

Conservative Criticism of Women's Activism (1852)

Abstract

In this excerpt from *The Family* (1852), Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897) attacks “emancipated” women and any type of activity by women in public life. Basing his argument on the natural differences between men and women, he calls on women to rekindle pride in their “true calling” as wives and homemakers, rather than founding women's associations.

Source

[...]

In Germany, too, women came forward and made a profession of the doctrine of unshackling women's manners and habits. Not only in Paris, but also in northern German cities, especially in the years 1842-1848, we have seen women strutting through the streets and carousing in the beer taverns in male coats and trousers, with spores and riding whip, a jaunty feather in the hat, a burning cigar in the mouth. We see Louise Aston—more so than others the “public personality” in this group—expelled, a “martyr.” She is accused of violating the press laws because her “Wild Roses” seemed too thorny. She resolutely answers the president of the Berlin police, Herr von Puttkammer, and expounds to him with great fluency her political, religious, and social views, not without a few theoretical excursions about marriage and the liberation of the natural rights of women. Afterwards she becomes a woman again and joins the campaign in Schleswig-Holstein to help out in the hospitals and to nurse wounded soldiers. And this much-talked-of lady was not, mind you, a crazy girl or an old maid, but a wife—even if a divorced one, a mother. Marriage has its deepest effect in keeping a woman womanly. Hyper-femininity, however, no longer understands the seriousness of marriage; just as the sex indulges without restraint in its characteristics in this hyper-femininity, the individual does likewise. That leaves no space for the willingness to sacrifice for the great idea of the family and the house. That emancipated woman was the daughter of a German country parson, raised in the solitude of the village, leading a fanciful emotional life from early on, then married to a rich, sober English machine manufacturer, suddenly thrust from her loneliness into a strange world-at-large. Here all the prerequisites for hyper-femininity were in place.

If thousands of men are currently becoming socially derailed because, tenderly concerned about themselves, they believe they have missed the “right life” and the “right job,” thousands of women are being driven mad by the natural position of woman because, with the same sort of self-indulgence, they think they have entered into the wrong marriage. When it comes to the seriousness of marriage, in particular, we are on average much too sentimental toward our own, dear Self, too tender toward ourselves. This is the effect of hyper-femininity, which is also making men womanish. People used to be more fatalistic, or, if you will, submissive to God; they grit their teeth and clung to the vocation they had chosen, the marriage they had contracted as a *fait accompli* according to God's way, and thus there were no communist men and only few emancipated women. After all, the real salt of marriage is that once one has said yes, one cannot say no.

In such manifestations as Louise Aston we see the fruit of our unhealthy literary trends. Out of hyper-femininity, the lady is copying men, but at the same time she shows the men how womanish they have become. Woman possesses an incomparably more powerful imitative impulse than man. In part it must replace in her the lesser creative power. The zeal with which so many literary ladies turn, in imitation, precisely to the most arrogant, fractured, and inherently corrupted poetry of our day reminds me of the Russian poets and artists, who also tend to imitate only those creations of occidental Europe which have

been substantially eaten away by the rot of commercialized culture.

It is very tempting to draw a parallel here between the Slavs and women. The Slavs are an easy-going, domestic people content in self-restraint, very much in the way of women; they like to sing and do it well, they dance even better, cling to ancestral customs, and have a good deal of passive courage, all the sort of things that are said to be found also in good women. But they lack the inventive and artistically self-creative spirit. In return, though, they are marvellous virtuosos of imitation; just like women. But once they—the Slavs—begin to imitate foreign ways, they become truly unbridled in the reception of foreign things, against which they otherwise close themselves off in a standoffish manner. Thus they are national and conservative in their manners, in their quiet being and nature; unrestrained toward the foreign when it comes to production. That is also the way of women, and in that sex it is no more an inner contradiction than it is in that people.

However, hyper-femininity erupts not only in the so-called emancipated ladies, but also in women who are quite opposite in nature, and it infects us with its marrowless character. Last century, when Pietism was moving from one German castle and manor to another, it was mostly countesses and baronesses who cultivated the new, soft, enthusiastic state of mind, which they then directed back at the men even softer and more sickly; they played pastor as though they had been ordained, and externally they carried out the most excellent propaganda for their party. This was also hyper-femininity which changed into masculinity and under whose influence the whole matter was corrupted.

The same reproach can be levelled against many of our contemporary gentle and pious women's associations, whose purpose is to heal every kind of moral and social damage. The proper women's association is the home. If a well-to-do woman is all alone, let her first look around to see whether in her clan there is not a family she could move in with as an "old aunt" and work in the household. This is still a nobler and more womanly sphere of activity than being the president of several women's associations. If she cannot be an old aunt, maybe there is a monastery where she can raise and educate poor children, and live and work with the other nuns as though in a large household. But if the monastery is not an option either, in God's name let her found and run women's associations. I know full well how much womanly kindness, womanly charity, womanly sacrifice lies contained in these women's associations as though in a precious vessel. But I also know that quite often the hyper-feminine desires to imitate the men lurk behind it, and that the most splendid ideas of comprehensive associations to provide help for our social needs are often made a mockery in these women's clubs and thereby rendered impossible. There are also many women who believe that joining a charitable, pious association is a way for them to escape the home without pangs of conscience. But one day their conscience will wake up and will tell them that a woman cannot be justified before the Lord if she was not first justified before her household. In the end it is merely a minor difference, conditioned by upbringing and way of life, whether one escapes the house by entertaining oneself in a club with plans for helping the suffering classes, or whether one reasons about liberty and equality in a literary club.

Peculiar testimony to how thoroughly the notion of the seriousness and dignity of the marital vocation has been submerged in the over-dainty hyper-femininity lies in the fact that the refined ladies feel most flattered if someone thinks they are not housewives and mothers. It is here with the womanly vocation the same as though the tailor were ashamed to be called a tailor—true social philistinism! What has happened to the pride of women in marriage as the "true estate," in the blessing of a large family and many relatives, in the house and all that belongs to it, in self-woven linen, which women used to be as ambitiously intent upon possessing in large quantity as the farmer was intent upon having the largest manure pile. For both were the surest emblems of excellent management.

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Source: Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, *Die Familie*, 2nd ed. Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta, 1852, pp. 67–71.

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