

Caroline Böhmer, Letter to Louise and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter (April 19, 1793)

Abstract

Caroline Michaelis (widowed Böhmer, later Schlegel, then Schelling, 1763-1809) was born in the university town of Göttingen, where her father was a professor of theology and oriental studies. After Caroline's first husband and two of her children died, she moved to Mainz as a young widow in 1792. In October 1792, Mainz was occupied by revolutionary French troops, and on March 18, 1793, the Mainz Republic was proclaimed. Caroline openly supported the revolutionary, democratic movement. When she feared that Mainz would be recaptured by the Prussian army, she left the city with her eight-year-old daughter Auguste and several other republican sympathizers. On the same day, they were arrested near Mainz and imprisoned at Königstein Castle. Caroline Böhmer wrote this letter dated April 19, 1793 to her friend Louise Gotter and her husband, the writer Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, while she was imprisoned in Königstein. At the time, Caroline was pregnant with the child of a French officer and feared that her pregnancy would be discovered. After her brother had written to the Prussian king, Caroline and her daughter were released from prison in July. As she was unmarried at the time, she gave birth to her child in secret and left it with a foster family in Saxony, where it died two years later. Her imprisonment had damaged her reputation so much that she was declared "undesirable" in her home town of Göttingen. In 1796, Caroline married August Wilhelm Schlegel, who had been a friend and supporter of hers. They then moved to Jena, where Schlegel was a professor at the university, and both became part of the Jena intellectual circle that shaped early German Romanticism. During this time, the couple worked on several German translations of Shakespeare's plays. Caroline also wrote literary reviews, but it is primarily her letters that have survived and provide insights into the German intellectual life of the time and its protagonists. The Schlegels' marriage was unhappy though and the couple divorced in 1803. One month later, Caroline married the philosopher Friedrich Schelling, with whom she had already had an intimate relationship during their marriage.

Source

Königstein, April 19, 1793

I thank you, dear Gotter, for the advice to turn to the Coadjutor – that was why I wanted to ask you. It is the worst thing that can happen to a woman to find herself in such a serious imprisonment – before she deserves it, she must have more to reproach herself with than imprudence of thought, and Mr. von Dalberg, who knows people, will feel that this imprudence is not to blame on her, but on the influence of her friends – he cannot want her to be ruined because of it, as I would inevitably be by a long imprisonment. I am not a criminal, neither directly nor indirectly – but I have had acquaintances who are, and who now make me seem suspicious. I thought I had separated myself from them forever, and there has never been such a connection between them and me that I could now consider myself a martyr. I have been told of a way out that could soon free me, namely if they would accept bail for me. As a lawyer, what do you think of that? It is terrible to have to depend on the duration of the siege of Mainz – and yet it is said that no formal investigation will take place any sooner. With the lack of news from abroad, won't the French be frantic enough to want to defend themselves for a long time?

Dear Louise, if only I could sit in the little room you so kindly prepared for me! I feel your heartfelt sympathy – will I be lucky enough to thank you in person? Will your friendship not wane? You see, I give no pleasure to those who love me, and will perhaps still cause them much worry. God bless you my dear – rejoice in your freedom, and that you can take your children for a walk yourself. I almost feel it is

impermissible to let Auguste share my fate; give my warmest regards to Wilhelmine.
Your husband should testify to Mr. von Dalberg how long I have been in conversation with him about my departure and, while he was in Frankfurt, asked him to get me a passport from the Duke of Brunswick.

Source of original German text: *Caroline. Briefe aus der Frühromantik*, Vol. 1, ed. Erich Schmidt, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1913, pp. 282-283. Available online:
<https://tudigit.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/show/GK-9099-S322-1>

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