

“The Rights and Condition of Women,” Samuel J. May (1845 or 1846)

Genesis, V: 1.--*In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him, male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam.*

Galatians, III: 28.--*There is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Allow me again to speak plainly to you of the rights and condition of Women. My thoughts were urgently drawn to this subject last Spring, by the fact that, at that time, the people of this State were called, in their primary capacity, to decide whether the sale of intoxicating drinks should be licensed--a question of the highest personal, domestic and social consequence--and yet more than half of the people, the women, were not only not expected, but not allowed to influence, directly, a decision in which they were so much interested.

About the same time, the *men* of our nation presumed to plunge us into the multiform calamities, crimes and expenditures of a war, without so much as consulting the women, who will have to share equally, if not to endure the larger part of the losses and sufferings, that are inevitable upon such a measure of folly and wickedness.

Again, during the past summer, a large Convention of delegates, elected by the people of this State, have been in session at the Capitol, framing a new Constitution, which is to affect as vitally the lives, liberties, properties, happiness of women as of men; and yet not a female was there to represent the interests of her sex; nor would one hardly suspect, from the document they have spread before their fellow-citizens, that there were any women in the body politic. Nor is this all; but last Tuesday, when the constituents of that Convention were called upon to signify whether they would ratify the new Constitution, the women of New-York were not expected, nor would they have been permitted to say, by their votes, whether or not they were willing to live under such a frame of government.

Now this is all unequal, all unrighteous--this utter annihilation, politically considered, of more than one half of the whole community. It is a piece of assumption just as egregious as it would be for the females to call a Convention, frame a state government, and go on to administer it by officers of their own choosing, without any recognition of the rights, and hardly any of the existence even of our sex.*

This entire disfranchisement of females is as unjust as the disfranchisement of the males would be; for there is nothing in their moral, mental or physical nature, that disqualifies them to understand correctly the true interests of the community, or to act wisely in reference to them.

I will not now speak of the many illustrious women of ancient and modern times, who have enlightened and blessed the families and communities, with which they have been connected. I will only say, that several of the best writers, in our language, upon political economy, have been women. There was no one in his empire, of whom Bonaparte stood more in awe, (because of her discriminating judgment on the policy of his government) than Madame De

Stael. Some of the ablest Sovereigns, that have ever worn crowns, either in ancient or modern times, have been women. We have, therefore, evidences enough that the female mind is competent to appreciate justly, and discharge ably the duties incumbent upon a member of the body politic; and for myself I am unable to see either justice or reason in that part of our civil Constitution which denies to women the right, if they see fit, to take part in the public counsels; and influence by their votes, if they please, public elections.

The Father of the human family, in his infinite wisdom, made man male and female. But he made us co-ordinate, equal in rank, alike rational and moral beings. God created woman to be the companion of man, not his slave, not his menial; not subservient to his will, any further than his will is in accordance with the will of the Divine Mind. He has not given one law to men, and another law to women, but the same law to both. The true interests of each, and the high purpose, for which life was given to each, are precisely the same. I am aware that this equality of the sexes has never been recognized, until since the Reformation of the 16th century, by the Quakers and a few smaller sects of Christians. But this is only one of many facts, which show, how benighted were the ages before that epoch; and how many clouds of error remain yet to be dispelled from the human mind. The doctrine that "the people" have rights to govern themselves is modern, and almost peculiar to America. It would be, at this day, scouted in Spain, Austria and Russia, as heartily as the doctrine I am advocating. And it is indeed deserving of no more respect. For if the people have the right of self-government, then I am unable to see why a half of the people have a right to govern the whole.

To prove, however, that woman was not intended to be the equal of man, the argument most frequently alleged is, that she is the weaker vessel--inferior in stature, and has much less physical strength. This physiological fact, of course, cannot be denied; although the disparity in these respects is very much increased by neglect or mismanagement. But allowing women generally to have less bodily power, why should this consign them to mental, moral or social dependence? Physical-force is of special value only in a savage or barbarous community. It is the avowed intention and tendency of Christianity to give the ascendancy to man's *moral* nature; and the promises of God, with whom is all strength and wisdom, are to the upright, the pure, the good,--not to the strong, the valiant, or the crafty.

