Emilie von Berlepsch Demands Intellectual and Emotional Independence for Women (1791)

Abstract

The internal demarcations within middle-class identity and the associated constructs within larger society have been questioned since their first emergence, but rarely as pointedly as by Olympe de Gouges in France or Mary Wollstonecraft in England. The author Emilie von Berlepsch (1755–1830), who had read Wollstonecraft's works, traveled through various European countries and published travel narratives, among other things. In a 1791 article in the *Neuer Deutscher Merkur*, an important Enlightenment journal, Berlepsch wrote that German-speaking middle-class culture defined femininity as a state of dependence in every regard. Although she called for intellectual and emotional independence for women, she also described marriage as their proper place.

Source

IV. On Several Characteristics and Principles Necessary for Happiness in Marriage[1]

I wish, my dear beloved sister, that I could make the last days you spend with me a lasting memorial to my tender loyalty and care for you. Perhaps I will really succeed in contributing something to the happiness of your new situation by collecting the ideas and truths that were often the subject of our confidential discussions, and from whose vivid memory I may promise myself to have a positive influence on your future life.

I will not begin by impressing upon you the seriousness of the matter. If you could doubt it; if the happiness of married life could seem insignificant enough to you not to deserve any serious reflection, or any tested and firm resolve, then all of my beliefs would be useless. Anyone who does not actively feel that domestic happiness is the source of all well-being, the support of all order, should shrink back before obligations that can only be fulfilled by honest zeal and by conviction about their great value.

[....]

But who would be able to enumerate all the consequences that must definitely result from this single note of discord in the harmony of feelings? Consequences that are all the more terrible and inevitable, the greater the woman's capacity and capability to love and to be loved. Unfairness and contempt are detrimental to every human being. The soul is degraded, courage weakened, strength crippled, and any fiery striving for greatness and perfection is stifled. But these effects vary, of course, according to the degree to which the individual is more or less susceptible to them. Feminine souls of the common sort, without energy and force, too dull for deep impressions, too cold for surges of the heart, perhaps run unconcernedly through life, scarcely heed, or react to, the blows received, if they can do so. But the more tender and delicate the tissue of feeling is spun, the easier the threads are torn apart and entangled. The more pure and true the self-awareness, the greater the danger of its being wounded, and many noble souls who would have been able to achieve the highest goal of feminine perfection if treated lovingly, fall into weakness of the body and mind, into melancholy or frivolousness, into alienation and foolishness of some kind, only because they were misjudged, misunderstood, treated unfairly, or

had their sensitivity wounded, and the beautiful warmth of their hearts remained unused.

If the danger is so great, so pressing, how much care we must take to avoid it! If even the best of men have not remained completely free of the generally widespread poison of unfairness towards us, how necessary is a means of protection that, if not abolishing the evil completely, is able to take away its corrupting influence! Gentleness alone is not sufficient, although vigorous resistance is still infinitely more damaging. It, the patient gentleness, will preserve peace and propriety on the outside, but it will not be able to prevent the inner sorrow, latent despondency, the gradually growing upset of the soul, and loud complaints will have the same effect as a strong wind blast has on the flame slowly devouring its surroundings. There is only one shield that can cover the soul and protect its delicate feelings from injury, and that shield is called—independence. I know that this quality is difficult to acquire for the youthful heart, especially for the female heart. It likes to attach itself to everything, always values itself only according to the value it sees ascribed to it by others, and certainly feels more deeply and vividly than any male heart can, that Rousseau is right when he says that our true self is not completely within us.[2] But precisely that is what we must combat; precisely that is the source of our vanity, our weakness, and much of our suffering. Because of this, many false, breaking reeds wound us very deeply and bloodily. For that reason, we are often the victims of our best and purest feelings. For that reason, our noblest principles are the plaything of prejudices and fashion. No, we must, we must learn to stand alone. We must make our way of thinking, our character, so venerable in our own eyes that the judgment of others cannot mislead us in our tested and just opinion of ourselves.

