ABSTRACT

MEINE EMANZIPATION: LOUISE HOCHE ASTON
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE ‘SELF’ IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PRUSSIA

by Kendall Fisher Stivers

This essay examines Louise Hoche Aston’s 1846 political tract Meine Emanzipation, Verweisung und Rechtfertigung to demonstrate how radical and daring Aston’s activities, writings, and personal beliefs were during a time when political and social dissent was met with extreme consequences; nineteenth-century Prussia. As a feminist and, even rarer, an atheist, Aston protested her forced removal from Berlin in 1846, writing both her defense and the details of her case in Meine Emanzipation. While detailing her brave stance against the Berlin police and Prussian government, Meine Emanzipation also stated Aston’s concept of “freedom of the self,” which held that everyone, regardless of their sex or religion, had the inalienable right to think and express themselves freely without fear of recourse from their government. This essay defends Aston against those who would label her progressive thinking and daring resistance against the Prussian police state as little more than a calculated “performance.”
MEINE EMANZIPIATION:
LOUISE HOCHÉ ASTON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE ‘SELF’ IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PRUSSIA

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of History
by
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Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2008

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I. Introduction

Louise Hoche Aston stands as one of the most intriguing figures of the 19th century. A radical feminist author during the years between Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 and the so-called “failed” 1848/49 liberal revolution in Germany known as the Vormärz period, she frequently appeared in pubs and in public doing exclusively ‘masculine’ activities, such as drinking beer, smoking, and donning male attire. She refused to be called anything but “Louis” rather than “Louise” during these times, and was often arrested, even expelled from Berlin, and shunned by both male and female literary contemporaries.

While her public escapades alone were controversial enough to warrant Aston acclaim in the annals of history, her formal writings often raised even more controversy. She wrote several bildungsroman, genre novels of dramatic romance popular at the time that were often authored by women and written for a female audience. These works served as a way for Aston to further her cause, for the stories and characters in Lydia, Aus dem Leben einer Frau, and Revolution und Contrerevolution all showcase the very vulnerable position women occupied in Prussian society. Her works also drew heavily on personal experience, and her heroine’s tribulations were often thinly veiled versions of past situations Aston herself had faced. Aston’s most powerful piece, a non-fiction account of her severe mistreatment by the Prussian authorities called Meine Emanzipation, Verweisung und Rechtfertigung, is an acerbic and daring indictment of a government she viewed as little more than a police state that scantly clothed its invasive policies in the guise of righteous paternalism. Her historical value as highly political author, activist, and early feminist is immense.

And yet Louise Aston remains a relatively unexplored figure. There have been studies of Aston, but mostly as part of historical surveys of female writers. Studies of Aston and her work have usually been vignettes included as part of larger surveys of the historical period, and have traditionally focused on two facets of her life. The risqué details, the pants and cigar smoking à la George Sands, have offered historians the chance to liven perhaps otherwise ‘boring’ historical monologue or at least entice readers in introductory paragraphs to read further. They have been used to distinguish Aston as a ‘radical’ amongst her female peers, as if the messages present in her writings were not enough to do so. This leads to the second focus of most studies of her work—her novels. To examine her in conjunction with other female bildungsroman authors, the majority of scholarship has centered more on analyses of Lydia, Aus dem Leben einer Frau, and
Revolution und Contrerevolution, and have overwhelmingly excluded Meine Emanzipation—the only first person account of the lot.

In addition, this scholarly work has been scattered in its assessments, and scholars have had difficulty reconciling certain elements of her life and work to present a more complete portrait of Louise Aston. Some have questioned her traditional label as a supposed ‘radical’ and feminist ideologist because of an apparent “allegiance to noble femininity” present within her novels, and because of her complete disappearance from the political and literary arena after her marriage in 1850.¹ Ruth- Ellen Boetcher Joeres, for example, raises these concerns in a small section of Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation, which surveys a number of notable female authors and their apparent struggles in rectifying their beliefs with the problems of everyday female life. Though Boetcher Joeres notes the multi-faceted nature of Aston’s work, particularly her incorporation of class issues when discussing gender, Boetcher Joeres finds that this approach ultimately works against Aston—“it is as if the categories of gender and nationalism and class are all competing within her—and ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, gender becomes eclipsed, or more precisely, the focus on its radical potential becomes dulled.”² Boetcher Joeres’s evaluation of Aston cuts even deeper, and questions the sincerity of Aston’s feminist behavior:

Perhaps because of the highly conflicted subject position of a progressive nineteenth-century German woman writer like Louise Aston, radicality can seem sometimes to be only skin deep, can appear as pure performance. In that case, it indicates more acquiescence than conviction, more show than deeply felt belief, and it may fizzle out.³

Granted, finding solid ground on which to evaluate Aston and produce a reliable historical appraisal is difficult given that relatively little is known about her life after 1850 when she disappeared from the feminist and literary scene after her marriage to Dr. Daniel Meier. It is risky to speculate the reasons why she would have ceased to write or appear in public protest following her marriage, and even more dangerous to interpret this disappearance as abandonment, calling into question the sincerity of her words and actions. We do not know the reasons why Aston disappeared from the public scene, and this is precisely why we cannot appraise her activities by her ‘inactivity.’ Furthermore, if scholars are ever to understand the

² Ibid, 115.
³ Ibid, 110.
historical significance of Louise Aston and her contributions to the early feminist movement in the German states and Europe, they must not be content to leave their appraisal of her as “ambiguous.” Rare is the human that has lived a life in which every facet of their existence has been bent toward a single purpose. To deem her “ambiguous” does not do justice to her work or actions, whether one labels them radical or not— espousing feminist views during the mid-nineteenth century in one of the most notoriously conservative areas in Europe was a daring feat in and of itself.

More importantly, in focusing almost exclusively on Louise Aston’s bildungsroman, scholars have repeatedly neglected her most political and powerful piece. This skews any overall appraisal of her life and works. The political tract in which Aston recounts her ordeals with the Berlin police, *Meine Emanzipation, Verweisung und Rechtfertigung* offers a scathing indictment of the Prussian government, and makes it difficult for anyone who has read it to understand how Louise Aston could be assessed as “ambiguous” about her beliefs, or that she subscribed to a “noble femininity.”

This analysis of *Meine Emanzipation* will be the first and foremost task of this essay. While the tract is by no means a magic lens that will bring Louise Aston’s life into perfect focus, *Meine Emanzipation*, more so than any other piece, serves as an excellent binding material for many of the seemingly disparate elements of her life. It states overtly, and using the potent medium of her direct experience with Prussian authorities, what her bildungsroman could only insinuate through fictionalized representations. This tract offers insights for understanding her potential motives, her arguments about women and the nature of their legal and social status in German society, her potential political motives, her opinions on how religion and class affected women’s rights, and her recommendations for change. As such, it will be pivotal to reevaluating Aston’s historical and intellectual legacy.

The interpretation of Aston’s life is an important exercise in historical analysis. The study of women’s history, and more particularly the writing of it, has often produced new and useful frameworks for understanding “woman” in a particular time and place. However, the frameworks that have been used in attempts to understand Aston have produced less than stellar results. Readers have been left uncertain as to her meaning and significance. Contrasting actions and beliefs have been deemed as “ambiguous” or “lacking conviction,” without attempting to understand the complex social pressures women such as Aston faced. Ultimately,
this study will hopefully provide more insight into the history of European feminisms, as well as
the manner in which history has approached and analyzed the history of women.

A Note on Language

This study deals regularly with two terms that were existentially non-existent during the
time period it examines: Germany and feminism. While a unified German state did not come
into being until 1871, there nonetheless existed a sense of “Germanness,” with language and
shared cultural traditions serving as unifiers in lieu of a formal nation. Aston herself even refers
to herself as a German, and to the German people in *Meine Emanzipation*. I have used the words
“German” or “Germany” in this paper when I deemed it appropriate. However, given the
staunchly conservative and monarchical climate critical to understanding the events Aston
discussed in *Meine Emanzipation*, I have also preserved Prussian distinctions from the rest of
“Germany” whenever possible for reasons of specificity.

