We Women and Our Authors

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We German women are accustomed to look upon ourselves as an appendage to or a part of man. Up till now it has been the chief object and the pride of our existence to subordinate ourselves to him, and to look after his comforts. It is so no longer, or at any rate it is not as common as it used to be. Women have begun to ask: Who am I? and not: Whose am I? which proves that they are conscious of their individuality and wish to live their own lives. At present they are only helpless beginners filled with desires, needs and claims, which they themselves do not understand and which they would rather not admit. Their first longing is for outward independence, and in that they are not even original, as the economic conditions of the middle classes have long since forced women to exert themselves to the utmost in order that they may be self-supporting in part, if not entirely. And they are proud and happy when they have succeeded thus far, they fight for it in public and in private life, in the family, in Associations for Women's Rights, in newspapers, and in books where the movement has advanced the furthest. They fight for the first and rudest basis of their independence, for the right to maintain themselves, which, while it is the lowest step on the way to freedom, is the one that gives them the first title to the possession and disposal of their own selves. It is by no means an aimless struggle, but it is a sad one, in which the woman only too often forfeits her most precious possession—her womanliness.

But there is something in the background, besides what a woman ventures for the sake of attaining her wishes and advancing her claims. Many women have not yet learned to express it, many consider it their duty to dispute it even to themselves, while some give way to the indistinct longing with fear and hesitation, and only a very few know what it is and welcome it with gladness and with the consciousness that through it their lives are being strengthened, and their souls and bodies beautified. Women have passed through a fresh development and have entered upon a new stage of their inner consciousness.

It was an event which it took the whole of this century to bring about, and which has only now begun to draw attention to itself and its consequences.

One of the causes which brought it into being was due to the authors of this present century.

There has never been a literature so rich and so full of variety as that which has surrounded us women of the present day. Woman has never played such an important part in the literature of any century as in ours. It is not merely that writers have made use of her as a speaking-trumpet to say much that they could not have trusted themselves to say more plainly, but they have needed the woman herself in many and more various ways than was ever the case in former times. They wanted to have her with them in all that they thought and created, they needed her with her soul, her mind, her approbation, in order that she might make them strong, and give them confidence. Since the end of the last century there have been few literary or intellectual works, either during the

classical or the romantic period, or about the year ’48, with which a woman has not been closely connected. The relationship between man and woman had changed from its simple foundation and had assumed a tenderer, more delicate form. This betrays the fact that the men, or rather let us say the *élite* among the men, of this century have become more sensitive, more refined, more nervous. But the same is true of women, only that they have also become more self-conscious, and this is largely owing to the influence of the superior men of their time. It was an influence that extended far beyond the limits of personal acquaintance. How many young girls have experienced their first soul-rapture in fearful bliss over a book, and have felt their heart and the world and existence itself to be too narrow for their emotions! How many women there are who have been awakened through the influence of writers in distant lands! How many of the tenderest emotions have been lived in secluded country districts and barren towns of which he, their awakener, never hears, although they are often richer and fresher than all the love that he has ever encountered! But the women who were thus moved could never grow entirely stupefied over the kitchen pot, nor could their minds be stultified with knitting, and it was they who became the discontented ones, who felt themselves thwarted and driven to despair by hopes doomed to disappointment; and these natures were among the first to go forth into the world, determined to become independent in order that they might find themselves, to become free, in order that their ego might speak.

If they had a real talent of any sort or kind they were sometimes able to work out their own self-development; but

how many women, and many of the best women too, have only the one talent, and that is their warm-hearted womanly nature. It was just this that was a hindrance to them, that prevented them from elbowing their way out of their narrow, gloomy surroundings, and prevented them from attaining to anything higher than a teacher or governess, or some such position of dependence which necessitates a loveless and celibate youth—and they were not happy. Or else they married as best they could in their small circle of acquaintances—and were not happy either.

Some of these unhappy ones became the pioneers of emancipation, and stamped it with their hallmark.

In the meantime the image of the woman in the author's soul underwent a surprising and rapid change.

The spirit of gallantry towards women with which the classics were imbued had soon disappeared. The writers of young Germany were already too much occupied in revolutionising the woman to do homage to her, and they had to be quick about it, for their own feverish spirits warned them that their reprieve was short. They drove her before them and rebuked her, saying that she was too timid and too luxurious to keep pace with them; they felt as in a wilderness without her, yet they had not the strength to drag her after them. They longed for her that she might rouse them and comfort them, and they found the time pass wearily for both.