The more men receive of the lessons of Christianity--the more they learn to trust in God, in the might of the right and true-- the less reliance will they put upon brute force. And as brute force declines in public estimation, the more will the feminine qualities of the human race rise in general regard and confidence; until the meek shall be seen to be better than the mighty, and the humble only be considered worthy of exaltation. Civilization implies the subordination of the physical in man to the mental and moral; and the progress of the melioration of the condition of our race, has been everywhere by the elevation of the female sex.

But some would eagerly ask should women be allowed to take part in the constructing and administering of our civil institutions? Allowed, do you say? The very form of the question is an assumption of the right to do them the wrong that has been done them. Allowed! why, pray tell me, is it from us their rights have been received? Have we the authority to accord to them just

such prerogatives as we see fit, and withhold the rest? No; woman is not the creature, the dependant of man, but of God. We may, with no more propriety assume to govern women, than they might assume to govern us. And never will the nations of the earth be well governed, until both sexes, as well as all parties, are fairly represented, and have an influence, a voice, and, if they wish, a hand in the enactment and administration of the laws. One would think, the sad mismanagement of the affairs of our own country should, in all modesty, lead us men to doubt our own capacity for the task of governing a nation, or even a state, alone; and to apprehend that we need other qualities in our public councils--qualities that may be found in the female portion of our race. If woman be the complement of man, we may surely venture the intimation, that all our social transactions will be incomplete, or otherwise imperfect, unless they have been guided alike by the wisdom of each sex. The wise, virtuous, gentle mothers of a state or nation, (should their joint influence be allowed,) might contribute as much to the good order, the peace, the thrift of the body politic, as they severally do to the well being of their families, which for the most part, all know is more than the fathers do. Even for the restraint of the unruly, and the reformation of the vicious, women would be found to possess a power and a skill, which far transcend the force and coarse appliances, on which men are wont to rely. In support of this last supposition, I need only point you to Mrs. Fry, in England, and to Mrs. Farnham and Miss Dix, in our own country. These women have evinced a fortitude and courage, as well as a degree of sound sense, which very few men possess.

Undoubtedly some of you are ready to say to me, "pray, would you have women public instructors, lecturing upon moral and political science, and haranguing the people upon their special duties as citizens?" Hear my reply. It is not for me, nor for us men, to prescribe the mode in which the women shall operate. Let us leave this to their own good sense, and taste. There is a great deal of lecturing and haranguing, that doth not profit. Would that neither men nor women should ever speak in public, unless they have somewhat to say worth hearing. But if a valuable thought is suggested to any one, I see not why that thought should be suppressed, because it was started in the mind of a female. And if she, to whom it has come, has power to utter it, and is moved so to do, I see not why she should be forbidden. To me, it is as grateful to hear words of wisdom and eloquence from a woman as a man; and quite as uninteresting and wearisome to listen to a vapid, inane discourse from the one as from the other. I know not why silly men should be encouraged to speak, more than silly women; nor why the wise of one sex should be forbidden, any more than the wise of the other, to communicate what they possess to those, who may need it, and in the manner they prefer. To whomsoever God has given the power to instruct and control others, by their learning, their eloquence or their wit, to them he has given the authority to do so. I have heard some women speak in a manner far more convincing and impressive than most men, that I have known, were able to; and so as amply to vindicate their right to stand up in the pulpit or the forum, as teachers of men.