While a feminist analysis of Aston would undoubtedly produce positive results given the
nature of her political beliefs and actions, that the very name and notion of ‘feminism’ or a
‘feminist,’ in our 21st century meaning of the terms, did not yet exist could pose certain problems
if not approached carefully. To meet this challenge, Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser’s
three-pronged definition of feminist behavior and/or ideology found in *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to Present* was employed during my analysis of Aston and
*Meine Emanzipation*, as well as in my discussion of these analyses in this essay. Feminists,
regardless of time, place, gender, or any other marker, (a) have claimed justice and humanity for
women by “rejecting traditions which subordinate and denigrate women,” (b) have created “new visions of society not only for women but for all, and (c) can identify with other women.4

These guidelines are extremely flexible and able to identify a wide variety of ideas and
actions as feminist – which proves a valuable tool when examining feminism in the absence of a
unified ideology or front. This also provides a helpful basis in comparing Aston with her female contemporaries, given the quite varied responses they produced in reaction to their
subordination.

Current Scholarship

Surprisingly little has been written on Aston, which seems especially strange given the historical value and richness of her texts. In most studies, scholars have either attempted to form connections between Aston’s personal life and literary creations or to position her as the quirky exception to the ‘normal’ views espoused by her female contemporaries and to German cultural normality in general. In his exploration of domestic fiction in Germany, Todd Kontje examines Aston as an ‘Amazon’ and the place of her work within a long tradition of female German writers in *Women, the Novel, and the German Nation, 1771-1871* (1998). Easily identifying Aston as the most radical of the *Vormärz* female writers, Kontje focuses mainly on establishing continuity between Aston’s works and those of other female German writers of domestic fictions, and the ways in which these texts can provide non-traditional critiques of German society at the levels of class and gender. Barbara Wimmer’s study of Louise Aston’s writings, *Die Vormärzchriftstellerin Louise Aston: Selbst- und Zeiterfahrung* (1993) is much more in-depth and comprehensive than that of Kontje, but uses the same literary approach. Even one of the most recent studies in Ruth Whittle and Debbie Pinfold’s *Voices of Rebellion*—which is the only source to provide a useful chronology of important personal and political events in Aston’s known life—examines, yet again, the clash between Aston, Otto, and the church, as well as the personal connections between Aston and the female characters in her novels.

Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres has put forth the most cutting criticism of Louise Aston, as she has called into question the one facet of her being that most scholars had appeared to agree on—her radicality. In *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation*, Boetcher Joeres found that in examining and evaluating Aston’s body of work as a whole, the impression that historians have of her as a “radical thinker, unstintingly outspoken in her wide-ranging opposition to political and social oppression, a fearless supporter of the rights of women and the need for a liberalization of the Prussian state…..does not always hold.”\(^5\) Boetcher Joeres holds that while *Meine Emanzipation* may be a very “searingly critical” comment on male authority, she also wrote “rambling novels in which heroines cater openly and willingly to the patriarchy not because they are subtly undermining the system but because they seem to want to be part of it, perhaps even support or

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\(^5\) Joeres, 112.
further its values."\(^6\) Louise Aston leaves Boetcher Joeres with a picture of a female writer with ambiguous messages, who searched intensely and frantically for appropriate intellectual models but never found them, and ultimately as a historical figure who best represents not radical feminism, but the “near futility of open rebellion under the unfavorable conditions presented by the fate of being an outspoken woman in Germany in the nineteenth century.”\(^7\)

While each author critically analyzes Aston, none provides a satisfactory portrait, and leaves the reader somewhat puzzled as to why this woman was important enough to be included in their studies. Her male attire and cigar-smoking serve more as a lure, and greatly overplayed compared to her intellectual contributions. Those studies that made Aston’s atheism a greater focus seemed closer to revealing the significant contributions made to the feminist intellectual arena than others, but without the inclusion of *Meine Emanzipation* their conclusions vary little, and seem no different than the opinion espoused by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres— that Louise Aston was very different from her contemporaries, perhaps even radical, but given the existing resources, all that can be said of Aston is that her life and messages are ‘ambiguous.’

**Essay Plan**

The first section will paint a picture of Vormärz Prussia— the severe impact on life post-Napoleon, the nature of government and social structure, the role women were to play in Prussian society and nature of their status as citizens. This section will also provide a biography of Louise Aston. The second section will deal exclusively with the examination of *Meine Emanzipation*. Part of this section will supply a brief overview of the events covered in *Meine Emanzipation*, but the most effort will be dedicated to analyzing Aston’s arguments on the abuse of power and human rights by the Prussian government, as well as her thoughts on the nature of citizenship in Prussia.

Finally, this paper will conclude with a brief discussion and comparison of Aston and one of her most outspoken critics, Louise Otto (later known as Louise Otto-Peters). Aston shared a belief in the desperate need for an increase in women’s rights with Louise Otto, but the similarities ended there. Otto was often the subject of much public criticism, but generally enjoyed a favorable reputation amongst other feminists. Aston however, was a complete pariah,

\(^6\) Ibid, 113.

\(^7\) Ibid, 117.
and most if not all of her contemporaries saw her as amoral, uncouth, and a discredit to other women who sought political advancement in a more dignified manner. Aston stood alone in her rejection of Christianity and the familial hierarchy its Prussian followers advocated, which was the subject of a particularly nasty exchange between Aston and Otto. Rejection of male superiority was one thing; rejection of a religion which even the most steadfast and fervent of German feminists believed in was quite another, and an ideological departure worth exploring—especially when Aston’s status as a ‘radical’ has been questioned by subsequent generations. The inability for the latter to comprehend the beliefs of the former provides keen insight into how markedly different Aston was from her contemporaries, illustrates how Aston has been misunderstood by scholars confirms that her status as a “radical” and revolutionary thinker are indeed well-deserved.
II. Aston and *Vormärz* Prussia

Napoleon caused a great deal of strife in Prussia during his years as leader of the French—both physically and psychologically. The 1807 Treaty of Tilsit nearly ruined the Prussian economy, which was still in the process of recovering when Aston began publishing in the 1840s. It lost claim to nearly half of its territories, was forced to pay an indemnity of 140 million francs, and faced severe restrictions on the size of its army. Towns that were forced to quarter French troops often complained about the pecuniary stress placed upon them by their hungry and unwanted guests. Napoleon also formed the Confederation of the Rhine from smaller German states to the south and west of Prussia, and from several others that had previously been under Prussian rule. Most insulting of all was Prussia’s forced recognition of Napoleon as French sovereign and protector of the Confederation. Napoleon represented the impending threat of modernity: he was a leader of relatively modest origin, who had risen to power during the chaos of bloody revolution which stood for social equality and the overthrow of old power. For the notoriously conservative Prussian kingdom to recognize this man as their conqueror was terrifying.

The years between 1807 and 1813 were especially traumatic. The many new social reforms were seen by the conservative nobility as part of a larger attempt to uproot German traditions, which had caused a “breakdown of Christian faith, the disintegration of large family units, and the rootlessness of modern man.” They feared that bureaucratic reforms such as the liberation of the peasantry, the replacement of guilds and artisans with factory work and the cancellation of a multitude of other social and economic restrictions (such as the relaxing of immigration policies to increase the tax base) would annihilate traditional German culture. Although these reforms would not drastically alter Prussian life, they would pose significant problems for their leadership when Napoleon was defeated and the areas taken from the Prussian monarchy in 1807 would be returned to their control.

Prussia, particularly the nobility, did not care for these more modern forms of government which threatened their traditionally privileged position. Many of the areas they now governed, particularly those to the south, “took the concept and potential of the Napoleonic

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9 Ibid, 61.
nation state much more seriously than Prussia.” ¹⁰ Those living in the Rhineland, now under Prussian control, had become quite attached to modern French social practices, particularly those involving the eradication of many long-standing class barriers and more participatory roles in government for the populace. This new sentiment, that German peoples could potentially unite not under a prince or king, but under a government guided by new liberal principles, caused great concern among the Prussian nobility. The nobility had been jeopardized by the “standardization of the modern age and of ‘natural’ inequalities. Inequality was part of the conservatives’ self-understanding and identity.” ¹¹ Prussian officials were even known to advise Rhinelanders to “re-conform to ‘German customs, German convictions, and the German way of thinking.’” ¹² This mission, to protect German tradition and culture from the external threat of modernity, prevailed as conservatives’ most important project in Prussia from 1815 onward.

