

CONTEXTS FOR *AURORA LEIGH*: VICTORIAN GENDER IDEOLOGIES

I. THE FEMININE IDEAL AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

(a) Mrs. Sarah Ellis, from *Daughters of England* (1842)¹

[Separate spheres for men and women]

I have already stated, that women, in their position in life, must be content to be inferior to men; but as their inferiority consists chiefly in their want of power, this deficiency is abundantly made up to them by their capability of exercising influence; it is made up to them also in other ways, incalculable in their number and extent, but in none so effectually as by that order of Divine Providence which places them, in a moral and religious point of view, on the same level with man; nor can it be a subject of regret to any right-minded woman, that they are not only exempt from the most laborious occupations both of mind and body, but also from the necessity of engaging in those eager pecuniary speculations, and in that fierce conflict of worldly interests, by which men are so deeply occupied as to be in a manner compelled to stifle their best feelings, until they become in reality the characters they at first only assumed. Can it be a subject of regret to any kind and feeling woman, that her sphere of action is one adapted to the exercise of the affections, where she may love, and trust, and hope, and serve, to the utmost of her wishes? Can it be a subject of regret that she is not called upon, so much as man, to calculate, to compete, to struggle, but rather to occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot with propriety be admitted—in which beauty and order are expected to denote her presence, and where the exercise of benevolence is the duty she is most frequently called upon to perform?

Women almost universally consider themselves, and wish to be considered by others, as extremely affectionate; scarcely can a more severe libel be pronounced upon a woman than to say that she is not so. Now the whole law of woman's life is a law of love. I propose, therefore, to treat the subject in this light—to try whether the neglect of their peculiar duties does not imply an absence of love, and whether the principle of love, thoroughly carried out, would not so influence their conduct and feelings as to render them all which their best friends could desire.

Let us, however, clearly understand each other at the outset. To love, is a very different thing from a desire to be beloved. To love, is woman's nature—to be beloved is

¹ Mrs. Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799-1882), wife of a missionary, wrote a series of widely read conduct books, probably the most popular Victorian manuals for middle-class women: *The Women of England* (1838), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), and *The Mothers of England* (1843). These guides defined women's roles as what Mrs. Ellis termed "relational creatures" (*Women of England* [London: Fisher, 1838] 149-50), individuals who derived their identity and meaning in life from their relationships with others. Focusing on women's domestic experience and duties and denigrating paid work such as authorship, these conduct books ignored the obvious incongruity that Mrs. Ellis herself pursued a career as a writer. She wrote in 1869 that educated women lacked employment opportunities not because they were incapable, but because there was "actually no work for them to do" beyond the domestic arena; consequently they should concentrate on "heart work," service in their homes and in charity activities (*Education of the Heart: Woman's Best Work*). Page numbers here cited refer to the American edition of *Daughters of England* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1843).

the consequence of her having properly exercised and controlled that nature. To love, is woman's duty—to be beloved, is her reward (8).

[Women's education and the "poetry" of womanhood]

Learning, Dr. Johnson² tells us, is a skill in languages or science. With regard to the time spent in the acquisition of languages, I fear I must incur the risk of being thought neither liberal nor enlightened; for I confess, I do not see the value of languages to a woman, except so far as they serve the purpose of conversation with persons of different countries, or acquaintance with the works of authors, whose essential excellencies cannot be translated into our own tongue; and how far these two objects are carried out by the daughters of England, either from necessity or inclination, I must leave to their own consideration.

With regard to the dead languages, the former of these two motives cannot apply. It may, however, be justly considered as a wholesome exercise of the mind, provided there is nothing better to be done, for young women to learn Greek and Latin; but beyond this, I feel perfectly assured, that for any knowledge they will acquire through the medium of the best Greek and Latin authors, our most approved translations would more than answer their purpose (24).

....

I have been compelled, during the course of these remarks, to use an expression which requires some explanation. I have said, that a young woman may with propriety learn even the dead languages, provided she has nothing better to do; by which, I would be understood to mean, provided she does not consequently leave undone what would render her more useful or amiable as a woman. The settlement of this question must depend entirely upon the degree of her talent, and the nature of her position in life. If she has no other talent likely to make her so useful as that which is employed in learning Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, this settles the point at once, or if she has no duties so important to her as to ascertain the derivation of words, or to study the peculiarities of heathen writers, then by all means let her be a learned lady, for every study, every occupation of mind, provided it does not include what is evil, must be preferable to absolute idleness (25-26).

....

Perhaps one of the lowest advantages, and I am far from thinking it a low one either, which is derived by women from a general knowledge of science, is, that it renders them more companionable to men. If they are solicitous to charm the nobler sex by their appearance, dress, and manners, surely it is of more importance to interest them by their conversation. By the former they may please; by the latter they may influence, and that to the end of their lives. Yet, how is it possible to interest by their conversation, without some understanding of the subjects which chiefly occupy the minds of men? Most kindly, however, has it been accorded by man to his feeble sister, that it should not be necessary for her to *talk much*, even on his favorite topics, in order to obtain his favor. An attentive listener is generally all that he requires; but in order to listen attentively, and with real interest, it is highly important that we should have considerable understanding of the subject discussed; for the interruption of a single foolish or irrelevant question, the evidence of a wandering thought, the constrained attitude of attention, or the rapid

² Samuel Johnson (1709-84), prominent man of letters--journalist, biographer, dramatist, essayist, poet, editor, and dictionary maker.

response which conveys no proof of having received an idea, are each sufficient to break the charm, and destroy the satisfaction which most men feel in conversing with really intelligent women.

It is also worth some attention to this subject, if we can thereby dispel many of the idle fears which occupy and perplex the female mind. I have known women who were quite as much afraid of a gun when it was not loaded, as when it was; others who thought a steam-engine as likely to explode when it was not working, as when it was; and others still, who avowedly considered thunder more dangerous than lightning. Now, to say nothing of the irritation which fears like these are apt to occasion in minds of a more masculine order, it is surely no insignificant attainment to acquire a habit of feeling at ease, when there is really nothing to be afraid of (26).

....

Do not suppose it would add any embellishment to your conversation, for you to discuss what are called politics, simply as such, especially when, as in nine cases out of ten, you do not really understand what you are talking about. Do not take up any question as belonging to *your* side, or *your* party, while ignorant what the principles of that party are. Above all, do not allow yourself to grow warm in your advocacy of any particular candidate for a seat in parliament, because he is a handsome man or has made a fine speech. All this may supply an opposite party with food for scandal, or for jest, but has nothing at all to do with that patriotic and deep feeling of interest in the happiness and prosperity of her own country, which a benevolent and enlightened woman must naturally entertain.

Destitute as some women are of every spark of this feeling, it is but natural that their conversation should at times be both trifling and vapid; and that when subjects of general importance are discussed, they should be too much occupied with a pattern of worsted work, even to listen.

I one day heard a very accomplished and amiable young lady lamenting that she had nothing to talk about, except a subject which had been playfully forbidden. "Talk about the probability of a war," said I. "Why should I talk about that?" she replied. "It is nothing to me whether there is war or not." Now, this was said in perfect sincerity, and yet the lady was a Christian woman, and one who would have been very sorry to be suspected of not knowing the *dates* of most of the great battles recorded in history.

I am perfectly aware that there are intricate questions, brought before our senate, which it may require a masculine order of intellect fully to understand. But there are others which may, and ought to engage the attention of every female mind, such as the extinction of slavery, the abolition of war in general, cruelty to animals, the punishment of death, temperance, and many more, on which, neither to know, nor to feel, is almost equally disgraceful.

I must again observe, it is by no means necessary that we should *talk much* on these subjects, even if we do understand them; but to listen attentively, and with real interest when they are discussed by able and liberal-minded men, is an easy and agreeable method of enlarging our stock of valuable knowledge; and, by doing this when we are young, we shall go on with the tide of public events, so as to render ourselves intelligent companions in old age; and when the bloom of youth is gone, and even animal spirits decline, we shall have our conversation left, for the entertainment and benefit of our friends (30-31).