"Ah," say some, "would you then have women engage in the acrimonious contests of the political parties, attend the angry meetings, witness the passion, hear the ribaldry and abuse, that are poured upon each other by the excited opponents; and be tempted, perhaps, to commit the same offences themselves? No; surely not. Neither would I have *men* guilty of such indecorum, folly and wickedness. If political meetings must needs be disgraced by such scenes,

they ought not to be held; and those men who would attend them, show that they are careless of their own moral health. It were no more unseemly, no worse any way, for women to be thus defiled than for us men. We are called to be upright, pure and holy beings as well as they. Propriety of conduct, courtesy of manners, purity of speech, delicacy, refinement, gentleness, are just as becoming in one sex as the other. For ore, I do not allow it to be a matter of course, that we men should be rough, violent, passionate, abusive, profane, obscene. It is unworthy of any man to be so. He is as much bound as a woman can be, "to keep himself unspotted from the world," and to keep himself away from places where, and from persons by whom, he may be tempted to become thus vile. Is it not indeed a mortifying confession--one that we men ought to be ashamed to make, that political meetings are occasions, from which the delicate and pure would shrink, and yet that we attend them? Nay, more, friends, if it be true that they are such,--if our primary political gatherings, at which the people are called to consider their true interests and duties, and to exercise their high prerogatives as a self-governing community,--if these primary meetings are indeed such scenes, that our mothers, wives, sisters and daughters would be disgusted if not corrupted at them, may we not seriously apprehend, that our civil institutions are unsound, rotten at the very core? and anxiously look about us, for healing and purifying influences, from any quarter, to save us from the impending ruin?

The terms, in which the two sexes are generally spoken of, seem to imply that men must of course go forth, take part in the collisions of political party, pecuniary interest, or local concernment; get themselves care worn, perplexed, irritated, soured, angry; while women are to stay at home, and prepare themselves with all the blandishments of maternal, sisterly, conjugal or filial affection, to soothe our irritated tempers, mollify the bruises we have received in our conflicts with other men; and so prepare us to strive with renewed resolution, and bruise or get bruised again. Now this seems to me like a perfect caricature of the true business of life; and still more of the relation, in which God has placed man and woman.

To each sex, the true object of living is the same; and by each it is to be pursued under circumstances of trial, differing somewhat in kind perhaps, but not much if any in degree. If men meet with causes of perplexity and irritation abroad, women are not by any means exempt from them at home. Each, therefore, should learn to bear calmly their own trials, withstand heroically their own temptations; and at the same time prepare themselves to bear one another's burthens. Why should man always be spoken of as the moral patient, and woman as the nurse? Surely this is very inappropriate, if man be, as he claims to be, the stronger vessel. Either may have occasion to soothe, comfort, uphold the other; therefore both man and woman should strive to acquire the same dispositions and graces, which adapt us to fulfill the various ministries of love. I can think of no excellence, that would be becoming and beautiful in a true woman, that would not be equally becoming and beautiful in a true man. Jesus of Nazareth, the perfect man, exhibited as much of the feminine, as he did of the masculine character. And doubtless every individual, of either sex, will approach the perfection to which we all are called, just so far as he or she combines in one the virtues and graces of both. Patience, tenderness, delicacy are as needful to complete the character of a man, as firmness, enterprize and moral courage are to complete the character of a woman.

If, therefore, there be any untoward influences in political, professional or mercantile transactions, *that cannot be withstood*, but necessarily harden the heart, blunt the moral sensibilities, and sour the temper, men ought to keep aloof from such intercourses, no less than women; for goodness of heart is as indispensable to the well being of the one, as of the other. The preservation and growth of godliness in us, should be, with all, the great objects of life. For the sake of this, the sacrifice of every thing else, if necessary, ought to be made. It may sometimes, aye often, be right that men and women should yield up their time, property, lives even, in the service of their country, much more in the cause of humanity. But it can never be required of either, under the moral government of God, to sacrifice their integrity, their purity--the health, the life of their souls. If, without this sacrifice, either men or women can render special service to the state, or the nation, by private or public speech or action, they may, they ought so to do.

