she uses the past tense to describe her love for her mother, her mother is still very much in her thoughts when Odysseus describes Penthesilea’s first encounter with Achilles at the Olympic Games. Odysseus reports that Penthesilea utters the following words: «solch einem Mann, o Prothoe, ist/Otrere, meine Mutter, nie begegnet!» (1.89–90). Though this has been read purely as an expression of desire for Achilles, there is also an attempt to relate her encounters with Achilles back to her mother and express a longing or desire for a connection to her, which is now impossible. Additionally, prior to telling Achilles about her love for her mother, she explains how it was «als ob die Mutter mich umschwebte» as she grasps the bow of Tanaïs; nothing seems more holy «[a]ls ihren letzten Willen zu erfüllen.» She then rides into battle, the battle prior to the Rosenfest, «Mars weniger,/Dem großen Gott, der mich dahin gerufen,/Als der Otrere Schatten, zu gefallen» (15.2161–69). Even as queen of the Amazons,
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Penthesilea is more concerned with her mother’s love and the desires Otrere has expressed for her than about her fellow Amazons.

Several critical analyses of *Penthesilea* have addressed the importance of love. In their Lacanian reading of both this drama and *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*, Chris Cullens and Dorothea von Mücke suggest that love serves as a counterpoint to social expectations that ultimately reinforce the patriarchal order of the Greeks (Cullens/von Mücke 463). Their analysis, while compelling, fails to account for Kleist’s deliberate construction of alternate ideals of love within the matriarchal Amazon society. Seán Allan suggests that the love «which we see in the mother-daughter relationship of Otrere and Penthesilea and in the «sisterly» love of Prothoe for Penthesilea» is ideal, selfless, and without «self-interest, possessiveness and compulsion» (Allan 154). He posits that Kleist’s portrayal of Amazon order is more «advanced» than that of the Greeks and that their concept of love leaves them «vulnerable to exploitation by more ruthless natures» – namely the Greeks (154). Allan seems to echo Cixous’s assessment of Amazon culture as somehow better than that of the Greeks, more evolved. However, Kleist’s text consciously constructs differing conceptions of love in Amazon and Greek societies, which must be understood both independent of one another and in their moments of intersection. Furthermore, Penthesilea’s personal conflict exposes the contradictions in Amazon interpretations of love.

Kleist’s works are often about confronting social expectations and attempting to redefine and reconsider the norms of society. As such, the love that is attributed to Penthesilea by others throughout the drama can be defined neither through the Greek cultural construction of love nor the reader’s expectations. While love in Amazon culture is different than that among the Greeks, there is little indication that this Greek love is somehow better than love in the Amazon culture. Allan contends that the *Rosenfest* represents the closest similarity to the Greek construction of conquest and love, which is always inflected with sexuality, and that the bonds that form during this rite lead to more emotional bonds (Allan 154). The words of the high priestess in relation to this are more ambivalent. As the preparations for the *Rosenfest* commence, the high priestess turns to the Amazon warriors and tells them to begin the festivities. While they wait for Penthesilea to return from the battlefield she impatiently chastises them for delaying saying: «Nun? Wollt ihr eure Gäste nicht erheitern? / – Steht ihr nicht unbehülflich da, ihr Jungfrau’n, / Als müßt’ ich das Geschäft der Lieb’ euch lehren!» (6.950–52) Though she refers to the act of sex with the men as «Liebe,» there is a sense that by «Geschäft der Liebe» she is referring to sex with the Greek captives. In this case, «Liebe» appears to be the act of procreation. The jux-
tапosition of Geschäft and Liebe indicates that this is a task that they must undertake, and that this is not a pleasurable type of love but a chore that must be undertaken: a Geschäft that is critical to the Amazon society. This heterosexual erotic love is consciously marked as a different type of love than that which is found in Amazon culture between its denizens.