One of the most significant developments in achieving this goal began shortly after French occupation; the use of the ‘family’ by the Prussian government as a means of imparting to Prussian men and women their patriotic duties. Prussia desperately needed some manner of uniting their people against the French in the absence of an existing sense of ‘nationalism.’ In 1813 King Frederick William III made his first direct appeal, “An Mein Volk,” to the populace for their aid in liberation. This appeal was a military call-to-arms aimed solely at Prussian men— the ‘father of the country’ asking the Volk, the ‘sons of the fatherland,’ to rescue Prussia and its honor. ¹³ Presenting the king as the symbolic ‘father’ allowed a rather distant ruler to connect with his subjects in a very personal way, even if it was patronizing and reminiscent of older feudal traditional obligations. Men could now lay claim to the most important patriotic roles— as those would physically defend Prussia, as the leaders of their own families, and as members of the Volk who truly understood the essence of what it meant to be German.

Women’s participation in patriotic activities was inextricably linked to their perceived role as ‘mothers’ of the national family. While a similar “Appeal to the Women of the Prussia

¹¹ Beck, 69.
State,” made by Frederick William’s sister-in-law Marianne (his wife died in 1810) and twelve other Hohenzollern princesses, asked women to do their part, this appeal centered on fulfilling motherly and nurturing tasks. They called for a ‘Women’s Association for the Good of the Fatherland,’ which would “collect donations of money and materials to help arm, equip and clothe the ‘defenders of the fatherland’ and to organize food and nursing care for the wounded and sick, so that they could be returned as quickly as possible to the ‘grateful fatherland.’”14

Though they incorporated women in the liberation efforts, these contributions were largely restricted to unglamorous, ‘behind the scenes’ work, which differed little from their peacetime roles. German men considered women “unsuited to share in the so-called military virtues,” and women tended to symbolize the “enjoyment of peace achieved by male warriors.”15

Women’s legal status was inextricably linked to their familial roles as well. Citizenship operated completely within the masculine realm. A Prussian man could marry a non-Prussian woman and retain his citizenship. His wife would receive citizenship automatically, to ensure that any children the marriage produced would be raised Prussian as well.16 However, only by marrying a fellow Prussian could a Prussian woman retain her civic status.17 This practice also strongly curbed the number of divorces, especially those initiated by women, as the Prussian General Law Code gave the husband complete authority on all marital issues—he “controlled the wife’s property, determined if she might practice a trade, and decided how the children were to be raised.”18 Divorced women would be left penniless and with no legal claim to their children.

Ultimately, citizenship for women and men was based completely on familial roles and used by the government to protect the patriarchal family unit as the basis of Prussian society. If the populace accepted this power structure at home, then they would be more likely to accept it in their government, hopefully quelling desires for a more democratic rule.

The patriotic “family” model also allowed conservatives to couch a carefully defined and inferior role for women under the guise of a “natural” hierarchy. By extending ‘normal’ individual family dynamics to the state level, they limited the activities of women to the domestic realm and used this condemnation to legitimize their exclusion of women from the

14 Ibid, 179.
15 George Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 98.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
activities of ‘real’ Germans who took up arms to defend the fatherland. This also gave male authorities the opportunity to regulate women’s moral behavior. As their primary responsibilities lay in instructing their children in ‘‘German national customs’’ and cultivating ‘‘German culture, language, and dress,’’ women who did not keep their ‘‘womanly honour pure’’ threatened to pollute generations of young Prussians. Women who dared overstep these bounds would be labeled by the state as behaving ‘‘unnaturally’’ and as undermining the social and moral fabric of Prussian society.

Few women violated these expectations more than Louise Aston. Aston neither subscribed to nor endorsed this image of the domestic and nurturing German wife and mother at the cost of other ambitions, nor did she strive to be the ‘domestic’ and ‘moral’ German woman that society desired her to be. She openly defied codes of proper conduct as a mother, a wife, and a Prussian-born subject. In a culture that promoted extremely narrow and rigid gendered behaviors, active and intelligent women were often forced to suffer in silence, tailoring their beliefs in women’s activism to more domestic concerns. Aston, however, actively rebelled against gender expectations through physical action and intellectual writing.

Louise Hoche Aston was born in 1814 to Luise and Johann Gottfried Hoche, a church advisor and senior pastor in Gröningen. Her parents felt that they should arrange for their only child an economic and practical marriage and save her the heartache of marrying for love. They themselves had been deeply in love as youths, but her mother’s wealthy family did not approve of this union as they felt she was marrying a man socially ‘beneath’ her. They married anyway, and after falling out of love within a few years after their marriage, her parents were quite disappointed by the lives they felt they were trapped in. They later arranged for their daughter to marry Samuel Aston, an English industrialist almost 23 years her senior, partly for financial reasons and partly because they wanted to protect her from the disenchantments that had pulled them into their own disappointing union.

Aston and her husband Samuel married in 1835 and moved to England to live. During the years of her marriage, Louise Aston found her husband thoroughly unsupportive of any type of independent activities, and expected her to primarily “entertain his clients and guests,” most of whom would have been individuals “determined by his business needs,” rather than any of her

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19 Hagemann, 192.
20 Ruth Whittle and Debbie Pinfold, Voices of Rebellion: Political Writing by Malwida von Meysenbug, Fanny Lewald, Johanna Kinkel and Louise Aston (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2005), 129-130.
own acquaintances or friends.\textsuperscript{21} Her married life to Samuel Aston was thus highly constricting. Her personal contacts were limited to her husband’s business clients, which forced her to remain in the privacy of their home to fulfill her role as hostess and ‘woman of the house.’ It is also suspected that this period in her life influenced the overall theme many of the events found in \textit{Aus dem Leben einer Frau}, which centered on a young woman who was forced to marry against her wishes and who ultimately lent her support to the downtrodden factory workers employed by the husband she loathed.

They divorced three years later in 1838, and month after the divorce she gave birth to their first daughter. She gave birth to a second daughter in 1841, whose parentage is unconfirmed but suspected to be by her ex-husband. Sadly, her eldest daughter died only a month after her second child was born. Four months after their daughter’s death, Louise and Samuel Aston reconciled and remarried. A third daughter was born in 1842, and shortly afterward the Astons divorced for the second and last time. In 1843 Louise Hoche Aston then moved to Switzerland and then to Berlin with custody of her daughters, though the youngest child died by the time she moved to Berlin.\textsuperscript{22} She did so, however, as a non-Prussian—by marrying an Englishman, the Prussian-born woman had lost her Prussian citizenship. This would cause a great deal of strife for her in the years to come.

Between 1843 and 1845 Aston made homes in two different cities, drifting in between Züllichau, Switzerland and Berlin. She finally settled in Berlin in 1845 with the goal of becoming a professional writer, and where she had numerous friends and a supportive circle of like minded intellectuals. Despite the fact that she was expelled from the city in 1846, 1847, 1848, and 1849, Aston produced the bulk of her literary work during her time living in Berlin. Her first published work, a collection of poetry called \textit{Wilde Rosen}, was released in 1846, as was \textit{Meine Emanzipation}. She published a novel a year for the next three years: \textit{Aus dem Leben einer Frau} (1847), \textit{Lydia} (1848), and \textit{Revolution und Contrerevolution} (1849). Each work dealt in some way with young women breaking from the restrains of the traditional feminine model of behavior while aspiring to engage in political activity.

Aston maintained custody of her only living child, as well as a small alimony until 1846, when her ex-husband used Aston’s unsavory reputation to have their daughter legally removed

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 133.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
from her custody. It is unknown whether this claim and court case took place in England or in Prussia. Citing her problems with the Berlin police, her love affairs with various men outside of marriage, her appearances in pubs smoking and drinking, and her penchant for wearing trousers and adopting the male personae “Louis” at the bar scene, Samuel Aston secured guardianship of their only surviving daughter, removing the five-year-old child from Louise Aston’s care, whom the court viewed as an unfit mother. The children produced during her marriage were used by her husband as little more than bargaining chips. Even though they were no longer married, Aston’s husband still maintained the power to reinforce proper female behavior.