Here the question comes--"would you have women leave their homes, neglecting their children and the duties of their households, that they may take part in the management of public affairs?" No; certainly not. No more would I encourage men to do this great wrong, as they too often do. The *family* is the most important institution upon earth. If the duties of father and mother were generally well discharged, there would be little of importance left for civil governments to take care of. The family, therefore, ought never to be neglected for the service of the state, by the father any more than the mother. Indeed, there is one reason why father should be even more especially careful to make himself an object of reverence and deep affection to his children. In the Sacred Scriptures, in the preaching and conversations which children hear, and the religious instructions they receive, God is represented as the *Father* of the human family. Now they must, of course, get their ideas of a father, from the character and the conduct of the earthly parent, who wears that name. If, therefore, he be not what the name imports, he will only obscure the divine being to the minds of his children. Whenever, therefore, public offices are incompatible with the faithful, kind and wise discharge of domestic duties, they ought to be declined by the father no less than by the mother. But where either men or women are without families; or where their children have come to years of discretion; or where they have such talent or tact, that they can fulfil well all their parental obligations, and have time, wisdom and strength to spare to the public use, they ought so to bestow them. It is as much the duty of women as of men to do this; and the institution or the custom of that community must be unwise, unnatural, unchristian, that would forbid them thus to contribute to the common weal.

In great emergencies, at those crises which have decided the fate of nations, women have been allowed, encouraged, nay summoned to lend their aid,--both in council, and on the field of battle. Now, I believe, if they were admitted to equal advantages of education, and permitted at all times to influence the counsels, and assist the administration of the affairs of state--I believe those terrible emergencies, which shake nations to their centres, would much less frequently, if ever, arise; and the redemption of the world would be sooner accomplished. No one can deny that the peace, good order and prosperity of families are much more frequently disturbed, thrown down by the male than by the female portions of them. So too, a large proportion of the disturbers of the public peace are males. Who will not gratefully own, that

the wise and virtuous mother contributes as much, nay, often more than the father, to the well being of the family? In the biographies of great men, we generally find it attributed to the influence of their mothers, that they became what they were. Now the community, the nation ought to be as one great family. It is the intention, the tendency of Christianity so to make it. But how can it ever become so, until it shall have mothers, as well as fathers, to guide and control it? Hitherto the nations of the earth have subsisted in the condition of half-orphanage; and they have acted (have they not?) much like rude boys, too early left to their own untoward guidance.

Much, that I have said may seem to you very unpoetical. Many even of my female hearers may turn away from me to-day, feeling that I have commended to them a course, that would be very ungraceful--very unlady-like. But, I submit, would it be unchristian? Nay, would it not be entirely accordant with the precepts, spirit, purpose of the Gospel? "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male or female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." How prominent a place do woman occupy in the history of Jesus! They were not only his most ardent friends. They were his most courageous followers.

"They, while Apostles shrank, could danger brave,
Last at his cross, and earliest at his grave."

If Christianity bears any one decisive mark of superiority to all other religious systems, it is in its influence upon the condition of the female sex. Much, very much is yet to be done, before this portion of our race will be fully instated in their rights. Still, wherever Christianity has developed any of its power, it has elevated woman. It requires that she be treated not as the drudge, the slave of man, much less as the creature of his lust; but as his nearest friend, his equal companion, his second self. Jesus and his apostles would have us look at woman as an intellectual and moral, not merely as a physical being. Nothing is worthy of her, any more than of man, that does not breathe the spirit of true goodness, active benevolence, stern integrity, moral courage. She, no less than he, is called to be like the Son of God.

That sentimental, sensual poetry, which is still too much in favor, is borrowed from the East, where woman is but the minister of man's self-indulgence. Believe me, there is a higher, deeper strain on this theme, than has ever yet been sung; a strain that shall awaken not a sensual thought, but quicken only the divine in man; and incite both the sexes to a pure co-operation for the redemption of the race, a redemption which *must commence in the sanctification of connubial love*. Oh, what sordid, mercenary, or sensual motives too often prompt to marriage--a relation which should never be formed but by those of congenial spirits, whose mental, moral and physical constitutions are good; and who have the disposition, and the ability, to discharge well the momentous duties of parents. But it shall not always be so. The tone of flattery, and fulsome adulation, in which women have been generally addressed, shall give place to truthful words, portraying all they might and ought to be. The duties which are devolved on them, shall yet be seen in all their high import, and be seen to call for every virtue, every grace, that can be unfolded in the human mind and heart. Form, complexion, feature will be held in less esteem; and qualities of mental, moral character alone shall kindle admiration. The rosy lip and