As indicated by the statements of the high priestess, there is a sense within Amazon society that the Geschäft der Liebe is different both from the emotion of Liebe and from the god Liebe, better known as Cupid or Amor. Furthermore, mythology common to both Greek and Amazon cultures is valued differently between them. In the seventh scene, when an Amazon captain reports that Penthesilea has been struck by «Amors Pfeil,» there is still no mention of any emotion of love associated with this arrow (7.1075–76). Instead the high priestess expresses disbelief and describes Cupid’s infectious strike as a sort of poison. What the Greeks would consider to be romantic love, is dangerous, even deadly, in Amazon culture. When Penthesilea describes the feelings she has for Achilles, she likewise describes them with a reference to Cupid. She explains: «Der Gott der Liebe hatte mich er- eilt. / Doch von zwei Dingen schnell beschloß ich Eines, / Dich zu gewinnen, oder umzukommen: / Und jetzt ist mir das Süßere erreicht» (15.2219–22). In referring to the God of Love we are reminded of the captain’s negative association with Cupid. While Penthesilea does not say that his arrow has struck her, she does suggest that he overtakes her, or triumphs over her. Her choices under his control are to either win over Achilles or to die. Her perceived defeat of Achilles allows her to not only be seen as a strong leader of her people, but it also fulfills her mother’s deathbed desires. Regardless of her emotional attachment to Achilles, her actions are counter to Amazon law and cultural norms. It is not that the Amazons do not experience love – the verb lieben and the adjective geliebt are used within the context of Amazon culture – but that these terms do not hold the same meaning as they might from the perspective of the audience or the Greeks.

Kleist uses the term Geliebte throughout the drama to describe the relationships between various individuals and particularly in relation to Penthesilea. For example, in the relationship between Prothoe and Penthesilea, Geliebte is the term most often used to describe the relationship between the two women. Upon returning from the battlefield for the first time, Penthesilea expresses her disappointment to Prothoe. In her attempts to comfort Penthesilea, Prothoe reponds «Geliebte, ich beschwöre dich –» and is cut off by Penthesilea who will hear none of her comforts or attempts to get her to think rationally about the situation with Achilles (5.634). Later, when Penthesilea decides to go into battle, Prothoe implores her again «Geliebte! Wir
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beschwören dich –» this time with the support of the rest of the Amazon army (9.1174). She then directs Penthesilea to speak when she considers her prospects on the battlefield, again calling her «Geliebte» (9.1341). This is not, however, a one-sided expression of formality on the part of the Amazons. Penthesilea tells Prothoe:

Ich weiß, ich weiß –
Nun, meines Blutes bess’re Hälf’t’ ist dein.
– Das Unglück, sagt man, läutert die Gemüter,
Ich, du Geliebte, ich empfand es nicht;
Erbittert hat es, Götern mich und Menschen
In unbegriff’ner Leidenschaft empört. (14.1684–89)

By calling Prothoe her better half, and referring to her as «Geliebte,» Penthesilea’s language demonstrates the type of love between Amazons. Prothoe seems to be her closest confidante, and the terms of endearment that Penthesilea uses to refer to her mimic what we might expect from lovers. The emotional bond between Prothoe and Penthesilea might be described as one of love – a type of almost familial or homosocial love. This sentiment is central to Amazon and therefore Penthesilea’s understanding of love.

When Achilles uses this same term, however, he does so from the perspective of the Greek cultural construction of love. Achilles declares his love for Penthesilea, albeit to Prothoe, stating:

Sag’ ihr, daß ich sie liebe.
[...]
Wie Männer Weiber lieben;
Keusch und das Herz voll Sehnsucht doch, in Unschuld,
Und mit der Lust doch, sie darum zu bringen.
Ich will zu meiner Königin sie machen (13.1520–24)