....

It must not be supposed that the writer is one who would advocate, as essential to woman, any very extraordinary degree of intellectual attainment, especially if confined to one particular branch of study. "I should like to excel in something," is a frequent, and, to some extent, laudable expression; but in what does it originate, and to what does it tend? To be able to do a great many things tolerably well, is of infinitely more value to a woman, than to be able to excel in one. By the former, she may render herself generally useful; by the latter, she may dazzle for an hour. By being apt, and tolerably well skilled in every thing, she may fall into any situation in life with dignity and ease—by devoting her time to excellence in one, she may remain incapable of every other.

So far as cleverness, learning, and knowledge are conducive to woman's moral excellence, they are therefore desirable, and no further. All that would occupy her mind to the exclusion of better things, all that would involve her in the mazes of flattery and admiration, all that would tend to draw away her thoughts from others and fix them on herself, ought to be avoided as an evil to her, however brilliant or attractive it may be in itself (35).

....

It is the taste of the present times to invest the material with an immeasurable extent of importance beyond the ideal. It is the tendency of modern education to instill into the youthful mind the necessity of knowing, rather than the advantage of feeling. And, to a certain extent "knowledge is power;" but neither is knowledge all that we live for, nor power all that we enjoy. There are deep mysteries in the book of nature which all can feel, but none will ever understand, until the veil of mortality shall be withdrawn. There are stirrings in the heart of man which constitute the very essence of his being, and which power can neither satisfy nor subdue. Yet this mystery reveals more truly than the clearest proofs, or mightiest deductions of science, that a master-hand has been for ages, and is still at work, above, beneath, and around us; and this moving principle is forever reminding us, that, in our nature, we inherit the germs of a future existence, over which time has no influence, and the grave no victory.

If, then, for man it be absolutely necessary that he should sacrifice the poetry of his nature for the realities of material and animal existence, for woman there is no excuse—for woman, whose whole life, from the cradle to the grave, is one of feeling, rather than of action; whose highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing, of herself; whose experience, if unparticipated, is a total blank; yet, whose world of interest is wide as the realm of humanity, boundless as the ocean of life, and enduring as eternity! For woman, who, in her inexhaustible sympathies, can live only in the existence of another, and whose very smiles and tears are not exclusively her own—for woman to cast away the love of poetry, is to pervert from their natural course the sweetest and loveliest tendencies of a truly feminine mind, to destroy the brightest charm which can adorn her intellectual character, to blight the fairest rose in her wreath of youthful beauty.

A woman without poetry is like a landscape without sunshine. We see every object as distinctly as when the sunshine is upon it; but the beauty of the whole is wanting—the atmospheric tints, the harmony of earth and sky, we look for in vain; and we feel that though the actual substance of hill and dale, of wood and water, are the same, the spirituality of the scene is gone.

A woman without poetry! The idea is a paradox; for what single subject has ever been found so fraught with poetical associations as woman herself? "Woman, with her beauty, and grace, and gentleness, and fulness of feeling, and depth of affection, and her blushes of purity, and the tones and looks which only a mother's heart can inspire."

The little encouragement which poetry meets with in the present day arises, I imagine, out of its supposed opposition to utility; and, certainly, if to eat and to drink, to dress as well or better than our neighbors, and to amass a fortune in the shortest possible space of time, be the highest aim of our existence, then the less we have to do with poetry the better. But may we not be mistaken in the ideas we habitually attach to the word utility? There is a utility of material, and another of immaterial things. There is a utility in calculating our bodily wants, and our resources, and in regulating our personal efforts in proportion to both; but there is a higher utility in sometimes setting the mind free, like a bird that has been caged, to spread its wings, and soar into the ethereal world. There is a higher utility in sometimes pausing to feel the power which is in the immortal spirit to search out the principle of beauty, whether it bursts upon us with the dawn of rosy morning, or walks at gorgeous noon across the hills and valleys, or lies at evening's dewy close, enshrined within a folded flower (43-44).

....

Men of business, whose hearts and minds are buried in their bales of goods, and who know no relaxation from the office or the counter, except what the daily newspaper affords, are apt to conclude that poetry does nothing for them; because it never keeps their accounts, prepares their dinner, nor takes charge of their domestic affairs. Now, though I should be the last person to recommend poetry as a substitute for household economy, or to put even the brightest emanations of genius in the place of domestic duty, I do not see why the two should not exist together; nor am I quite convinced that, although a vast proportion of mankind have lost their relish for poetry, it would not in reality be better for them to be convinced by their companions of the gentler sex, that poetry, so far from being incompatible with social or domestic comfort, is capable of being associated with every rational and lawful enjoyment....

What man of cultivated mind, who has ever tried the experiment, would choose to live with a woman, whose whole soul was absorbed in the strife, the tumult, the perpetual discord which constant occupation in the midst of material things so inevitably produces; rather than with one whose attention, equally alive to practical duties, had a world of deeper feeling in her "heart of hearts," with which no selfish, worldly, or vulgar thoughts could mingle? (45).

....

To have the mind so imbued with poetic feeling that it shall operate as a charm upon herself and others, woman must be lifted out of self, she must see in every thing material a relation, an essence, and an end, beyond its practical utility. She must regard the little envyings, bickerings, and disputes about common things, only as weeds in the pleasant garden of life, bearing no comparison in importance with the loveliness of its flowers. She must forget even her own personal attractions, in her deep sense of the beauty of the whole created universe, and she must lose the very voice of flattery to herself, in her own intense admiration of what is excellent in others.

This it is to be poetical; and I ask again, whether it is not good, in these practical and busy times, that the Daughters of England should make a fresh effort to retain that high-

toned spirituality of character, which has ever been the proudest distinction of their sex, in order that they may possess that influence over the minds of men, which the intellectual and the refined alone are capable of maintaining? (45).

[Women writers]

There is yet another flight of female ambition, another course which the love of distinction is apt to take, more productive of folly, and of disappointment, perhaps, than all the rest. It is the ambition of the female author who writes for fame. Could those young aspirants know how little real dignity there is connected with the *trade* of authorship, their harps would be exchanged for distaffs,³ their rose-tinted paper would be converted into ashes, and their Parnassus⁴ would dwindle to a molehill....

.... The same want of sympathy which so often inspires the first effort of female authorship, might often find a sweet and abundant interchange of kindness in many a faithful heart beside the homely hearth. And after all, there is more true poetry in the fireside affections of early life, than in all those sympathetic associations with unknown and untried developments of mind, which ever have existed either among the sons or the daughters of men.

Taking a more sober view of the case, there are, unquestionably, subjects of deep interest with which women have opportunities peculiar to themselves of becoming acquainted, and thus of benefiting their fellow-creatures through the medium of their writings. But, after all, literature is not the natural channel for a woman's feelings; and pity, not envy, ought to be the meed of her who writes for the public (78-79).

[Women's good fortune]

I have said, that women, above all created beings, have cause for gratitude. Deprived of the benefits of the Christian dispensation, woman has ever been, and will be ever the most abject, and the most degraded of creatures, oppressed in proportion to her weakness, and miserable in proportion to her capability of suffering. Yet, under the Christian dispensation, she who was the first in sin, is raised to an equality with man, and made his fellow-heir in the blessings of eternal life.⁵ Nor is this all. A dispensation which had permitted her merely to creep, and grovel through this life, so as to purchase by her patient sufferings a title to the next, would have been unworthy of that law of love by which pardon was offered to a guilty world. In accordance with the ineffable beneficence of this law, woman was therefore raised to a moral, as well as a spiritual equality with man; and from being first his tempter, and then his slave, she has become his helpmate, his counselor, his friend, the object of his most affectionate solicitude, the sharer of his dignity, and the partaker in his highest enjoyments.

When we compare the situation of woman, too, in our privileged land, with what it is even now in countries where the Christian religion less universally prevails, we cannot help exclaiming, that of all the women upon earth, those who live under the salutary

³ distaffs] the staffs on spinning wheels which hold the flax or wool from which thread is spun; often used as a metonymy for traditional women's work.

