

Woman in the Golden Ages

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PREFACE

In this series of detached essays I have tried to gather and group the most salient and essential facts relating to the character, position, and intellectual attainments of women in the great ages of the world. It is not an easy matter to trace with any exactness the lives of women of classic times, as they were largely ignored by men who chronicled events. If the historians gave them any place at all, it was an insignificant one, concerning only their relations to men, and they were more inclined to sing the praises of those who ministered to masculine caprices than of those distinguished for any merit whatever. There were exceptions in the cases of a few women of very remarkable gifts; but even these were subject to the worst aspersions, for the simple reason that they had the courage of their talents and convictions. This fashion of considering women only as convenient appendages of men may account largely for the space given to those of more beauty and sensuous charm than decorum—a fact which has doubtless misled after-ages. It accounts also for the reckless flings of satirists and comedians, who were even less to be trusted in early times than they are to-day. Truth compels me to recall more or less the contemptuous attitude of men, as it was too large a factor in determining the position of women to be omitted. But in no case has it been exaggerated, or set down in a spirit of antagonism.

The most striking points in the lives of world-famous women are sufficiently familiar. True or false, they are often quoted in

proof of one theory or another. But a few isolated facts gathered at random count for little. It is only in the grouping of many facts of many ages that the real quality of the old types of womanhood can be clearly discerned. One is constantly confronted, however, with discrepancies in the records. This may be readily understood when we consider the impossibility of getting a correct version of things that happen next door to us. Reports of events and estimates of character are about as various as the people who offer them. One can only accept those which have the most inherent probability, or are given by the chronicler who has the best reputation for veracity. So far as possible, I have relied upon contemporary writers for the facts of their own age; but I am also indebted largely to the research of the great modern historians. In the few classic or Italian translations, I have usually availed myself of those nearest at hand, if they had the stamp of authority, though they might not always be the latest, perhaps not even the best.

These essays are limited mainly to the golden ages of Greece, Rome, and the Renaissance, with a brief interlude that serves as a transition from pagan to medieval times. The mantle of the great Italians fell upon the women of the golden age of France, who reached the summit of the power and influence of their sex in the past. The personality and intellectual influence of these women I have considered at length in "The Women of the French Salons."

The inevitable "woman question" is not touched except as it may appear in the effort to show, in a small degree, the intellectual quality and influence of some of the representative women of the past, and to vindicate them from charges which

are often as untrue as unjust. Without any pretension to profound learning or philosophic criticism, I have simply presented the most significant facts available, with their various settings, and a few plain conclusions which may be insufficient, but which are at least sincere and carefully considered. In estimates of people I have taken the most charitable view possible without sacrificing truth to imagination. It is the safer side in which to err, as the world has always been much more active in the spread of calumny than of praise, especially where women are concerned.

There is no pretense to historical continuity, or to a serious study of present conditions, in the single modern essay. It simply considers one phase of our own age, which we doubtless claim to be altogether golden.

The work has been a labor of love. If I have succeeded in throwing any fresh light upon the women of long ago, many of whom are already half mythical, or in giving a clear impression of what we owe them, my long and pleasant hours among old chronicles and forgotten records will not have been in vain.

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August, 1901.

INTRODUCTION

It has been quite gravely asserted of late that “woman has just discovered her intellect.” As a result of this we are told with great earnestness that the nineteenth century belonged to her by virtue of conquest, and that she is entering upon a new era of power and intelligence which is to usher in the millennium.

On the other hand, we are assured with equal persistency that the divine order of things is being upset: that women are spoiled by over-education; that the time-honored privileges of men are ruthlessly invaded and their mental vigor endangered; that morals are suffering; that all the good old ideals are in process of destruction; and that we have the dismal prospect of being ruled, to our sorrow, by a race of Minervas who neglect their families, if they have any, and insist upon running things in their own way, to the ruin of social order—all of which has been said periodically since the beginning of the world.

With these serious questions I do not attempt to deal any further than to picture, to the best of my ability in a limited space, the position of women in the great ages of the past, and the personality, aspirations, and achievements of a few of their most famous representatives, so far as this is possible after the lapse of centuries. From a multiplicity of facts which point their own moral, each one of us may draw his or her special lessons.