As a representative for the Greek culture on neutral ground under the oak tree following his defeat of Penthesilea, Achilles references a heteronormative conception of love that Protoe and Penthesilea do not understand, but that seems to coincide with the final wishes of Penthesilea’s mother Otrere. This is reaffirmed in scene fifteen, when Achilles expresses shock and horror that Amazons cut off their breasts. As he presses his face to her chest he says: «O Königin!/Der Sitz der jungen lieblichen Gefühle,/Um eines Wahns, barbarisch –» (15.2012–13). He seems to be referencing feelings of love, likely the romantic love, with which he is familiar. Penthesilea responds: «Sei ganz ruhig./Sie rettet in diese Linke sich,/Wo sie dem Herzen um so näher wohnen. Du wirst mir, hoff’ ich, deren keins vermissen. –» (15.2014–17). Penthesilea hopes that Achilles will find this love sufficient for the bond that they seem bound to pursue. She seems to recognize that her idea of love is
something distinct from what Achilles means as she does not express her emotion toward Achilles in the same way. Though Cullens and von Mücke suggest that Penthesilea holds an «intense love» for Achilles that «would make even a bear or panther harmless and approachable,» the passage they cite in reference to this says nothing of love (Cullens/von Mücke 469). Instead the term Penthesilea uses to describe her emotion is *Regung*:

> Mir diesen Busen zu zerschmettern, Prothoe!
> – Ist’s nicht, als ob ich eine Leier zürnend
> Zertreten wollte, weil sie still für sich,
> Im Zug des Nachtwinds, meinen Namen flüstert?
> Dem Bären kauert’ ich zu Füßen mich,
> Und streichelte das Panthertier, das mir
> In solcher Regung nahte, wie ich ihm. (9.1177–83)

She has no name for the emotion she feels, because the only type of love she can identify and name is the love between mother and daughter or a filial love between Amazon sisters.

Though Penthesilea can be described as harboring feelings for Achilles, the question remains whether these feelings can rightly be called «love.» Chaouli has suggested that «Penthesilea does not desire Achilles but ‹Achilles,› a name passed on to her by her dying mother in contravention of Amazon law» (Chaouli 137). His focus on the metaphorical role of Achilles in the drama establishes him as a place holder or an ideal, and not as a person whom Penthesilea desires. The meaning he embodies must be considered separate from a desire for him as an individual, and instead as a desire for what he represents. Richter argues that Achilles stands in for the missing Amazon breast in his Kleinian reading of the drama (Richter 233). He focuses on Achilles as representative of the breast that has been removed in formation of the Amazon state. Based on the cultural construction of love in Kleist’s Amazon society and the mythology of the breast he constructs, I suggest instead that Achilles might be seen as representative of the breast that remains. The love Penthesilea is capable of feeling is the love she harbors in her left breast, the breast she associates with her mother.

For Penthesilea, Achilles is the culmination of her mother’s desires and a means reuniting with her. Though Penthesilea willingly goes against Amazon law to recapture this maternal bond, there is no sense in her actions and statements that she is interested in taking Achilles as a king which would be a further violation. While she gives Achilles a golden ring to explain who she is and to mark him as belonging to her, this ring, rather than taking the place of a wedding ring, is a means of shackling Achilles to her (15.1810–40). In this context she speaks several times of the brides at the *Rosenfest*, but there is
never once a mention of a groom or «Bräutigam.» In fact, she quickly replaces the aforementioned ring with «eine andre Kette,» namely the Rosenkranz she has made him as a symbol of the Rosenfest, where she will procreate with him (15.1832). Finally, she expresses no interest in becoming his queen. Once she believes that she has captured Achilles, she insists that they return to Themiscyra. When it is revealed that Achilles is the one who defeated her, she is troubled and announces that she would rather die than leave with him.