The Prussian authorities had kept a watchful eye on Aston almost since the moment of her arrival in Berlin in 1845, especially since the city already served as an epicenter for the revolutionary-minded. Police had first been made aware of her behavior by a woman who denounced her as an “evil and immoral seductress” after losing a lover to Aston in 1845. By 1846, several “concerned” and anonymous citizens of the Prussian state had written authorities and even the Prussian king to “inform” them of her unfeminine and unnatural activities, which rebelled against the institutions of marriage and traditional feminine roles that upheld social order. In one complaint, the author protested the fact that Aston was able to use her eloquence to evade punishment, effectively “throwing sand in their faces.” The letter goes on to compare Aston’s moral corruption to Valeria Messalina, the wife of an ancient German king who married her lover while her husband was at war. In another letter to the king, an anonymous source complained of her disgusting public behavior. She smoked cigars and drank alcohol, did not believe in God or marriage, publicly ridiculed religion, and worked for the emancipation of women (and thus worked against the state). It stated that though it cannot be proved that her conduct was not completely licentious, her manner was, nevertheless, “of the custom against decency.”

At the heart of these complaints, which offered little in the way of solid evidence against Aston, was the ‘threat’ she posed morally to the staunchly Christian Prussia. She had abandoned her roles as wife and mother, and her behavior and writings seemed to encourage other women to

23 Ibid, 133.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
follow suit. These ‘anonymous’ individuals were more than willing to act as an extension of the already invasive police force by reporting Aston’s threats to social and moral order. Allowing her to remain in Berlin would only afford her a greater opportunity to “pull careless youth and husbands into her deadly net.”

*Meine Emanzipation, Verweisung und Rechtfertigung* was written Aston while lived in exile in Switzerland shortly after her first expulsion from Berlin in 1846. While the police already knew and had received complaints of Aston’s immoral behavior, this expulsion was ironically not because of anything Aston did or wrote, but because of a poem written by friend and fellow liberal Rudolph Gottschall. The nature of the poem was sexually and religiously controversial, and was dedicated to Aston, which only furthered suspicions of her illicit beliefs and behavior. This poem, entitled *Madonna und Magdalena*, described and outlined the characteristics that a modern Madonna and Magdalena would possess and the role each would play in the world to come. The verses state that a “mania” had hold on the king’s sceptre, presumably in reference to the strong influence of Christianity on state policy, and wondered “Who will bring us redemption?” A new law, which would release the people from the maniacal rule of the present king, would sound when this holy Madonna came through the land. This law was that of *freie Liebe* – “free love,” which would no longer bear the shame it had previously. The qualities that Gottschall praised in the Magdalena were equally controversial. “You have loved, but have never regretted it,” the poem began, and continued to praise this woman who would have been viewed by society as immoral. Gottschall thought differently; “Adoring, I sink down before the sinner.”

The descriptions of the Madonna and Magdalena would have raised considerable protest from the public, whether or not Gottschall had dedicated the poem to Aston. The unorthodox portrayal of the venerated women was perceived by the public as blasphemous. The modern Virgin Mary whom he foretold as being the one to save Prussia also advocated free love, and he worshipped the new Magdalena even though she was a “sinner.” The behaviors commended countered the emphasis Prussian society placed on female morality and virtue. The dedication gave the public reason to believe that Louise Aston was the “Madonna” and “Magdalena”

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 29.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid, 30.
described in the poem who intended to uproot their society. Aston had only lived in Berlin for a year, but her reputation for drinking, smoking, and wearing men’s clothes in public had become well known and only exacerbated these public concerns.

1846 was a pivotal year for Aston in many respects. She moved to Berlin to begin a career, and published her first literary work as an independent woman and author. However, she also faced considerable legal and social scrutiny because her lifestyle, which ultimately led to her first expulsion from the city. Moreover, Aston lost custody of her only daughter to her ex-husband largely because of her questionable morality and her ability to act as a fit mother. These issues of female behavioral expectations and especially the right to privacy serve as significant points of contention for Aston when arguing her case in *Meine Emanzipation.*
III. Meine Emanzipation

Aston states in the first lines of Meine Emanzipation that “a woman who brings her private matters before the general public forum must be either completely defeated or be driven, by extreme necessity, to this step.”\(^{32}\) Aston was both. She had lost control of her own life, or at least the right to represent herself in her own words. The dubious legality of the Berlin and Prussian authorities’ actions had driven Aston, “by extreme necessity,” to defend herself and her honor through this tract.

Meine Emanzipation is a brief but potent essay that focused on her 1846 legal battles with the Prussian government during her stay in Berlin. Around 20 pages in length, approximately half the essay documented her lengthy and ultimately futile attempts to prevent her expulsion from the city for her morally-reprehensible behavior—such as smoking and drinking in public, and attempting to incite uprisings against the government with her politically charged writings. Though each visit to progressively higher ranked officials resulted in frustration, her detailed accounts of these encounters served as valuable and revealing evidence for her arguments in the latter half of Meine Emanzipation.

Meine Emanzipation may be divided into two sections. The first half of the text is dedicated to recounting the series of events that led to her arrest and expulsion, beginning with her arrival in Berlin, detailing her problems with the police and libelous comments made against her in various media, and ending with the rejection of her final appeal to the King of Prussia. Aston makes several points painfully clear in this part of the text: that her actions were in no way illegal, and that the authorities targeted her simply because she was (a) a woman and (b) an atheist. The information she divulges in this part of her tract later served in the second half of Meine Emanzipation as ‘evidence’ for her arguments concerning the abuse of power by the Prussian government.

This chapter analyzing Meine Emanzipation will be organized in a similar fashion— the first portion will focus on detailing (with brief analyses) the major events described in Meine Emanzipation, while the second critically analyzes Aston’s arguments. Woven within her apologia are three major contentions that stem directly from Aston’s police encounter and address the nature of political freedom, or lack thereof, within Prussian society: (1) certain

\(^{32}\) Louise Aston, Meine Emanzipation, Verweisung und Rechtfertigung, in Für die Selbstverwirklichung der Frau: Louise Aston in Selbstzeugnissen und Dokumenten, in Goetzinger, 61.
inalienable human rights exist regardless of nationality or gender, and these are routinely abused by the current Prussian state, (2) the nature of citizenship and civil rights is so patriarchal that women are rendered helpless before the state and the men in their lives, and (3) the Christian religion is at the deepest root of both of these problems.

The Events

Aston’s introductory comments on the historical development of women’s rights are quite wry given the otherwise serious nature of *Meine Emanzipation*. She pointed out that women in days of old were afforded the protection of knights and “glorified in the sweetest songs and the bloodiest fights.”

However, in light of more progressive ways of thinking over the years, this arrangement was done away with—but replaced with nothing. Ironically, the ‘backward’ medieval European world—so highly esteemed by 19th century romantics for its mystical Christianity, romantic irrationality, and emphasis on ‘natural’ gender roles—in reality provided women with more protection than modern times. Women did not see an increase in legal rights with the advent of a “progressive world,” and had lost the only form of protection they had, albeit highly backward. As a result, women were now left “helpless and helpless, exposed to every hostility.”

Aston’s case demonstrated first-hand just how helpless Prussian women were. Having lost her own Prussian citizenship upon marrying a foreigner, and though they were divorced by this time, she never regained it. Instead, she had to secure permits to stay and live in the city of Berlin. At first, Aston obtained these permits when she first moved to Berlin in 1845 without any problems. On February, 1846, when she tried to renew her original permit, her renewal was denied and she was told to contact the police immediately for further information. As Aston had recently become ill, she sent her doctor to obtain the document. His request went ignored for several days, until a police officer finally visited Aston at her residence, and explained that given her past behavior—her appearance in local pubs, her literary activity, and ultimately the controversy surrounding Gottschall’s poem *Madonna und Magdalena*—the Prussian government had denied her permit renewal, and she would soon be required to leave the city. It had been several police officers, in fact, that had come forth to protest her stay, and multiple

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33 Ibid, 61.
34 Ibid.
attacks in printed media (and especially the anonymous letters) gave state officials reason to believe that her ideas and behavior would incite moral decay.

Thinking the situation might be resolved by speaking directly with the local government, Aston visited their offices at the end of February to clarify any misgivings they might have about her based on the evidence given them by the police. Aston explained that during her wait to see the state official, another civil servant named Stahlschmidt began chatting with her. During the course of their seemingly friendly conversation, he asked about her opinions on religion and marriage. She openly discussed her opinions with him on both topics, and conveyed that she disapproved of both institutions. At the end of their conversation, however, the man abruptly led her to the office of the very official she was waiting to see, and quickly “denounced” her by reading aloud secret notes he had made during their conversation to his superior, giving all the views which Aston had thought she was expressing in private. Aston saw that Stahlschmidt had been planted to first gain her confidence, but with the intent of later coercing her to admit her radical sociopolitical beliefs. The officials had not expected her to be so unashamed or direct in expressing these views.

