Feminism and Woman Suffrage

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THE woman's movement in this country has been political rather than social. Suffragists have, of course, assured us that the vote was a symbol, but their conduct proved that it was in reality an end. In spite of the failure of men to achieve any real independence by the extension of the franchise, and the growing disinclination of the more intelligent to exercise their vote, or at least to attach any importance to it, women have continued to concentrate their efforts in this direction. The result has been the rise and growth of "militancy" as apparently the only means of achieving an end which had heretofore passed as a means, of some importance certainly, but not of such paramount importance as women at present believe. Had the energies of the movement been merely wasted in pursuit of a shadow, delay would have been the worst result. Unfortunately the amateur outrages, and general hysteria of militancy, have had a more serious effect. Apart from the initial mistake of aiming at externals rather than essentials, the militant policy bids fair to alienate, not the sympathy of a general public disturbed in its golf and correspondence, but of a certain class of "intellectuals" whose support was at one time a foregone conclusion. Signs have not been wanting of late to show that a large number of feminists are engaged in revising their ideas of the position of women. Disgusted with the militants they have, by an inevitable reaction, been led to query even the fundamental principles of feminism. They have been helped by the vulgarisation of Nietzsche, that arch-reactionary whose works have just recently been fully translated into English, and by the pessimistic pathology of such anti-feminists as Sir Almoth Wright. All "advanced anti-feminists" are Nietzscheans of the deepest dye, they go to their women with a whip, regard them as the "recreation of the warrior," etc., and, armed with certain doubtful hypothesis of medical "science," scorn the merely sentimental objections of the older opponents of the emancipation of women. Au fond, however, their arguments are identical with those of the people who talked, and occasionally still talk of the "true sphere" of women, as if any human being were other than the product of milieu, training and opportunities.

It is now urged that all the talk about the economic independence of women is absurd, because if they do not depend upon a husband for money they are dependent upon an employer, usually another man. Industry is not the "natural sphere" of woman, and she is, therefore, always ready to forsake it for marriage, at the earliest opportunity. It is not only the nature and disposition of women to live economically dependent upon man, but they are happier and more self-respecting in that relation. One of the most brilliant critics of the feminist position recently devised the formula: "Man exploits Nature; Woman exploits Man; and Nature exploits Woman." He contended that the women's movement was a dark device of capitalism to lower wages and to break up the family, so as to throw a quantity of cheap labour into the market. It was a "degradation" for women to be driven from exploiting men to the exploitation of nature on behalf of capitalists. A decrease in
the number of marriages, that is in the number of kept women, was taken to be the
sign of a declining society, and an increase in men's wages was suggested as the
solution of the whole problem. Apparently if every man could support one or more
women in comfort the feminist movement "would die in euthanasia!" Women have
no grievance apart from men; they have, therefore, merely to return to the kitchen
or the nursery and wait, with a becoming air of submissive patience, while their lords
and masters proceed to agitate for higher wages. A pleasing picture, no doubt, and a
simple method of disposing of one half of the human race, whose problems threaten
to encroach too largely upon public attention! Unfortunately, in spite of its
superficial aspect of modernity, this attitude represents a return to early-Victorian
principles. In a new form we are presented with the old phases anent the "sanctity
of the home," the "sacred function of motherhood," and all the transcendental
virtues of the female as "sweetheart, wife, and mother." Our old friend the
"womanly" woman, so dear to the hearts of the early sentimental critics of
feminism, is once again thrust forward, reinforced this time with economic half-
truths, and the ill-digested facts of gynaecology.

Those who talk of the "true function" of women are in the same position as a
primitive man who might argue that the natural function of the human race was to
fight, hunt, eat, sleep, and procreate, and that anyone who suggested the possibility
of a Plato, a Racine, or a Beethoven, merely wished to divert man from his "natural
sphere". They fail to distinguish in women sex functions and economic functions.
Obviously women are designed by nature to play a different part from man in the
process of reproduction, but that is no reason why they should be thrown back upon
this one purely physical function for the means of subsistence. Goethe had the same
primitive physical needs as the Bushman, but who would suggest that his existence
should, therefore, have been passed in the same manner as the latter's? Moreover,
the incapacity of woman in the very sphere which tradition has made peculiarly her
own, is a striking commentary upon the confusion which lies at the bottom of the
anti-feminist position. Motherhood, that "crowning glory," has become associated
with death and disease, and has lost all the characteristics of a natural healthy
function. Our over-sexed women, who depend upon sexual specialisation for their
livelihood, are less capable and less inclined to perform their natural duties. We have
set them apart for centuries forbidding them to take part in any other form of
production with the result that they show a marked decline in reproductive
efficiency as compared with the females of other species where no such
specialisation has obtained. It is precisely where women are less dependent
economically upon their husbands that motherhood is easier and less pathological.
Anti-feminists seem to regard maternity as an exchangeable commodity which
women give in return for food, clothing, and maintenance. That is the only
justification for the comparison of a woman dependent upon an employer and a
woman who depends upon her husband. If both are producers, they are entitled to
payment, and the economic position of each is justified. It is doubtful, however,
whether the purely domestic woman pays her way. Such payment as she receives
bears no relation to the services she is supposed to perform. Women who are not
mothers have the same economic status as those who bear children. In fact they are
usually better off in exactly inverse ratio the size of their families. Nor is it sufficient
to reply that they earn their support by domestic work, for in that case they would only be entitled to the current wages paid to cooks, housemaids, and governesses, for such services. The fact is, of course, that they are paid out of all proportion to the work done, either too much or too little. In the former case they pay other women to perform these domestic duties, and their ability to do so depends entirely upon the earning capacity of the man. Clearly there is a great difference between the woman who works for an employer and the woman who enjoys an unearned income from her husband. The anti-feminist "economists" profess to see no difference because in each case the payment is made by a man. The community is entitled to ask whether "woman's work" is really a sufficient justification for her economic dependence. Is a woman to live as a parasite because she has borne children once or twice in a lifetime, or perhaps not at all? While she is engaged in the functions of motherhood she has obviously every right to consideration and support, but when her children no longer require her undivided attention, her right to maintenance disappears.

