

Bettina Brentano (1785-1859) and Achim von Arnim (1781-1831), married 1811



Achim von Arnim,
Portrait by Peter Edward Stroehling, 1803



Bettina Brentano
Drawing by Ludwig Emil Grimm 1809

Apparently, in better quality reproductions of the drawing of Bettina Brentano than I can find online, it is possible to see that the book she is holding is *Wintergarten*, a collection of short stories by Achim von Arnim (1809).

Elisabeth Catharina Ludovica Magdalena Brentano, known as “Bettina” or “Bettine”, was born in Frankfurt am Main. Her father was from the large Brentano family of Italian merchants. Her mother died when she was eight; her father died when she was twelve. She spent three years at a convent school, then lived in the houses of various relatives.

Bettina has been called an archetype of the Romantic movement. From an early age, she was passionately romantic; in a letter to her older brother and mentor Clemens (himself one of the leaders of German Romanticism), she wrote, “It is no use telling me to be calm; to me that conveys sitting with my hands in my lap, looking forward to the broth we are having for supper... My soul is a passionate dancer; she dances to hidden music which only I can hear... Whatever police the world may prescribe to rule the soul, I refuse to obey them.”

For a longer account of Bettina’s remarkable life, see the links at the bottom of this section; here, I note a few highlights before describing her courtship and engagement to Achim von Arnim. She collected folk music and folk tales and wrote original music, fiction, memoirs, and communist political tracts. She fell passionately in love with Goethe and she was a friend of Beethoven, the Brothers Grimm, and Karl Marx. Her music was praised by Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Franz Liszt. She used her

influence to get the Brothers Grimm a job in Berlin when they had been fired for political activities as part of the “Göttingen Seven”. She advocated for the Jewish community. She was also a considerable prevaricator; her books invented letters that were never written and incidents that never occurred.

Carl Joachim Friedrich Ludwig von Arnim, known as “Achim”, was born in Berlin to an aristocratic family. His father was the chamberlain of Prussia. He studied at the University of Halle and received a degree of Doctor of Medicine, but never practiced. He was a poet, a novelist, and a collector of folk tales.

Arnim and Bettina first met in 1801. Starting in January 1806, they started a steady correspondence. By September 1806, they were using each other’s first names in their letter.¹ By July 1807, their relation had gotten to the point that Bettina wrote to Arnim, “Wenn Sie wüssten, wie viele Liebe auch für Sie in mein ganzen Leben eingewebt ist!” (“If you only knew how much love is woven into my whole life for you too!”) By January 1808, they were addressing each other with the familiar second person “Du”.

They became engaged on December 4, 1810. Bettina described their engagement thus, in a letter to Goethe:

Am 4 Dezember war kalt und schauerlich Wetter, es wechselte ab im Schneien, Regnen, und Eisen; da hielt ich verlobung mit Arnim unter freien Himmel um 1/2 9 Uhr abends in einem Hof, wo hohe Bäume stunden von denen der Wind den Regen auf uns herabschüttelte, es kam von umgefür.

On December 4, the weather was cold and dreadful, alternating between snow, rain, and hail. That evening, around half past eight, I became engaged to Arnim under the open sky in a courtyard where tall trees stood, from which the wind shook the rain down on us. It all happened by chance.

On Christmas Eve, they had an “official” engagement ceremony, at a party given at the home of Bettina’s sister and brother-in-law, Kunegunde and Friedrich von Savigny. They exchanged engagement rings. Bettina gave Achim a ring with golden lilies against a black enamel background. Achim gave Bettina a ring with a chrysoprase, engraved with two hands clasping. Achim described the celebration in a letter to the Brothers Grimm:

Was hilf die Zieren, geradaus ich habe mit Bettine Verlobungsringe gewechselt, und seit die Weihnachtsabend, wo er mir bescheert wurde, prangt an meiner linken Hand ein golden Fingerlein mit goldnen Lilien auf schwarzemailliertem Grunde, der

¹If that seems tame, keep in mind that in the novels of Jane Austen, who was born in the same year as Bettina, the use of a first name between people who are courting but not engaged was improper, and correspondence between them was absolutely prohibited. One might say that Bettina was what Marianne Dashwood wanted to become.

mir einwachen soll, wenn mir der erhoffte gute Zeit einen Bauch, und bequette fette Finger gewärt und kein ungeschicktes Geschick ihn mir raubt. Wir hatten uns früher verlobt, auf freier Straß unter Gottes freiem Himmel. Die Ringe waren nur ein Erinnerung, doch war der Abend dieser Weihnacht recht schön.

What use are all pretences? To put it plainly: I have exchanged engagement rings with Bettine. And ever since that Christmas Eve, when it was presented to me, there has shone on my left hand a little gold ring with golden lilies on a black-enameled background, meant to stand guard so that, when the hoped-for good times give me a belly and plump, fat fingers, no untoward fate will rob me of it. We had become engaged earlier, in the open street under God's open sky. The rings were only a souvenir, but that Christmas evening was very beautiful.

This is the sonnet that Achim wrote for the occasion:

Es war ein Abend, sternlos, grau und feucht,
Gleichgültig zog der Wind am Strom entlang,
Und wieder trennen sollte uns der Gang,
Zu dem ich dir so still den Arm gereicht.

O Welt, wie anteillos und doch voll Klang,
O Herz, wie oft getäuscht und nicht gebeugt!
Der Tag, auf den du warst vertröstet, weicht
Und hat verscherzt der Hoffnung ernsten Drang.

Wir schieden schon – da drückt sich Hand in Hand,
Und beide ziehn im Glückstopf gleiches Los,
Uns eint auf freier Straß' ein freies Band,

Daß ich die Hand nun nimmer lasse los,
Das macht des Steines Sinnbild dir bekannt,
Der Ring sei nicht zu klein und nicht zu groß.

There are parts of this sonnet for which I have not found a translation that seems reasonable. To what extent this is due to the limitations of the software I am using and to what extent it reflects obscurities in the original, of course I can't say. I started with the output of ChatGPT-o1 and then made changes that hopefully make better sense, though they are further from the original. This is the best I have been able to do. If any reader can suggest improvements, I will be hugely obliged.

It was an evening, starless, gray, and damp,
Indifferent, the wind moved along the stream,
And once again our paths were about to part
Along which, in silence, I had offered you my arm.

O world, so apathetic yet filled with sound,
O heart, so often deceived yet never bowed!
The day you thought would bring you comfort now recedes,
And your most earnest hope is gone.

We were already parting — then hand pressed into hand,
We both draw the same lot in Fortune's cup,
A free road and a freely chosen bond unite us.

That I will never let go of your hand again —
This is what the symbol on the stone shows you:
The ring must be neither too small nor too large.

Bettina and Achim were married on March 11, 1811.

There is a large literature in German on the von Arnims but I barely know any German and the literature in English is quite limited. The texts quoted in German above are quoted from *Bettine und Arnim: Briefe der Freundschaft und Liebe* ed. Otto Betz and Veronika Straub, Verlag Josef Knecht, 1986. The translations were done by me with the aid of Google Translate and ChatGPT-01. Thanks to Christina Behme and Dan Zwick for catching errors in my transcription of the German.

Links:

[Wikipedia page for Bettina von Arnim](#)

[Wikipedia page for Achim von Arnim](#)

“A Virtuoso Muse” by Jan Swafford, *The Guardian*, August 22, 2003.

Portrait of Bettine Brentano with Achim von Arnim's “Wintergarten”, European Romanticism in Association, May 27, 2023.