This incident would be one of many Aston recounted intending to show readers how Prussian authorities often operated—covertly and without regard for legal rights, even if the subject was a citizen. While Aston was not yet a citizen of Berlin, she saw herself as a Prussian by birth and blood, and had willingly returned to her ‘fatherland’ after her divorce from her English husband. Aston would have freely admitted adherence to the beliefs she espoused to the senior official she was to visit, and I insisted that she had never tried to conceal these views. Yet, as she told her readers, moments before her meeting, the government felt the need to deceive and spy on her. They gave her no opportunity to convey these beliefs to the senior official, and had the audacity to denounce her then and there. When Aston was brought into the senior official’s office, her conversation had been read aloud as if it was something of which to be ashamed. She was not given the chance to defend or explain her thoughts, but simply asked to confirm their “suspicions.”

Aston received a second abrupt and evasive order on March 21 to leave Berlin within 8 days, as she sought to bring to life “ideas which are dangerous for middle-class order.” At this point she decided to write a letter to the Minister of the Interior’s office explaining her case and

situation. On April 24, she received a response from the Minister which reiterated previous orders to leave the city. She decided to speak with the Minister in person. Though she admitted both the visit and the Minister were much more pleasant than her previous encounter with the authorities, she felt patronized once again. The Minister claimed his attitude toward Aston stemmed from an “unconditional goodwill” and “care for [her] personal welfare.” Like others in the Prussian government, he wished only to acquire the “childish love and surrender of [his] subjects”— and offered Aston no real aid or advice whatsoever.

Aston recorded a segment of their dialogue, offering further evidence for her case. Expressing surprise at first that she had protested her case and this “frivolous” matter so far, the Minister soon found himself on the defensive. “I do not know what….your Excellency calls frivolous?” Aston inquired. She soon found that these “frivolities” were her beliefs— particularly her religious beliefs, or rather, lack thereof. They wondered why she did not believe in God, and why she would dare to declare this disbelief publicly. She responded: “Because I do not play hypocrite, Excellency!” With this, the Minister pointed out that although she desired to remain in Berlin, which offered an environment she found an intellectual and spiritual stimulus for her writing, that she must be expelled to a “little place” where her ideas were not quite so “seductive.” Her writings were to spread no further, at least not in Berlin. At this point Aston amusingly asked why the Prussian state was so afraid of a woman.

Louise Aston’s protest did not end here. On April 28 she wrote to the Prussian king himself explaining her predicament. In the first lines she overtly states that she was a Prussian subject, born and raised in Prussia as the daughter of a man who had served his country for 34 years as a constable and superintendent, who left only because a forced marriage compelled her to follow her husband abroad. Now divorced, without husband or family to protect her, Aston had become the object of unwarranted and unfair treatment at the hands of the Prussian police. She recounted what she considered the petty and baseless charges brought against her. Wearing masculine clothes and writing poetry were no threats to public order she argued, and those who had claimed otherwise were “libelous newspapers” and anonymous fiends who bent the truth

36 Ibid, 69.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 70.
solely to injure her reputation. At the end of her letter she again pleaded, “as a woman, without protection and shelter…in the highest distress,” for the king to reconsider her case. She received a verbal response some days later, via the police, that she had 8 days to leave Berlin.

Her final audience for this defense against the Prussian state was the readers of *Meine Emanzipation*, as she now turned to an even higher authority—“the German people!” At this point Aston used the events she described earlier in the essay—her visits to and treatment by the Berlin police—to specifically illustrate how much individual freedoms were being compromised by the government. She then used this to explain her personal beliefs, such as her detestation of marriage and the Christian religion, to which she ultimately attributed her expulsion. *Meine Emanzipation* intended to show, in great and specific detail, how the inherent sexism found within the structural framework of Christianity, combined with authoritarian tactics and elevated to the level of state policy had resulted in the extreme abuse of power by the Prussian government.

**Analysis**

While a large part of *Meine Emanzipation*’s power rests in its sheer boldness—that a Prussian woman would dare enter the public forum to regain control of her voice—its strength lies in its commentary on the nature of power in Prussia. The majority of Louise Aston’s complaints found in *Meine Emanzipation* focus on broader problematic issues concerning the lack of political freedom for women and men in Prussia. First, police routinely abused their power under the premise of maintaining order and did not answer to the populace for their actions, violating both legal and inalienable human rights. For Aston, inalienable rights stemmed from one major premise—the “freedom of personality,” which will be discussed in greater depth. The second issue was the treatment and status of women within Prussia. As their legal rights were completely determined by the men in their life, either a father or a husband, they were dependent upon men for any claim to power or defense. Aston’s case showed just how helpless women were when under the policing spotlight with little recourse for defense. The third and last issue was one that Aston steadfastly held responsible as the cause of both the abuse of power by the Prussian police and the lack of power held by Prussian women—the Christian religion. Her menswear may have raised a few Augenbrauen, but Aston attributed her expulsion from Berlin to her atheism.

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42 Ibid, 73.
It should be noted that *Meine Emanzipation* was as much (if not more so) a statement of Aston’s sociopolitical beliefs given as a public defense and clarification of her actions. Prussian law did not guarantee the ‘freedom of personality’ or other inalienable rights that Aston showed they had violated. But they *ought* to have had such laws in place, and Aston demonstrated that this absence was just as deplorable as if they had been legally violated.

**Police State**

Aston’s claim that she had done nothing to warrant her expulsion was demonstrated by the rather cooperative nature of her behavior prior to and after she received her notice to leave. She sent a doctor in her stead to question the notice. She worked her way up the bureaucratic ladder, speaking with each official calmly about the nature of her expulsion and how the government came to believe this a necessary step without first addressing her directly. She even wrote to the king of Prussia. In other words, Aston handled the this situation with the calm and logical manner that was the complete antithesis of what the authorities perceived and portrayed her as being. Aston never threatened physical violence, and there was no indication from either side that her writings had or would give rise to insurrection or riot. She attempted to explain her situation to both Stahlschmidt and his superior, to the Minister of the Interior, and even the king, never hiding her views from any of them.

Through her description of the controversy surrounding her stay, Aston made several arguments about the dangerous influence of social morality on state policy, human rights, and the abuse of civil rights by the Prussian government. She had not proselytized her beliefs in public, nor had she sought to rouse the public in a revolt against the existing order. The ideas put forth in her *Wilde Rosen* were mildly feminist—one poem hailed Georges Sand as a prophet and another compared woman to a wild rose, full of natural beauty but with thorns and a desire not to be ‘plucked’ by just any unwitting passerby. But these poems were not read aloud for all to hear; they were privately printed and for sale only to those who wished to pay the price to purchase them. Aston had worn a suit, smoked cigars, and drank beer in public; but it was in a small bar, and in the company of friends known as *Die Emanzipierten*. There was no evidence that she ever actively tried to bewitch unwitting Berlin citizens. Aston simply sought to support her daughter earning a living through her writing, which she enjoyed, and to have a social life outside the home and with like-minded friends.
Nothing in *Meine Emanzipation* demonstrated that the Berlin police or government officials involved in Aston’s case gave much thought to the legality or fairness of their actions. As a Prussian subject she had been obliged to “trust that the rules of the government, though they might be incomprehensible” to her, would act like Providence, and ultimately in her best interest. 43 Louise Aston could no longer operate under this assumption. What she had once perceived as a healthy trust in her fellow Prussians and government she now saw as little more than blind faith, which was expected, demanded even, by the Prussian government in order for current practices to continue unchanged. “Against a police rule, juridical defense is impossible,” especially when its swift and unyielding actions were cloaked in the guise of caring but stern paternal despot.44

Granted, it is a bit difficult to speak to the legality of government action when Prussia was all but a police state, and that as a women and non-citizen, Aston had even fewer rights (if any) than she would have had, had she still been a female citizen. Her dealings with the public and the police illustrate the degree of government intolerance of dissident opinions, even when they remained unrealized ideas from the “weaker” sex. Moreover, Aston did not speak to these inalienable rights as a specific defense against her ‘charges,’ but rather to demonstrate how lacking current Prussian law was in affording its citizens the most basic of human rights simply because its rulers were still haunted by the fate of the ruling class in revolutionary France.

