

# ON WOMEN WRITERS

## Christian Ompteda to his brother, Louis Ompteda

Bremen, 17 February 1788

...But are the contents of letters from a mother to her son, from a sister to her brother, from a girl to her lover—is the value of such letters, usually detailed recitals of domestic occurrences, small incidents and trivialities, heightened into life and interest by the warmth of their sensitive faculty, which drapes them in a light, pleasing, simple manner—are such things, I say, of such value, so impressive, so important as to stand publicity? What must the subject-matter of a woman's letters be if they are to appear before the world? Surely it must be something treated scientifically, or be a romance?

In the first case—oh, believe me!—if they really have acquired learning, which is obviously entirely unsuited to them, they have, at the same time, too little logic and too much vanity to treat their subjects with proper accuracy, and, at the same time, must lose their light, pleasing, and flattering turns of style, so that we are no further advanced.

As to romances—that is to say, works comparable to *Tom Jones*, to *Heloise*, to *Agathon* (for the ordinary miserable trash we need not take into consideration)—it is impossible for women to present to us faithfully either nature, the spring of human passions and actions, or the varied ways in which the latter manifest themselves, whether in a duchess's *boudoir* or a nook in a house of ill-fame, at Pharaoh's table or behind the bottles of an alehouse. They have no experience of such situations, and one can only tell really well what one has personally seen and heard; or, supposing them to have obtained a good deal of this kind of knowledge, so to speak, by peeping through keyholes, is it consistent with feminine modesty to reveal such privacies? Ought they to admit it to any but their best friend, and hardly to her? Must they not even shun too strong an expression? And under such extreme limitations, is it possible to expect pictures like those of Hogarth or Fielding? Where the nervous fist of man should be felt, one would detect the soft, smooth fingering of a girl. And so the strongest scenes would be lost.

There remains, however, a third class of subject, the description of localities and landscapes, and so forth. In this they can perhaps attain the heights of the Siebenberge, but will never reach the summit of Mont Blanc.

After all the exceptions taken, what then remains for women? Undoubtedly a rather wide field, that of poetry. Apart from the already demonstrated deficiency in other necessary qualifications, their lack of constant purpose protects us from poems of such dimensions as *Paradise Lost*, *Oberon*, or the *Henriade*. Good. Then as for minor poetry; just the same defects which take all the salt and strength out of their novels reappear again, though in their place we have, to be sure, roses and forget-me-not, nightingales and moonshine to excess. Likewise moving dialogues between Damon and Pythias, to an accompaniment of bleating lambs. Also moral tales, and gossip between papa and mamma and Carl and Luischen, not to mention fables of the wolf and sheep, with a commonplace maxim to conclude with. Ah! if I could only relish milk-diet as I once did!

I read the criticism in the Göttingen literary papers, and I liked it. The remark also about the material for satire which the book offers may be true here and there. But ought the Bible never to have been written because jokes have been made on it?

I am not afraid of the reproach for arrogating the pen, because I can retort by making a similar point on the arrogation of the plumed hat and sword

Baron Ompteda. *In the King's German Legion. Memoirs of Baron Ompteda, Colonel in the King's German Legion During the Napoleonic Wars.* (London: 1894):7–9.