

CONCERNING WOMEN

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To
ELLEN WINSOR
AND
REBECCA WINSOR EVANS

CONCERNING WOMEN

Let there be, then, no coercion established in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT.

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNINGS OF EMANCIPATION

It will be foolish to assume that women are free, until books about them shall have ceased to have more than an antiquarian interest. All such books, including this one, imply by their existence that women may be regarded as a class in society; that they have in common certain characteristics, conditions or disabilities which, predominating over their individual variations, warrant grouping them on the basis of sex. No such assumption about men would be thinkable. Certain masculine qualities, so-called, may be singled out by amateur psychologists and opposed to certain feminine qualities, so-called; but from books about the sphere of man, the rights of man, the intelligence of man, the psychology of man, the soul of man, our shelves are mercifully free. Such books may one day appear, but when they do it will mean that society has passed from its present state through a state of sex-equality and into a state of female domination. In that day, in place of the edifying spectacle of men proclaiming that woman is useful only as a bearer of children, society may behold the equally edifying spectacle of women proclaiming that man is useful only as a begetter of children; since it seems to be characteristic of the dominant sex to regard the other sex chiefly as a source of pleasure and as a means of reproduction. It seems also to be characteristic of the dominant sex—I judge from the world's experience during the domination of men—to regard itself as humanity, and the other sex as a class of somewhat lower beings created by Providence for its convenience and enjoyment; just as it is characteristic of a dominant class, such as an aristocracy, to regard the lower classes as being created

solely for the purpose of supporting its power and doing its will. When once a social order is well established, no matter what injustice it involves, those who occupy a position of advantage are not long in coming to believe that it is the only possible and reasonable order, and imposing their belief, by force if necessary, on those whom circumstances have placed in their power. There is nothing more innately human than the tendency to transmute what has become customary into what has been divinely ordained.

Thus among the Hebrews the subordination of woman gave rise to the notion that she was fashioned out of man's rib. She was the result of a divine afterthought, the *sexus sequior* of the ancients and more recently of Schopenhauer, "inferior in every respect to the first." Since the Divine Artist had had good practice in creating Adam, it might logically have been expected that His second sex would turn out even better than His first; we must therefore lay His failure to the somewhat sketchy nature of the materials He chose to work with. This Hebrew myth of the creation of woman has had considerable effect on her status in the era known as Christian. Being "only a supernumerary bone," as Bossuet reminded her, she could naturally not aspire to a position of equality with man. She must remember her origin, and be humble and subservient as befitted a mere rib.

She was humble and subservient, as a matter of fact, for an incredibly long time; so long that there exists a general suspicion even at the present day that there is something in her nature which makes her want to be subject to man and to live as it were at second hand. This thought would be even more alarming than it is, perhaps, if it were not true that men themselves have stood for a good deal of subjection during the world's known history. Chattel slavery and serfdom were abolished from the civilized world only

at about the time that the subjection of women began to be modified; and men still endure, not only with resignation but with positive cheerfulness, a high degree of industrial and political slavery. The man who is entirely dependent for his livelihood upon the will of an employer is an industrial slave, and the man who may be drafted into an army and made to fight and perhaps die for a cause in which he can have no possible interest is the slave of the State; yet one can not see that this proves Aristotle's assumption that there are free natures and slave natures, any more than the subjection of women proves that they want to be subjected. What the slavery of men, as of women, implies is the existence of an economic and social order that is inimical to their interests as human beings; and it implies nothing more than this.

Nor does the opposition to the emancipation of women which still finds expression in this country and in Europe, prove anything more than that superstitious addiction to custom of which I have already spoken. Those anxious critics who protest that women have got more freedom than is good for Society make the mistake of supposing that Society can exist only if its organization remains unchanged. The same conservatism has opposed all the revolutionary adaptations which have fitted the social order to the breakdown of old forms and their replacement by new ones. Yet when the need for such adaptations ceases, the growth of the social organism ceases with it, and we have such a spectacle of arrested development as the civilization of India presents. Society, in so far as it has become organic, is governed by the same rules as any other organism: the condition of its health is growth, and growth is change.