sparkling eye will awaken less delight in a manly, Christian heart, than a mouth, from which proceed habitually words of good sense, of honest truth, of earnest interest in the welfare of mankind. A soft and lily, tapering hand will seem less graceful, than a hand well worn and hardened in ministries of mercy, or in honest toil for self-subsistence. And a frame cheated of half its growth, or distorted from those wise proportions, which God had given it, by subserviency to fashion, will be less pleasing than a frame made, by wholesome exercise, proper nourishment, and due obedience to the laws of health, to expand, develop its energies, and become able to endure the labors of love, the eager pursuits of literary or scientific attainment, and the wise discharge of all private or public duties, to which the claims of others may call, or the spirit within may urge it.

Women are coaxed, flattered, courted, but they are not respected by many men as they ought to be; neither do they respect themselves as they should. They are not regarded and treated as equals; nor did they claim to be. So long has this been the case, so long have they and we all been used to that organization of society, in which they are assigned to an inferior place, that most of us, and most too of themselves acquiesce in the wrong, as if it were right. But this does not make it so; nor avert the evil consequences, which are flowing through society, from the entire exclusion of the wisdom and virtue of half of mankind, from the councils of State, and the administrations of justice and mercy. The intellectual and moral powers of the female sex generally are not half developed, because no adequate demands are made upon them. Excluded as they are from all direct influence, in the decision of many of the greatest questions of social and national interest--they seldom take the trouble even to consider them; and so we lose the benefit we might derive from their perceptions of rights, which are often clearer than our own. When we see what has been done for the redemption of mankind, by the few women, who have broken through the enclosure, in which custom would keep them, and have thought, and spoken, and written freely in behalf of humanity, we cannot repress the apprehension, that states and nations are suffering immeasurably, from that waste of intellect and moral sense, which are expending themselves upon the inanities of fashion, and the follies of personal or household display.

Through the influence of Christianity, great improvements have been made in the condition of women. Still they are subjected to sundry disabilities; and may, no more than any other class of men, expect to have their wrongs fully redressed, *until they themselves have a voice, and a hand, in the enactment and administration of the laws.* Women are so often trifled with as if they were mere toys, or used as if they were only conveniences to man's estate, that there are not a few, who always sneer when their *rights* are spoken of. But deride it who will, there is as much truth and solemnity in the claim I have set up for them, as there was in the first assertion of the right of *men* to govern themselves, though monarchs affected to despise it, and lordlings trampled it under their feet.

Women are too dependent upon men. We have too much power over them; and they are often cruelly oppressed. See how pitifully their labors are requited. The disclosures that have been made of the incessant, wasting toils to which they are subjected, especially in or near large cities, for a compensation utterly insufficient to provide them amply with the bare necessities

of life; the degradation of their persons to which they are often driven by the pressure of absolute want; the case with which the base, heartless seducer escapes the condemnation which his villany deserves; and the unforgiving censure, with which his victim is pursued--these disclosures alone are enough to show how unequal, how unfair is the dealing of our race with that portion, which, if either, should be treated with the greater leniency--enough to show how false, hypocritical is much of the adulation that is bestowed on women. Can those men feel any proper respect for females, who make them their drudges from morning to night,--or who are willing to pay them the miserable pittance which they do, for labors that consume the live long day, and oft the sleepless night? *Yes about as much as the slaveholders feel for their slaves.*

Again, as it respects education, that grand leveller as well as well as elevator of mankind--how much more liberal are the provisions, which are made to give our sons than our daughters a generous culture, in all the arts and sciences, that open to the human soul perennial sources of high, pure satisfaction; and give to their possessor not only abilities for greater usefulness to others, but multiplied means of self-subsistence of self-subsistence. I know the majority of female children are so much more disposed to study, and are so much quicker to learn than those of the other sex, that there may be found in the community a greater number of pretty well instructed women, than of men. But let their thirst for knowledge be ever so ardent, let their powers of acquisition be ever so good, females are nowhere admitted into the highest seminaries of learning. *

And even as it respects property, a due portion of which is in this life convenient for all, which the majority seem to regard as "the one thing needful," our being's end and aim, which therefore ought, in all fairness, to be made accessible to all--even as it respects property, women are nowhere allowed the same opportunities to acquire it; nor have the same securities for its preservation.