It is quite true that the woman of to-day is putting her intellect to new uses; possibly she has become more vividly conscious of it. We know also that the average intelligence of all classes of

women, as well as of men, was never so high as now. But the intrinsic force of the human intellect is not measured by averages. A thousand satellites do not make a sun, though they may shine for ages by the light of one. Then, whatever our achievements may be—and I do not underrate them—it would reflect rather seriously on the feminine mind to suppose that it could lie practically dormant all these centuries, even under the heavy disabilities which were imposed upon it. The fact that women have always been in subjection and on the whole very much oppressed and trampled upon, especially in the early ages, makes it all the more remarkable that they have left so many striking examples, not only of the highest wisdom and intelligence, but of the highest executive power, ever since Deborah sat as a judge in Israel, Miriam sang immortal songs of heroic deeds, and Semiramis conquered Asia.

No doubt our own deserts are great, and we do well to burn a fair amount of incense to them; but possibly the smoke of it is so dense that we fail to see all the fine things that have been done before us. Other women have been as clever as we are, and as strong, if not individually stronger; many have been as good, a few perhaps have been more wicked than most of us; and the majority have had a great deal more to complain of. “There is nothing new under the sun” was written so long ago that it seems as if there could have been nothing old. Even the “new woman” has her prototypes in the past, who have thought, written, lectured, ruled, asserted themselves, and been honored as well as talked about in their day. Men have prophesied strange revolutions in human affairs because of them, and sometimes have sent them back to the chimney-corner and silence, as one of our own chivalrous writers says

they will do again if this irrepressible being who presumes to have opinions makes things too uncomfortable for them. But the world has gone on marrying and giving in marriage, and growing in the main, let us hope, happier and better, while the social condition of women has steadily improved, with an occasional reaction, in spite of the fears of the timid and the sneers of the cynical.

It may be safely said that there was not much in the lives of the women of two or three thousand years ago which we should care to repeat. Their field was, as a rule, narrow and restricted, their privileges were few, their burdens and sorrows were many. To go outside the sphere prescribed for them called for great talent and great courage, since respectability was usually regarded as synonymous with insignificance. But even in this aspiring, much-knowing, self-gratulatory, woman-honoring twentieth century, whenever we are told that the feminine intellect is inherently weak and has never created anything worthy of immortality, we point with pride to Sappho, the one woman poet of the world whose claim to the first rank has never been disputed. If we wish to illustrate the social and political influence of woman, we cite Aspasia, the trusted confidante and adviser of the greatest statesmen and philosophers, as well as the presiding genius of the first salon of which we have any knowledge. Yet these women lived in the dawn of the present order of things. We may recall the scholarly mind and masterly executive qualities of Zenobia, which perhaps have never been exceeded; the profound learning and brilliant oratory of Hypatia, who was torn in pieces because of them by the fanatical Alexandrian mob; Cornelia, gifted and austere, adding the courage of a Stoic to

the tenderness of a mother; Livia, wise, tactful, and far-seeing; Marcella, saint and *grande dame*, a savante, a leader, and a heroine. Other figures of the classic ages, grave and thoughtful, clever and brilliant, or mystical and sweet, pass in stately array before us, each supreme in her own field. It may have been an intellectual gift that she had; it may have been a masterful character, or a heroic virtue, or a spirit of sublime self-sacrifice, or a faith so exalted that it has illuminated all the centuries. Each of these traits has its illustrious examples among the women of long ago.

Passing ages of darkness, in which here and there the talent of a Countess Matilda or an Héloïse shone brightly through the mists of ignorance and superstition, we find the women of a new era delving side by side with men in the mines of classic lore, and bringing to their work the same enthusiasm, the same untiring patience. We find them, too, versed in all the learning of their time. If we are disposed to plume ourselves overmuch on our intellectual glories, it may serve as a lesson in humility to recall the wonderful women of the Renaissance, who filled chairs of philosophy and law in the universities, sustained public theses, spoke in Latin before learned societies, wrote pure Greek and studied Hebrew, preached in cathedrals were sent on special embassies and consulted on grave affairs of State by popes and kings. With all our latter-day prestige and the chivalry of modern men, it would be difficult to imagine Leo XIII or the German Emperor consulting a woman on serious questions of policy, or even listening to one unless she were a queen with power that must be reckoned with. If they did, it would be behind closed doors where no one could know it. Yet we have wise women and able ones.

