

Agnes Maule Machar: The New Ideal of Womanhood (1879)

Nothing in the progress of thought during the last generation has been more observable than the change in the ideal of womanhood. Of course there have always been exceptional women, in poetry as in real life—Portias and Cordelias, as well as Ophelias and Juliets. Sir Walter Scott had his Rebecca and his Jeanie Deans, as well as his Rowena and his Lucy Ashton. But on the whole, the ideal woman of prose and poetry has usually been what has been called the ‘clinging-vine type,’ a creature of sentiment and emotion, absolutely dependent on man for any life worth living; the type evidently present to the mind of Milton (who perhaps had specially good reasons for preferring it) when he wrote,

‘For contemplation he and valour formed,
For softness she, and sweet attractive grace.’

It should not have been necessary indeed, one thinks—looking at such a heroine as Portia—to separate the ‘sweet, attractive grace’ from the tendency to ‘contemplation’; but poetry is often one-sided for the sake of contrast—and Milton seems to have thought that the man could do all the necessary thinking for himself and the woman too. It is quite probable that this very couplet of Milton’s—not seldom quoted—even yet has had a good deal to do with keeping up the limitations of the old ideal. [...]

It is curious, how pertinaciously the idea has been clung to by the opponents of reform, that it is the imagination and the affections which woman should chiefly cultivate; in the face of their own argument that her strong prejudices, which are of course the outcome of affection and imagination unregulated by sound judgment, must always disqualify her from forming an intelligent opinion on great social or political questions. Can the reason be, that they unconsciously desire to perpetuate the disqualification? Women, at all events, know, that the imagination and affections are, as a rule, the side of their nature which has least need to be cultivated in the sense of being stimulated, and unless they are to be balanced and regulated by sufficient

development of the intellect or reason, as well as of the moral faculty, these good gifts may easily become perverted to their torture and destruction. Let the records of any lunatic asylum be examined, if evidence of this truth be required.

However, the fact is practically admitted now, that woman as well as man requires a harmonious and symmetrical development of all her faculties, and however beautiful the ideal of a ‘common soul’ may be, she must, for purposes of training and education, be regarded as a distinct and complete being. It is also being more and more admitted that she has a right to her share in the world’s work, whether in what has been rightly considered her more especial sphere, or in any other for which she is fitted, and that, to fit her for the efficient discharge of her duties, she has a right to the highest and most invigorating mental discipline that can be made available. It is admitted, though not so generally as it might be, that the thorough and liberal education necessary to qualify her for taking part satisfactorily, in any kind of professional work to which her natural gifts may point, will be by no means thrown away on the wife and mother, any more than it is thrown away on the lad who may go into business instead of choosing a profession. We have too many testimonies, in the lives of eminent men, to the potent influence of a gifted and educated mother to doubt that the higher the intellectual plane of those who are the moulding power of the rising generation the higher will be the intellectual and moral average of that generation; for it is rarely indeed, that thorough education does not strengthen and develop the moral as well as the intellectual faculties of woman. [...]

However desirable a stimulus may be given to the cause of higher and more thorough education for girls, by the existence of the University examinations and certificates now within their reach, these will only defeat the object in view if they are regarded as an end instead of a means; if they merely turn out a number of female ‘Admirable Crichtons,’ prodigies of scholarship or mathematical acquirement, without the desire or the power to pursue any branch of knowledge for its own sake, or turn their attainments to any useful end. [...]

Healthful study and healthful work, are a perpetual ‘tonic which stimulates without exhausting.’ And until this is understood, the drifting tendency which ‘lets life run away in a dream,’ must go on un-

checked. The writer has heard girls of more than average ability, who had full opportunities of carrying on the work of self-culture, declare that 'the claims of society' upon them made it impossible to carry on any serious study. What were these claims of society, when analysed? Nothing but rounds of conventional 'calls' or little less conventional parties, nothing that contributed in the least to the true idea of society as the healthful interchange of thoughts and feelings, nothing certainly worth absorbing the whole of an intellectual being's life! We all know 'that where there's a will, there's a way.' It only needs a little enthusiasm for an interesting study, a study which appeals to the higher nature and higher tastes, to prove that the determination to secure it will provide unimagined treasures of time out of the fragments that have been lost for want of a saving motive. It is an American saying, that 'you have all the time there is,' but unfortunately, too many of us do not have all the time we might. And the reason is in a great measure an encouraged aimlessness in girls which would never be tolerated in boys. If a lad, however free from the necessity to labour, insists on spending his life in mere amusement, or even in light and trivial pursuits, public opinion is at once down on his guardians for permitting it, and the aimless man who lives only to kill time, receives, in general, no more respect than he deserves. But with regard to girls, there seems to exist an impression that nothing useful is to be expected of them so long as they are tolerably ornamental, that they are to be like the lilies of the field 'which toil not, neither do they spin.' There can be no question that the great majority of the very girls whose gifts of means, leisure and talent, place within their reach a high degree of self-culture, throw away all their golden opportunities, because their minds are imbued with the mistaken idea that they need have no object in life save to 'amuse themselves,' look as pretty as possible, and end by making a 'desirable' marriage. [...]