⁴ Parnassus] a mountain in Greece which in Greek mythology is sacred to the arts as represented by Apollo and the muses.

⁵ Ellis invokes the relationship of the sexes outlined in *Genesis* 3: Eve, responsible for Adam's loss of Paradise, is subordinated to him in punishment and eternal penance.

influence of British laws and British institutions, have the deepest cause for gratitude. And can the daughters of Britain be regardless of these considerations? Will they not rather study how to pay back to their country, in the cultivation and exercise of their best feelings, the innumerable advantages they are thus deriving? And what is the sacrifice? Oh! blessed dispensation of love!--that we are never so happy as when feeling grateful, and never so well employed, as when acting upon this feeling! (84).

(b) From *The Edinburgh Review* 73 (1841), pp. 99-110.

...It will not be denied, that, be they assignable to education or nature, great differences do exist between the moral and intellectual characteristics of the two sexes.

Of these differences, the following appear to us to be the most remarkable:--Women have less of active, and more of passive courage than men. They have more excitability of nerve; and with it, all those qualities which such excitability tends to produce. They are more enthusiastic—their sympathy is more lively—they have a nicer perception of minute circumstances. Whether ... they have greater quickness and facility of association, may, we think, be reasonably doubted. They are certainly not superior to man in those powers of association which produce wit, though they often possess them in an eminent degree. They are inferior in the power of close and logical reasoning. They are less dispassionate—less able to place their feelings in subjection to their judgment, and to bring themselves to a conclusion which is at variance with their prepossessions. They have less power of combination and of generalization. They are less capable of steady and concentrated attention—and though their patience is equal, if not greater, their perseverance is less....

.... Taking, then, as the period to which our observations refer, the first thirty years of the present century, we are of opinion, that in the upper and middle classes of life, the education of girls was, on the whole, better than that of boys. The majority of the boys were occupied in learning *imperfectly* Latin and Greek, and scarcely anything else; while girls were acquiring not only languages, and perhaps music and painting, but such more important knowledge as must constitute an essential part of every well-devised scheme of education, and would be valuable to them through life. We firmly believe, that in a vast majority of cases, the girl of seventeen was better informed upon such subjects as well-educated persons ought to be conversant with—possessed a more cultivated understanding, and was more capable of conversing intelligently with persons much older than herself—than the boy of the same age. If this be so—and though no proof can be offered in support of such assertion, we confidently make it, in the belief that there are few of our readers who will not concur with us—it cannot be argued with any plausibility, that to education rather than to nature man owes that mental superiority over woman, the existence of which cannot be denied....

If the intellectual inequality of the two sexes were attributable to education rather than to nature, the evidence of inequality would be least apparent in those instances in which education has least influence. Such is that remarkable aptitude and ability which is termed *genius*, and which, when existing in the highest degree, is confessedly independent of the influence of education, and is even not to be repressed by any obstacles of an ordinary kind. If, then, nature had bestowed intellectual gifts in equal

abundance on the two sexes, we might reasonably expect that the number of women of remarkable genius—of women who have attained the highest eminence in literature and in art—would have been as considerable as that of men. But how stands the case? We will not apply a severe, and what some might call an unfair test, and ask for the female counterparts in genius to those great leaders of their race who have been mightiest in the arts of war and government; because the exercise of such arts is not congenial with female habits. We will look for excellence of the highest kind in the calm pursuits of literary taste—pursuits which are as well adapted to the habits of women as of men, and for which nothing in the education of men peculiarly tends to enable them to excel. We will even set aside science, lest it should be considered too severe, and take for our basis of comparison poetry and the fine arts; in which the sensitive and imaginative temperament, and refined and tasteful habits of women, might, *à priori*,⁶ be presumed to give them an unquestionable superiority over the more stubborn nerve and coarser habits of man. Yet, though educated women are very conversant with elegant literature, perhaps even more than the majority of men, and many have from all times been *versifiers*—and though the poet is proverbially “born, not made;” and though there is nothing in the habits of women which, so much as in the severer occupations of men, should tend to quench the poetical fire, or induce them to resist its inspiration; yet where is the poetess whom even partiality could place in that elevated class to which belong our Shakspeare, Spencer, Milton, Dryden, Byron?⁷ Women, especially in England, have written so much and so well, as to prove that they have no natural inaptitude for poetry; and there are not a few (of whom some are living) who have written with a degree of power and beauty, which, though it cannot raise them to the highest class, or create a strong impression upon the public taste, ought to elevate them far above the disparaging character of mediocrity. This, therefore, is a fair field of competition—this is a good ground on which to try the question of natural superiority. Yet, in this least masculine exercise of intellect—this department so suitable to their more sympathetic and nervous temperament—although there has been excellence, yet that which is of the highest class has never been displayed by woman.

Look, next, at the arts of painting and music. These are arts which seem to depend most upon qualities which are rather attributes of the female character, than of the sterner and less sensitive nature of man. They are less congenial with the ordinary pursuits and avocations of men than of women; and by the influence of education, especially in this country, they fall peculiarly to woman’s share. For twenty girls to whom music and drawing are a part of education, you will scarcely find one boy respecting whom it is the same. In other countries the differences may be less; but still the cultivation of these arts will be found to preponderate on the female side. Moreover, these are arts which are not treated by women as mere embellishments. They are pursued by many as professions—they are cultivated with all the ardor which the keenest sense of self-interest can inspire. Yet where are the great names? There have been many men whose names will live as painters and composers of music, as long, perhaps, as the delightful arts in which they excelled continue to be appreciated as an important portion of the innocent pleasures of civilized society. But of what woman can we say the same? We cannot name one whose

⁶ *à priori*] without examination (Latin).

⁷ Major British writers William Shakspeare (1564-1616), Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-99), John Milton (1608-74), John Dryden (1631-1700), and George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824).

title to such distinction would be ratified by the public voice. These are plain and undeniable facts; and we see not how we can avoid the obvious inference, that, even in those departments of the intellect which are most congenial with woman's nature, education, and pursuits, there is not such an approach to equality of power, as to enable woman to attain those heights to which man's superiority sometimes raises him (101-4).

(c) Coventry Patmore, from "The Social Position of Woman," *North British Review* 14 (February 1851), 275-89.⁸

For many years past the presses of England, France, Germany, and America have teemed with books, having for their object, the definition and adjustment of the "rights," "duties," and "social position" of woman. It is especially note-worthy, first, that the works produced in England are written, for the most part, to denounce and confute the errors originated and disseminated by the publications of the other three countries; and, secondly, that a large proportion of these works are by female authors.

....

America, France, and Germany, in doleful chorus, lament the slavery of woman, and the tyranny of man. Masculine and feminine are proclaimed to be accidents of organization, which ought in no way to affect the relationship of souls. The woman's excellent privilege of subordination, and the man's ennobling responsibility as chief, are declared to be the prime evils, which have preyed, "fell and forgotten," on the heart of society, ever since the days of the first despot, Adam.

Even were a new confutation at large, of the folly in point demanded, we should not think of offering it in this Journal. The great majority of our readers are sober Christians; persons who conceive that St. Peter and St. Paul, and the Author of the book of Genesis,⁹ spoke with an authority sufficient to determine men's opinions, in the ever-surprising, although ever-recurring event of their deafness to the clear sentence of the natural world. We choose rather to contemplate the matter as one of the odd aberrations of the popular intellect, which alternate with periods of common sense, by laws akin to those which produce the alternations of graceful and disgraceful fashions in dress (275).

....