This right of all individuals to formulate their own ideas, regardless of their nature or popularity was the most basic and essential freedom—“my belief and thinking is my property, and something that concerns no one.”45 Aston believed strongly in a concept she called the “freedom of personality,” or, in more modern terms, freedom of “self” or “individuality,” an idea that went beyond the freedoms of speech and expression. “Our highest right,” she penned in the introduction, “is the right of a free personality in which all our power and our beliefs rest; the right to develop undisturbed our most inner being…and express ourselves uninhibited.”46 By banning both her and her writings from Berlin, the government had completely denied her this

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43 Ibid, 74.
44 Ibid, 73.
inalienable right. No one had the power or right, “least of all a state power… to touch this most inner sanctum.”

Aston used her case as a warning to Prussian citizens about the safety of their own freedoms. As a Prussian subject, she had been “obliged to trust” that government rules and actions, “even if incomprehensible, were in my best interest.” In fact, all Prussian subjects had to place this same trust in their government. And even if they were not actively inhibited by the government, as Aston was, citizens would then be conditioned by her example to think and behave a certain way to avoid conflict. If their behavior mirrored Aston’s, or displayed any trace of dissent, they would likely receive the same treatment, perhaps worse. Aston pondered this very question in the Introduction to Meine Emanzipation— “If the state power already finds the thinking and beliefs of a woman punishable, how will it stand against the spiritual freedom of men?”

Aston’s statement that even men would receive ‘no quarter’ from the Prussian government should not be perceived as a statement of priority, and that she believed abuse of men’s rights a more serious offense than that of women. It will become apparent in analyses of her commentary later in this chapter that her intentions were to incite Prussian awareness, first toward the deplorable lack of women’s rights, and then toward the widespread pattern of complete disrespect for human and legal rights exhibited by their own government.

Women

An air of misogyny loomed over the transactions between Louise Aston and the various government officials. Aston also noted the paternalistic undertones of these interactions. She likened her meeting with Stahlschmidt and the senior official to an inquisition, making her feel “ashamed” and “shy” because of her ideas, and that she had not caught on to their schemes. She was treated like a child being reprimanded for some foolish action, and commented on the “fatherly disposition” taken toward her by the Prussian officials. After her fruitless visits with the state officials from February to April of 1846 she written formally to higher state authorities, only to receive a terse and formal letters shortly afterward informing her that the order for her to leave Berlin stood. Although it gave no specific reasons for her expulsion, she credited her ideas

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47 Ibid., 78.
48 Ibid., 74.
49 Ibid., 62.
50 Ibid., 66.
and personae, which had been labeled by the police as “dangerous for the middle-class order” and likely to “entice others,” as the primary reason.\footnote{Ibid, 69.}

Language used by the Minister of the Interior was especially revealing, as he often referred to her political beliefs as “little ideas,” to her intellectual clout as “seductive” rather than a less sexed term such as “influential” or “compelling,” and patronizingly referred to her entire situation as unfortunately “frivolous.” He also related to Aston that he cared for her personal welfare, which seems quite out of place given that he upheld the decision for her expulsion, and very likely played a part in this decision in the first place. This stood in direct contrast with her previous encounter with the government official Stahlschmidt and his superior, who used a more heavy-handed and confrontational approach. Though the approaches differed greatly, they were both wholeheartedly masculine. Stahlschmidt and his superior acted as the stern disciplinarians, authoritatively confronting and questioning Aston’s misdeeds. The Minister took on the role of a father-figure, comforting his child after she had been sent to her room for inappropriate behavior. Like others in the Prussian government, he wished only to acquire the “childish love and surrender of [his] subjects”— which Aston assumed included herself.\footnote{Ibid.}

Historical scholarship has shown this stern paternalism to be the \textit{modus operandi} of post-Napoleonic Prussia in dealing with citizens rumored to hold opinions contrary to their conservative Christian mantra. Terrified by the acceptance of Napoleonic ideas by a large portion of their previously occupied population, as well as the rise in liberal sentiments sweeping Europe during the 1840s, the highly conservative state felt the need to quell voices which ran even the slightest bit contrary to their monarchic Christian rule. As a result, individuals such as Louise Aston frequently found themselves in conflict with the authorities.

Aston’s case also demonstrated the nebulous legal space occupied. While no Prussian law prohibited women from divorcing their husbands, or publically engaging in acts such as smoking, drinking, or donning men’s attire, the government still found ways to regulate their behavior, and punish those who breached these social bulwarks. Aston’s case was a perfect example. She noted that the Berlin police told her they found her ideas “dangerous to middle-class order,” and had expelled her so that she did not “entice” others.\footnote{Ibid.} This statement is revealing on several levels, not just for its designation of Aston’s power to amass followers as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid, 69.
\item[52] Ibid.
\item[53] Ibid.
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sexual rather than intellectual. Her writings advocated neither violence nor insurrection—they were well-argued, reasonable requests for women’s rights as human beings and as fellow Prussians. And although she might not have attempted to incite an active and bloody rebellion, her actions presented a public lifestyle completely alternative and completely unsuitable for the traditional Prussian woman—and this by definition threatened government order.

Prussian society and government were both structured around this “natural” middle-class family model: the father, as a caring but stern authority figure; the mother as a nurturer and a bearer/teacher of culture and tradition; the children who were instructed by the appropriate parent in their duties as a male or female, and as Christians and as Prussians. Christianity, too, played a significant role in maintaining this natural family model, solidifying the need for a married mother and father as well as Prussian emphases on the male/female power dynamics within the household. Much as the father watched over his children, so the Prussian king and his government devotedly but sternly monitor their citizen subjects. A break from this arrangement at the familial level would potentially erode authority at the governmental level. As a divorced mother who was also a liberal, a denouncer of Christianity, and an active writer, Aston stood in direct contrast to everything a Prussian woman should be. Though none of her activities broke specific Prussian laws, her behavior in general was labeled as dangerous to public and moral order. Such a broad and loosely defined charge worked well in curtailing potential followers.

It is because of this that Aston demanded that women must have legal rights independent of those determined by their familial roles, for without them they were left extremely vulnerable. Todd Kontje notes in his study of Aston’s bildungsroman Lydia that one of her intents in creating the characters of Alice (a trouser-wearing, cigar-smoking, emancipated woman) and Lydia (a naïve virgin engaged to a cad, courtesy of her parents) was to discourage the sort of upbringing that encourages women to cling to the men in their life for their own decisions and identity. Until the time of their marriage, they lived under the control of their father, who (as exemplified by Aston’s case) had the authority to decide and arrange marriages without any consideration for their daughter’s opinions. Kontje points out that Aston also targeted mothers who continued to raise their daughters in this tradition, and used Lydia as warning against “the sort of mother who cultivates rare lilies destined to die on the altar of lust.”

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The Prussian General Law Code gave the husband complete authority on all marital issues, including control of the wife’s property, whether or not she could practice a trade, and of how the children were raised. Divorced women were left penniless and with no legal claim to their children. Aston’s experiences with the Prussian police were meant to illustrate this point, and demonstrate exactly what could happen to women without such rights. The most important of these rights, “our highest right,” was the right “to develop undisturbed our most inner self” and express it in an uninhibited way. This would undoubtedly meet resistance from those believing that women should maintain a largely private life, a belief central to the structure of Prussian social and legal systems.

Religion

Aston believed, and rightly so, that her views toward the Christian religion to be the ultimate reason for her extreme scrutiny and expulsion. She noted that sometime during her ‘inquisition’ she realized that judgment of her illegal behaviors had “passed into the realm of the heavenly.” Stahlschmidt covertly questioned her about her beliefs on marriage and religion. The Minister of the Interior had wondered how in the world she could possibly not believe in God, or even have the outlandish gall to admit such an unpopular sentiment publicly. Feminism was undoubtedly taboo, and the status of women within a marriage was something most feminists sought to improve. Aston was not the only feminist in Prussia, but she was the only major feminist figure who was also an atheist. While other feminists such as Louise Otto worked to form their ideology and beliefs within the constructs of their Christian faith, Aston did not. She rejected marriage, the model of marriage put forth by Christianity, and the traditional social interpretation of male and female roles by Christianity altogether. Feminism did not necessarily have to directly counter central tenets of the Prussian monarchy and government. Atheism did.

