

Hedwig Dohm, *What the Pastors Think of Women* (1872)

Abstract

Hedwig Dohm (1831–1919), author and women’s rights advocate, was married to Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Dohm, editor of the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch*. Through her husband, she came into contact with Berlin’s intellectual elite. In a career spanning more than fifty years, Dohm published novels and plays, but she remains best known for the ironic and sharp-witted essays that she wrote between 1872 and 1879 on the subject of women’s rights. The following essay, one of the first of this sort, brought her national attention. Here, Dohm attacks a pamphlet that is subtitled *Zur Frauenfrage* [*On the Women’s Question*] (Halle, 1871) by Philipp von Nathusius-Ludom (1842–1900), a Protestant theologian and editor of the Conservative Party’s leading newspaper.

Source

What the Pastors Think of Women. On the Women’s Question, by Philipp von Nathusius and Professor of Theology Jacobi in Königsberg

(Page 2)

[...] If I devote brief attention to these writings despite their triviality, it is firstly because the women’s question [*Frauenfrage*] is yet another matter in which the authors, strictly conservative, devout men, largely advocate the views of their influential party, of orthodox circles in the church, of the conservatives in politics, and secondly because Mr. von Nathusius expressly states his wish to be refuted.

Whether the souls of the devout pastors (for I also regard Mr. v. N. as a servant of God) came to each other through free elective affinity or whether one drew his murky water from the spuming fountain of the other—this I cannot decide.

Of course, there is no way this essay can provide an exhaustive refutation of the two pamphlets; the one by Mr. v. N. alone comprises 150 pages. I have to content myself with submitting some of the salient points of the two gentlemen’s theories to the insight and judgment of readers.

When the authors take refuge in the field of religion and use biblical passages as evidence, taking them as immediate revelations from God, I can neither follow them nor give pursuit. The temple has been a shelter for all sorts of wrongdoers since time immemorial.

Mr. von Nathusius begins his work by attempting to prove that marriage is women’s sole calling.

(pp. 49ff)

“The home is the woman’s world! Women’s calling and purpose in life rest once and for all in the firm orders of nature and the godly commandment and cannot budge an inch!!”

Mr. von Nathusius, like most who think the same way he does, continuously confuses customs or historical conditions and the laws of nature. Exploring the laws of nature is reserved solely for the deepest minds, the most sublime geniuses. A Newton, a Copernicus discovered the laws of nature governing the earth. But who, up to now, has explored the laws of nature that apply to the human spirit in a way that builds upon an eternal world order? You perhaps, Mr. v. Nathusius?

You yourself tell the story of a savage people whose men lie in bed shortly before their wives give birth. If these savages were able to express themselves in an educated fashion, they would certainly describe their behavior as deriving from an immutable “law of nature.” And isn’t it right that these laws “that cannot budge an inch” have now determined for centuries that the day laborer’s wife has had to choke down her dry bread, year after year, under the sweat of her brow, while the rich countess or the princess ruins her nervous system with fancy foods and idleness?

These unfortunate laws of nature appear to be the scapegoats for all the outrageous nonsense, for all the malice generated by people and the times. Custom by no means follows the laws of nature; it is more often the product of prejudice than sound judgment. You know just as well as I that custom merely constitutes the form in which the spirit of a certain period reveals itself—whether this period encompasses a decade or three millennia!

But that is the tragic side of our social conditions, that their forms often outlast the spirit that once informed them. And precisely these dead forms, these ghosts, have the incredible presumption of wanting to dominate living spirits in the broad light of day!

On top of that, Mr. v. Nathusius, when the first women were created, there were probably no houses or homes at all—and there were perhaps no homes, no clothes, and no fire, either, for millennia thereafter—and one may assume that, had nature assigned women solely to the home, then it would have provided them with little hearths, sewing tables, and brooms to start out with in the world.

Or perhaps by virtue of some mysterious revelation you know something about those thousands and thousands of years that preceded these lousy few millennia with which the rest of us are familiar? [...]

“Supporting the home,” you continue, “has been the man’s duty since the end of paradise,” etc.

As already mentioned, no one except you knows anything about the primordial state of humanity, even though it would appear that our modern women resemble those of primeval times as little as today’s candidates for the higher civil service or lieutenants resemble lake dwellers. Let us stick with the present, however.

“It is man’s obligation,” you say, “to maintain the home.”

Why do you forget here to hurl your condemnatory thunderbolt at men who marry wealthy women? [...]

Secondly, you doubtless know that the great majority of women in the lower social strata take part in the men’s economic work (or does the proletariat, in your view, not figure in at all?); and, to my knowledge, no substantial objections have ever been raised against this, not even from the most pious and conservative gentlemen.

Why do you not rail against these classes of women, these women who trample the laws of nature, these female miscreants who lock their children up at home or otherwise act recklessly, who go off, perhaps for three days and three nights in a row, to do laundry?

Why does one tolerate these crimes against a woman’s natural calling?

