

WOMANHOOD SUFFRAGE
A REVIEW OF OBJECTIONS

I. THAT WOMAN WOULD UNSEX HERSELF BY PARTICIPATING IN THE DUTIES OF PUBLIC LIFE.

The term "unsex" has never been definitely explained; but this proposition is supposed to mean that woman would lose the refinement, modesty, purity and unselfishness which characterize her by taking an active part in matters affecting the public welfare. Why a consideration of measures to promote the well-being of thousands of her fellow creatures would convert a lovely and conscientious woman into a monster of selfishness and hardness, while ignorance or carelessness of any interest outside her own and those of her family and immediate circle of friends would keep her gentle and unselfish, we are not told. The assertion is made dogmatically and with no attempt at proof. It rests upon the assumption that a woman under the same conditions with a man would develop manlike qualities. This is a mistake. A sunflower and a rose may grow in the same soil, and be nourished by the same showers and sunshine yet the sunflower does not become a rose, nor the rose a sunflower. Neither does a woman become unwomanly by entering fields in which man has heretofore been the principal worker. Literature, a century ago, was a comparatively new field for woman, and great was the prejudice against literary women. Even within the last half century Miss Mitford regretted the necessity of taking up her pen for a living, and would gladly have devoted herself to scrubbing, as being a "more feminine" employment, had it been equally remunerative. Yet literature has not "unsexed" woman. Lady authors are not proverbially coarse, bold or unlovely. The same objection has more recently been made against women as public speakers, ministers and physicians. Time has shown us, however, that the fear was equally unfounded. To some extent woman has already participated in political life, and when she has done so no loss of womanliness has been the result. Queen Victoria is not unsexed by being the ruler of a great nation, by proroguing Parliament, and consulting with her ministers on important affairs of state. The women of our own Territory of Wyoming have not – so far as can be ascertained – lost their womanliness in the act of depositing the ballot.

Nothing wears so well as womanliness. It was evidently made for use, and not merely for ornament. Hitherto it has gone forth conquering and to conquer; refining, civilizing, Christianizing, but never becoming corrupted or tarnished by any good work. We need not fear to introduce it into our national councils, lest it should prove too weak to stem the tide of selfishness and corruption.

The question is asked whether woman will "be made better and more unselfish by giving her hand in political strife." Yes; when that strife is for justice against wrong, for purity against corruption, for virtue against vice, for education against ignorance, for peace against bloodshed. Political life is not necessarily a life of ambition and self-seeking. It may be, and doubtless with a Christian woman would be, a life of noble and unselfish labor. A beautiful illustration of the truest, highest modesty, that of entire self-forgetfulness, is given in the character of Dinah Morris, the heroine of "Adam Bede" – a character drawn from real life. Her duties were public, those of a Methodist preacher, yet she lost none

of her womanly purity, sweetness or refinement, while laboring among the rough, ignorant and uncultivated of both sexes.

Women imbued with her spirit of devotion and unselfishness, entering the Senate chamber or the 'State Assembly, feeling that they were assuming duties no less sacred than those of the ministry, would not be contaminated with evil.

II. THAT WOMAN'S INFLUENCE WOULD BE BAD.

While we are told that woman is too good and pure to mingle in political life, we are also told, in almost the same breath, that her influence therein would be bad. Are we to understand by this that the majority of women are so much less just or righteous, so much less pure and incorruptible, than the majority of men, that their accession to public duties would be disastrous to society? Since, as we are constantly informed, woman's influence at present is elevating, this is impossible. What magic exists in the ballot to transform an influence which is now a blessing into a curse?

Moreover, these same women are not only permitted but urged and exhorted to become wives and mothers – a calling far higher and holier, and more responsible, than any other. Are they capable of filling this high position, yet unworthy a lower one? To ask the question is to answer it.

The difficulty, then, cannot be a moral one. Is it an intellectual one. Are not the majority of women sufficiently well informed to use the ballot judiciously? If not it is quite time they became so. By all means let them be instructed and educated at once, even if it be at the sacrifice of a few frills and flounces, and an occasional party. And while we are about it, would it not be well for some young men (of course older ones wouldn't need it) to go through a similar course of instruction? Are we quite sure that they understand thoroughly what they are doing when they deposit their votes? A class of young gentlemen and ladies pursuing a course of political studies together might not be a disadvantage to society, and the studies pursued would probably be quite as good a mental discipline as Latin or French, and as fruitful of good results.

But the ignorant "Biddies" who would vote, if the franchise were given to woman, are a stumbling block to many excellent people, who are almost persuaded that the ballot ought to be given to intelligent Christian women. "Great," we are told, "Would be the consumption of cheap ribbons and jewelry on election days," if women were permitted to vote. Probably not greater than the present consumption of whiskey and "lager bier," and certainly less harmful. But if Bridget-voting is an argument against Woman Suffrage, Patrick-voting is equally an argument against manhood suffrage. If the objection proves anything, it proves that an educational or a moral test is necessary at the polls; but it does not touch the question of sex.

Undoubtedly the ignorant foreign vote is the most serious obstacle with which our republican government has to contend. Any just measure which would tend to decrease that vote would be a public benefit. The admission of woman to the polls would do this. The census shows that of the immigrants who have come to our shores, the males are in excess of the females in the proportion of three to two. Between the ages of twenty-five and forty, the number of men is double the number of

women. This being the case, the admission for woman to the franchise, while increasing the actual number of foreign voters, would diminish the relative number – that is, it would in reality lessen the foreign political power. It is not to be supposed that Bridget would so far surpass Patrick in repeating as to make up for this disposition. The argument of the foreign vote, therefore, so far from being an argument against Womanhood Suffrage, is one in its favor.

The baneful influence of another class of women is sometimes mentioned as an obstacle to woman voting. But since this class is supported and encouraged by a still larger class of men without whose patronage it could not exist, it will readily be seen that virtue and not vice would be the gainer by giving the ballot to woman.

It is sometimes said that selfish and unprincipled women would vote, while good women would stay at home. Is it possible that bad women are so much more in earnest in serving their own selfish interests than good women are in serving God? Heaven forbid! The very fact that so many excellent women hesitate about assuming this added duty of the suffrage shows how scrupulous they would be in fulfilling it were it theirs, and how much less they would be influenced by ambitious than by conscientious motives.

It is not true that in Wyoming, good women remained at home, and only unscrupulous or ambitious ones appeared at the polls. The papers at the time recorded the fact that “the election passed off quietly; the women generally voting” Probably the result of Female Suffrage throughout the country would be similar.

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