Marriage was a particularly sensitive topic for Aston because of her own forced marriage arranged by her parents as a young woman. They felt that marrying a wealthier man would guarantee her a better life, and dismissed her protests. Aston viewed this entire situation, which was essentially a transference of ownership between two men, as no more than institutionalized

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55 Aston, 62.
56 Ibid, 76.
enslavement. Women must have freedom, must “no longer be sold into slavery to serve the moods of contemptuous masters.”

Aston believed that the only way that women could truly become equals with men was to dismantle the Christianized expectations for the sexes. The inferior role assigned to the woman in marriage could be not amended solely through feminist advances (i.e. more civil liberties, holding rights irrespective of a male figure such as a husband or father, control over their work choice or finances). When women were in the home, and as long they remained faithful to the current central tenets of Christianity, they were still obliged to submit and defer to their husbands or fathers on important issues. The Prussian monarchy depended on keeping its subjects deeply entrenched in this Christian heterosexual patriarchal model to guard against memories of secular French republicanism.

Aston rebutted those who criticized her views on marriage and her immorality, countering that the “immorality lies in the institution, not in the person.” After her own experience with marriage, which was likely similar to those of other Prussian women of her class, she believed that she could not be expected not to voice her contempt publicly for such a vile yet accepted and widespread practice.  

I do not believe in the necessity and holiness of marriage because…I cannot approve of an institution which has the arrogance to bless the free right of personality, to give it endless consecration, while nowhere is this right more kicked and injured to the core; an institution which boasts of the highest morality, while opening the gate and door to every immorality…I reject marriage because it makes into property something that can never be property: the free personality.

In addition to her refutation of the Christian institution of marriage, Aston also criticized the censoring of religious dissent by the “conscience police.” She had the right (or rather, ought to have had the right) to speak her mind and write her opinions without fear of censure by the “fluctuating and arbitrary police government.” Police reached beyond the limits of their power, even repressing statements and ideas made in casual conversations. Yet the current environment seemed to tolerate the intolerance of the “conscience police,” which presented a false image of a completely Christian state. Whereas in “earlier, uncultured times” they had the

57 Ibid, 79.
58 Ibid, 78.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid, 77.
61 Ibid.
Inquisition, “in our enlightened century, however, we have accepted a more refined version in the form of the conscience police.”\textsuperscript{62}

Aston never proselytized any of her beliefs. Her works were available for purchase if one wished to read them, and her outings dressed as ‘Louis’ were strictly among friends and at small local pubs. But Prussian citizens were constantly “guided” on how to think and act. This new Christian state made the conscience police “necessary in providing for the welfare of the souls….and Christian breeding and improvement.”\textsuperscript{63} Had Aston been as proactive and intrusive in spreading her messages as the Prussian government had been in sustaining Christian dominance, she would have assuredly faced much swifter and graver consequences. She freely admitted that her religious beliefs deviated significantly from those of the official Prussian state. But as Aston pointed out with an ironic reference to Martin Luther, “this would only be a crime if I had sent missionaries for my ideas into the world, or struck the theses of a new belief on church doors.”\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 80.
IV. Conclusion: Performance or Resistance?

Appraisal of Louise Aston is not an easy task. At times her arguments and actions can seem to stand in complete disagreement with her physical actions. For example, wearing men’s clothing, smoking cigars, and drinking in public was an immensely daring and taboo act in ultra-conservative Vormärz Prussia. Despite her claim that she wished nothing more than to be left alone to simply enjoy a night out with her friends, the act itself was a significant statement of resistance against gendered social expectations, regardless of how small the pub was, or that she was with a small group of friends. She was emotional and outspoken, and then for no validly documented reason, she disappeared from the annals of “real history.” Furthermore, little is known of her life after her marriage to Dr. Daniel Meier in 1850. That Aston remarried after passionately disdaining the institution in Meine Emanzipation is somewhat bizarre, and her quiet exit from the political and literary scene has led some scholars to believe that, in the end, Aston may have ironically chosen for herself the very sort of domesticated life that she so vehemently fought against. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres has interpreted and labeled this behavior as “pure performance…. more acquiescence than conviction, more show than deeply felt belief.”

In accepting this appraisal, we must assume that behind every arrest, every scathing news item, her entire body of work, and her expulsion, was a woman either desperate for attention or acting out what she thought a revolutionary should be and do.

Those who see Aston’s actions as “pure performance” would argue that she should have known the consequences of her actions in Berlin: the left-leaning published works, the masculine guise and presence in smoky liberal pubs, her openly professed disdain of Christianity. Born in the year of Napoleon’s defeat, she had grown up during the time of Prussia’s most concentrated efforts to restore the ‘old’ regime and snuff out sympathetic remnants of modern/liberal reforms enacted by the French during their occupation. Moreover, why did she insist throughout her testament in Meine Emanzipation that she had broken no laws? Prussian officials certainly thought otherwise—and proved otherwise, with their extensive documentation of private citizen complaints and police reports on her activities. Most importantly, Aston forfeited her citizenship upon marrying foreigner Samuel Aston, and whatever meager rights it may have afforded. Although born a Prussian, she returned to Berlin as a divorced mother and as a visiting guest at the mercy of the government; hence the permits. So technically Aston had no actual rights, not

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65 Joeres, 110.
that she would have enjoyed much more status or leniency from the authorities had she been married to a Prussian citizen. As the Prussian government thought and operated, Aston had violated the law, and certainly overstepped her bounds as a non-permanent resident of Berlin.

So is Louise Aston’s historical significance truly of little more value than as an example of futile it was to be an “outspoken” woman in Vormärz Prussia?\textsuperscript{66} Certainly not. While Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres’s appraisal of Aston in \textit{Respectability and Deviance} could and may benefit, unlike this study, from evaluating Aston’s body of work as a whole, including both \textit{Meine Emanzipation} and her \textit{bildungsroman} in the same analysis, it seems to drag an extremely vociferous and well-written political tract into the mire with a couple of cheesy nineteenth-century genre novels.

While Aston may have written rambling and ambiguous \textit{bildungsroman}, her voice and message in \textit{Meine Emanzipation} is focused and strong. She is quite clear in her call for the “freedom of personality,” what she described “the right to develop undisturbed our most inner being…and express ourselves uninhibited.”\textsuperscript{67} She called for a release from the social binds of the Christian religion, which made pariahs out of those who dared reject its message and lifestyle, and tethered women to a subservient role in the guise of religious and moral obedience. She called for an end to the tactics and overreaching authority of the Prussian/Berlin police, or rather the “Christian conscience police,” who could (and did) arbitrarily detain, question, arrest, and expel individuals without clear cause or reasoning for doing so. These arguments do more than simply extend beyond the political platforms of nineteenth-century liberalism—they bear a striking resemblance to many of the rights outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights put forth by the inaugural General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. \textit{Meine Emanzipation} is unambiguous in its sociopolitical message, and it is seems odd that the message of this lucid and scathing political tract would, rather than serve to elevate or clarify the ambiguities in Aston’s “rambling” novels, instead be weighed down and slightly denigrated by them.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, to question the commitment or degree of radicality of a woman who was the only known major feminist to openly criticize the Christian religion in staunchly Christian and conservative Vormärz Prussia oversteps the bounds of

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 61-62.
reasonable expectation. Aston alone recognized how deep the roots of these sexist feminine expectations went, and still dared to sign her actual name to both *Meine Emanzipation* and every other work she published, something not even Louise Otto could claim. She refused to “play hypocrite” and deny her loathing of Christianity to the Berlin police and Prussian state authorities. How much more should be expected of Aston in order to properly demonstrate her commitment? If the historical label of “radical” is forsaken, could not the belittling label of “ambiguous” at least be removed?

It is risky to assign value on existing knowledge based on nothingness for several reasons, the most obvious being that so little is known of Aston’s life after the events of 1848-49. One cannot suppose another meaning in a figure’s deeds or words without clear counterevidence. No evidence exists of Aston either continuing or discontinuing her political involvement after marrying Dr. Daniel Meier and leaving Prussia in 1850. Nothing has indicated Aston’s lack of conviction, excepting perhaps her disappearance from the political scene. Analyses of her *bildungsroman*, such as those by Kontje or Whittle and Pinfold, indicate that while she may have suffered from the same fantastical plots and sappy language as her contemporaries, at no point did her characters cease to reflect Aston’s feminism.