A good specimen of the tone in which a certain class of 'smart' writers are accustomed to refer to women and their attempts at self-improvement is the following, taken from a recent article in *Blackwood's Magazine*. He is describing the change which has passed over English provincial society, and the general enlargement of its ideas. He describes the dreary inanity of the convivial gatherings in the olden time, when, among details of their stupidity he tells us that 'a few fine

ladies might get up on their hobbies, and chatter over the mania of the day, china, pug dogs, court trains, Shakespeare, Garrick and the musical glasses—but their less fashionable sisters, when scandal ran short, could sit only in silence or compare notes over domestic grievances.' Now, he admits, there is an improvement, and this is his fashion of describing it. The younger son, he tells us, who formerly would have had little to speak of beyond farming and cows—'is now superficially, at least, a well informed gentleman.' 'His wife or sister, in the intervals of husband-hunting and lawn tennis, has found time to sit at the feet of philosophers and listen to the eloquence of popular lecturers. They manoeuvre for tickets for the Geographical Society and the Royal Institution, as their grandmothers used to do for vouchers to Almacks; and if they have but vague notions of the *sense* of modern speculation, at all events they have caught some echoes of its sound. They have their artistic and literary idols whom they worship; and in art and literature as well as religion, they profess some fashionable form of belief. Few of them can shine by good looks alone, and they are bound to cultivate a habit of babbling.'

That remarks so flippant and vulgar in tone should appear in a first-class magazine is only an illustration of the essentially low ideal of womanhood which still clings to many conservative minds. We need not spend time in inquiring why the proverbial husband-hunting proclivities of the young women are so unnecessarily dragged in, while the equally proverbial fortune-hunting propensities of younger sons are completely ignored. But whatever chaff may mingle with the grain of genuine self-culture in English women, there can hardly be two opinions as to the arrogance, the unchivalrous and unmanly spirit of the man who goes out of his way to bespatter with what mockery he may, any attempt—however rudimentary—of women to rise to some higher objects of interest than 'court trains' and 'pug dogs.' However, sneers, like hard words, break no bones, and women can afford to let their professed adorers in society laugh at them in print, while they are the gainers, and learn, even from hostile sneers, to avoid the little follies and pretensions which throw discredit on their genuine search after a truer culture. [...]

Into most girls' minds, however, this earnest purpose might be instilled by a more judicious training, and more especially by their being

early made to realize the importance of so developing any natural gift or aptitude that it may become, not only a worthy interest throughout life, but also a source of honourable independence should it be their lot to require to maintain themselves. This is a possibility that really lies before every girl almost as much as before every boy, since no individual woman can be certain of marriage, and even married life is subject to chances and changes, and to an abrupt termination. The cruelty of bringing up girls accustomed to every luxury in the assumption that they are always to enjoy the same without any care or thought of theirs, has been strikingly illustrated many times, but seldom more strikingly than in the result of the lamentable failure of the Glasgow Bank, when numbers of young ladies, unfitted by training for any lucrative method of earning a livelihood, were suddenly reduced to utter poverty. A writer in *Good Words*, in commenting upon this fact, observes most truly that 'the domestic tragedies which have come to pass within the last few weeks form a strong argument for women to lay aside the false and petty shame which forbids them to work in order to increase their means of livelihood. [...] Now is the time for women of all ages to get rid of the wretched, unworthy prejudice that work, not idleness, is a disgrace impeding their claims to gentle breeding—almost to womanliness.' Never, indeed, was there a more silly and unworthy prejudice than this, which, it may be hoped, will soon vanish before a truer ideal of what womanliness is! [...]

