

“Woman in the Nineteenth Century”

Margaret Fuller ¹ (1843)

Knowing that there exists in the minds of men a tone of feeling toward women as toward slaves, such as is expressed in the common phrase, “Tell that to women and children;” that the infinite soul can only work through them in already ascertained limits; that the gift of reason, Man’s highest prerogative, is allotted to them in much lower degree; that they must be
5 kept from mischief and melancholy by being constantly engaged in active labor, which is to be furnished and directed by those better able to think, &c., &c.,—we need not multiply instances, for who can review the experience of last week without recalling words which imply, whether in jest or earnest, these views, or views like these,—knowing this, can we wonder that many reformers think that measures are not likely to be taken in behalf of
10 women, unless their wishes could be publicly represented by women?

“That can never be necessary,” cry the other side. “All men are privately influenced by women; each has his wife, sister, or female friends, and is too much biased by these relations to fail of representing their interests; and, if this is not enough, let them propose and enforce their wishes with the pen. The beauty of home would be destroyed, the delicacy of the sex be
15 violated, the dignity of halls of legislation degraded, by an attempt to introduce them there. Such duties are inconsistent with those of a mother;” and then we have ludicrous pictures of ladies in hysterics at the polls, and senate-chambers filled with cradles.

But if, in reply, we admit as truth that Woman seems destined by nature rather for the inner circle, we must add that the arrangements of civilized life have not been, as yet, such as to
20 secure it to her. Her circle, if the duller, is not the quieter. If kept from “excitement,” she is not from drudgery. Not only the Indian squaw carries the burdens of the camp, but the favorites of Louis XIV. accompany him in his journeys, and the washerwoman stands at her tub, and carries home her work at all seasons, and in all states of health. Those who think the physical circumstances of Woman would make a part in the affairs of national government
25 unsuitable, are by no means those who think it impossible for negroes to endure field-work, even during pregnancy, or for sempstresses to go through their killing labors.

As to the use of the pen, there was quite as much opposition to Woman’s possessing herself of that help to free agency as there is now to her seizing on the rostrum or the desk; and she is likely to draw, from a permission to plead her cause that way, opposite inferences to what
30 might be wished by those who now grant it.

As to the possibility of her filling with grace and dignity any such position, we should think those who had seen the great actresses, and heard the Quaker preachers of modern times, would not doubt that Woman can express publicly the fulness of thought and creation, without losing any of the peculiar beauty of her sex. What can pollute and tarnish is to act
35 thus from any motive except that something needs to be said or done. Woman could take part in the processions, the songs, the dances of old religion; no one fancied her delicacy was impaired by appearing in public for such a cause.

¹ Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8642/8642-h/8642-h.htm>

As to her home, she is not likely to leave it more than she now does for balls, theatres,
meetings for promoting missions, revival meetings, and others to which she flies, in hope of
40 an animation for her existence commensurate with what she sees enjoyed by men. Governors
of ladies'-fairs are no less engrossed by such a charge, than the governor of a state by his;
presidents of Washingtonian societies no less away from home than presidents of
conventions. If men look straitly to it, they will find that, unless their lives are domestic, those
of the women will not be. A house is no home unless it contain food and fire for the mind as
45 well as for the body. The female Greek, of our day, is as much in the street as the male to cry,
"What news?" We doubt not it was the same in Athens of old. The women, shut out from the
market-place, made up for it at the religious festivals. For human beings are not so constituted
that they can live without expansion. If they do not get it in one way, they must in another, or
perish.

50 As to men's representing women fairly at present, while we hear from men who owe to their
wives not only all that is comfortable or graceful, but all that is wise, in the arrangement of
their lives, the frequent remark,

"You cannot reason with a woman,"—when from those of delicacy, nobleness, and poetic
culture, falls the contemptuous phrase "women and children," and that in no light sally of the
55 hour, but in works intended to give a permanent statement of the best experiences,—when
not one man, in the million, shall I say? no, not in the hundred million, can rise above the
belief that Woman was made for Man,—when such traits as these are daily forced upon the
attention, can we feel that Man will always do justice to the interests of Woman? Can we
think that he takes a sufficiently discerning and religious view of her office and destiny ever to
60 do her justice, except when prompted by sentiment,—accidentally or transiently, that is, for
the sentiment will vary according to the relations in which he is placed? The lover, the poet,
the artist, are likely to view her nobly. The father and the philosopher have some chance of
liberality; the man of the world, the legislator for expediency, none.

Under these circumstances, without attaching importance, in themselves, to the changes
65 demanded by the champions of Woman, we hail them as signs of the times. We would have
every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as
freely as to Man. Were this done, and a slight temporary fermentation allowed to subside, we
should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty. We believe the divine
energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages, and that no
70 discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres, would ensue.

Yet, then and only then will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for
Woman as much as for Man shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession.
As the friend of the negro assumes that one man cannot by right hold another in bondage, so
should the friend of Woman assume that Man cannot by right lay even well-meant restrictions
75 on Woman. If the negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, appavelled in flesh, to one Master
only are they accountable. There is but one law for souls, and, if there is to be an interpreter
of it, he must come not as man, or son of man, but as son of God.

Were thought and feeling once so far elevated that Man should esteem himself the brother
and friend, but nowise the lord and tutor, of Woman,—were he really bound with her in
80 equal worship,—arrangements as to function and employment would be of no consequence.
What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect
to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her

when we left our common home. If fewer talents were given her, yet if allowed the free and full employment of these, so that she may render back to the giver his own with usury, she will not complain; nay, I dare to say she will bless and rejoice in her earthly birth-place, her earthly lot. Let us consider what obstructions impede this good era, and what signs give reason to hope that it draws near.

I was talking on this subject with Miranda, a woman, who, if any in the world could, might speak without heat and bitterness of the position of her sex. Her father was a man who cherished no sentimental reverence for Woman, but a firm belief in the equality of the sexes. She was his eldest child, and came to him at an age when he needed a companion. From the time she could speak and go alone, he addressed her not as a plaything, but as a living mind. Among the few verses he ever wrote was a copy addressed to this child, when the first locks were cut from her head; and the reverence expressed on this occasion for that cherished head, he never belied. It was to him the temple of immortal intellect. He respected his child, however, too much to be an indulgent parent. He called on her for clear judgment, for courage, for honor and fidelity; in short, for such virtues as he knew. In so far as he possessed the keys to the wonders of this universe, he allowed free use of them to her, and, by the incentive of a high expectation, he forbade, so far as possible, that she should let the privilege lie idle.

Thus this child was early led to feel herself a child of the spirit. She took her place easily, not only in the world of organized being, but in the world of mind. A dignified sense of self-dependence was given as all her portion, and she found it a sure anchor. Herself securely anchored, her relations with others were established with equal security. She was fortunate in a total absence of those charms which might have drawn to her bewildering flatteries, and in a strong electric nature, which repelled those who did not belong to her, and attracted those who did. With men and women her relations were noble,—affectionate without passion, intellectual without coldness. The world was free to her, and she lived freely in it. Outward adversity came, and inward conflict; but that faith and self-respect had early been awakened which must always lead, at last, to an outward serenity and an inward peace.

Of Miranda I had always thought as an example, that the restraints upon the sex were insuperable only to those who think them so, or who noisily strive to break them. She had taken a course of her own, and no man stood in her way. Many of her acts had been unusual, but excited no uproar. Few helped, but none checked her; and the many men who knew her mind and her life, showed to her confidence as to a brother, gentleness as to a sister. And not only refined, but very coarse men approved and aided one in whom they saw resolution and clearness of design. Her mind was often the leading one, always effective.