Certainly the present tendency of woman to assume a position of equality with man involves, and will continue even more to

involve, profound psychic and material readjustments. But to assume that such readjustments will injure or destroy Society is to adopt toward Society an attitude of philosophical realism, to attribute to it a personality, to suppose that it is equally capable of destruction with the individual, and that it may in some mystical way derive benefit from the sacrifice of the individual's best interests. But what is Society save an aggregation of individuals, half male, half female? Where you have a handful of people forming a community, there you have Society; and if the individuals are enlightened and humane it may be called a civilized Society, if they are ignorant and brutal it will be uncivilized. To assume that its "interests" may be promoted by the enslavement of one-half its members, is unreasonable. One may be permitted the doubtful assumption that this enslavement promotes the welfare of the other half of Society, but it is obvious that it can not promote the welfare of the whole, unless we assume that slavery is beneficial to the slave (the classic assumption, indeed, where the slaves have been women). When we consider the political organization known as the State, we have a different matter. The State always represents the organized interest of a dominant class; therefore the subjection of other classes may be said to benefit the State, and their emancipation may be opposed as a danger to the State.

It is evident from the very nature of the State^[1] that its interests are opposed to those of Society; and while the complete emancipation of women, as I shall show later, would undoubtedly imply the destruction of the State, since it must accrue from the emancipation of other subject classes, their emancipation, far from destroying Society, must be of inestimable benefit to it. Those critics, and there are many, who argue that women must submit to

restrictions upon their freedom for the good of the State, as well as those advocates of woman's rights who argue that women must be emancipated for the good of the State, simply fail to make this vital distinction between the State and Society; and their failure to do so is one of the potent reasons why the nonsense that has been written about women is limited only by the literature of the subject.

Feminist and anti-feminist arguments from this standpoint centre in the function of childbearing; therefore it should be noted that the emphasis which is placed on this function by the interest of the State is quite different from the emphasis that would be placed upon it by the interest of Society; for the interest of the State is numerical, while the interest of Society is qualitative. The State requires as many subjects as possible, both as labour-motors and as fighters. The interest of Society, on the other hand, is the interest of civilization: if a community is to be wholesome and intelligent, it is necessary not that the individuals who compose it shall be as numerous as possible, but that they shall be as wholesome and intelligent as possible. In general, the interest of the State is promoted by the number of its subjects; that of Society by the quality of its members.

The interest of the State in this respect has been most concisely expressed by Nietzsche. "Man," said he, "shall be trained for war, and woman for the re-creation of the warrior: all else is folly", and if one accept his premises he is exactly right. But there have been many writers on women who have not accepted his premises—not at least without qualification—and who have yet failed to observe the antithesis between the interest which the State has, and the interest which Society has, in the question of population. Hence, mingled with the voices of those critics who have demanded the subjection of woman for the sake of children, have been the voices

of other critics demanding her emancipation for the sake of children: and both these schools of critics have overlooked her claim to freedom on her own behalf. It is for the sake of humanity, and not for the sake of children, that women ought to have equal status with men. That children will gain enormously by the change is true; but this is beside the issue, which is justice.

The argument that woman must be free for the sake of the race, is an argument of expediency; as nine-tenths of the arguments against her legal subjection have been, and indeed had to be. Unfortunately, humanity is likely to turn a deaf ear to the claims of justice, especially when they conflict with established abuses, unless these claims are backed by the claims of expediency plus a good measure of necessity. Adventitious circumstances have made the social recognition of woman's claims a necessity, and their political recognition a matter of expediency. Otherwise she would have to wait much longer for the establishment of her rights as man's equal than now appears likely. In the Western world her battle is very largely won; full equality, social, industrial and legal, seems to be only a matter of time and tactics. This she owes to the great political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century.

The conscious movement towards freedom for women may be said to have originated in the great emancipatory movement which found expression in the American and French revolutions. The revolutionists did not succeed in establishing human freedom; they poured the new wine of belief in equal rights for all men into the old bottle of privilege for some; and it soured. But they did succeed in creating political forms which admitted, in theory at least, the principle of equality. Their chief contribution to progress was that they dramatically and powerfully impressed the idea of liberty upon the minds of men, and thus altered the whole course

of human thought. Mary Wollstonecraft's book, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," revolutionary though it seemed in its day, was a perfectly natural and logical application of this idea of liberty to the situation of her sex. This remarkable book may be said to have marked the beginning of the conscious movement towards the emancipation of women.

