

Woman's Progress a Comparison of Centuries

Mary K. Ford

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THE participation of Mrs. Taft and Mrs. Sherman in the Inauguration Procession at Washington on the 4th of March, and the fact of their doing so without provoking any adverse criticism, is a comment upon the position that women are now taking in public affairs. And yet this state of things has come about so gradually, it seems so natural that women should be keenly interested in public as well as domestic questions, that it is hard to realise that not so very long ago the interests of men and women and all that concerned their mental needs were considered to have nothing whatever in common.

It was in the eighteenth century that women first began to emerge from the seclusion of the home and to wield some influence in society as well as to take their place among the writers, philanthropists, and educators of their day. One of the first results of this state of things was the growth of a strong feeling among the more thoughtful women in favour of a better education for their sex. And no wonder, for it is perfectly amazing to read the views of even the most advanced instructors of that time. The text-books for girls were carefully edited, and their knowledge of "science" was to be limited to a few "popular and amusing facts," but in return for this intellectual emancipation they were strongly advised by the educational authorities of the time to avoid all disputes, to give up their opinions, even if they knew they were in the right, and finally (and in this all authorities, male and female, united as one man) never to allow it to be suspected that they knew anything or their matrimonial chances were gone forever.

It would be interesting to trace the steps by which the victim of such views as these developed into the college girl of to-day. Education may not have proved the universal panacea that all good Americans are inclined to think it, but surely the somewhat aggressive intelligence of the Smith or Vassar graduate is preferable to the insincere and conscious attitude recommended to women a hundred and fifty years ago. No higher tribute could be paid to the quality of the female mind than the fact that it has survived years of such stultifying training without being hopelessly deadened, and if a college education has not yet accomplished for women all that was expected of it, no one can deny its superiority to the methods of the eighteenth century.

It was against these methods that Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin protested energetically in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a book which the modern suffragists would find entirely inadequate to their present demands. Mrs. Godwin was one of the first Englishwomen to resent the inferior position of her sex, and she pleaded earnestly, not for political equality — such a thing was undreamed of — but for an education for women which should develop their minds and elevate their understanding. The eternal advice to women to seem to be this, that, or the other, the limited nature and poor character of the education given them, their constant state of dependence upon some man — all this excited Mrs. Godwin's indignation, and her book is a demand for something better.

Although quite a different woman from Mrs. Godwin, Hannah More, too, deplored the existing unenlightened ideas on female education, declaring that "practical Mohammedanism prevailed" and that women were brought up as if devoid of mind or soul. Her efforts toward better things were not confined to her own class; she started Sunday-schools in the neglected district near which she lived, and was soon the centre of a system of classes, clubs, and the benevolent activities that now characterise a well-ordered parish. She even dabbled a little in politics, and a partial biographer records that a distribution of her poem "The Riot" prevented an attack on the mills from some striking colliers. Labour agitators are made of sterner stuff in these days and it takes more than a

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perusal of Mr. Steffens's or Miss Tarbell's magazine articles to divert them from their evil designs.

Hannah More was one of those conscientious women to whom, as a civilising influence, England owes more than can ever be definitely ascertained. To us, the methods of her time seem simplicity itself. The submissive attitude of the poor toward the gentry made it an easier matter to instruct them than in our day and country, where no pressure can be brought to bear upon them, but that docility must have been more than counterbalanced by their dense stupidity, against which cleverer reformers than Hannah More have dashed themselves in vain. But when we consider the expensive and elaborate paraphernalia now considered necessary for the relief of poverty and the instruction of ignorance, Hannah More's schools and clubs seem worthy of high praise.

Improving works were not the only sign of female literary talent in the eighteenth century. The appearance of Miss Burney's novel *Evelina* caused a veritable sensation, and we read with some surprise of Edmund Burke's delight in it, of Sheridan's dreading to find a rival in the author, and of Sir Joshua Reynolds sitting up all night to finish it. The book was published anonymously, for in those days "female delicacy" was such that it was supposed to shrink at the bare idea of publicity, though in reality Fanny Burney was as pleased as possible by her fame. Perhaps it was only failure that the women of that day feared, for they always enjoyed any praise that their work received. This timidity has continued among some of the later English writers, women, the excellence of whose work needed no shelter. No masculine pseudonym was necessary to ensure to the books of George Eliot and Lucas Malet the instant appreciation of people of discernment. Decorum reigned in those bygone days, sharing its supremacy with what was called "elegance," by which was meant a false and stilted style. Such a book as *Three Weeks* would have been impossible then, but so would *The House of Mirth* and *The Wages of Sin*. Perhaps we have gained as much as we have lost.