They aroused the woman, awoke her out of a condition of vegetative ease, shook her personality awake, taught her to be

discontented, to wish, to think, but they gave her nothing, and mirrored her indistinctly in their books.

The first to possess what they lacked was Gottfried Keller, and he possessed it unmistakably. No German writer has ever given us a truer, finer, more complete picture of the German woman. We meet with his models everywhere in life, whether it be in the great world, or in small towns, or in lonely country houses. The woman who is good *comme le bon pain*, simple, honest, warm-hearted, merry, motherly, the woman who is generous as the fruitful earth, who understands everything from instinct, and who grows more submissive the more she loves—it is the temperament of the German woman in short, with all its native conditionality and indissolubility, with its homely attractions, its domestic bondage, and also with its little and all too simple perversities.

In Keller’s writings the German woman saw herself for the first time reflected as in a truthful mirror, and she was astonished when she recognised the likeness and learned to know herself.

How many of us have been told by Keller what we are, and what we need, and what we endure, and what we ought not to endure! He became, what he least of all men ever dreamed of becoming, an awakener of women, and while he bade them glance into that part of their being of which they knew nothing, he awakened in them the consciousness of their personality.

In their surroundings and external circumstances, Keller’s women belonged to a bygone age. The social conditions in which they lived were simple and primitive as their own souls.

They were never in want, or overworked, and they had no need to earn their living.

In Paul Heyse's writings also there is no outward misery, no cruel restraint. But in spite of the absence of this peculiar feature of the time, he too has become an awakener of the individual woman of our century.

In the first place he understood women. Not one of his contemporaries can produce as rich a portrait gallery. His success did not depend upon one or two special types, for he never confined himself to exteriors, however interesting. He understood women in all the impetuosity of their being, he had the intuition necessary for seeing them as they really are in all their various moods, and he, of all the writers of the age, was the only one who invariably respected them. By these means he introduced something into literature and into the nature of women which was destined to bear incalculable results, for by regarding them in every position and under all circumstances as individuals, he taught them so to regard themselves. Till then women had been accustomed to be more or less at the disposal of others—Paul Heyse aroused them to the consciousness of their own worth. He gave them the right to dispose of themselves. He led them out of mere vegetation into the light of existence and taught them to reverence their sex. He taught them the courage of individualism.

He did more. After having improved and enriched these women, he freed them from household drudgery, and gave them the grace and manners of the outer world. To a cultivated soul he added a cultivated mind, a fearless gaze, and a certain *savoir faire* in all the circumstances of life.

In former days the German woman in fiction had been a native of the provinces, her chief charm lay in her romantic imagination, and she looked up to man with the trustful admiration that is born of inexperience; but Heyse's woman sometimes overlooked man altogether, she possessed the knowledge of life and discernment of one who had travelled and seen the world, she was a cosmopolitan with few illusions. She had a keen sense of proportion, and was in the habit of criticising every one, even the man she loved; she had analysed life to its core, and she knew the why and the wherefore of her affections, but her scepticism only made her love richer, fuller, deeper and more attractive than it had been before. She was innocent, not from ignorance, but from a certain delicacy of soul, and chaste, not from piety or duty or coldness, but from a finer cult of the ego, which loathes impurity as if it were actual dirt, and reserves itself for rare and noble enjoyments.

It was thus that we women encountered ourselves in Heyse's portrait gallery, at a time when we had reached our most impressionable age and were beginning to dream about life. We were made of pliant material, and a rough hand might have left its clumsy mark upon us, especially if it had been the hand of a favourite author. We shut ourselves out from our surroundings, we would not allow ourselves to be stamped with the dull stupid sameness of the life in which we had been brought up, we stretched out our open hands to receive all that was brought to us by the precious, forbidden books, the books which made our pulses beat faster, and aroused from the darkest depths of our souls all that was capable of perfection in us. How many helpless women whose talents bore no hope of fruition have lived their youth solely in books and for books!

And as though their hearts were the chords of a quivering instrument, Heyse played his tender tale of the far horizon, and sang to them of liberty, of spiritual greatness, and of the glory of woman, beside which the doctrine of self-renunciation which was preached to us at home and at school appeared ugly and dull in the extreme.