The unconscious movement was the outgrowth of the revolution in industry, brought about by the introduction of the machine. Women had always been industrial workers, but their work, after the break-up of the guilds, was for the most part carried on at home. When the factory supplanted the family as the producing unit in society, the environment of women was altered; and the change affected not only those women who followed industry to the factories, but also those who remained housewives, for where these had before been required to perform, or at least to superintend, a large amount of productive work, they now found their function, as the family became a consuming unit, reduced to the superintendence of expenditures and the operation of the household machinery—a labour which was increasingly lightened by the progress of invention. With domestic conditions so changed, what was more natural than that the daughters should go into the factory; or, if the family were well-to-do, into the schools, which were forced reluctantly to open their doors to women? And what was more natural than that women, as their minds were developed through education, should perceive the injustice and humiliation of their position, and organize to defend their right to recognition as human beings? "If we dared," says Stendhal, "we would give girls the education of a slave.... Arm a man and then continue to oppress him, and you will see that he can be so perverse as to turn his arms against you as soon as he can."

Women in the factories and shops; women in the schools—from this it was only a moment to their invasion of the professions, and not a very long time until they would be invading every field that had been held the special province of men. This is the great unconscious and unorganized woman's movement which has aroused such fear and resentment among people who saw it without understanding it.

The organized movement may be regarded simply as an attempt to get this changing relation of women to their environment translated into the kind of law that the eighteenth century had taught the world to regard as just: law based on the theory of equal rights for all human beings. The opposition that the movement encountered offers ample testimony to the fact that "acceptance in principle" is more than a mere subterfuge of diplomats and politicians. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resolutely clung to the theory of equality, and as resolutely opposed its logical application. This is not surprising; most people, no doubt, when they espouse human rights, make their own mental reservations about the proper application of the word "human." Women had hardly been regarded as human in mediaeval Europe; they were considered something a little more from the chivalrous point of view, and something a little less from the more common, workaday standpoint. The shadow of this old superstition still clouded the minds of men: therefore it is hardly surprising that the egalitarians of the French Revolution excluded women from equal political and legal rights with men; and that the young American republic which had adopted the Declaration of Independence, continued to sanction the slavery of negroes and the subjection of women. How firmly rooted this superstition was, may be seen in the following irresistibly funny excerpt from the writings of that great American

advocate of freedom, the author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson.

Were our State a pure democracy, in which all its inhabitants should meet together to transact all their business, there would yet be excluded from their deliberations (1) infants until arrived at years of discretion. (2) Women, who, to prevent depravation of morals and ambiguity of issue, could not mix promiscuously in the public meetings of men. (3) Slaves.

Thus does superstition cast out logic. Nor does superstition die easily. The masculine assumption, usually quite unconscious, that women are unfit for freedom, bids fair to persevere as stubbornly as the feminine assumption that marriage offers a legitimate and established mode of extortion.[\[2\]](#)

If the conscious feminists bore the brunt of the resentment aroused by woman's changing relation to the world about her, it was because their opponents did them the honour of believing that they were responsible for the change. It was a strangely incurious attitude that permitted such an assumption to be held; for it really takes a very feeble exercise of intelligence to perceive that a handful of feminist agitators could hardly coax millions of women into industry—under conditions often extremely disadvantageous—into business, the schools and the professions. I believe the cause of this incuriousness lay in the very fear aroused by these changes and the social revaluations which they implied; fear for a relation between the sexes which, having been established for so long, seemed the only reasonable, or indeed possible, relation. Filled as they were with this fear of change, which is one of the strongest human emotions, the opponents of woman's emancipation were incapable of objectivity. Their

intellectual curiosity was paralyzed. This accounts, perhaps, for the utterances of two such eminent philosophers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. They came to the subject strongly prejudiced: the idea of any claims on behalf of women filled them with disgust; therefore, as one may take a certain malicious pleasure in observing, their thought on the subject was hampered by that “weakness of the reasoning faculty” which Schopenhauer found characteristic of women. If, when discussing woman, they had not been as “childish, frivolous and short-sighted” as they believed women to be, they might, along with lesser minds, have arrived at some understanding of a subject which has always been thought much more mysterious and baffling than it really is. The woman of their day may have been the poor creature they pronounced her to be, but if she was, the obvious question was, Why? Was she a poor creature by nature, or because of centuries of adaptation to a certain kind of life? This question neither Schopenhauer nor Nietzsche took the trouble to ask. They weighed her as she was—or as they thought she was—and arrived at the sage conclusion that the West had much to learn from the Orient concerning the proper attitude toward her.

