

***His Learned Wife* (1919)**

Abstract

In his 1919 film *Seine gelehrte Frau* [His learned wife], an excerpt of which is featured here, the director Eugen Illés presented the story of a brilliant medical researcher, Dr. Ada Haller, who finds herself married to a wealthy layabout named Freddi, who feels both neglected and threatened by his wife's busy schedule. While Ada works in her lab and cares for her patients, Freddi sits forlornly at the dining table, with neither a career nor a conversation partner to occupy his time. One evening, he decides to visit a dance club, where he meets Emmi, a taxi dancer with whom he begins an extramarital affair. Freddi goes so far as to set Emmi up in her own apartment, paid for out of his inheritance. In the film's climactic scene, two male doctors call on Ada's expertise to treat a woman struggling with a particularly difficult pregnancy, who turns out to be Emmi. As Emmi's condition deteriorates, Freddi rushes to his lover's bedside, and Ada now realizes that she has just treated her husband's mistress and delivered his baby. In the denouement, she decides that her own inattention to her husband's desires had driven him into another woman's arms, and she rededicates herself to Freddi and raises the baby girl as their own.

That self-blaming judgment notwithstanding, the film confronted a number of sensitive issues—from out-of-wedlock childbirth to women in the workforce—that typified the wave of “*Aufklärungsfilme*” [educational films] that took advantage of lax censorship right after the war to address hitherto taboo topics. It opened with both Ada and Emmi supporting themselves, after all, and its focus on one man's involvement with two women evoked the postwar dilemma of “surplus women,” a generation of marrying-aged females whose corresponding male cohort had been decimated by the war. The character of Ada also reflected the growing class of female doctors who completed their training during the war and staffed the newly established maternity clinics during the republic. Moreover, she thrived in her field, winning the respect of male colleagues who honored her research and sought her advice. The film insisted, however, that such professional freedom came at a personal cost for Ada, just as Emmi's sexual freedom resulted in her fatal pregnancy. In a period of heightened anxiety about declining birthrates, both characters' autonomy represented, especially in conservative political circles, a threat to the nation.

The film's producers distributed *Seine gelehrte Frau* under a different title in Germany, as well, *Frauen, die nicht heiraten sollten* [Women who should not marry], which cast its central theme in a different light, suggesting that marriage did not suit every woman and that society, therefore, should not compel it. The film's two leading actresses reflected its conflicting messages in their own lives. Esther Carena, who played Ada, starred in over 30 films between 1916 and 1924 and had studied medicine for a semester, but she stopped pursuing either career after marrying in 1924. Meanwhile, Blandine Ebinger, who portrayed Emmi, pursued a successful career in show business throughout her life—while single, married, and divorced.

Source

Intertitles:

Act II.

Due to Ada's heavy workload as a doctor, Freddi saw little of his wife.

“... there are still about twenty female patients in the waiting room”

Dr. Werner Schilling, who was at medical school with Ada, has become assistant to the famous doctor.

“Doctor, it’s time!”

... and late at night Freddi was still wandering aimlessly through the streets.

Emmi.

The first step.

“...no, I don’t want any money from you...come back soon. I love being with you!”

“Yes, the lady has recently returned home and is still working in the study....”

“My poor boy...You’re always alone...I’m neglecting you... but my job...”

“Ada...a child would make me so very happy. It would bring us closer together!”

“Good night, Freddi!”

“...no!!....”

[...]

Some time later.

Freddi has set up a pretty nest for his girlfriend Emmi.

“I’m always so happy when you’re here... and I always ask myself: 'How long will my happiness last? You belong to someone else!'”

“Don’t be afraid, Emmi!” I am fascinated by your silly little femininity!...oh, how I hate this science that makes unfeminine creatures out of women!”

“I will give you all the love that you miss so much!”

”I am to tell Madam that the master is dining out!”

[...]

[Emmi has died while giving birth to Freddi’s child.]

Ada: “Today is her funeral.....go and pay your last respects to her!”

”Yes.... it's my fault, not his....I am the one who went astray, who denied her natural destiny... A learned woman may be the pride but never the wife of her husband.”

Source: *Seine gelehrte Frau* (clip), dir. Eugen Illés, Neutalfilm, 1919. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv Filmwerk ID: 12393. <https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/12393/672075>

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