When men lost themselves in metaphysical abstractions it was the “new woman” of the Renaissance who lent wings to their minds and stimulated creation. A touch from her uncaged intellect thrilled the learning of the age and put into it a soul. A Vittoria Colonna inspires a Michelangelo, writes an immortal *in memoriam*, and brings poetry to the service of religion. An Olympia Morata pauses in her high intellectual flight to give an object-lesson in moral courage and the virtues of a gentle womanhood. A Catherine of Siena thinks as well as loves, writes as well as prays; the head of Christendom is moved by her wise counsels, and the currents of the world are changed.

It was woman, too, who married thought to life, presided at the birth of society, and diffused the seeds of the new knowledge. She took philosophy out of the obscurity of ponderous tomes, and made men reduce it to clear terms with the logical processes left out, so that the unlettered might read. If men held the palm of supremacy in reason and abstract thought, women illuminated them by sentiment and imagination, so touching the world to living issues. The swift, facile, intuitive intellects of women complemented the slower and more logical minds of men, and it is this union that creates life in all its larger, more enduring forms. It was the social gifts of women added to a flexible intelligence that raised conversation to a fine art. A Duchess Leonora, an Isabella d’Este, a Duchess Elisabetta, call about them the wit, learning, talent, and genius of an age, and in this atmosphere poets, artists, and men of letters find an audience and an inspiration. Each gives of his best, which is fostered and turned into new channels. Standards are raised by the association of various forms of excellence, and society reaches a higher altitude of living and

thinking. To be sure, the day comes when it matters more to talk and be talked about than it does to know. The rank weeds of mediocrity spring up in profusion and overshadow the flowers. The ideals droop and the brilliant age ends. But it has fulfilled its mission, and all ages end, great and small, luminous and dark alike.

Did men degenerate in the intellectual companionship of women? To what glorious heights did they attain in the dark ages, when no woman's voice was heard, except in prayer? What heights have they reached in any period that did not find its ideals in brute force, when, at least, a few women of light and leading did not stand at their side, though only by courtesy, instead of sitting at their feet?

Did women lose in morals when they gained in intelligence, as men so often delight to tell us? Quite the reverse, if I have read history aright. In seasons of moral decadence it is the women of serious education who have been among the first to lift their voices against the sins of the period in which they lived. If they were often swept along by the current which they had no power to stem, it was because of their helplessness, not of their knowledge. They were not faultless but human, and subject at all periods to the same conditions that were fatal to men, who claimed supremacy in strength. If they have sometimes broken on the rocks of superstition, it was because they had too little intelligence, not too much.

Have they lost the tender instincts of wifeness and motherhood? The records of the world are full of the unselfish devotion of great wives and great mothers, and the men who shine most conspicuously on the pages of history, from Cæsar

and the Gracchi to George Washington and Daniel Webster, have been the sons of able and intelligent women. A cultivated intellect is not a guaranty of virtue, but it has never yet made a woman forget her love and allegiance to a strong and noble man, or turn a cold ear to the artless prattle of a child, though vanity and weakness and folly have done so very often. But it has many a time given her the power and the impulse to rear a world-famed monument to the one, and to give the best work and thought of a self-sacrificing life for the glory of the other. It is not simply heredity, but the atmosphere and companionship of the first years, that make or mar a destiny. But let us not confound intelligent women with pedants and pretenders, or great women with small ones on a pedestal of any sort, self-erected or other.

