

Women's Issues in 19th Century Theater Culture:

A Study Based on Anna Löhn-Siegel's Memoir of Theater

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1. Introduction

This analysis focuses on Anna Löhn-Siegel (1825–1902), a successful 19th century actress who became a leading figure in the women's movement. It refers to Löhn-Siegel's long theatrical memoir, *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde: aus den Anfängen meiner Theaterlaufbahn*, [*How I Became an Actress: From the Beginnings of My Theater Career*, 1881] (hereafter *Wie ich Schauspielerin wurde* or WS), in which she discussed her theatrical career.

Using the book as a starting point, this study scrutinizes Löhn-Siegel's view of the theater as a place of liberation for women, and her simultaneous criticism of it for propagating a show culture that celebrated oppressed female characterizations and prioritized the physical appearance of actresses over their acting skills. It also examines her recognition of the theater as a "republic" space, a cultural space that provided equal opportunities for men and women to play active roles.

1.1. About Anna Löhn-Siegel

In the present day, Löhn-Siegel is a forgotten actress with little research conducted on her legacy. In one of my previous articles, I discussed Löhn-Siegel's interpretation of Heinrich von Kleist's (1777–1811) famous 1810 drama *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn oder der Feuerprobe* [*Katie of Heilbronn or The Trial by Fire*] from the perspective of women's issues, and briefly introduced the actress in the paper introduction (Yamazaki 2025). For those who have not read that article, I present here a brief introduction of Löhn-Siegel.¹⁾

Löhn-Siegel was born in Naundorf, a small town near Freiburg, not far from

the large city of Dresden. She was brought up by her father, a Protestant pastor, and her mother, who was passionate about education. Löhn-Siegel's family was a strict, patriarchal middle-class family, and Löhn-Siegel received a rigorous education and was passionate about learning languages such as Latin, Greek and French. However, she grew tired of this strict educational atmosphere and constantly thought about leaving the house and becoming free.

Löhn-Siegel's parents encouraged her to play the piano from a young age, inculcating in her a deep appreciation for music and the performing arts. As she grew up, she went to Dresden to study to become a piano teacher, where she was also trained as an actress. She signed her first contract as an actress in the small Polish city of Posen in 1845, followed by contractual engagements with the National Theatre in Leipzig in 1848 and subsequently with the Court Theatre in Dresden. She became a famous actress of her time but, in 1872, retired at the age of 47 and married lawyer and journalist Franz Ludwig Siegel (1812–1877) (Chrambach 2020).

In addition to her acting career, she also showed rare talent in the literary arts, writing poetry and plays, and was highly regarded by Heinrich Laube (1806–1884), a famous playwright at the National Theatre in Leipzig at the time (WS, 259). In her memoirs, Löhn-Siegel frequently criticized the unequal situation of men and women in society and the arts. In fact, she had already written an essay in 1870 before drafting these memoirs, titled “*Unfeminine: A Word to Counter a Prejudice Among a Large Part of the Female World*” [*Unweiblich: Ein Wort zur Bekämpfung eines Vorurtheils unter einem großen Theile der Frauenwelt*]. In this essay, she confronted social prejudice against emerging career women, and discussed the oppression of women and their liberation from such subjugation. Oelsner (1894, 56) lists this essay by Löhn-Siegel as one of the many important documents for understanding the women's liberation movement of the 19th century.

Löhn-Siegel wrote her memoirs in this context, reflecting her awareness of the quest for women's civil rights and the improvement of their social status at the turn of the 19th century. Focusing on Löhn-Siegel's memoirs, this study examines her ideas about femininity in relation to theater and the performing arts.

1.2. Analytical methods

This paper uses Angelika Schaser's (2020) study of women's issues in the era of Löhn-Siegel as its theoretical framework. Schaser analyzes the women's liberation movements that evolved out of the French Revolution, religious developments in the 19th-century Germany, and women-led media that contributed to the formation of public discourses on women's issues.