It would be a very desirable thing [says Schopenhauer] if this Number Two of the human race were in Europe also relegated to their natural place [which he conceives to be the harem of a polygamous household] and an end put to this lady-nuisance, which not only moves all Asia to laughter but would have been ridiculed by Greece and Rome as well.

Nietzsche, in the same vein, remarks that a man who has depth of spirit as well as of desires, and has also the depth of benevolence which is capable of severity and harshness, and easily confounded with them, can only think of woman as Orientals do: he must

conceive of her as a possession, as confinable property, as a being predestined for service and accomplishing her mission therein.

Such a view of the “weaker sex” of course proves nothing about women, but it proves a good deal about the effect that their subjection has had on the minds of men. It is a significant fact that both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were Germans, and that in their day the status of women was lower in Germany than in any other important country of the Western World, except Italy.

The corruption of both sexes that results from the subjection of one, has been too convincingly dealt with by other writers to need discussion here. What I should like to emphasize is the futility of approaching the so-called “woman question” with any sort of pre-conceived notion concerning the nature of woman, or her sphere, or her duty to the State or to Society; and above all, of approaching it with the idea—the idea that obsesses all reformers—that she is a more or less passive creature about whom something either ought or ought not to be done, or, for that matter, about whom something can be done. What she should and can do for herself is a different matter; and to that question I intend to address myself before I leave this subject.

CHAPTER II

WOMAN'S STATUS, PAST AND PRESENT

I

Woman tends to assume a position of equality with man only where the idea of property in human beings has not yet arisen or where it has disappeared: that is to say, only in extremely primitive or highly civilized communities. In all the intermediate stages of civilization, woman is in some degree regarded as a purchasable commodity. Her status varies widely among different peoples: there are primitive tribes where she holds a position of comparative independence; and there are civilized peoples, on the other hand, among whom she is virtually a slave. But always there is present the idea of subordination to a male owner, husband, father or brother, even though it may survive only in ceremonial observances, *e.g.*, in the ritual practice of "giving in marriage," or in certain legal disabilities, such, for instance, as the law entitling a man to his wife's services without remuneration.

The subjection of women, then, bears a close intrinsic resemblance to both chattel slavery and industrial slavery, in that its basis is economic. As soon as civilization advances to the point of a rudimentary organization of agriculture and industry, woman becomes valuable as a labour-motor and a potential producer of children who will become labour-motors and fighters. Her economic value, or chattel-value, then, is a commodity for which her family may demand payment; and hence, apparently, arises the custom of exacting a bride-price from the man who wishes to

marry her. Once established, this custom of barter in marriage strikes root so deeply that the woman who has brought no bride-price is often regarded with scorn and her children considered illegitimate; and the idea of male ownership that accompanies it becomes so pronounced that it persists even where, owing to an excess of women coupled with monogamy, the custom has been practically reversed, and the father buys a husband for his daughter. An instance of this survival is the system of dowry which exists in France. Unless it is otherwise stipulated by pre-nuptial agreement, the dowry is at the disposal of the husband, and the wife, under the law, owes him obedience.

When the bargain has been made and the bride delivered to her husband's family, her services generally become, save in tribes where residence is matrilineal, the property of her purchasers, and she is subject to her husband, or, where the patriarchal system is highly developed, to the head of his tribe. It must be remarked, however, that although this is the usual arrangement, it is not invariable. Among some peoples, the husband's rights are purely sexual, the services of the wife, and often even her children, belonging to her own tribe; and among others, the husband must pay for his bride in services which render him for a long period the virtual slave of his wife's relatives. The point to be remarked in all this is that any conception of woman as an individual entity, as in any sense belonging to herself, and not to her own relatives or to her husband and his family, seems to be practically non-existent among primitive peoples, as it was until recently among civilized peoples. But it must be remarked, too, that in this respect her position is only less desirable than that of the man; for in primitive society the group so dominates the individual that in almost every phase of life he is hedged about with restrictions and taboos which

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