



Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Early German Feminist Criticism of Marriage: Louise Otto, "Marriage in the Countryside" (1851)

In the 1851 article "Marriage in the Countryside," published in her own *Women's Newspaper* [*Frauen-Zeitung*], Louise Otto (1819-1895) attacked the "coarseness" and immorality of rural marriages. Otto explained that these arrangements, which were increasingly set up by the agents of "farming economists," were based on the transfer of property as opposed to mutual affection – a point made clear by the fact that bride and groom were often unknown to each other.

According to our conceptions, which form the foundation of the entire goal of our "Women's Newspaper," marriage is a moral and therefore sacred union. It is in the very nature of such a bond that those who enter into it must be imbued with its sacred meaning – otherwise they commit an act of desecration.

We find such a transgression not only in what is called common adultery, but also in the manner in which a large number of marriages are concluded, which the world judges favorably and approvingly, and upon which the priest before the altar bestows the church's blessing – upon an act of sacrilege.

Let us examine more closely the manner in which marriages are commonly concluded at the present, and let us begin with marriage in the countryside, [. . .] First we shall take a look at the well-off in the villages of the kingdom of Saxony. It is known and laudably acknowledged everywhere that the education of the people [*Volksbildung*] in Saxony is ahead of that in some other German states; [. . .] not counting the mountainous and factory districts, the rural population enjoys considerable prosperity. The large manors [*Rittergüter*] have mostly passed into the hands of capable farmers, the large estates have been dismembered, other peasant holdings have grown through the acquisition of new fields; slowly there has emerged in the countryside, like in the cities, an aristocracy of property – what the industrial bourgeoisie is in the cities, the peasant-aristocracy is in the countryside. Between the noble lords of manors [. . .] and the small cottagers and rural laborers living a wretched life, there has grown up, especially in some areas of Saxony, [. . .] a wealthy middle class, which has ownership in common with the former, and labor with the latter. These farmers are equally proud of their money and their social standing, and they seek to demonstrate it in every way. [. . .]

If a farmer wants to get married, either the thought occurred to him only after being persuaded by an 'agent,' or he had it first and then sought out an agent. The former case is the more common. – These agents are men, mostly of dubious reputation, such as failed merchants, grain brokers, usurers, and so on, and live for the most part in small towns with larger villages close by. Here they travel from one village to the next, visit one holding after another under all kinds of pretexts, and seek to discover in detail the situation of the young people; then they suggest to a farmer, father or son, a suitable girl for the latter, and if the young farmer is not opposed, the agent goes to the girl's parents. In most cases the two people destined for each other are complete strangers. When it comes to the girl, the agent inquires about assets, a dowry, and the arrangements regarding the farm holding– then he provides the same information about his client keen to get married. If the girl and the parents are not opposed, the agent soon reappears in their house with the suitor and introduces him. The parents on both sides negotiate the rest and the agent receives his fee in cash. A short time later the wedding takes place.

This is the kind of commercial contract marriage is in the countryside.
Not a word of hearts and emotions.

It may well be that this is also done in the cities often enough – yet the crudeness, which here does not even seek a gentler cover, insults the moral sensibility even more. In the countryside, there is not even an effort to get to know each another – there is only a look at the other person and then a weighing of the situation of each.

In this regard the girls are just as indelicate and unfeeling as the men. For the most part they are thinking only of money in order to satisfy their mania for finery, or they get married merely out of vanity, to get a husband quickly and be a bride, so that they 'no longer have to show up alone' at the balls, as they themselves put it.

Source: Louise Otto, "Die Heirat auf dem Lande," *Frauen-Zeitung* ["Marriage in the Countryside," *Women's Magazine*], vol. 3, no. 26 (July 5, 1851), p. 171f.

Original German text reprinted in Margrit Twellmann, *Die Deutsche Frauenbewegung im Spiegel repräsentativer Frauenzeitschriften. Ihre Anfänge und erste Entwicklung. Quellen, 1843-1889* [*The German Womens' Movement as Reflected in Representative Women's Journals: Its Beginnings and First Developments. Sources 1843-1889*]. Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1972, pp. 87-88.

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