The study of Heide Wunder (1992), who examined the conditions and professional activities of women in modern Germany, was also used as the theoretical framework for this paper. Wunder indicated that women of this period, in contrast to men, were enclosed in private spaces and engaged in limited occupations. By referring to these studies, this article shows that women's liberation and oppression in the theater world, problematized by Löhn-Siegel, are linked to the broader gender-based issues faced by women during the same period. Thus, this paper not only analyzes the progressive features of the theater world but also discusses its negative aspects that reinforced the oppression of women.

2. Emancipation from patriarchal family and stereotyped gender roles

As mentioned in the introduction, it was her family's deep molding in the arts that nurtured Löhn-Siegel's passion for acting. However, her decision to become a professional actress was strongly motivated by the desire for freedom from a patriarchal and conservative family that harbored oppressive views of women. During that time, the theater industry had established itself as a place for women's professional advancement and, by becoming an actress, Löhn-Siegel aimed to claim her own independence.

In this section, her purpose is examined in light of the research on women's issues of her time. First, it focuses on an episode described at the beginning of her memoirs.

I crawled out from behind the patriarchal stove of the rectory and went to the theater, not so much for the sake of stagecraft, but for the purpose of getting to know the world and people. (WS, 21)²⁾

Löhn-Siegel symbolically referred to the private space of the home, which generally made people comfortable, as a “stove”, portraying it as a fundamental masculine and conservative place. She longed to be liberated from that closed place and enjoy the wide and free world.

Initially, Löhn-Siegel confessed that although she had a suitor, she did not want to marry and preferred to study as well as write poetry rather than do domestic work (WS, 36), contrary to the general trend among women at the time. In the 19th century, men and women were distinguished not only in the public but also the private spheres. Women were expected to devote themselves to the private sphere, the home, reinforcing the gender role of the female as wife or mother (Schaser 2020, 17). Löhn-Siegel did not choose a life modelled on this gender norm.

For the progressive Löhn-Siegel, theater was the place where she could realize her professional independence as a woman; according to Wunder (1992, 146), the performing arts from the 18th century onward required a high degree of skill in acting, dancing, and singing, which led to the professionalization of female actors. The advancement of women in this artistic field began with Friederike Caroline Neuber (1697–1760), who played a leading role. However, this advancement was seen mainly among women who hailed from families that were in the theater business (*ibid.*, 150).

Theater in the 19th century shifted its identity from a circus-like, disorganized form of entertainment performed by traveling troupes to a stable artistic institution that consistently presented culturally oriented works based on literary texts in theaters. This shift resulted in an increased demand for highly skilled actresses.

Indeed, many prominent actresses were working in German-speaking theaters during that period. In Löhn-Siegel’s memoirs (WS, 200–201), for example, she praises Sophie Schröder (1781–1868), an actress of great renown at the National Theater in Dresden as well as at the Theater in Hamburg and the Burgtheater in Vienna: Schröder was known for her outstanding and highly advanced recitative skills (Yamazaki 2014, 123).

The theater field featured actresses who served as role models for women,

working as professionals in front of the audience in the public space. Even in conservative times when gender discrimination was still prevalent, actresses, like their male counterparts, were highly respected for their acting and recitation skills. For this reason, Löhn-Siegel hoped to develop her artistic talents in a free and creative cultural space open to women.

As the above quote indicates, the theater was a place where one could meet many inspiring people. However, beyond that, the stage also brought to life characters of diverse races, classes, and genders from different countries. Actors could cross borders to embody and depict the lives of varied people, enabling them to experience different identities.

In this vein, Löhn-Siegel's childhood theatrical experiences at home could shed light on her skeptical attitude toward conventional gender roles. According to her memoirs, she disguised herself one day as a boy for a performance – to the surprise of her colleagues, who saw her and said, “now fully dressed as a man” (“nun vollends in Männerkleidern”) (WS, 47). Löhn-Siegel's openness toward donning male costumes was facilitated by her childhood experience of playfully performing mythical stories with her older sister, as depicted in this quote:

But that might have been due to the fact that I felt freer and more unbound than I did in the ladies' room. A different kind of courage entered me when I was free of the long skirts. At least then I could appear to be what I would have liked to be in reality: a boy.