In her cannibalistic act against Achilles, Penthesilea attaches herself to his breast. Penthesilea’s attachment is not only a means of defeating him, but also of reuniting with her mother: «Den Zahn schlägt sie in seine weiße Brust,/Sie und die Hunde, die wetteifernden,/Oxus und Sphynx den Zahn in seine rechte,/In seine linke sie [...]» (23.2670–73). About this scene Mahlendorf suggests: «It is significant that she attacks his left breast, the breast intact with her, for in attacking him she attacks herself» (Mahlendorf 254). Rather than attacking the self, Penthesilea instead attempts to reunite with her original source of love and connection by suckling at her mother’s breast. She identifies her own remaining breast with that of her mother’s, the breast upon which she nursed as a child, again simultaneously devouring and kissing her mother. Because of the strong identification with and love for her mother, Penthesilea attempts to reconstitute this relationship and does so through attachment to Achilles. His breast then stands in for her mother’s and enables her to believe that she has reestablished her original maternal bond. This reading also suggests an alternative understanding of oral references in Kleist’s drama. If Achilles serves as a means of reincorporating the body of her mother, whom he represents to Penthesilea, the many mentions of eating, chewing, and kissing, among many others, can then be read as gesturing to the maternal signification of the breast as central to the Amazon culture, not necessarily as destructive tendencies. This reincorporation ultimately fails, however, because this is a false breast; it cannot lead to a reunion with her mother. Though he metaphorically stands in for the mother he is a poor substitute, and only represents her rhetorically, not physically.

Finally, Penthesilea’s death and the destruction of the Amazon state may be seen as a final reunion with her mother. After devouring Achilles, a catatonic Penthesilea returns to her Amazon sisters who narrate her approach. Penthesilea and her actions are now just as foreign to her own people as they were to Odysseus and the Greeks. After Achilles has been laid at the high priestess’s feet, she demands that Prothoe take Penthesilea away. Prothoe is distraught and as a means of commanding her to get a hold of herself the priestess says: «Fass’ dich. – Sie hatte eine schöne Mutter./– Geh,
biet’ ihr deine Hülf’ und führ’ sie fort» (24.2743–44). This mention of her mother shows that the high priestess recognizes the bond between the two. Although Chaouli suggests such references to the beautiful are an attempt to counteract the aesthetic representation of disgust in the drama, the high priestess attempts to replace Penthesilea’s attack on Achilles with the memory of her beautiful mother, just as Penthesilea attempts to replace her mother with Achilles. In addition to commenting on Penthesilea’s mother, the first Amazon queen, Tanaïs, is alluded to as Penthesilea reawakens out of her catatonic state and drops her bow – the bow that Tanaïs both took up and similarly dropped when she assumed control of the Amazons. As the bow falls the Amazons describe how it «taumelt – / Kliirrt, und wankt, und fällt – !/ Und noch einmal am Boden zuckt – / Und stirbt, Wie er der Tanaïs geboren ward» (24.2770–72). Tanaïs is not only the mother of the Amazon people, but also a connection to Penthesilea’s maternal bloodline and a reminder of the Amazons’ bloody origins, to which Penthesilea has returned through her murder of Achilles. The mention of these two «mothers» shows that although the Amazons neither condone nor accept Penthesilea’s actions, she embodies the conflict at the core of their society, the conflict between the individual and the social, the subject and the state, the biological and the culturally constructed.

The battle between rational law and emotion is Penthesilea’s internal struggle. She must decide between love for her mother and obedience to Amazon rule. While Penthesilea’s sense of duty to her people leads her to desire to abide by Amazon law, the emotional connection to her mother provides incentive to act counter to these rational tenets. In the end, Penthesilea renounces her throne and her role as queen before killing herself. She tells Prothoe: «Ich sage vom Gesetz der Frau mich los,/ Und folge diesem Jüngling hier» (24.3012–13). She chooses to follow the law established by her mother’s deathbed instructions rather than the Amazon state, of which she is now the matriarch. Additionally, by saying she is following Achilles, she also chooses to follow her mother into the afterlife. After failing to fulfill her mother’s wishes, Penthesilea chooses to die rather than compromise her individual desires to Amazon laws, which are not supported by all Amazons. What we see in Penthesilea is a queen of a culture «married» to Mars, the god of war, who is just participating in her first battle; a virgin leading a people who worship at the altar of Diana, the goddess of childbirth; and a daughter who privileges the relationship with her mother within a society that honors motherhood but not the individual mother-daughter bond. Her subject position is continually at odds with her society, and yet she knows nothing but the values and teachings of her culture.
When Kleist explained to his cousin Marie in 1810 that his «innerstes Wesen liegt darin, und Sie haben es wie eine Seherin aufgefaßt: der ganze Schmutz zugleich und Glanz meiner Seele» (Kleist, Werke 4 398), he suggested that this drama offers a mirror of his soul. While many analyses of the drama focus on Kleist’s own romantic life as fodder for Penthesilea and Achilles’s tragic love story, this investigation has sought to consider the work on its own terms beyond the biographical connection. Alongside the romantic aspects of Kleist’s drama there is a tension between the individual desires and social norms that Penthesilea embodies. By taking a broader view of the drama, away from the romantic relationship between Penthesilea and Achilles, and focusing on Kleist’s construction of love, emotion, and motherhood, we are able to see that Penthesilea occupies a space of tension in the text. That Kleist claims such a close connection with the work and the character suggests he identifies not only with the romantic aspects of the drama, but with the other subject positions that Penthesilea defines for herself within and against her socially constructed roles. Reading the text as symbolic of the complex relationship between the individual and the cultural, the biological and the social has moved us away from an interpretation focused strictly on erotic, romantic love and towards a more complex understanding of the culturally constructed meanings that Kleist sought to interrogate.