Sin, which must always abound when the light of Christianity suffers, as now in certain countries, an eclipse, is not only the leveler of men, it also abolishes the loveliest and the deepest distinctions of sex. The more a man fulfils his sphere, which of himself he cannot do, the more does he become peculiarly a man; and so it is with woman; but, in

⁸ Coventry Patmore (1823-96) is most identified with his long narrative poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-63), which idealizes woman and marriage as sources of spiritual solace for man. His essay represented here responds to the arguments of two books, *Thoughts on Self-Culture, Addressed to Women* by Maria G. Grey and Emily Shirreff (1850), and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* by Margaret Fuller (1850). Here Patmore associates conventional gender stereotypes and hierarchy with Nature, Christianity, and Englishness. In 1856 EBB aligned herself against Patmore's conservative ideas about women (unpublished letter to Isa Blagden, quoted in Margaret Reynolds, ed., *Aurora Leigh* [New York: Norton], p. 335).

⁹ Peter, Paul, Genesis] *Genesis* relates that when God expelled Adam and Eve from Eden, He decreed that man would rule over woman (*Genesis* 3.16). The scriptural writings of Peter and Paul reiterate this hierarchy; Paul's words are particularly misogynistic.

abandoning their happy station, on the Rock which is higher than they, and withdrawing, as it were, from the light which creates color with its contrasts, they suffer a base approximation of natures, and, as they descend, part, one by one, with every blissful spiritual opposition, until external difference alone is recognized, of all the infinite and far deeper original diversity. This doctrine is variously confirmed. We know that the entire psychical contrast of man, and his sweet coheir of immortal life, is nowhere so emphatically declared as in the Book of Absolute Verity. And, next in force to this fact, is the truth, which is a matter of common remark, that none but the very highest poets have succeeded in obtaining an insight into the sexual diversity of souls sufficiently deep to enable them to sing truly concerning woman (275-76).

...

It was among the fetid and gaudy poppies which dyed the harvest of the first French Revolution, that the doctrine of the “equality” of man and woman first, in modern times, arose.¹⁰ It has been blundering on ever since, with the vigor of ignorant and conceited zeal, and is now echoed in many a shrill cry for the “emancipation of woman,” by the female “spirits of the age” in Germany and America. The French, who have spoken and written about women ten times as much as all the rest of the world put together, are precisely the people in the world who know least about the subject. Hannah More,¹¹ concerning the social position of woman in the East, well remarks, that “it is humbling to reflect that, in those countries in which fondness for the person of women is carried to the highest excess, they are slaves, and that their moral and intellectual degradation increase in direct proportion to the adoration which is paid to external charms.” The observation bears almost as strongly upon France as upon Persia. It is true, that some of the most polished female intellects on record have belonged to France. But notwithstanding many noble instances to the contrary, it is yet generally true, that in France, as in the East, the culture of the female intellect is, and long has been, consciously and avowedly, no more than one of the means of increasing sensual debasement; and, if the question is candidly examined, it will be found that, between the African savage, who approaches her master on her knees, and the French woman, elegantly postured and adored on a plaster-of-Paris pedestal, there exists far less real than apparent difference of social rank. “Une femme tendre est, pour un algébriste ce que l’algèbre est pour une femme tendre;”¹² and no less a mystery is she to the sensualist than the algebrist. Let the reader determine for himself, whether we are wrong in affirming that, in a country where men like Fourier¹³ pass for “pure-minded” and philosophic, it is impossible that anything true can be said concerning the relationship of man and woman. We believe that we are justified in regarding any doctrine that may have been propounded by the popular teachers of modern France on the subject in point, as a presumption that the reverse is the truth; or rather, in treating their social philosophy, in this respect, as having no direct significance whatever for a people

¹⁰ Especially after the French Revolution, the English generally associated France with social, political, and sexual anarchy.

¹¹ Hannah More (1745-1833), writer on education and Christian morals.

¹² “A tender (or young) woman is, for an algebrist what algebra is for a tender woman” (French), meaning a tender woman is a mystery to the mathematician, just as algebra is a mystery to woman.

¹³ Charles Fourier (1772-1837), French utopian socialist who proposed to organize society in communal co-operatives (phalansteries), a model that Romney Leigh attempts to follow in EBB’s *Aurora Leigh*. Fourier’s socialism became associated with free love through his argument that society’s constraint of passions with bourgeois marriage conventions creates misery and vice.

who are still in a condition of moral vigor. We proceed, then, not to expose French lies, or the spawn of them in Germany and America, but to confirm and clarify the knowledge of the truth, which, with hearty gratitude to God, we perceive to prevail, although somewhat dimmed and confused, in the breasts of most of those have been nurtured in this favored island.

A glance at certain facts concerning the condition of women in past times, and other nations, will help us to arrive at just views of their present social position, and their prospects for the future. It is impossible for any one to close his apprehension against the shameful truth, that, in the history of the world, the rule has been for woman to suffer oppression from man: and it is most necessary to remark, that in direct confutation of the assertions of certain French pseudo-philosophers, the question of relative stages of civilization really seems to have had little to do with that of the refusal or cession to woman of her natural rights. Short of habitual subjection to physical injury, she could scarcely have been worse off than among the most highly polished people of the ancient world; while in the neighboring and comparatively uncivilized Sparta,¹⁴ her condition, relatively to man, was much higher. It seems probably that the ancient German barbarians entertained a deeper respect for, and conceded practically a larger amount of social “rights” to their women, than are conceded to or entertained for the women of France, by their obsequious lords and masters, in the present day. It has been observed that, with different tribes of savages inhabiting the same country, the treatment of women varies between the extremes of kindness and ferocity; and that their social position, as it happens, is one of importance, responsibility, and respect, or of worse than bestial slavery and insignificance. Franklin, Parry, La Perouse, Clarke,¹⁵ and other travelers have borne ample and very curious evidence to the entire dependence of the social condition of women, among savage tribes, upon caprice and accident; and historians have shewn that these agencies are almost as powerful with civilized as with uncivilized people, in the determination of woman’s happiness. Climates, in which she is unusually beautiful, or circumstances which render the services that she is best fitted to perform unusually necessary, are found to tell favorably upon her social condition; that is to say, her rank has been raised, when its elevation has happened to recommend itself obviously to the selfishness of man.

These facts might have been predicted from a moderate amount of insight into the human constitution. The social subordination of woman to man is a law of nature: it is not a thing that can ever be reasonably called into question. That men have the strongest muscles no one doubts; and it must be almost equally manifest upon reflection, that women are quite as little fitted to become Miltons or Bacons, as to share the laurels with Van Amburgh or Ben Caunt.¹⁶ Having thus the advantage of the stoutest limbs, and the strongest wit to use them with, it is obvious that were man to decree the social insubordination of woman, he would, by that very decree, be performing an act of sovereignty which, thanks to his muscles and his wit, he could at all times recall. He

¹⁴ Sparta] city state in ancient Greece noted for its fierce militarism.

¹⁵ Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), British explorer in northern Canada. Sir William Edward Parry (1790-1855), British arctic explorer. Jean François La Pérouse (1741-c. 1788), French explorer in the Pacific Ocean. Edward Daniel Clarke (1769-1822), British mineralogist and traveler throughout Europe, Scandanavia, Russia, Greece, and the Middle East.

¹⁶ John Milton (1608-74), author of *Paradise Lost*. Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), philosopher, scientist, man of letters. **Van Amburgh. Ben Caunt.—Marjorie, I haven’t found these guys yet.**

could no more vote away his real claim to the subordination of his partner, than he could vote away his own sex. This being the case—the social subordination of woman being an irreversible natural law—it was to be expected that, among all nations not blest with a lively and authentic faith in the immortality common to man and woman, the ideal of *social subordination* of the latter would be more or less confounded by both with that of a *moral inequality*, which is, in truth, a widely different thing (276-77).

...