All this I trust will be made clear by illustration in these pages, together with the fact that the intellects of at least a few women have been very much awake in all the golden ages of the world, and exercised on many of the same problems that confront them to-day. The question of equality has been discussed in every period. It is needless to pursue these discussions here any further than to recall them. It does not signify whether women have or have not done this, that, or the other thing as well as men—whether they have or have not been conspicuous for creative genius, or scientific genius, or any other special form of genius. It is as idle to ask whether they are, on the whole, equal or inferior to men, as to ask whether an artist is equal to a general, an inventor to a philosopher, or a poet to a man of science. There are certain things that will always be done better by men; there are other things of equal value to the happiness and well-being of the

race, and worthy of equal honor, that will always be done better by women; there are still other and many things that may be done equally well by either. The final proof of ability lies in its tangible result, and it is a waste of words to speculate on unknown quantities, or to say that under certain conditions women might have attained specific heights which they have not attained. No doubt it is true, but one cannot deal with shadows. We have to consider things as they are, with the possibilities toward which they point.

But the past we have, with its achievements and its lessons. We find that women, with all their restrictions and in spite of denunciations from men which seem incredible, have long ago touched their highest mark in poetry, in wisdom, in administration, in learning, and in social power. In the great ages of the flowering of the human intellect, a rare few have always stood on the heights, beacon-stars which sent out their rays to distant centuries. As the world has advanced they have increased in number more than in altitude; but barriers have been removed, one after another, until they have practically ceased to exist. It is worth while, however, to bear in mind that four hundred years ago a woman, with many disabilities, had ample facilities for reaching her full intellectual stature with honor and without hindrance. Why did her sex lose these privileges so liberally accorded to men, in the "land of the free" and the early nineteenth century?

We too have our stars—our women who think, our women who know, our women who do; we too have our special distinctions—our triumphs in new fields in which we have had no rivals. But I have touched only a single phase of modern life.

There are too many fresh and difficult problems to be disposed of in an essay. Then we can hardly hear the message of the age for the din of the voices. It is true enough that the old ideals are disappearing. What we do not know yet is whether, apart from the intelligence which gives all life a fresh impulse and meaning, the new ones forced upon us by the march of events are better. It suffices here to say that what really signifies to the woman of to-day is to expand in her own natural proportions, to maintain her own individuality without the loss of her essential charm, to temper strength of soul with tenderness, to strive for achievement instead of the passing honors of the hour, to preserve the fine and dignified quality of an enlarged and perfected womanhood. It is not as the poor copy of a man that she will ever come into her rightful kingdom. Duty or necessity may lead one into strange and hard paths, but the crown of glory is not for those who fling away their birthright to join in the strident chorus of the eager crowd that kneels before the glittering altars of the money-gods, or to follow the procession that throngs the dusty highways and, lifting its eyes no more to the mountain-tops, sings its own apotheosis in the market-place.

WOMAN IN GREEK POETRY



- Denunciation of Woman in Early Poets ·
 - Kindlier Attitude of Homer ·
- Penelope · Nausicaä · Andromache · Helen ·
- Contemptuous Attitude of the Dramatists ·
 - Their Fine Types ·
 - Iphigenia · Alcestis · Antigone ·
- Consideration for Women in the Heroic Age ·



I

“The badness of man is better than the goodness of woman,” says a Jewish proverb. And worse still, “A man of straw is better than a woman of gold.” As men made the proverbs, these may be commended for modesty as well as chivalry. The climax

is reached in this amiable sentiment: "A dead wife is the best goods in a man's house." Under such teaching it is not at all surprising that the Jews began their morning invocations, two thousand years ago, with these significant words: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a heathen, who hast not made me a slave, who hast not made me a woman."

These are very good samples of the manner in which women were talked of in ancient days. In Egypt, however, they fared rather better. We are even told that men pledged obedience to their wives, in which case they doubtless spoke of them more respectfully. At all events, they had great political influence, were honored as priestess or prophetess, and had the privilege of owning themselves and their belongings. But a state of affairs in which

Men indoors sit weaving at the loom,
And wives outdoors must earn their daily bread,

has its unpleasant side. How it was regarded by women does not appear, but if they found a paradise they were speedily driven out of it. Evidently men did not find the exchange of occupations agreeable. Two or three centuries before our era, a Greek ruler came to the throne, who had other views, and every woman awoke one morning to the fact that her day was ended, her power was gone, and that she owned nothing at all. Everything that she had, from her house and her land to her feathers and her jewels, was practically confiscated, so that she could no longer dispose of it. These women had rights, and lost them. Why they were taken away we do not know. Possibly too much was claimed. But all this goes to prove that "chivalrous

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