Notes

1 Ursula Mahlendorf’s article provides an excellent early synopsis of secondary literature on love as it relates to Penthesilea. For more recent scholarship see Allan and Cul-lens/von Mücke.
2 All citations of Penthesilea come from the Erstdruck version of the work in volume two of Kleist’s collected works published by the Deutscher Klassiker Verlag. Quotations are cited with scene and line numbers.
3 This analytical focus on Amazon social construction of meaning is indebted to Amber Jacobs’s analysis of the absence of maternal law in contemporary psychoanalytic readings of myth. Though the theoretical core of this paper does not utilize the categories of the Lacanian real, imaginary, and symbolic and is not based on the work of Melanie Klein or Luce Irigaray (on whom Jacobs focuses), Jacobs’s suggestion that the maternal be read back into understandings of mythology was critical to the formulation of my approach.
4 For other psychoanalytic readings of the drama see Mahlendorf and Richter.
5 Koelb has suggested that this theme of literal reincorporation through eating is a theme that is found elsewhere in Kleist, such as in Michael Kohlhaas.
Of Mothers and Lovers

Works Cited


The young Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), influenced by eighteenth-century Enlightenment views, was mistrustful of superstition and religious ceremony. In a letter to his sister, Ulrike von Kleist, dated May 1799, Kleist writes: «Etwas muß dem Menschen heilig sein. Uns beiden, denen es die Zeremonien der Religion u. die Vorschriften des konventionellen Wohlstandes nicht sind, müssen um so mehr die Gesetze der Vernunft heilig sein» (Kleist 491). Rather than supporting religious rituals and conventions that may have appealed more to the emotions, the young Kleist favored reason, as the above excerpt reveals. As scholars have long pointed out, however, reason for Kleist became unsettled two years later after his encounter with Immanuel Kant’s philosophy in 1801. This is not to say that Kleist completely abandoned reason, but he began to question its nature as well as the perception of sensory phenomena: is truth really truth or does it only appear so to a particular subject?

In Kleist’s novellas, occurrences rarely turn out to be how they are first perceived. The entrance of supposed supernatural events into the world of causality, as well as the differences in perception of and belief in these phenomena, complicates the situations further. One example precedes the frequently cited rape scene marked by the dash in «Die Marquise von O …» (1808). At first, it appears that the Russian Officer steps in to rescue the Marquise from the seizure and assault by the enemy riflemen. Immediately before the Marquise sinks to the ground and collapses in a dead faint, her perception of the Russian Officer resembles a type of hallucination: «Der Marquise schien er ein Engel des Himmels zu sein» (Kleist 105). Later it is revealed that a paranormal or divine encounter did not occur; the novella provides more closure, calling the initial perception and belief of the Marquise and the narrator into question. Along similar lines, mysterious events occupy the center of Kleist’s «Das Bettelweib von Locarno» (1810) and «Die heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik (Eine Legende)» (1810), but in these two narratives, the phenomena retain their shrouds of mystery even at the end. Critics tend to treat these two narratives separately in Kleist schol-