The precept that women must seek to acquire agreeable characteristics, talents, and knowledge only for the sake of men, only to please them, only to be esteemed, praised, and preferred by them. This precept, which is preached by mothers and governesses to the point of impropriety and is only too often praised by men themselves, is only suitable in my opinion for the Orient, for that ignoble state in which the slack-souled man does not require a helpmate but only miserable slaves, only lowly playthings for sensual lust. In that state, the free woman created his equal is degraded to being his property and is robbed of the noble purpose of her existence. There the blossoms of her spirit may lose their fragrance and wither in deplorable restriction at the tyrant's feet, because they cannot set any fruit that would ripen in the best interest of humanity. But we, who are protected by a better fate and a clearer understanding of reason, we who share and enjoy undesecrated rights—at least in many areas—with men, why should we not also preserve our inner, spiritual existence independently and autonomously? Haven't men, with their education, with their undertakings and plans, a purpose in life independent of our approval, determined by obligation or inclination, necessity or advantage, and appropriate to their manifold capabilities and needs? Why shouldn't we, too, with our activities and thinking, with the education of our mind, the refinement of our feelings, the application of our talents, look to the great whole, just as they do? And are they not important, lofty purposes that profession and destiny have told us to look to? Promotion of general and individual welfare, moral beauty and grace, enhanced amity of social life, the great advantage of seeing a nursery for noble humanity shoot up under our care, and in this way to become benefactors in future times!

How then will those pretenses of childish vanity crumble! How all the small, inglorious arts, the surreptitious paths of obsession with intrigue and the tangle of contradictory inclinations and drives will disappear, if our striving is directed to those great purposes! Higher and purer pleasure will fortify our souls to act and suffer, for rest and activity. The incense that men sprinkle on us will not intoxicate us, their undeserved censure will not offend us, their disparagement not trample us. And gradually these things, too, will disappear, when, no longer irritated by our pretensions and petty intrigues, the desire to retaliate through haughtiness will be taken from them.

Love will lose nothing as a result. Alas, it; the mighty one, invincibly directs all desires, abilities, and actions, all

beauty, strength, and warmth, with only one, one object. It cares nothing of warning or teaching. It knows nothing of ownership and selfhood. How could it calculate what brings happiness? It only knows the height of happiness or the depth of misery.

But in all relationships where it is necessary to calculate in order to increase and maintain contentment—and where would it be more necessary than in marriage?—independence must be earned, because—Oh, may the preachers favoring gentleness, cheerfulness, patience, and all suffering virtues take heed—because independence alone endows these virtues with strength and permanence.

May, then, only carping wags seek to ridicule us with the name *maitresse-femme*, if we do not, like reeds moved by the wind, depend on all their whims and fancies, do not do everything only and forever for the sake of their approval, which we will never, like [Jean de] La Fontaine's miller (who with his son and his donkey complied with everyone's view, and still never pleased anyone), in any possible way completely and consistently win. The good and reasonable among them will feel how much they gain when we have a sound character, when the inner dignity of feeling guides us and lifts us up.

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NOTES

[1] The joy of being able to share an essay, such as the present one, with the readers of the T. M. [*Teutscher Merkur*] is something too rare for me not to at least allow my heart (in which I must on this occasion suppress so much that threatens to make it overflow) to publicly thank the generous authoress for the courtesy of granting my request to allow me to put the essay to this use, after it had lain hidden under her papers for over ten years. It was originally intended for the use of a beloved sister (taken from her friends and the world all too soon), but for precisely that reason it contains something that is missing from many otherwise excellent works on matters of morals and life philosophy, something that even the most beautiful, educated spirit cannot produce by itself without the assistance of a sensitive and intimately sympathetic heart, in short, something that every reader who has a heart will feel upon reading this essay without me, and about which I could write a book without giving the remaining people a sense of it.
[2] "Notre plus douce existence est relative et collective, et notre vrai moi n'est pas entre en nous." ["Our more gentle existence is relative and collective, and our true self is not all within us."] Rousseau, judge of Jean Jacques.

Source: Emilie von Berlepsch, "Ueber einige zum Glück der Ehe nothwendige Eigenschaften und Grundsätze," in *Neuer Teutscher Merkur*, vol. 2 (1791), pp. 63–64, 88–93.

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