Already in our childhood plays at home, I was always the man and my older sister the woman. Even in the mythological performances, which were very common in our house, when we played the gods of Greece and Scandinavian mythology in the granary or hayloft of the vicarage, I always pretended to be a god, while my sisters felt happier as goddesses and was only forced to accept a god role. (WS, 47)

Löhn-Siegel willingly played the role of a male god in a mythological performance with her sister. She also freed herself from the “long skirt” (“die langen Röcke”) that symbolized the typical women's clothing of the time and

achieved the transformation from woman to man. According to Wunder (1992, 117), middle-class housewives and daughters wore long skirts that were more buttoned up since the 16th century. In contrast, the maids and day laborers who served them, needing to ensure greater mobility for their household work, wore clothing that showed more leg.

Löhn-Siegel uses the term “long skirt” to symbolize an oppressed woman confined to a closed life in the private spaces of a bourgeois household. The shedding of this garment signified liberation from the repressed female condition.

For Löhn-Siegel, the theatrical experience allowed her to cross fixed gender boundaries through her various roles. This indicates that Löhn-Siegel experienced considerable dissatisfaction with the female gender role she played in real life and, in contrast, felt liberated from stifling gender norms when on stage. Thus, she decided to seek professional independence in the theater where she could demonstrate the artistic skills of her contemporaries and chose to develop her own literary and intellectual formation by working as an actress and writer. In the theatrical world, where she crossed gender boundaries, she reexamined the dominant power structures and femininity that determined the public and private lives of her contemporaries.

3. Criticism of the theater: Visualizing and reinforcing gender inequality through the performing of works

The previous section examined the reasons why Löhn-Siegel chose theater; a workplace that enabled female artists to achieve professional independence and break free from traditional gender norms. However, while she appreciated the theater as a workspace where men and women could work together in an equal capacity, she disapproved of the presentation of works that were derogatory toward women. From the perspective of modern German literary criticism, criticism is often levelled against the dramas of the time that incorporated discrimination against women and contempt and satire towards minorities. However, Löhn-Siegel did not mention these things, and mainly referred to her female roles.

Taking this Löhn-Siegel critique as a cue, this section examines how the theater reinforced the public's conservative conception of gender through its

productions from the perspective of the women's issues of the time, discussing this actress's resistive spirit in confronting the conservative and repressed representations of women.

When Löhn-Siegel first took the stage, she realized that many female characters on stage were oppressed and downtrodden figures. She expressed her indignation at the audience's delight in seeing these psychologically distressed women:

The many women I had to play, suffering and wailing under laws to which they had never given and would never give their consent, began to disgust me even then. Perpetually oppressed, enslaved women! And the audience enjoyed it. The worse off a woman was, and the more she cried and screamed, the more applause she got. Incomprehensible!

"What sane person can find a taste for that? Take pleasure in the most obvious injustices that the weaker gender has to endure? And my female colleagues flock to these torture sticks!" I often exclaimed in amazement. (WS, 106)

Löhn-Siegel criticized the oppressed women portrayed on stage as well as the public's sadistic attitude of acceptance that applauded them. Her critique of both sides reveals that the theater is a cultural device that visualizes the hierarchical relations of male dominance and female contempt in human society and commercially showcases the "weak gender" of women who endure suffering and misery as a selling point.

There is an episode in this regard about Löhn-Siegel that is worth mentioning. She was given the role of Maria, the younger sister of the title hero, in a performance of Goethe's historical drama *Götz von Berlichingen mit eiserner Hand* [*Goetz von Berlichingen of the Iron Hand*, 1773] in Glogau. Maria is a woman who is betrayed by the man she loves. This actress thought that in order to perform the role of Maria, she needed to have a "soft, delicate, feminine" tone of voice, and she also ironically told her colleagues that she had to "whisper lovingly to the unfaithful, bad white man" (WS, 168). Löhn-Siegel regarded Maria as a

weak and helpless gender who was at the mercy of men and whose feelings were violated. She would have preferred to play Adelheid von Walldorf, an active and independent aristocratic woman who uses her beauty as a means to control men (ibid.).