Nor is the *ennui* of ordinary female life less in need of a resource than the unresisted dominion of grief. The energetic business man, when buckling on his defences from the weather on a stormy morning, may be tempted to think his wife and daughters rather enviable in their sheltered lot; their immunity from the need of breasting wind and weather—their freedom to spend the day in lounging by the drawing-room fire, in novel reading or in some 'elegant' manufacture which nobody wants, and which is probably destined to encumber still further some unfortunate apartment already sufficiently distracted with a multiplicity of 'knick-knacks.' It never occurs to our good Paterfamilias that in a household of lively and energetic girls there may be activities or aspirations reaching beyond even crochet and crewel work, and by no means fully satisfied by the sensational light reading which they, unfortunately, too often affect. It never occurs to him that

he himself would find intolerably dull the very existence which he expects them to enjoy; blank as it is in all interests other than the most transient and trifling ones. And many a girl, fitted for nobler interests, *does* chafe and fret under her silken bonds which yet she sees no way of breaking. [...]

Before, however, girls can be expected to prepare themselves, as a matter of course, for some remunerative employment, the facilities for such preparation must be made sufficient, the avenues to suitable employment must be set open, and the principle must be established that work should be paid for according to its intrinsic value, and not according to the sex of the worker. Facilities for preparing women for the higher departments of work are increasing rapidly. To what has been stated concerning these in a former article, it may be added that Harvard University has now opened to women an institution corresponding to the Cambridge Girton; in other words, it was placed within their reach the advantages of a first-class University. It was also a matter of interest in this connection, that six women have recently graduated in the honour-class at Cambridge. Of course, owing to many causes, the women who avail themselves of University advantages will be only the exceptional cases. [...]

But there is little doubt that, in the long run, women will find themselves permitted to do whatever they shall prove themselves able to do well—all *a priori* prejudices to the contrary notwithstanding. The world wants good work so much more than it wants old prejudices—that these must eventually yield to common sense, and the inevitable law of demand and supply. Even the much vexed question of the suffrage, so obstinate before mere agitation, will ultimately, doubtless, be settled by the women who quietly demonstrate their capability of discharging all other duties of life, and of organising and conducting even great undertakings with the calm and judicious judgment, the perseverance and the thorough conscientiousness of highly cultivated women, which, we believe, will not be found inferior to the same qualities in highly cultivated men. [...]

Women are often pathetically warned, that if they insist in competing with men they will lose the chivalrous consideration still extended to their physical weakness. Those who look beyond the small formal observances of 'society' may well wonder where this chivalrous consid-

eration, as a rule, existed! It would appear that it is equal to handing a lady from one room to another, or to her carriage (especially if there be a footman in attendance), to picking up her scissors, or maintaining a certain show of deference in conversation, to be too often exchanged for a very different tone in the freedom of the smoking-room; but it cannot stand any tougher strain. To the woman who has her 'way to make in the world,' how rare a boon is the chivalrous, brotherly consideration of the stronger for the weaker, the kindly help and sympathy along the thorny path of life. [...] On the contrary, the moment that the principle of self interest comes into play, the average man is more ready to grind down, to over-reach, to underpay, to cheat outright a woman than a man, just because he thinks he can do it with more impunity. It is small wonder if women feel that the compensation of a thin veneer of social courtesy for the ability to earn an honest independence, is very like offering a stone for bread!

A feminine writer in the *Contemporary Review*, not long ago, expressed her fears lest the fast growing movement for training women to self-support and to cherish interests larger than personal ones, may in time so alter the nature and aspirations natural to woman, as to throw into confusion the whole existing scheme of human affairs and become the 'beginning of the end.' Of all the novel theories we have been recently favoured with, this seems one of the wildest, contradicted by all experience, ignoring the 'Divinity that shapes our ends,' and unsupported by any rational probability even then. So far as we have seen yet, the highest cultivation possible to man or woman has not gone in the direction of assimilating their characteristic differences in the least. Neither Mrs. Browning nor 'George Eliot,' two of the most highly cultivated women that the world has seen—have been one iota the less womanly for all their cultivation. Working women of the lower classes are not one whit the less devoted wives and mothers because before marriage they worked hard to earn their own living. Love, in some form or other, will almost always be lord of a woman's life, and a truly happy marriage its most perfect fruition. But a woman will be all the better fitted for marriage if her previous life has not been wasted on trivialities, if her mind and faculties have been trained and disciplined, and if her sacred treasure of affection has not been prematurely frittered away on 'make-believe' *affaires du coeur*. There

will be fewer loveless and unhappy marriages, doubtless, when women feel themselves less dependent on marriage as a means of livelihood.