# A Protestant Pastor on Courtship and Marriage among Propertied Farmers and Tenant Farmers in Westphalia (1786)

## Abstract

This text describes a region in which relatively prosperous landed farmers leased cottagers' plots to families who supplied necessary seasonal agricultural labor and otherwise occupied themselves with flax spinning in a rural, proto-industrial setting. The author, a Protestant pastor, emphasizes, as many such commentators across Western Europe did, the young unmarried cottagers' lack of discipline and their defiance of conservative sexual codes.

## Source

### "On the Ravensberg Peasant"

*Johann Mortiz Schwager*

[…]

The relation of a tenant farmer [*Kötter*] to his landlord is essentially a far worse slavery than the serfdom of the farmer himself. For a reasonable rent payable to his farmer, whom he and the domestics call his landlord, the tenant farmer is given a humble dwelling and just enough land for him to grow the minimum of necessary vegetables and to support a cow in the summer.

[…] In exchange, the tenant is the farmer's serf, at his call he must show up to work with his wife and children, for which he is paid, yet the poor tenant often has to neglect more work at home than the days' wages are worth to him. The only thing that can make his slavery more palatable for him is the familiarity with which he treats the landlord and the landlord treats him, and the credit the landlord extends to him. In the winter the landlord only needs the tenant for threshing. […] Thus the tenant and his family spend the winter spinning in order to repay their debt. He has grown the flax himself since the landlord rents out the land to him during the summer and cultivates it for him. As long as the flax grows, he is spared any illness, and his children are five to six years old so they can help him spin, the tenant is able to live and spare a little money for himself; but if his cow, his biggest treasure, dies or his wife is too fertile or a member of his family is ill for some time, he is ruined and can hardly recover. His poverty is usually self-inflicted, however. Young folk enters matrimony too early, boys of eighteen marry girls of sixteen, seventeen years, and instead of saving up they make debts. Such a marriage produces many children, and the slightest misfortune will set this couple so far back that recovery is out of sight. This […] poverty […] is caused by nothing else but moral decline.

[…] Due to the now common familiarity of the sexes and the shameless abandon with which even seemingly honorable people speak of things which the ear of no young man and no maiden should hear, certain urges are developed and ferment too early among the local rural population. Since the young men are encouraged rather than discouraged by the girls the sexual instinct is satisfied without consideration of the consequences. A farmer's daughter would risk too much by following her inclination, for her greatest ambition is to become a farmer's wife on a good farm, and that is what makes her remain virtuous. A tenant farmer's daughter, however, knows no greater happiness than having a man, and among this class of people the male sex is the demure one and the female sex goes

courting. The sons of our tenant farmers are too poor to pay off a dishonored girl, so they take her for want of money, and it is easy to guess how such a marriage will work out. […] This is exactly why the common girl enjoys giving herself as well as seducing so much. In her way she knows the art of coquetry just as well as a lady and just as unashamedly bares her bosom and other parts halfway since it helps more than fully. If the young man remains prudish, she helps his senses along with some brandy, and if he does not follow her invitation to her bed she will visit him in his. This usually is the whole plot of the novel, begun at the end. The marriage which soon follows and the poverty which accompanies it quickly kill any spark of tenderness, if it still exists, and childbed will cause the first painful expenditures. There was never any mutual respect and thus such a marriage becomes a marriage of savages held together by necessity and animal instincts only.

[…] One doesn't have to look far for the causes of these instincts which develop so early and so strongly. The tenant does not only sleep in the same small room with his children, but in the same bed, even once they have reached maturity. They witness marital intimacies which cannot be kept secret enough and listen in on exchanges which must arouse. The natural result of this is speculation in order to satisfy the awakened tyrant, and if they lack the opportunity to do so in a natural way they will invent silent sins, for necessity is the mother of invention. If the tenant's children rent themselves out to the landlord, they are in the company of more common folk and eat better and more substantial food than at home. The more substantial food, in addition to dirty conversations and a heart void of principles, can only serve to completely kill the seed sown in school and by religious instruction. I have often secretly listened in on conversations between young people, which could not be viler on Tahiti or Kamchatka, and the shamelessness of lewd peasant girls may only be surpassed by whores in a bordello.

It is a particular skill in farm girls' education to teach maturing girls ambition as a threshold to lust. The landlord's daughter is familiar with the servants and treats them as equals. And yet both sides remain conscious of the difference between them, which they image to be bigger than it is. […] If the landlord's daughter does not stand to inherit the farm and if her honor is somehow compromised, she may not expect to be courted according to her wishes and station, despite all the immorality, for the men are not just prudish but also delicate. This is a major inhibitor and it proves that moral motives may be very powerful if the people's mindset is favorable to them. If a dishonored tenant's daughter happens to have some means, however, or if the deflowered landlord's daughter stands to inherit the farm, one is not too strict about these things.

Source: Johann Mortiz Schwager, "Über den Ravensberger Bauern", *Westphälisches Magazin zur Geographie, Historie und Statistik*. Edited by P.F. Weddigen. Volume 2 (1786), Issue 5, pp. 55–58; reprinted in Jürgen Schlumbohm, ed., *Kinderstuben, Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700-1850.* Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983, pp. 78–81.

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