In this way, Löhn-Siegel was aware of having her own ideas about “theatre, roles, and her entire theatrical life” – more than her surroundings would have expected (ibid.). Löhn-Siegel’s criticism and indignation are not only about on-stage discrimination and violation against women, in which the actors who perform them participate indirectly. It is directed at the stage’s complicity in reinforcing unequal gender norms by using them for visual entertainment.

Löhn-Siegel wrote the above quoted lines at the time of the 1848 German revolutionary period. According to Schaser (2020, 26), the women’s liberation movement was active and many liberal women’s organizations were founded in 1845–1851. Louise Otto-Peters (1819–1895), a feminist activist, published a women’s newspaper dedicated to women’s issues and shaped public discourse on the advancement of women’s rights, including women’s labor and education and political and social issues (ibid., 30–31). The role of women in society was reevaluated, and equal rights to women as to men were demanded.

Against the backdrop of these times, Löhn-Siegel criticized the image of the oppressed woman that projected the unequal relationship between men and women in the theater where she was engaged and the masses who consumed this vulnerable sexuality to satisfy their sadistic desires.

Löhn-Siegel was harshly critical of misogynistic classical works created under old gender norms that were performed on stage. One such work is *The Taming of the Shrew* (ca. 1592–1594), one of Shakespeare’s most famous comedies of the 16th century. The story is about the training of an egomaniacal female protagonist into a reverent and subservient woman in the patriarchal, authoritative society of the Elizabethan era. The work has been interpreted, particularly since the 1990s, using the barbaric metaphor of “taming” women – not simply as a documentary narrative of female conquest but as an ideological narrative that supports and inculcates the idea of misogyny that underpins patriarchal society in the historical context of male dominance and female oppression (Holderness

2010, 1–2).³⁾

In the 19th century, when women's issues were widely discussed, Löhn-Siegel identified with the repressed position of the female protagonist in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the punishment she suffers as well as the patriarchal superiority exhibited in the play. She was highly dissatisfied with the fact that this theatrical figuration was being performed and presented by an actress on stage:

The Taming of the Shrew outraged my feminine sensibility and my sense of justice, which had been revolting against the oppression of the female gender, against the patronization and subjugation of the same by man, ever since I was able to grasp the difference in the position between man and woman in public and private life. (WS, 283)

Löhn-Siegel called out the on-stage enslavement of women by men and expressed intense disgust and resistance to performing classical works that encompassed such an old gender order for this purpose. She pointed out that, despite its progressiveness, the world of theater presented conservative and traditional productions that conformed to retarded gender norms, thus actively reinforcing and fostering these old-fashioned values.

As is well known, the theater of the 19th century was strongly meant to be the “moral theater” evolved from the theatrical reforms of the 18th century and functioned as a place of culture for the bourgeois class. However, the theater was also a site of consumption of cultural experiences: according to Enderwitz (1999, 191–195), the bourgeois family, which maintained social gender norms in the 19th century democratic and capitalist societies, was a consumption unit. This family institution was considered essential as a consumption entity, and the family met the needs of education, entertainment, and leisure. The theater was an entertainment venue that offered exemplary productions that maintained these bourgeois family conceptions of gender, which was an important commercial strategy of the theater.

The theaters of Löhn-Siegel's era were strongly influenced by civic and commercial aims. For this reason, and similar to the case of the female protagonist

in *The Taming of the Shrew*, they visualized the correction of people who deviated from the traditional gender order. Thus, the stage demonstrated the reconstitution of a community by promoting social conformity.

Löhn-Siegel criticized the theater as an old moral and consumptive space for performing such works that oppressed women, and the conservative and obsolete attitude of acceptance of the audiences who enjoyed them. Her criticism was in line with the trend of the women's liberation movement of the time.