What *is* the present position accorded to woman, relatively to man, is a question which ought in reason to precede the discussion of what may be needful for its amelioration. Now this question is not to be answered by saying that many women, or even—though we believe that this would be an exaggeration—that most women are unjustly treated by those whom the laws of nature, as well as of heaven and men, have constituted their rulers. The question is, what is the feeling and conscience of civilized society upon this matter? Does this feeling, while it withholds from woman the kind of equality which is desired for her by dreamers of the George Sand order,¹⁷—an equality which is aptly typified by their occasional advocacy of identity of costume, —also withhold from her the acknowledgment of a complete moral equality with man? If so, the conscience of society is a blind and an impure one, and the sooner the order of things which is based upon such a conscience is overturned the better. But we shall be seconded heartily by every well-nurtured person, in utterly denying that the soul of modern civilization is thus foully and ruinously diseased. There are thousands, it is to be feared, among the lower classes, who have too little self-command to deny themselves what was formerly considered a legitimate mode of correction in extreme cases, namely, the infliction of corporeal punishment on disobedient wives; but we doubt if there is a cobbler in Great Britain who beats his spouse without lurking doubts as to the identity of might and right. Nor do we find that affronts less gross are commonly justified by their perpetrators upon the ground of any inherent right in man to a degree of moral consideration, which is not equally the right of woman. Men treat women selfishly, or brutally, not because they believe that they have any right, but because they can and they choose to do so, in the teeth of Christian law and conscience. This is an evil which will never be mended by outcries about the “rights” of women. Nor would any considerate person desire an interference of the Legislature, in order to a maintenance of them more strict than that which at present obtains. We believe that women, far less even than men, would be inclined to purchase any such observance of their rights, as the nature of things would allow to be so purchased, by a sacrifice of that privacy which casts its sacred shade around even the least home-like home. All that it might have been possible to do for woman, by “bawling her rights and wrongs like pot-herbs in the street,” has been long ago effected, by silent and far higher means; and what remains to be desired for her happiness and welfare, must be wrought by the same gentle and almighty power. That religion whose chief outward badge is self-denial, or rather self-oblivion, for the sake of others, is the only instrument whereby the further amelioration of the *practical* position of woman relatively to man can be effected. The *theoretical* position at present held by

¹⁷ George Sand] pen name of Aurore Dudevant (1804-76), French novelist notorious for the feminism and sexual boldness of her writings (and for conducting high-profile love affairs and dressing in men’s clothing); she is the subject of two admiring sonnets by EBB (pp. **).

her, as we have said, is all that she herself, unless she has unsexed herself, will desire (p. 278).

...

Thus much concerning the position which is claimed by and accorded to woman in decently moral society, high, middle, or plebeian. As for the way in which the interests of women are treated by the Legislature, the question is soon disposed of. Lawmakers have perceived and acted upon the plain and unalterable natural fact, that those interests can never be sufficiently distinguished from the interests of men to warrant any extensive separate consideration. An unmarried woman, in ninety-nine cases of a hundred, is necessarily and voluntarily under the guardianship of father, uncle, or brother. A married woman entirely identifies her interests with those of her husband; or if not, she is in imminent danger of identifying them with those of some other man, which the law very properly provides that she shall not do where she can be hindered—that is to say, in matters of property. With regard to the question of the ability of women to vote for or as members of the House of Commons, we are not aware that there exists any express law against it; but we suppose that the tacit vote of every sane man and woman has hitherto prevented any attempt at its exercise (280).

....

...Now, if indeed it be true that “the end of a maid is to be married,” and that such be her best inclination and duty when she is married, what shall we say for her capacity generally of exercising any salutary influence which is not in great part associated with personal attachments? We say “generally,” because there are numerous exceptions to the rule of exclusion from wider and weaker social powers. A defect of a superabundance of gender may merge the sphere of a woman’s influence in that of man. Or adverse circumstances, as single life, or a bad match, may turn her powerful and earnest capability and desire of direct personal influence into a weak and sentimental taste for ameliorating the condition of her race. There may perhaps be some extremely few cases—although we have never had the luck to know of one —of hermaphrodites in heart and mind, creatures capable of fulfilling well the functions of either sex, according to the occasion; and there certainly have been cases of women possessed of the properly masculine power of writing books; witness the authoresses of “Self-Culture,” and “Woman’s Rights and Duties,” not to mention scores of others who have written well on matters which do not at present concern us, and some two or three who are said to have attained the awful eminence of “Quarterly Reviewers.”¹⁸ But these cases are all so truly and obviously exceptional, and must and ought always to remain so, that we may overlook them without the least prejudice to the soundness of our doctrine, which may perhaps be illustrated better by describing a few traits of her who is unfit for, or who mistakes her true vocation, than by the more gracious but incomparably more difficult portrayal of her concerning whose partner it is written, that he hath found favor with the Lord. The errors of those women who culpably neglect their calling bear the sufficient blazon of their own evil. It is more to our purpose, in a paper occasioned by the modern agitation of the question of “Woman’s Rights and Duties,” to consider the generic character of those ladies who endeavor to exceed their commission. “Emancipated

¹⁸The *Quarterly Review* (founded 1809), which published anonymous reviews and essays, was a Tory periodical which generally opposed social and political reform.

women,” or “women of the nineteenth century,” or “femmes d’esprit,”¹⁹ as the kind of ladies in point are self-designated in Germany, America, and France, do not as yet constitute so considerable a fraction of the “female sect” in Great Britain as to have merited a distinctive appellation. Probably, however, there are few of our readers who have never met with an individual of the species. In speaking of her we will call her the “emancipated woman,” that being the most expressive phrase of the three. Our English word “Blue-stocking”²⁰ is nearly obsolete, and not much to the purpose, since it assumes that the bearer of it writes books, which is by no means an invariable, though a lamentably frequent characteristic of the “emancipated woman.” These, then, are some of the principal features in virtue of which she claims, and is very often by others considered to hold a position above and in advance of the rest of her race. Of course her leading feature is her emancipation from the Christian faith, or at least from all that ordinary persons understand by the Christian faith (280-81).

II. WOMEN POETS AND THE FEMININE IDEAL

(a) George W. Bethune, from *The British Female Poets* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1852).

The following volume contains the Editor’s gatherings during a leisurely excursion through a most pleasant department of English literature. The manifestation of female talent is a striking characteristic of our age, and a very interesting proof of its moral advancement. Clever and even learned women had appeared in the course of the last century, and a few, “far between,” yet earlier; but they were, when at all successful as writers, rather petted by the gallantry of their contemporaries because of their gentler sex, than admitted to the high society of wits for their actual merits; nor did they, scarcely one excepted, deserve greater consideration. The last hundred, especially the last fifty years, have demonstrated, that as there are offices necessary to the elegant perfection of society, which can be discharged only by the delicate and more sensitive faculties of woman, so her graceful skill can shed charms over letters, which man could never diffuse. In all pertaining to the affections, which constitute the best part of human nature, we readily confess her superiority; it is, therefore, consistent with her character that the genius of woman should yield peculiar delight when its themes are love, childhood, the softer beauties of creation, the joys or sorrows of the heart, domestic life, mercy, religion, and the instincts of justice. Hence her excellence in the poetry of the sensibilities. There are instances of her boldly entering the sphere of man, and asserting strong claims to share the honors of his sterner engagements; but the *Daciers*, *De Staels*, and *Hannah Mores*,²¹ are variations from the rule prescribed by a wise Providence. The much-vexed question as to the superiority of male or female intellect, is one that should never be discussed, because the premises are so different that it can never be settled. As well might we

¹⁹ femmes d’esprit] women of spirit (French).

²⁰ Blue-stocking] a term applied to unusually learned women, often derisively.

²¹ Anne Dacier (1654-?1720), French critic and author of scholarly prose versions of Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), French novelist and woman of letters. Hannah More (1745-1833), dramatist, poet, and writer on education and Christian morals.

compare the vine, with its curling tendrils, its broad-leaved convolutions and delicious clusters, to the oak, that is destined for the architrave or the storm-daring ship.²² The trees of the forest go down before the tempest; the vine lives on, to cover with foliage the ruin of the shaft around which it twined. We are pained to see a woman toiling in the sun or the cold; but what were man's labor worth, if he had no home where woman reigned in her realm of affection? Yet within that home are trials, cares, duties and difficulties, to which only woman's tact, conscience and endurance are equal. Faith is the highest exercise of reason, hope the best practice of faith; but charity is the greatest of the three;²³ and we do woman honor when we consider charity, in its widest sense, as peculiarly her attribute. The records of literature confirm this position (Preface, pp. iii-iv).