If women are to live at the expense of some worker while bearing and rearing children, they must perform these duties efficiently. Likewise, the woman who professes to earn her living by domestic work must show that she has qualification for her task. The actual system by which individuals are assigned works purely for reasons of sex is injurious, wasteful, unintelligent and, therefore, expensive. We have all sorts of incompetent amateurs, whose sole commercial asset is sex, undertaking duties which are quite beyond them. Meanwhile the romanticists, and more recently the Nietzscheans, talk about woman's "sphere," feminine intuition, and other things which are supposed to do duty for knowledge and experience in what is admittedly a most important department of human activity. Women are to be educated with a view to marriage and domesticity; they are warned of the danger of becoming "unsexed" and losing the "charm" which will enable them to live in unproductive leisure, but they are never prepared for any of the duties which await them as wives and mothers. They secure a man who will support them, and then "muddle through" as best as they can. The statistics of infant mortality bear eloquent testimony to their success as mothers, while their incapacity as wives is seen in their uneducated children, and their futile, unorganised methods of housekeeping, all of which we suffer, because of the sentimentality with which the whole wretched business has been invested. The children who survive are of use to the community only in so far as they escape from the decivilising influence of the ignorant but fond mother. Fortunately the "home," as it exists in the imagination of the anti-feminist, is ceasing more and more to be the lot of the average child, who escapes to the street, the school or the university where he learns to measure himself against his fellows, rather than to view life from the pedestal upon which the egoism of the maternal "instinct" would place him. That "wonderful centre," as one anti-suffragist recently described it, where woman reigns supreme, the home, which has always appealed to those far away from it, no longer exercises any great influence upon the child, whose life soon lies entirely outside it. Were it not for the school-masters, governesses, and all those who save the healthy child from his mother, we might have a really reliable picture of the educational value of family life. Fortunately most children are not educated by their parents. It is arguable, at
least, that the "womanly" woman, whose sex has been her profession, and who relies upon that for all that she has to get out of life, is hardly qualified to bring up children in a proper manner. Her own up-bringing has taught her to rely upon cunning and instinct, rather than intelligence, and she can only teach the same slave morality to her children.

There is little doubt that so far from having any heaven ordained "sphere" in which she alone excels, woman is, as a rule, a hopeless amateur, even in the work which has been assigned to her for centuries. She has been, it is alleged, the educator of our children, yet she has never made any original contributions to pedagogics until the recent appearance of Mme. Montessori, who is by no means the ideal domesticated female of the anti-feminist type. She has watched the first efforts of the child to speak, but has been of no help in the study of language. She has been consigned to the kitchen, and told to specialise in dressmaking, in order to enhance her chances of gaining a livelihood, nevertheless, in both these departments men are admittedly masters. Is it possible that cooking, clothes, and children are the "true sphere" of man? It is curious that women have always had to learn, with the help of men, the elements of all these things which are supposed to be essentially feminine functions. The truth, of course, is that mentally undeveloped human beings are inevitably devoid of initiative, hence the absence of originality in women's work throughout the ages. They had no special talents for cooking, housekeeping and education, but were forced by circumstances to occupy themselves with these things. As a result, we see at present inefficient cookery, unintelligent household management, and the general chaos resulting from incompetency. Is it any wonder that, whenever it is possible, women depute to paid servants all the duties for which they are supposed by masculine浪漫ists to be peculiarly endowed? They do not enjoy this work, most of which is futile and unnecessary, and are consequently seizing every opportunity of concerning themselves with other matters. Much capital has been made by the anti-feminists out of the alleged superiority of the economically dependent wife and mother over the woman who is trying to support herself. Leaving out exceptional cases of both kinds, it will be found that, generally speaking, the woman who is a producer is superior to the woman who is simply a non-productive consumer, for as we have seen, women do not, as a rule, justify their existence economically, by keeping house for a husband. The woman who is a worker has learnt to value money, she has escaped from the narrow horizon and cramping influences of ordinary domesticity, she has learnt to consider herself as a human being related to other human beings, not as a woman related to some particular individual or group. It is not woman's business to "exploit man," in the sense that nobody has any right to live as a parasite upon the work of others. The woman whose sex is her profession, degrades both herself and her supporters; from the point of view of human progress she is useless. As a mother she is a failure, as a wife she is merely a doll or a domestic automaton, as a human being she is uncivilised. When her sex attraction has disappeared she has no interest for her husband, when her children grow older she is separated from them by her absence of mental development, until finally all that remains to console her are the panegyrics of the idealists. Women are beginning to realise how dearly they have purchased the halo of femininity, which the pseudo-economists of Nietzschism are
so anxious to restore. Whether voters or voteless they should beware of the wolf in sheep's clothing; so far the only tangible fruit of militancy.