Then came Ibsen, the first after Heyse whose woman-problems were discussed by the press and in the family between the girls and older women. He succeeded Heyse in the souls of the younger generation, and put his stamp upon the women among them just as Heyse had done to his pupils in former times. But the daughters of Ibsen were different from the daughters of Heyse. They were poor people's children and had to earn their own living; they lived in mean surroundings without any prospect of improving them, and love was a luxury which they had not time to think about. They had grown up in poverty and were poorly dressed; they had over-exerted themselves in the "struggle for life" which sometimes attained the dimensions of an entire philosophy of life; yet they too, one and all, claimed a right which they would not relinquish; it was the same which had been made by Heyse's women, it was the right to cultivate the ego.

Paul Heyse had pictured woman in her best moments, and under the most favourable circumstances of her development, the high days and holidays of life. But Ibsen drew our wretched, bitter, barren existence such as it was every day of our lives, he described our mothers, brothers, husbands, guardians and teachers as they only too often were, when they deprived us of light and air and expected us to be thankful for the little that

was left, when they broke our wings and asked us in surprise why it was that we could not fly. He threw a fierce, penetrating light into the back parlours of the middle classes, revealing with a disgusting plainness the dingy make-believe of respectable family life. Horror and disgust, combined with a nervous longing to escape, to find oneself, to live one's own life in this short existence where so much had already been lost,—such were the feelings which Ibsen aroused with inconceivable intensity. I cannot better describe the influence which these two writers exerted over some of the most gifted women of their time than by quoting what one of them said to me on the subject. She was a woman who afterwards filled an important position in life besides attaining to personal happiness, and all through her own courage and her own unaided efforts. "I was doomed to be discontented," she said. "I was born in one of the most out-of-the-way places on the frontier, amid social conditions worthy of Little Peddlington. At the age of fourteen or fifteen I read Heyse. He did not arouse me to rebellion, he only woke me quite imperceptibly to the knowledge of myself. He gave me a spirit of proud reserve, he taught me to respect my physical and spiritual nature as a woman, and to watch over my integrity for its own sake. He gave me a glimpse into the possibilities of great happiness or of no happiness at all, and he made me understand that one could not choose. He gave me a certain dreamy peace, which refreshed and soothed me. Ten years later Ibsen's books found their way into our nest. I read him and was beside myself. I lay on the floor and writhed with feelings which could not find expression either in thoughts or words. The people and the social conditions in his dramas were just my circle, my social conditions, my world.

Never before had I seen so clearly what it was that bound me down and thwarted me. I saw that I must get away, that I should have no peace if I remained. Go I must, and at once! I had no connections anywhere, and I was ignorant of the world, but I went with a desperate faith in the one thing that I possessed—my scrap of talent. If it had not been for Ibsen I should never have gone. I lived for years alone in a strange country among strangers, among people who were indifferent to me,—but I belonged to myself. I was free from the stupid tempers and prejudices of others. I read and thought about what I liked. I belonged to myself! I supported myself entirely, and felt my personality, both intellectual and spiritual, struggling towards freedom. I owed nothing to my surroundings or personal intercourse. Heyse and Ibsen were my awakeners and the guides of my life."

The curious thing in this life was that the influence of these two great antipodeans was held in the balance, and the one appeared as continuing the work begun by the other.

One would have thought that it was impossible, and that the influence of the one would not have allowed itself to be ingrafted on the work of the other. Imagine Heyse's refined sensualism beside Ibsen's negation of the senses! Between the disciples of the one, a comprehensive sympathy; between the others—no mercy. That there is no mercy to be found amongst the people of our day—that each one is imprisoned in the iron harness of his own interests—that was just the terrible news that Ibsen imparted to us in his dramas, when he urged us to help ourselves because there was no other help to be had.

Yet the figures of Ibsen's principal women are to be found in Heyse, for before Ibsen Heyse had already met with and understood the apparitions with which Ibsen has revolutionised us; Heyse discovered the same highly developed type in a few solitary specimens which have only been discovered by Ibsen many years later.