....

The prominent fault of female poetical writers is an unwillingness to apply the pruning-knife and the pumice-stone. They write from impulse, and rapidly as they think.²⁴ The strange faculty, which women have, of reaching conclusions (and, in the main, safe conclusions) without the slow process of reasoning through which men have to pass; the strong moral instincts with which their nature is endowed, far above that of the other sex; their keen and discerning sensibility to the tender, the beautiful and the luxuriant, render them averse to critical restraints. With the exception of Joanna Baillie and Mrs. Tighe,²⁵ scarcely any of them seem to have inverted their pen. As the line came first to the brain, so it was written; as it was written, so it was printed. Mrs. Hemans's melody was as much improvisation as Miss Landon's;²⁶ Mrs. Butler disdains to chip off her roughest corners; Mrs. Norton exults in the swiftness of her strength,²⁷ and Miss Barrett glories in her expedients to save time, though they be false rhymes or distorted syllables.²⁸ A due degree of condescension to take more pains would have gained for either of these ladies an increase of excellence, which even their genius might covet (Preface, pp. viii-ix).

ELIZABETH B. BARRETT (MRS. BROWNING)

The poems of this lady are marked with strength of beauty and beauty of strength. She is deeply read, being familiar with the original of the great ancients (the Greek dramatists having been her particular study), and with the more attractive of the Christian fathers.²⁹

²² Victorian writers and painters frequently used the image of a stalwart oak and clinging ivy to represent the relationship between strong man and dependent woman. Architrave] in architecture, the beam that rests directly on top of a column to support the superstructure.

²³ Cp. "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (*1 Corinthians* 13:13).

²⁴ In contrast to Bethune's assertion, EBB's manuscripts document extensive revision and self-editing.

²⁵ Joanna Baillie (1762-1851), dramatist and poet, especially noted for a sequence of plays on the passions. Mary Tighe (1772-1810), poet noted for a sensuous allegorical poem *Psyche, or the Legend of Love* (1805).

²⁶ Two of the most popular Romantic poets, Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Landon ("L.E.L.," 1802-38). See EBB's "Felicia Hemans: To L.E.L., Referring to Her Monody on the Poetess" (p. **) and "L.E.L.'s Last Question" (p. **).

²⁷ Frances Anne Kemble Butler (1809-93), author of lyric poems and dramatic ballads; best known as Shakespearean actress Fanny Kemble. Lady Caroline Norton (1808-77), poet, novelist, and after her marital rupture, pamphleteer lobbying for women's rights to child custody, property ownership, and divorce.

²⁸ On reviewers' complaints about EBB's imperfect rhymes and rhythms, see **Introduction**, p. **.

²⁹ In the 1842 *Athenæum* EBB published a study of these Christian poets, including her original translations from their Greek, as "Some Account of the Greek Christian Poets."

Her translation of the untranslatable *Prometheus Bound* of *Æschylus* received high praise as a worthy attempt;³⁰ and her various writings show that she has drunk true inspiration from the fountain to which she has so often resorted with the graceful vase of her natural genius. Miss Barrett is singularly bold and adventurous. Her wing carries her, without faltering at their obscurity, into the cloud and the mist, where not seldom we fail to follow her, but are tempted, while we admire the honesty of her enthusiasm, to believe that she utters what she herself has but dimly perceived. Much of this, however, arises from her disdain of carefulness. Her lines are often rude, her rhymes forced, from impatience rather than affectation; and for the same reason, she falls into the kindred fault of verbosity, which is always obscure. She forgets the advice which *Aspasia* gave a young poet, “to sow with the hand, and not with the bag.”³¹ Her Greek studies should have taught her more sculptor-like finish and dignity; but the glowing, generous impulses of her woman’s heart are too much for the discipline of the classics. Hence it is that we like her less as a scholar than as a woman; for then she compels our sympathy with her high religious faith, her love of children, her delight in the graceful and beautiful, her revelations of feminine feeling, her sorrow over the suffering, and her indignation against the oppressor. It is easy to see, from the melody of rhythm in “*Cowper’s Grave*” [p. **], and a few shorter pieces, that her faults spring not from inability to avoid them, if she would. Her ear, like that of *Tennyson* (whom she resembles more than any other poet),³² thirsts for a *refrain*; and like him, she indulges it to the weariness of her reader. Her sonnets, though complete in measure, are more like fragments, or unfinished outlines; but not a few of them are full of vigor. Her verses must be recited; none of them could be sung. There is scarcely anything in the language more exquisitely natural than the ballad of *The Swan’s Nest among the Reeds* [“*Romaunt of the Swan’s Nest*,” p. **], which she playfully calls a “romance;” and we may regret that she has not written more in the same delicious strain. As it is, we would scarcely take the bays from her muse-like head, but love her better when she herself is content to replace it by the “simple myrtle,” or the wild-flower garland from the meadows and hedge-rows of her native England.³³ The thyme of *Hymettus*³⁴ is not so sweet in her fair hands, as the daisy, the cowslip, the violet, or the porch-encircling brier, no unfit emblem of love shedding sweetness amidst the thorns of daily life.

Though we have spoken of this accomplished lady as Miss Barrett, because by that name our readers know her best, she has recently been married to Mr. Robert Browning,

³⁰ EBB published translations of *Prometheus Bound* in 1833 and 1850.

³¹ *Aspasia* (5th century B.C.) teacher of rhetoric noted for her intellect and memorialized in dialogues (both called *Aspasia*) by Socrates’ followers *Antisthenes* and *Aeschines*, and in Plato’s *Menexenus*. Friend of Socrates and from c. 445 B.C. to his death in 429, mistress of the Athenian statesman *Pericles*, *Aspasia* was subjected to political attacks because of her associations with them.

³² *Alfred Tennyson* (1809-92), from 1850, when he became Poet Laureate, was recognized as the leading Victorian poet.

³³ In classical antiquity poets were traditionally honored by being publicly crowned with garlands of bay (laurel) leaves, associated with glory and triumph. Women were usually represented not as honored poets, but as silent muses who inspired male poets. Cp. EBB’s aspiring poet *Aurora Leigh* crowning herself not with bay, or myrtle (sacred to *Venus*, goddess of love), and not with *verbena* (enchantment) or *guilder-rose* (love, beauty), but with a wreath of *ivy*, traditionally associated with eternity as well as friendship and matrimony (*Aurora Leigh* 2.38-53).

³⁴ *Hymettus*] mountain near Athens that was sacred to *Zeus*.

author of *Paracelsus, Bells and Pomegranates, &c.*³⁵ Her writings which have reached us are: *Prometheus Bound and Miscellaneous Poems*, 1833; *The Seraphim and other Poems*, 1838; and *The Drama of Exile and other Poems*, 1844 (pp. 452-53).

(b) Frederick Rowton, from *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (London, 1853)³⁶

...Had the soul of woman been allowed to operate more widely in the world, it cannot be doubted that humanity would have been far wiser, and better, and happier than it is. Man's coarser spirit has preponderated in the universe of life, and has made us much too gross, material, sensual, and violent. Our passions, sentiments, and beliefs, have all been too strong, too rough, too vehement; and we have gone through much strife and sorrow on this account. They should have been tempered, harmonized, smoothed down, softened by contact with the mind of woman. Our mental atmosphere has contained too large a proportion of *one* of its elements; and hence, it has neither been so pure nor so wholesome as it might have been. Only *one-half* of the human soul has yet had a fair scope for development,--and that the coarser half; the other has been circumscribed in its operations, and thus has been left to run to waste (Preface).