All you housewives, chase these women from your dolly tubs, from the windows that they wish to clean! Do not tolerate this frivolous waste of time; drive them away and back to their children, so that they nurture and look after them like mothers, dressing them in clean clothes and taking them for walks as duty commands!

But that is likely too difficult for these irresponsible persons; they cannot tear themselves away from the

dolly tub and the cleaning rag; they succumb to them just as men do to drink, and they die from them often enough as well, when rheumatism and gout help them along!

They deserve it!

Of course, if they happen to be widows, this dishonorable passion may be excusable to some degree, but that is a factor that cannot be reckoned with. Being a widow is not a woman's calling. Let her pay for this perversion against nature!

(pp. 56, 23)

To women, though, he [Nathusius] calls out: "The most important of all your assignments, even in economic terms as well, is to provide society at large with a husband refreshed in body and soul every day and with well-behaved children in every generation."

But who then, Mr. von Nathusius, will refresh the poor women after a hard day's work? For surely you will concede, what's good for the goose is also good for the gander.

(pp. 10, 57f)

To sweeten the bitter pill of subordination (and of serving, that is), women are given a reprehensible doctrine in consolation: "Be subservient to man so that you may reign!"—a doctrine that the author impresses upon women repeatedly and with various turns of phrase.

Let us disregard the nonsensical logic of this sentence, whose two parts are incompatible, for if one reigns, then one is clearly superior and not inferior.

But this hypocritical commandment, which is considered good and pious, is saturated with the spirit of Machiavelli. In other words, it reads:

"Instead of ruling by means of the noble abilities and moral merits that God has given you, suppress and conceal them; if necessary, submit to a man who might be brutish, do not contradict him, appear to do as he demands, let him have his way in all things, no matter how foolish or reprehensible. Hypocrisy and intrigue shall be your weapons; spy out his weaknesses, be gentle, flatter him, and you will dominate him. If he is Samson, you be Delilah!"

(pp. 58/57)

Recently, I came across a medieval poem that deals with wifely duties and introduces the married master as a malicious baboon.

It begins as follows:

"When he shouts, she remains silent,
Once he is quiet, she addresses him,
If he is in a grim mood, she is in a cool mood,
If he is very grim, she speaks in a quiet voice,
If he is quietly grim, she is in a consoling mood,
If he is impetuous, she speaks in a subdued voice,
If he rages with fury, she avoids him,
If he is fuming, she is obliging,
If he gripes with fury, she speaks to him.
He is the sun, she is the moon.
She is the night; he rules the day."

By the way, Mr. v. Nathusius is not the only person, who, in his eagerness to prove that women must stay at home, shrouds men in an aura of utter stupidity.

(pp. 11, 8/9)

Who, I ask, who delivers us from the phrase?—“from the subordination of the female sex on the basis of the biblical words: ‘he shall be thy master.’”

As a rule, he is exactly that in the lower classes, for the law of the jungle still applies there.

To be sure, in the educated classes, the wife often has predominance in the marriage, but unfortunately, in these cases, it is very rarely the spouses’ good qualities that dictate who rules. — Mean, egotistical female characters can take care of themselves. Nearly always, the female martyrs in matrimony are noble women of refined constitution.

In the few ideal marriages that I know of, however, no one is subordinate and no one superior; what prevails is the most perfect respect for each other’s individual nature; the spouses live in secure freedom, and so will it always be among truly noble people.

But let us stick with the subject of marriages as they generally are, and as they virtually must be on the basis of our social institutions, and let us ask: Who should prevail in these marriages?

Not one of the sexes, Mr. von Nathusius, but an attitude, the nobler attitude and the purer spirit should prevail.

(pp. 17ff)

Nevertheless, the author most kindly wishes to permit three types of occupation as emergency employment to those unhappy, unmarried women who have missed their real vocation:

“The job of deaconess, which includes midwifery by extension, and—would you believe it—the profession of physician.”

Yet as soon as Mr. von Nathusius has spoken the bold word, he is overwhelmed by moral scruples, which he then attempts to assuage with the following qualification:

“A great deal, however, will depend on steering this aspect of the ‘women’s question’ in the right direction. If one intends to treat it as nothing but an aspect of women’s competition with men, without maintaining that each sex has its own particular strengths and limitations, [...] then there is the danger that this competition will fail and the whole thing will end in a ridiculous attempt.”

“The female healer’s vocation will be restricted to women and children (of course); preferably it will tackle women’s and children’s illnesses. Men’s superiority with respect to calmness, reason, and energy will remain rooted in this profession, just as it does in the nature of both sexes.”

I would like to meet the woman who would entrust herself, or her children, to a female physician if she believed her to be less capable of calm, reason, and energy than her male counterpart! I would not have such a female doctor cure even a cat, Mr. von Nathusius. [...]

Recently, people have become somewhat suspicious of medical specialists, and perhaps rightly so, because one may fear that their constant preoccupation with a single organ could cloud their view of the body as a whole. And you would delight us with such amateurishly trained female specialists? That practically amounts to preaching child murder! [...]

The third occupation that Mr. von Nathusius accepts is teaching, and he does “not shrink back from the thought of female elementary school teachers for boys.”