There is Nora, for instance, who has become the platform woman. I do not think that anyone has ever explained in what Nora's sacrifice for her husband consisted. It rests upon Heyse's fundamental principle—the incommensurable, *i.e.*, that which cannot be measured by the common standard. In the essay upon Heyse I have enlarged upon this. In Nora's eyes love is the great miracle, the gift that one receives without having done anything to deserve it. In her eyes there is nothing above or below that can be compared to love. That is how she loves her Helmer. Social duties and other considerations, unless they are in some way connected with him, have no existence for her. Her husband takes the place of the entire network of engagements and obligations with which most people, especially women, occupy the greater part of their lives. Everything that is exists for her only in its relation to him; if it bears no relation to him, it has no existence for her either. Her love is her religion, her law book, her moral code, and the sole object of her being. And her great disappointment is this: that for Helmer love is not the incommensurable, it is not the thing which is of chief importance in his life. She had given herself to him entirely, but he had not given himself in like manner, and the discovery freezes her heart and her senses. The much-talked of "miracle" in which she can no longer believe is

nothing other than the awakening of the incommensurable in Helmer's soul.

Here we have the fundamental instinct of human nature which both Heyse and Ibsen, independently of one another, discover to be the absolute and all-ruling motive in the lives of hundreds of the women of their time. Heyse was the first to immortalise this variety, and in his *Children of the World* he calls her Toinette; Ibsen calls her Hedda Gabler. She is the sexless woman who is filled with spiritual emotions, and who, though utterly passionless, is a mistress of the art of attracting and fascinating the man, though the mere thought of abandoning herself to him fills her with a feeling of unconquerable horror. It is a type which has considerably increased in numbers and lost in charm during the last ten years; the woman who is really emancipated and entirely freed from man, the unmarried professional woman who is perfectly contented with her lot and who preaches happiness in independence—Björnson's apostles of purity with Svava at their head, or Hauptmann with his Anna Mahr and the brother and sister theory (*Lonely People*), which same doctrine is now being ardently preached by the aged Tolstoy.

Björnson's Svava is also forestalled by Heyse in the person of a young girl of noble family (*In Paradise*) who sends away her strong, handsome young lover as soon as she discovers that he has lived with another woman.

Thus we find that the heroines of the Scandinavian problem-novel are no northern discoveries, but are developments of this century who had their origin in real life, where Heyse, who understood women, found them, and made them known to the

public in his writings long before the problem-novel was invented.

In the meantime external conditions have undergone a considerable change.

Heyse's woman was an aristocrat who was protected on all sides, but Ibsen's woman lived alone in the midst of that universal "struggle for life," which is the peculiar feature of our time, and Björnson's reformer was a woman of the people, who elbowed her way alone through the crowd, and preached morals to men.

From Russia, England and Sweden, the new type of woman gladly joined in the cry.

What a difference between the noble, spiritual-minded woman of Heyse's time and the women of Strindberg's creation! How changed was the image of the woman in the author's soul! The entire character of the age had undergone a great change in the last twenty or thirty years. Women had entered into the war of competition with men, and had really won some success in the battle. Numbers of fathers and brothers were released from the burden of supporting their unmarried women-folk; they were even released from the necessity of marrying them. Indeed, nowadays, many daughters and sisters work for their parents and younger brothers. The world has grown more morose, and the whole of existence has assumed the appearance of an immense grey day of toil. Year after year competition grows harder, and every department of labour is overcrowded with envious, nervous, panting people, who are pitted one against the other. Merchant against merchant,

author against author, man against woman,—all business people, all race-runners for their own gain, all struggling, restless, joyless ... all in a rudimentary or advanced stage of degeneration. And woman keeps pace bravely. She keeps pace because she knows that this is the only possible means by which she can attain to the full possession of herself, to perfect independence, to the right to dispose of her own person; she keeps pace because she must either run or be downtrodden; she runs, because every one else runs, and she takes the matter seriously, as is invariably the case with beginners. But she expects a great deal too much. She whose bodily frame is so dependent on leading a natural and healthy life, whose brain gets so easily tired, sits on school benches and studies for junior and senior examinations, and goes in for higher educational courses, and continues with these until she has reached or passed her twentieth year. She then sits on in badly-ventilated rooms as an art-worker, a book-keeper, or a telegraph clerk, and if she is exceptionally clever and industrious and has the necessary means, she studies, and when she has finished, she is six-and-twenty, eight-and-twenty, or more. After that the real work of life begins.

She is free!

True—but she is also a woman; or has she ceased to be one?

Many women have instinctively avoided this question, in the same way as they would avoid the subject of death, and they are apt to give way to an ugly exhibition of temper towards the man, but more especially towards the woman, who ventures to allude to it; but for all that, they cannot dispose of the fact any more than they can dispose of death. When they look at

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