Furthermore, the current literature of the day--the fashionable novels, the poetry, and the newspapers, are inimical to the independence, and true welfare of women. These are continually intimating, that *marriage* is indispensable to the respectability and usefulness of females. Not only the silliest jokes, but often also the most cruel taunts are flung at "single" women. So that, in addition to the urgencies of pecuniary necessity, they are impelled, by the dread of ridicule, (of which strong and wise men often stand in awe) to rush into wedlock, on the first opportunity, consenting, it may be, to the most ill-assorted alliances, from which only sorrow and sin can flow.

These circumstances operate powerfully to depress, and oppress women--to make them too dependent--to leave them at the mercy of men; and I do not believe their condition will be essentially improved, until their rights are recognized as equal every way; *nor until these are secured in the very frame-work of society.*

I hope and pray that what has now been said may not fall to the ground. I have alluded to our new Constitution, as furnishing one evidence of the great social wrong, against which I have now entered my earnest protest. That Constitution, however, I consider a great improvement

upon the present one. It contains several important provisions for the melioration of our social state. I voted for its adoption. I hope it will be ratified. But its defects should be noted, and all good men and true should do what they may to obtain a still more perfect basis of our civil fabric, so soon as the people can be brought to feel the need of another revision. I fain would hope that, when next the people frame a Constitution for this State, the stupendous fact will not be overlooked, *that more than one-half of our population are females, to whom equal rights and equal privileges ought to be accorded, and secured by Constitution and Statute law.*

Annotation: Samuel Joseph May (1797-1871), was a Unitarian minister and one of the greatest social and educational reformers of the 19th century. He advocated on behalf of freedom and civil rights for blacks, voting rights for women, and just rights for workers. He was ahead of the majority in acceptance of the policies he fought for; therefore, he was often at odds with his ministerial colleagues, church members, and the public at large. In 1845, May began his longest ministry, at the Church of the Messiah in Syracuse, New York. In his address, the Rights and Condition of Women, 1846, he asked why "half of the people have a right to govern the whole." He became a familiar figure working closely with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the women's rights movement.

EXCERPT: To prove, however, that woman was not intended to be the equal of man, the argument most frequently alleged is that she is the weaker vessel, inferior in stature, and has much less physical strength. This physiological fact, of course, cannot be denied; although the disparity in these respects is very much increased by neglect or mismanagement. But allowing women generally to have less bodily power, why should this consign them to mental, moral, or social dependence? Physical force is of special value only in a savage or barbarous community. It is the avowed intention and tendency of Christianity to give the ascendancy to man's moral nature; and the promises of God, with whom is all strength and wisdom, are to the upright, the pure, the good, not to the strong, the valiant, or the crafty.

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dependent of man but of God. We may with no more propriety assume to govern women than they might assume to govern us. And never will the nations of the earth be well-governed until both sexes, as well as all parties, are fairly represented and have an influence, a voice, and, if they wish, a hand in the enactment and administration of the laws.

One would think the sad mismanagement of the affairs of our own country should, in all modesty, lead us men to doubt our own capacity for the task of governing a nation, or even a state, alone; and to apprehend that we need other qualities in our public councils, qualities that may be found in the female portion of our race. If woman be the complement of man, we may surely venture the intimation that all our social transactions will be incomplete, or otherwise imperfect, unless they have been guided alike by the wisdom of each sex. The wise, virtuous, gentle mothers of a state or nation (should their joint influence be allowed) might contribute as much to the good order, the peace, the thrift of the body politic as they severally do to the well-being of their families, which for the most part, all know is more than the fathers do.

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