It may be true that woman's verse is less exciting than man's; and less "interesting" to the mass of readers: but I am inclined to think that this is so only because the mind of the world has been hitherto unduly stimulated, and therefore can only relish highly-seasoned food. War, Passion, Glory, and Sensual Pleasures have been the chief subjects of verse down to a comparatively recent period; and not until this false excitement has altogether passed away, can the gentler glow of woman's unobtrusive spirit be fairly felt. The qualities of woman's mind are the *stars* of the mental hemisphere; and during the time that is past, they have been outblazed by fiercer fires; but the heaven is now clearing, and the soft starlight is becoming visible (xi-xii).

I am quite prepared to grant that the mental constitutions of the sexes are *different*; but I am not at all prepared to say that "difference" means "inferiority." It is easy enough to understand that the sphere of woman's duty requires powers altogether dissimilar from those which are needed by man; but that this is any proof of a smaller development of mind, I beg leave emphatically to deny. Woman's qualities may be less conspicuous, but they are quite as important; they may be less apparent, but they are quite as influential. Man has to bear outward, tangible, rule; and his faculties are necessarily of an authoritative, evident, external, commanding order. Woman has to bear invisible sway over the hidden mechanism of the heart; and her endowments are of a meek, persuasive, quiet, and subjective kind: seen rather in result than in action. Man rules the mind of the world: woman its heart (xiv).

³⁵ RB's long narrative poem *Paracelsus* (1835) achieved some positive reviews but poor sales. His pamphlet series *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-46), published at his own expense, included such works as "Pippa Passes," "My Last Duchess," and poetic dramas. EBB's graceful compliment to *Bells and Pomegranates* in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (p. **) prompted Robert Browning to write his first letter to her.

³⁶ Republished in the United States as *Cyclopædia of Female Poets* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, n.d.); page numbers refer to this edition.

.... [W]hile man's intellect is meant to make the world stronger and wiser, Woman's is intended to make it purer and better...[H]ow rarely our Female Poets have addressed themselves to the mere understanding, and on the other hand how constantly they have sought to impress the feelings of the race; how little they have endeavored to increase our wisdom, and how much they have labored to promote our virtue. It is for man to ameliorate our condition; it is for woman to amend our character. Man's Poetry teaches us Politics; Woman's, Morality (xvii).

Man without woman is strong, but unenduring; courageous, but impatient; enterprising, but incautious. He is self-relying, but easily deceived; confident, but soon cast down; undertakes much, but is soon wearied. Left to itself, his hope fails almost at its birth; his faith speedily turns to doubt; his mind preys upon itself; he becomes gloomy, suspicious, and misanthropical.

On the other hand, woman without man is timid, feeble, apprehensive, and defenceless. The first shock of doubt or affliction overcomes her; and afterwards she hopes beyond reason. Evil preys upon her unresisted; she confides to be deceived: her affections become idolatrous; her sympathies, weaknesses; and her religion grows into superstition.

Thus the perfect mental character is only formed by the union of the two incomplete parts. United, there is strength with endurance, enterprise with caution, courage with patience. Self-reliance is moderated by dependence. Thought is aided by feeling. Reason is confirmed by sympathy. Reliance links itself with belief, ambition with love, faith with piety; despondency meets with cheerfulness, affliction with consolation, and despair with hope (xvii-xviii).

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

It may be a question ... whether an intense devotion to scholastic learning is not rather injurious than beneficial to the female mind. It cannot be pretended, of course, that schoolcraft, and the philosophy of art, science, and reason, ought to be altogether overlooked and unstudied by woman:--the proposition would be monstrous. But it may perhaps be fairly argued that, as woman's faculties are rather perceptive than investigative, and as her knowledge of truth is rather intuitive than acquired, there is a possibility of her understanding being injured by over-cultivation. Just as some flowers lose their native beauty when forced by horticultural art, may the female mind be spoiled by excess of intellectual culture.

Far as we should carry female education, we should, I think, take especial care not to found it on the same studies as appear necessary to man's. The acquirements of the sexes must be kept *unlike*, or man will find in woman, not a help meet, but a rival. Harmony results not from similarity, but from difference....

Further, the spheres of the sexes are different and require different faculties, and different education. The man—"for contemplation formed"—should learn by study, and reflection, and comparison, and investigation; the woman—"for softness formed and sweet attractive grace"—should acquire knowledge mainly through her rapid instincts, her wide-spreading sympathies, and her quick instantaneous perceptions.

The male and female minds arrive at truth by different roads. Man reaches it by proof; woman, by faith. Man knows it; woman feels it. Man demonstrates it; woman believes it....

In proof of these remarks I think I can fairly say that learned poetesses, however great their genius, have rarely been so effective and popular as less cultivated writers, possessed of even smaller natural powers.... (500-01).

To come however (at last) to the lady whose poetical works this Chapter proposes to consider, I scruple not to say that she is certainly most effective in her least labored compositions. Her genius, it is impossible not to see, is of the highest order—strong, deep-seeing, enthusiastic and loving; but although all her compositions prove this, I find the greatest evidences of her powers in her most unpretending works. Where there is effort, there is often obscurity; but where she gives her soul free unconscious vent, she writes with a truth and force of touch which none of the poetic sisterhood surpasses (502).

III. WOMEN'S LEGAL STATUS

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, from *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women: Together with a Few Observations Thereon* (1854)³⁷

A single woman has the same rights to property, to protection from the law, and has to pay the same taxes to the State, as a man.

Yet a woman of the age of twenty-one, having the requisite property qualifications, cannot vote in elections for members of Parliament.

A woman duly qualified can vote upon parish questions, and for parish officers, overseers, surveyors, vestry clerks, etc.

If her father or mother die *intestate* (i.e., without a will) she takes an equal share with her brothers and sisters of the personal property (i.e., goods, chattels, moveables), but her eldest brother, if she have one, and his children, even daughters, will take the *real* property (i.e., not personal property, but all other, as land, etc.), as the heir-at-law; males and their issue being preferred to females; if, however, she have sisters only, then all the sisters take the real property equally. If she be an only child, she is entitled to all the intestate real and personal property.

The church and nearly all offices under government are closed to women. The Post-office affords some little employment to them; but there is no important office which they can hold, with the single exception of that of Sovereign.³⁸

³⁷ Barbara Leigh Smith (1827-91, married Eugène Bodichon 1857) was one of five children born to the common law marriage of an affluent Member of Parliament and a milliner. Her father settled £300 a year on each child, thereby insuring his daughters' independence. Barbara Smith studied law, political economy, and art, and in 1854 began a career as a writer and feminist reformer by publishing this *Summary*. She campaigned against slavery, promoted passage of a Married Women's Property Act to allow wives to control their own personal and real property, and founded the *English Woman's Journal* as a feminist forum. She bequeathed £10,000 (proceeds from the sale of her frequently exhibited paintings) to Girton College, which had recently been founded to allow women to study at Cambridge University.

The professions of law and medicine, whether or not closed by law, are closed in fact. They may engage in trade, and may occupy inferior situations, such as matron of a charity, sextoness of a church, and a few parochial offices are open to them. Women are occasionally governors of prisons for women, overseers of the poor, and parish clerks. A woman may be ranger of a park; a woman can take part in the government of a great empire by buying East India Stock.³⁹

....

If a woman is seduced, she has no remedy against the seducer; nor has her father, excepting as he is considered in law as being her master and she his servant, and the seducer as having deprived him of her services. Very slight service is deemed sufficient in law, but evidence of some service is absolutely necessary, whether the daughter be of full age or under age.

These are the only special laws concerning single women: the law speaks of men only, but women are affected by all the laws and incur the same responsibilities in all their contracts and doings as men.

Laws Concerning Married Women

Matrimony is a civil and indissoluble contract between a consenting man and woman of competent capacity.

These marriages are prohibited—A widower with his deceased wife's sister; a widow with the brother of her deceased husband; a widower with his deceased wife's sister's daughter, for she is by affinity in the same degree as a niece to her uncle by consanguinity; a widower with a daughter of his deceased wife by a former husband; and a widower with his deceased wife's mother's sister. Consanguinity or affinity, where the children are illegitimate, is equally an impediment.

A lunatic or idiot cannot lawfully contract a marriage, but insanity after marriage does not make the marriage null and void....