4. The theater as a “republic of the genders”: Gender equality and the possibility of women's professional freedom

As examined in Section 2, Löhn-Siegel recognized the theater as a place where men and women could enjoy equal opportunities and play active roles. Her specific views on this is clearly revealed her saying, “The theater is the only republic of the genders” (“Das Theater ist die einzige Republik der Geschlechter”). This is confirmed by the following quote:

Only those who achieve the most artistically significant things are also the most respected in the corporation and seek to mark a certain rank. But always without distinction of gender, and that is all we are talking about here. This dignified equality of position is not offered to women in any other artistic, business or private relationship. The theater is the only republic of the genders. Here alone the woman feels nothing of the superiority and of the position of the man, which is otherwise everywhere privileged and even more elevated by traditional prejudice. And this privilege, which honors and delights women nowhere else in the world, has always made the institution of the theater so valuable to me, more valuable than art itself was to me. (WS, 283) (*underlined emphasis is mine)

Here Löhn-Siegel praises the theater as the only gender-equal workplace where women are treated equally with men. Particularly noteworthy is her said observation about the theater being a “republic of the genders.” This reference to “republic” reflects the influence of the French Revolution, which abolished the

monarchy and the old hierarchy, resulting in the concept of the republic as a state of freedom and equality.

According to Schaser (2020, 7), the French Revolution and the proclamation of human and civil rights had a profound impact on the women's liberation movement, mobilizing demands for legal and social equality for women. This political revolution also led to the development of the women's liberation movement in Germany, where the improvement of the oppressive position of women was shaped by public opinion. Among others, the Enlightenment writer Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1741–1796) wrote the books, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* [On the civic improvement of women, 1792] and *Über die Ehe* [On Marriage, 1793], both of which had a major impact on the German women's movement.

In addition, it is likely that one of the people who influenced Löhn-Siegel was Madame de Staël (Anne Louise Germaine de Staël, 1766–1817), whom she mentions in her memoirs. Löhn-Siegel had read Madame de Staël's famous work, *Les considérations sur la principaux événemens de la Révolution française* [Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution] (published after her death in 1816) before leaving her hometown (WS, 56).

Madame de Staël was an Enlightenment thinker, critic and novelist who lived during the French Revolution. She was the daughter of Jacques Necker (1732–1804), a commoner who became finance minister and tried to implement tax equality, one of the triggers of the French Revolution. In her book, she examines the political system of France and critically analyzes the transition from the despotic monarchy to the republic through the French Revolution. Madame de Staël herself was a moderate republican who tried to incorporate the features of the monarchy into the freedom of the republic (Takeda, 2013). The ideals of the republic include the guarantee of citizens' freedom and rights and the elimination of discrimination in politics, society and education. Löhn-Siegel was probably aware of the ideas of women's civil rights that were being formed in public opinion at the time of the founding of the French Republic.

In addition to Madame de Staël, Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), a French actress and women's rights activist, wrote the *Déclaration des droits de la femme*

et de la citoyenne [*The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, 1791] in response to France's the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in 1789. This famous woman called for the attainment of women's civil and political rights. However, it is unclear whether Löhn-Siegel read her declaration.

The said women's liberation movement in the neighboring French Republic to remove the absence of civil rights and barriers that oppressed women also had an impact on Germany. Löhn-Siegel's comment that "the theater is the only republic for the genders" is associated with this politicized republican concept of a free and equal human condition. She praised the theater, a cultural public space, as an ideal and progressive cultural space for gender equality and women's professional independence.

Nevertheless, Wunder (1992, 258) indicates that "republic" was used differently by male and female communities. For example, de Gouges had a vision of a republic consisting of male and female citizens, while Hippel envisioned a women-only cultural community, a "republic of literature," which excluded women from politics (*ibid.*). Unlike Hippel's vision, Löhn-Siegel imagined a republic in which men and women could participate equally, as envisioned by de Gouges. Löhn-Siegel idealized the republic as a civic cultural community, finding commonality between the democratic ideals of a modern state and theatrical culture, which is a living art form.

