

The Titles “Frau,” “Fräulein,” “Herr,” and “Herrlein” (1871)

Abstract

Women’s emancipation was still a long way off at the time of German unification in 1871. Here, one critic of gender-specific titles points out that language reinforced traditional roles. Unmarried women of any age were addressed with the diminutive form of *Frau*, i.e. *Fräulein*, which seemed to suggest that, in the absence of a spouse, these women were somehow “incomplete”; only married women were addressed as *Frau*. Adult men, by contrast, were always addressed as *Herr*, regardless of their marital status. The present-day option of “Ms.” was not available at the time (please note: there is still nothing comparable to “Ms.” in German; the title “Frau” is simply used), but this critic’s proposal to introduce the diminutive form *Herrlein*, though deliberately provocative, was based on the same kind of logic.

Source

Language and language usage are the most vital expression not only of the spirit of a people, but also of their social structure. As a rule, a word denotes the nature of a thing; therefore it should not seem frivolous for us to make a serious case for the pros and cons of titles, i.e. of words. — We are referring to the titles “Frau” (Mrs.) and “Fräulein” (Miss)^[1], which are commonly used to differentiate between married and unmarried members of the female sex. — This strict distinction is attributable to the fact that until now a woman’s value was almost entirely sexual, and she was viewed exclusively within the bounds of her “natural calling.” — Women are hardly ever, at least rarely in Germany, judged from the objective, purely human perspective as an independent part of human society, but instead only in relation to men. As a result, only when a woman gets married does she attain, as it were, a fully legitimate existence, entering the highest legal and social sphere accessible to her—she becomes “Frau.” — Unmarried women, by contrast, whether young or old, are and remain something small, insignificant, incomplete—neutral—they are “Fräulein.”

Why are unmarried men, even adolescents who have barely escaped boyhood, never called “Herrleins?” — That’s because they enjoy an independent right to exist in and of themselves from birth onward; they do not first require a union with the opposite sex to form a complete whole; in fact, they do not need any connection to the opposite sex to be somebody in society (in the broadest sense).

NOTES

[1] In German, “Fräulein” is the diminutive of “Frau.”—trans.

Source: Franziska Essenther, “Der Titel ‘Frau’,” in *Frauen-Anwalt. Organ des Verbandes deutscher Frauenbildungs- und Erwerbs-Vereine*, Berlin, 2, no. 6, 1871, p. 193; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 102–3.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: The Titles “Frau,” “Fräulein,” “Herr,” and “Herrlein” (1871), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-543>> [April 26, 2025].