For example, Todd Kontje’s exploration of Aston’s novel *Lydia* in *Women, the Novel, and the German Nation, 1771-1871: Domestic Fiction in the Fatherland* demonstrates how nearly all the major female characters display some facet of her personality or life. The character Alice, “like her creator, sports the outer signs of emancipation: she smokes cigars, carries a dagger, and occasionally dresses in men’s clothing.”68 The titular character Lydia stood in direct contrast to Alice, who fought not with dagger, but against controlling parents and the prospects of unwanted marriage. Kontje makes several comments on Aston’s characterizations, noting how Aston uses these characters to “offer a new twist on an old paradigm: for all her sympathy for Lydia’s plight, her primary concern is to set up Alice as a new type of feminist heroine. *Lydia* is not primarily about innocence lost…and not at all about innocence regained…but about maturity preserved.”69 It is impossible not to see the inclusion of the personal in the creation and development of Alice and Lydia given what is known of Aston’s past. As a feminist, Aston was able to sympathize with Lydia, who so obviously represents the young Louise Hoche, who was

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68 Kontje, 176.
69 Ibid, 178.
herself forced into an unwanted marriage by her parents. On the other hand, Aston was simultaneously able to capture the plight of so many young women with Lydia, while advocating a new type of heroine, Alice, who was more closely modeled on Aston’s behavior and beliefs later in life.

Aston also faced staunch criticism from her peers for her behavior as well as her lack of faith. She differed greatly from them because of her secular beliefs, and was the only one who vocally recognized that gendered Christian roles must be uprooted and separated from state rights before any real progress could be made. Louise Otto was the perfect example of a feminist who remained steadfast in her commitment to have Christianity and feminism peacefully coexist. In his article, “On a Feminist Controversy: Louise Otto vs. Louise Aston,” Hans Adler uses the friction between these two women to illustrate exactly how covertly important the Christian religion was in nineteenth century German society. Also a writer, a vocal revolutionary, and women’s rights advocate, Louise Otto was one of Louise Aston’s most strident and steadfast critics. Adler uses an anonymous book review of Aston’s poetry found in an issue of Otto’s Frauen-Zeitung to reveal the core of the commentator’s disparaging assessment—that even Aston herself realizes that her actions are wrong and she is a sinner.

This anonymous critic attempts to use quasi-philosophical reasoning to counter an argument put forth by Aston in one her poems. The critic uses “Den Frauen,” to take issue with Aston’s claim that “the free person commits sins because he is forced to do so.” Citing arguments from both Feuerbach and Luther—that sin is a lack of freedom—the critic contends that from a philosophical standpoint, if Aston views her actions as sins she cannot really call herself a “free person,” and is not really free at all. Aston might rebel against religion and authority, but deep down, this critic argued, she still felt her actions were wrong.

As we have already seen from her arguments in Meine Emanzipation, Louise Aston remained firm on the ideal of complete emancipation for all Germans, especially for women and especially from the social tyranny of religion. That she remained stalwart in these beliefs under interrogation from the Berlin police casts significant if not total doubt on any claim that Aston harbored any innermost feelings of guilt or remorse for her actions. In this light, “sin” should be

71 Ibid, 196.
viewed as little more than Aston using their terminology to rebuke their claims. Actions that constituted “sin” or something morally wrong to critics like Louise Otto would not be considered as such by Aston. In order to live the life she desired, she must “sin.” By not removing the sinful stigma from such behavior, Christianity forced Aston to “sin.” This term would have held little importance for Aston, as she did not invest the same importance or meaning into “sin” as someone like her anonymous critic, Louise Otto, or any number of other contemporaries who could not imagine a morality or code of ethical conduct irrespective of Christianity.

This analysis of “Den Frauen” further illustrates how deeply ingrained religion was within German society. The critic could not understand “sin” irrespective from religious moral standards. It also demonstrated that Aston viewed “sin” as a social construct deeply rooted in the social institution of the Christian religion, and that the critic was doing little more than manipulating Aston’s usage of the term to indicate some sort of self-loathing on her part. The critic would never have accepted or understood Aston’s true meaning. The critic’s, and perhaps Otto’s distinction, seemed almost as necessary a requisite for Germanness as birth and speaking the native tongue.

For contemporary notable feminists such as Otto, being associated with Aston’s brand of feminism would have significantly lowered external opinion of feminists as whole. For example, an article published in the Allgemeine Zeitung in 1850 by a male contributor surveyed current literature commented on the works of several major female and feminist writers, and grouped both Louise Aston and Louise Otto together in an unfavorable appraisal. He noted that their stories were little more than feminine folk stories, labeling both Aston and Otto as “amusing” and “our political Bluestockings,” and apologized for even mentioning their names in a scholarly journal. Feminists such as Otto who held very differing opinions from Louise Aston would be mortified that an external observer had grouped them together in heaping scorn on both their writing styles and political beliefs, which to Otto and Aston, differed dramatically because of Aston’s atheism. Any media which distanced Aston from more mainstream Germany feminism, such as this critical article published in Otto’s Frauen-Zeitung, would be the most effective tool at their disposal in labeling Aston as a pariah within the movement. Demonstrating that her usage of the term “sin” revealed that Aston still harbored inner guilt over her actions served a

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72 Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, “1848 From a Distance: German Women Writers on the Revolution,” in MLN 97, No. 3 (April 1982), 594.
dual purpose in devaluing her message and dissociating her from “normal” feminists like Otto, who were God-fearing Christians that sought expansion of their roles and rights without threat of moral decay or blasphemy.

While it cannot be proved that Louise Otto penned this critique, as the editor of Frauen-Zeitung, her necessary approval for its printing holds her equally responsible. In this case Louise Otto provides an excellent juxtaposition for evaluating Aston’s place within the Prussian feminist movement. Otto was well-respected among fellow feminists at the time. While conservative feminists “simply wanted greater recognition of their contribution to society through their homemaking skills,” Otto was noted for her concern and work in ascertaining improved working conditions for women in lower economic echelons.\textsuperscript{73} Described by contemporaries as a “‘demagogue’ and as a ‘courageous, patriotic German girl’” and judged by historians as a socialist, near-Marxist, and advocate of revolutionary change, Hans Adler quickly points out that none of these assessments take little or any account of Otto’s religious views.\textsuperscript{74} Though Otto was ever vocal about her Catholicism, her sociopolitical views were progressive, but were tailored to fit within her religious ideology. The notion that a loving God was in control stood as the cornerstone in her “unshakeable religious framework” – which was often tested by her political beliefs and by contemporaries like Louise Aston.\textsuperscript{75}

Louise Aston believed in complete emancipation for all Germans, but for women especially. This included freedom from the grip of religion, which reified existing hierarchies in government and in the home. Women could work, earn money, vote, own land, or be afforded any number of other equalizing civil rights. But as long as religion, particularly the contemporary German Christian religion, remained an accepted and core foundation of society, true freedom could not exist. Women suffered the most. Staked to the home on an invisible leash, their most valued contributions and roles were those relegated to domestic tasks. These positions did not necessitate political or intellectual contribution beyond proper upbringing of German youth.

While others, including Louise Otto, easily recognized the economic and legal disparities between the class and sex of German citizens, few identified (or vocalized) religion as a

\textsuperscript{74} Adler, 204.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 205.
repressor. To understand or accept Aston’s conception of “sin” Otto would have had to understand morality as something that existed irrespective of Christianity and that did not share key similarities – such as marital monogamy. This undermined everything Otto believed. However progressive, radical, revolutionary, or whatever other terms her contemporaries and history have used to label Otto’s politics, they were firmly anchored in Christianity—as was the Prussian government.

For Aston, no political belief rooted in a religion that held women as inferior help-meets that sprouted from a man’s rib could never overcome its inherent sexism. One would ultimately be sacrificed for the other. Reformation was impossible—it would be simply like putting on a mask, with the true face still lying beneath. The Christian religion was so deeply ingrained in Prussian culture that separating oneself would have had dire social consequences. Aston quickly found this out. Her trousers may have gotten her noticed, but it was her atheism that got her arrested. And unlike Aston, most Prussians could not recognize that morality or ethics could exist outside Christianity—at least, not the strict codes to which they subscribed. It was this secularism that Aston desired; the same that France had been steadily embracing over the past 60 years, and that the Prussian monarchy and government had been assiduously trying to suppress since Napoleon’s defeat.
Primary Works


Secondary Works