However, although Löhn-Siegel praised the theater as a place where women worked on equal footing with men and played an important role in the public's attention, the old gender-discriminatory practices persisted. According to her criticism, actresses were not valued principally for their artistic skills like male actors, but rather for their good looks, or were treated with excessive indulgence by the management and the audience. The following two quotes confirm this, the first of which concerns actresses' physical appearance:

The audience is no less ambitious in its demands on external appearance; it would like to see in the actress an ever-changing shop window of the silk merchant, the hairdresser, the milliner and the ready-made clothing supplier.

(WS, 236)

The second quotation pertains to Löhn-Siegel's criticism of the privileged treatment of actresses:

This feeling was heightened by the fact that I was currently in a situation where men and women are on an equal footing and work with equal respect, namely in the theater, where, on the contrary, the female members are usually the more pampered, both by the audience and by the management. (WS, 283)

Löhn-Siegel, while praising the equal working environment for men and women adopted in the theater, also criticized the system that undervalued the artistic skills and achievements of actresses and instead paid excessive attention to their makeup and personal appearance. She criticized the special treatment that actresses received from audiences and management and considered such treatment as a sort of trivialization of their individuality that ultimately deprived them of their independence and autonomy. In this regard, she censures critics, requesting them to be more critical of the flamboyance and opulence of actresses (WS, 236). The argument presented here relates to the need for a proper system to evaluate actresses' artistic skills.

In this connection, according to Article 6 of the Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the French Republic, all citizens are equal and receive recognition according to their abilities and talents without discrimination. Löhn-Siegel was raised in an artistic environment from childhood, could play the piano, was fluent in foreign and classical languages, and excelled in exceptional artistic skills, including accepting operatic productions. In reality, the discriminatory and undervalued attitude toward women in the German theater was far removed from the republican ideal of valuing the talents of men and women on an equal basis.

Nevertheless, Löhn-Siegel believed that theater, as a moral theater for the nation, needed to realize the democratic ideals of gender equality that would resolve women's issues, and she offered criticism in order to improve theatrical culture. Thereby, the theater was expected to develop as a cultural and public

artistic space where men and women were equal, as in a republic with modern and democratic ideals.

Conclusion

Löhn-Siegel became a prominent figure in the women's movement in later years. It is noteworthy that when she reflected on the theater in the mid-19th century in her memoirs of 1881, it was already regarded as a workplace open to women. Society was separated into public and private spaces at that time, with women generally being responsible for domestic work, and few women being employed in professional occupations. Despite these pre-modern and gender-discriminatory conditions, the theater was already an ideal workplace open to women on an equal footing with men, and a place where women could achieve self-fulfillment as artists.

Nevertheless, as Löhn-Siegel critiqued, there was a discriminatory tendency even then for actresses to be evaluated first in terms of their appearance, including their costumes and makeup. In this respect, even today, in the 21st century, lookism toward actresses is still rampant, with disproportionate attention paid to their costumes, makeup, body shape, and facial features. The commercialistic media then addressed such external elements of the actresses as topics that would please the public. It is also worth noting that Löhn-Siegel astutely remarked that there was a system and practice of unfairly evaluating the artistic talent and acting skills of actresses by all sides, including the management, audience, and critics as media. As an insider actress, her criticism of the invisible discrimination against women was greatly influenced by Germany's women's movement of the day.

Although unfair evaluations of female actors were still customary, Löhn-Siegel's theatrical stage was superimposed on the national ideals proclaimed by the French Republic, which aimed to abolish class, to make men and women equal and free, and to eliminate discrimination in professions. She hoped to further connect the theater community with the women's movement and promote women's liberation by showing independent and conscious women on stage rather than by flattering the audience with oppressed women as objects for consumption.

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Endnotes

- 1) For a biography of Anna Löhn-Siegel, see Löhn-Siegel 1880; Oelsner 1894, 149; Kabel 1983, 353–354; Chrambach 2020.
- 2) All English translations of original German quotations are mine.
- 3) In recent years, this story has been reinterpreted in discussions of gender, power and sexuality in the early modern period, and it has been pointed out that it contains elements of instability, such as the breakdown of patriarchal authority and gender norms. Therefore, this story has moved away from a unifying interpretation (Holderness 2010, 3–9).

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