The consent of the father or guardians is necessary to the marriage of an *infant* (i.e., a person under twenty-one), unless the marriage takes place by banns.⁴⁰ The consent of the mother is not necessary if there be a father or a guardian appointed by him....

An agreement to marry made by a man and woman who do not come under any of these disabilities is a contract of betrothment, and either party can bring an action upon a refusal to complete the contract in a superior court of Common Law....

A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband. He is civilly responsible for her acts; she lives under his protection or cover, and her condition is called *coverture*.

³⁸ Bodichon remarks the irony of women's extensive legal and cultural disabilities in a land ruled by Queen Victoria from 1837 until she died in 1901.

³⁹ The British East India Company (begun in 1600) was a commercial enterprise which acted as the agent for the British government of India. This arrangement ended in 1858, after the India Mutiny (or Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, an uprising among Indians serving in the British Army), led to governing authority's being transferred to the crown.

⁴⁰ banns] a declaration of intention to marry read on several consecutive Sundays in the parish church of an engaged couple. This public announcement allowed anyone knowing an impediment to the marriage to declare it.

A woman's body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of *habeas corpus*.⁴¹

What was her personal property before marriage, such as money in hand, money at the bank, jewels, household goods, clothes, etc. becomes absolutely her husband's, and he may assign or dispose of them at his pleasure whether he and his wife live together or not.

A wife's *chattels real* (i.e. estates held during a term of years, or the next presentation to a church living, etc.) become her husband's by his doing some act to appropriate them; but, if the wife survives, she resumes her property.

Equity is defined to be a correction or qualification of the law, generally made in the part wherein it faileth, or is too severe. In other words, the correction of that wherein the law, by reason of its universality, is deficient. While the Common Law gives the whole of a wife's personal property to her husband, the Courts of Equity, when he proceeds therein to recover property in right of his wife, oblige him to make a settlement of some portion of it upon her, if she be unprovided for and virtuous.

If her property be under £200, or £10 a year, a Court of Equity will not interpose.

Neither the Courts of Common Law nor Equity have any direct power to oblige a man to support his wife—the Ecclesiastical Courts (i.e. Courts held by the Queen's authority as governor of the Church, for matters which chiefly concern religion) and a Magistrate's court at the instance of her parish alone can do this.

A husband has a freehold estate in his wife's lands during the joint existence of himself and his wife, that is to say, he has absolute possession of them as long as they both live. If the wife dies without children, the property goes to her heir, but if she has borne a child, her husband holds possession until his death.

Money earned by a married woman belongs absolutely to her husband; that and all sources of income, excepting those mentioned above, are included in the term personal property.⁴²

By the particular permission of her husband she can make a will of her personal property, for by such a permission he gives up his right. But he may revoke his permission at any time before *probate* (i.e. the exhibiting and proving a will before the Ecclesiastical Judge having jurisdiction over the place where the party died).

The legal custody of children belongs to the father. During the lifetime of a sane father, the mother has no rights over her children, except a limited power over infants, and the father may take them from her and dispose of them as he thinks fit.⁴³

⁴¹Writ of *habeas corpus*] (Latin, "you shall have the body") a legal document that guards against secret incarceration; it ensures that anyone arrested must have an opportunity to appear in court before a judge or magistrate.

⁴²The notorious case of Lady Caroline Norton (1808-77) illustrated the inequity of this law. Separated from her husband, when she published pamphlets protesting the laws that awarded him custody of her children and ownership of her property, he was able to claim the proceeds from sale of these writings. Her highly publicized case contributed to the eventual adoption of laws that partially acknowledged women's rights regarding divorce, child custody, and personal property: the Infant Custody Act (1839), the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), and the Married Women's Property Acts (1870, 1882).

⁴³The 1839 Infants Custody Act gave a woman the right to petition a court to allow her access to her children under age seven (but the court was not obliged to do so). Not until 1886 did a woman gain the right to custody of her children if their father died.

If there be a legal separation of the parents, and there be neither agreement nor order of Court, giving the custody of the children to either parent, then the *right to the custody of the children* (except for the nutriment of infants) belongs legally to the father.

A married woman cannot sue or be sued for contracts—nor can she enter into contracts except as the agent of her husband; that is to say, her word alone is not binding in law, and persons giving a wife credit have no remedy against her. There are some exceptions, as where she contracts debts upon estates settled to her separate use, or where a wife carries on trade separately....

A husband is liable for his wife's debts contracted before marriage, and also for her breaches of trust committed before marriage.

Neither a husband nor a wife can be witnesses against one another in criminal cases, not even after the death or divorce of either.

A wife cannot bring actions unless the husband's name is joined.

As the wife acts under the command and control of her husband, she is excused from punishment for certain offences, such as theft, burglary, housebreaking, etc., if committed in his presence and under his influence. A wife cannot be found guilty of concealing her felon husband or of concealing a felon jointly with her husband. She cannot be found guilty of stealing from her husband or of setting his house on fire, as they are one person in law. A husband and wife cannot be found guilty of conspiracy, as that offence cannot be committed unless there are two persons.

Usual Precautions Against the Laws Concerning the Property of Married Women

When a woman has consented to a proposal of marriage, she cannot dispose or give away her property without the knowledge of her betrothed; if she make any such disposition without his knowledge, even if he be ignorant of the existence of her property, the disposition will not be legal.

It is usual, before marriage, in order to secure a wife and her children against the power of the husband, to make with his consent a settlement of some property on the wife, or to make an agreement before marriage that a settlement shall be made after marriage....⁴⁴

Although the Common Law does not allow a married woman to possess any property, yet in respect of property settled for her separate use, [the Court of] Equity endeavors to treat her as a single woman.

She can acquire such property by contract before marriage with her husband, or by gift from him or other persons.

There are great difficulties and complexities in making settlements, and they should always be made by a competent lawyer.

When a wife's property is stolen, the property (legally belonging to the husband) must be laid as his in the indictment.

⁴⁴ Obviously this discussion of property rights pertains to the affluent. In a summarizing discussion, Bodichon emphasizes the special hardships of working-class women: "Upon women of the labouring classes the difficulty of keeping and using their own earnings presses most hardly. In that rank of life where the support of the family depends often on the joint earnings of husband and wife, it is indeed cruel that the earnings of both should be in the hands of one, and not even in the hands of that one who has naturally the strongest desire to promote the welfare of the children. All who are familiar with the working classes know how much suffering and privation is caused by the exercise of this right by drunken and bad men."

Separation and Divorce

...Divorce is of two kinds:

First, divorce *à mensâ et thoro*, being only a separation from bed and board.

Second, divorce *à vinculo matrimonii*, being an entire dissolution of the bonds of matrimony.

The grounds for the first kind of divorce are, first Adultery, second, Intolerable Cruelty, and third, Unnatural Practices. The Ecclesiastical Courts can do no more than pronounce for this first kind of divorce, or rather separation, as the matrimonial tie is not severed, and there is always a possibility of reconciliation.

The law cannot dissolve a lawful marriage; it is only in the Legislature that this power is vested. It requires an act of Parliament to constitute a divorce *à vinculo matrimonii*, but the investigation rests by usage with the Lords alone, the House of Commons acting upon the faith that the House of Lords came to a just conclusion.

This divorce is pronounced on account of adultery in the wife, and in some cases of aggravated adultery on the part of the husband.⁴⁵

The expenses of only a common divorce bill are between six hundred and seven hundred pounds,⁴⁶ which makes the possibility of release from the matrimonial bond a privilege of the rich.

A wife cannot be a plaintiff, defendant, or witness in an important part of the proceeding for a divorce, which evidently must lead to much injustice.

⁴⁵ In other words, although a husband could divorce his wife on grounds of adultery, for a wife seeking divorce, her husband's adultery was insufficient, and she had to prove additional charges such as incest, bigamy, bestiality, or excessive brutality.

⁴⁶ Six hundred pounds in 1850 would be roughly equivalent to £60,000 today.