

## Ernst Lubitsch, *Kohlhiesel's Daughters* (1920)

### Abstract

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In the 1920 silent film comedy *Kohlhiesel's Töchter* [Kohlhiesel's Daughters], director Ernst Lubitsch decided to relocate the plot in Shakespeare's sixteenth-century play *The Taming of the Shrew* from Italy to the Bavarian Alps. The story revolves around an innkeeper's quest to marry off his two daughters, one of whom, Gretel, attracts a great many suitors and eagerly anticipates matrimony, while the other, Liesel, covets her independence and repels suitors with her prickly demeanor. The innkeeper, a man by the name of Kohlhiesel, decides, however, that Gretel can only marry after her elder sister Liesel has first tied the knot. In the film's opening scene, shown here, audiences get introduced to the two sisters, both of whom are portrayed by the same actress, Henny Porten, one of the period's leading German movie stars. The film peddles unapologetically in broad comedy and regional stereotypes, with dirndls, beer halls, and snowy landscapes framing the action, but moviegoers likely focused far more on Lubitsch's clever use of the split-screen technique to enable Porten to appear as both sisters in the same scene. The film also proved commercially successful, one of a string of hits for Lubitsch that wound up drawing him to Hollywood in late 1922. There, he successfully transitioned from silent to sound film and gained a reputation for more sophisticated comedies that bore his unmistakable "Lubitsch Touch." A number of leading German filmmakers and actors attempted a similar move to one of the American studios in the 1920s, following in the path blazed by Lubitsch. This number grew exponentially after 1933, as an entire generation of German artists—Jewish, politically left-leaning, and/or otherwise—sought to escape the Nazi regime.

### Source

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Intertitles:

Traveling salesman Seidenstock is in the area again.

"Selling everything below cost!"

Gretel, the younger daughter.

[Looks at his wares and wants to buy a brooch. Seidenstock waits while Gretel tries to get coins out of her piggy bank.]

"But quickly before prices rise!"

Gretel: "Is it genuine gold?"

Seidenstock: "Much better than gold... it's genuine Dublee [imitation gold]."

[Gretel buys the brooch and pins it on her dress. An elderly couple of neighbors walks by.]

Gretel: "They'll be impressed with this brooch!"

[The couple take no notice, keep walking.]

Gretel: "What do they know about Dublee."

Liesel, the elder daughter.

[Liesel is shown milking the cows in the stable.

Seidenstock enters and tries to sell her his wares.

Liesel gets angry and throws his wares out of the barn, yelling at Seidenstock.

Gretel observes the scene and ridicules Liesel.]

Liesel: "What are you laughing at, you stupid cow!"

[She chases after her sister threatening to hit her with the milking stool.

Gretel runs inside the house, where she finds Kohlhiesel, her father.]

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Gretel: "Father, Liesel wants to hit me!"  
[Kohlhiesel stops Liesel and slaps her cheek.  
Liesel then furiously breaks a window with the milking stool.]  
Liesel: "If you slap my cheek, I smash your windowpane!"

Source: *Kohlhiesels Töchter*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, Messter Film, 1920. wikimedia  
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