In those days the woman who read and who talked well succeeded in gathering about her a society of intelligent men and women — she was sought by the clever men of her day, not shunned. Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu of Blue Stocking fame was such a woman. The only thing of any importance that she ever wrote was her *Essay on Shakespeare*, a reply to Voltaire's attack on that poet. At this day it hardly seems as if Shakespeare needed defence from Mrs. Montagu, but the work was considered very fine and was highly commended by many authorities, although Dr. Johnson, always a severe critic of women's productions, declared that while it did Mrs. Montagu honour, it would have done nobody else honour. Many a literary woman of to-day would be at a loss as to her opinions on Shakespeare, and not one in twenty could write any kind of a defence of him, although she would be ready with a paper on "Dante and the Poetic Principle," "Keats's Inheritance from the Greek Dramatists," or "The Poems of William Blake in Relation to His Art."

Such women as Mrs. Thrale and Mrs. Montagu needed only the charm of their conversation to bring around them the men of talent and genius of their day. Now the woman desirous of a brilliant entourage resorts to more indiscriminate modes of procedure, which too often defeat themselves, the socialistic lion and the literary lamb finding themselves incapable of lying down peacefully together. Be that as it may, the literary women of that time really recognised and enjoyed good talk, and the celebrated Blue Stocking Club was their protest against the excessive card-playing of that day and the result of their effort after something better. That men like Dr. Johnson, Horace Walpole, Garrick, and Edmund Burke frequented Mrs. Montagu's drawing-rooms was a proof that they enjoyed what they found there, not that they were enticed thither as bait for smaller fry. Whatever may be the superiority in creative ability of the modern literary woman, it is a fact that as an assembler of talent she is unable to do what seems to have been an easy matter to her predecessor, and her attempts at anything like a salon are doomed to failure so long as she is unable to discriminate between fame and notoriety, or ability and pretence.

In those happy days literature was the pursuit of the few, none read save those who enjoyed it. Now the fountains of culture are unsealed and some very arid pastures watered thereby, the direction of the streams being often confided to strange hands. A list of the lectures to which most of us are asked to take tickets during the winter makes us wonder if there was ever a time when a little knowledge went so far. Lectures on Dante by women ignorant of Italian, talks on "The Poets of Ireland" by young persons who never heard of James Mangan, and

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"Hours with the French Dramatists" by cautious litterateurs who seldom venture beyond the safe harbour of Racine and Moli re, give reasonable ground for the belief that never has there been a time when the utterances of ignorance obtained such a respectful hearing.

We may reassure ourselves. The over-praised mediocrities of the present day have their counterpart of the eighteenth century in Miss Anna Seward, fondly called by her friends "The Swan of Lichfield." Nothing could be worse than her poetry except her criticisms, and to them she joined that fatal facility that has been the destruction of many more gifted women. The literary fetish of those days was "elegance," which meant the use of long words instead of short ones, and a maddening habit of never saying anything directly. A poetess was "Apollo's daughter," the moon, "mild luminary of the midnight sky," and a mysterious quality called "soft sensibility" was made the test of what was genteelly alluded to as "female elegance." Miss Seward's critical powers consisted of an unbounded capacity for seizing upon mediocrity and lauding it to the skies, and yet Dr. Johnson, who generally had little mercy upon women's achievements, paid her a high compliment upon her "Ode on the Death of Captain Cook," a compliment which was not returned, as Miss Seward elegantly proclaimed that "envy was the bosom serpent of this literary despot."

But this forced and unreal style of writing could not last, and with the dawn of a new century things began to mend. Miss Edgeworth freed herself from her father's influence, began to look about her and to describe what she saw, and, instead of writing foolish books on the education of children, produced *Castle Rackrent*, one of the classics of our language. In 1811 *Sense and Sensibility* appeared, the first of those six, all-too-short novels, which have given Jane Austen a supremacy which bids fair never to be disputed. The book dealt the death blow to the quality of sensibility, which has never raised its head since that day. Fanny Burney lived to see the appearance of these books as well as those of Miss Ferrier, and to witness the beginnings of a feminine authorship that was to include the rugged strength of Charlotte Brontë and the deep insight of George Eliot. We wonder if the contrast ever struck her.

Novels are mirrors, reflecting the manners, fashions, and opinions of their day. We glance regretfully at the drawing-rooms of Mrs. Montagu and her friend Mrs. Vesey, thronged with the best society of the time, conscious that in this respect we cannot compete with those days, but there can be no doubt that in general intelligence, education, and good judgment, the women of to-day have the advantage over those of two hundred years ago.

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