“How much less,” he muses, “would a female teacher cost the municipal or patron’s purse.”

Here again is the masterful principle, even when it comes to intellectual work, of not paying for performance, but merely paying only as much as the female teacher needs to avoid dying of starvation. Mr. Nathusius wishes that any education of women at secondary school be ruled out, just “for the simple reason that, in his view, any collegiality between men and women would likely prove not only corrupting but also perpetually impractical, since it is essentially unnatural.”

Here, Mr. von Nathusius fails to justify his opinion. Why, we ask ourselves, does he deem this collegiality perverse and corrupting, even though it has existed—at least in larger cities—in elementary classes and schools for many years, and, at least to our knowledge, without prompting any unnatural manifestations?

Does he perhaps regard our solid, honorable, German male teachers and heads of families as nothing but closet Don Juans, or does he view collegiality as a campaign between the sexes in which the vanity of the male colleagues might sustain injury?

In this regard, I do not understand Mr. v. Nathusius whatsoever.

Secondly, he excludes women from secondary education “since any learned education will and must always lie outside women’s calling.”

Mr. v. Nathusius seems to imagine learned education as something particularly wonderful and lofty.

Becoming learned, Mr. von Nathusius, is possible for anyone who, whether his or her mind be mediocre or even poor, has sufficient ability to sit on his or her derrière—if you’ll pardon the phrase; and according to my information, no one has ever denied women’s industry and perseverance.

You, and along with you the entire educated set, consider the upbringing of children a woman’s noblest and most suitable vocation, though not her only one. And you, a man of masculine intellect, you believe in all seriousness that understanding and fostering a child’s soul requires less logical reason than acquiring a “learned education”?

I am telling you: Raising children is the loftiest and most difficult of all vocations, and among all people, women and men, only few are so highly talented, so select as to fulfill this office according to God’s will. [...]

“Providing learned education to women,” says the author in the same passage, “is, in my view, a degradation of women that removes them from a much nobler realm and also constitutes, apart from complicating women, a deprivation to men, who, in their own arduous struggle for knowledge, rely on being refreshed by the unlearned and, for that very reason, the often cleverer and wiser wife.” [...]

“Men in their arduous struggle for knowledge,” is your turn of phrase.

I do not know how much toil is involved in preparing a sermon, but I am acquainted with men of science, whose studies are to them the greatest comfort and pleasure, indeed life in its truest meaning. And should one not deduce from your expression “the arduous struggle for knowledge” that all men are scholars? [...]

Incidentally, many a husband can tell you a thing or two about the nature of that refreshing, charming chattering of a simple, uneducated wife as you intend her, “with fragments of elementary knowledge and

even without such.” But there is no arguing about matters of taste; whereas one man would rather hear chatter about washday, good-for-nothing maids, and the malicious ladies next door, another prefers different subjects of conversation.

(pp. 58/59)

“One had better not teach girls too much,” says Mr. von Nathusius, “for by educating and teaching them too much, one deprives them of a true asset [...] How endearing is their ignorance [...], how much daily pleasure does one take from men by making girls too learned.”

What cynical egotism!

As if all that mattered was women providing men with the most pleasure possible! Only a slave exists for the sake of another person.

And wherein lies the pleasure? Possibly in the sense of superiority? Damn this ridiculous vanity!

Or is the pleasure supposed to lie in the educating deed, in which case I would understand it completely? However, apart from the fact that this deed is practiced by men on their young wives only in the most exceptional cases, this “educating and teaching” would always apply merely to the developing female soul and not to the mature woman.

And herein, I am afraid, lies one of the main sources from which men derive their eccentric ideas about women. — When speaking of the charm of ignorance, their minds are instantly populated with lovely girls aged 16 to 18, whereas they are incapable of separating the conception of a scholarly, educated woman from the image of an old, ugly person. Woman ceases to exist for them as soon as she does not serve their pleasure anymore.

Indeed, the naiveté and ignorance associated with a young girl may not lack a certain spicy charm; associated with a 40-year-old woman, however, these traits become unbearable. Value can be ascribed only to those traits that prove their worth in the long run.

The good men talk us into believing that we are living under their rule as in paradise.

In vain, we are shouting ourselves hoarse, saying that we have tasted the tree of knowledge and are no longer worthy of Paradise.

Like the angel in the Garden of Eden, man grips the flaming sword, but this good fellow, this charitable soul, does so not to expel us but to forcibly confine us there against our will!

Source: Hedwig Dohm, *Was die Pastoren von den Frauen denken. Zur Frauenfrage von Philipp von Nathusius und Herrn Professor der Theologie Jacobi in Königsberg*. Berlin, 1872. Available online at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb11018712?page=,1>; reprinted in Margrit Twellmann, *Die Deutsche Frauenbewegung im Spiegel repräsentativer Frauenzeitschriften. Ihre Anfänge und erste Entwicklung*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Quellen 1843–1889*. Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1972, pp. 177–83.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Hedwig Dohm, What the Pastors Think of Women (1872), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-2492>> [May 01, 2024].