

CHARLES KINGSLEY

WOMEN AND
POLITICS

Charles Kingsley

Women and Politics

«Public Domain»

Kingsley C.

Women and Politics / C. Kingsley — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

WOMEN AND POLITICS. 1	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	8

Charles Kingsley

Women and Politics

WOMEN AND POLITICS. ¹

Somewhat more than 300 years ago, John Knox, who did more than any man to mould the thoughts of his nation—and indeed of our English Puritans likewise—was writing a little book on the ‘Regiment of Women,’ in which he proved woman, on account of her natural inferiority to man, unfit to rule.

And but the other day, Mr. John Stuart Mill, who has done more than any man to mould the thought of the rising generation of Englishmen, has written a little book, in the exactly opposite sense, on the ‘Subjection of Women,’ in which he proves woman, on account of her natural equality with man, to be fit to rule.

Truly ‘the whirligig of Time brings round its revenges.’ To this point the reason of civilised nations has come, or at least is coming fast, after some fifteen hundred years of unreason, and of a literature of unreason, which discoursed gravely and learnedly of nuns and witches, hysteria and madness, persecution and torture, and, like a madman in his dreams, built up by irrefragable logic a whole inverted pyramid of seeming truth upon a single false premiss. To this it has come, after long centuries in which woman was regarded by celibate theologians as the ‘noxious animal,’ the temptress, the source of earthly misery, which derived—at least in one case—‘femina’ from ‘fe’ faith, and ‘minus’ less, because women had less faith than men; which represented them as of more violent and unbridled animal passions; which explained learnedly why they were more tempted than men to heresy and witchcraft, and more subject (those especially who had beautiful hair) to the attacks of demons; and, in a word, regarded them as a necessary evil, to be tolerated, despised, repressed, and if possible shut up in nunneries.

Of this literature of celibate unreason, those who have no time to read for themselves the pages of Sprenger, Meier, or Delrio the Jesuit, may find notices enough in Michelet, and in both Mr. Lecky’s excellent works. They may find enough of it, and to spare also, in Burton’s ‘Anatomy of Melancholy.’

He, like Knox, and many another scholar of the 16th and of the first half of the 17th century, was unable to free his brain altogether from the *idola specûs* which haunted the cell of the bookworm. The poor student, knowing nothing of women, save from books or from contact with the most debased, repeated, with the pruriency of a boy, the falsehoods about women which, armed with the authority of learned doctors, had grown reverend and incontestable with age; and even after the Reformation more than one witch-mania proved that the corrupt tree had vitality enough left to bring forth evil fruit.

But the axe had been laid to the root thereof. The later witch prosecutions were not to be compared for extent and atrocity to the mediæval ones; and first, as it would seem, in France, and gradually in other European countries, the old contempt of women was being replaced by admiration and trust. Such examples as that of Marguerite d’Angoulême did much, especially in the South of France, where science, as well as the Bible, was opening men’s eyes more and more to nature and to fact. Good little Rondelet, or any of his pupils, would have as soon thought of burning a woman for a witch as they would have of immuring her in a nunnery.

In Scotland, John Knox’s book came, happily for the nation, too late. The woes of Mary Stuart called out for her a feeling of chivalry which has done much, even to the present day, to elevate the

¹ ‘The Subjection of Women.’ By John Stuart Mill.—‘Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture.’ Edited by Josephine Butler.—‘Education of Girls, and Employment of Women.’ By W. B. Hodgson, LD.D.—‘On the Study of Science by Women.’ By Lydia Ernestine Becker. (*Contemporary Review*, March 1869.)

Scotch character. Meanwhile, the same influences which raised the position of women among the Reformed in France raised it likewise in Scotland; and there is no country on earth in which wives and mothers have been more honoured, and more justly honoured, for two centuries and more. In England, the passionate loyalty with which Elizabeth was regarded, at least during the latter part of her reign, scattered to the winds all John Knox's arguments against the 'Regiment of Women;' and a literature sprang up in which woman was set forth no longer as the weakling and the temptress, but as the guide and the inspirer of man. Whatever traces of the old foul leaven may be found in Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, or Ben Jonson, such books as Sidney's 'Arcadia,' Lyly's 'Euphues,' Spenser's 'Fairy Queen,' and last, but not least, Shakespeare's Plays, place the conception of woman and of the rights of woman on a vantage-ground from which I believe it can never permanently fall again—at least until (which God forbid) true manhood has died out of England. To a boy whose notions of his duty to woman had been formed, not on Horace and Juvenal, but on Spenser and Shakespeare, —as I trust they will be some day in every public school,—Mr. John Stuart Mill's new book would seem little more than a text-book of truths which had been familiar and natural to him ever since he first stood by his mother's knee.

I say this not in depreciation of Mr. Mill's book. I mean it for the very highest praise. M. Agassiz says somewhere that every great scientific truth must go through three stages of public opinion. Men will say of it, first, that it is not true; next, that it is contrary to religion; and lastly, that every one knew it already. The last assertion of the three is often more than half true. In many cases every one ought to have known the truth already, if they had but used their common sense. The great antiquity of the earth is a case in point. Forty years ago it was still untrue; five-and-twenty years ago it was still contrary to religion. Now every child who uses his common sense can see, from looking at the rocks and stones about him, that the earth is many thousand, it may be many hundreds of thousands of years old; and there is no difficulty now in making him convince himself, by his own eyes and his own reason, of the most prodigious facts of the glacial epoch.

And so it ought to be with the truths which Mr. Mill has set forth. If the minds of lads can but be kept clear of Pagan brutalities and mediæval superstitions, and fed instead on the soundest and noblest of our English literature, Mr. Mill's creed about women will, I verily believe, seem to them as one which they have always held by instinct; as a natural deduction from their own intercourse with their mothers, their aunts, their sisters: and thus Mr. Mill's book may achieve the highest triumph of which such a book is capable; namely—that years hence young men will not care to read it, because they take it all for granted.

There are those who for years past have held opinions concerning women identical with those of Mr. Mill. They thought it best, however, to keep them to themselves; trusting to the truth of the old saying, 'Run not round after the world. If you stand still long enough, the world will come round to you.' And the world seems now to be coming round very fast towards their standing-point; and that not from theory, but from experience. As to the intellectual capacity of girls when competing with boys (and I may add as to the prudence of educating boys and girls together), the experience of those who for twenty years past have kept up mixed schools, in which the farmer's daughter has sat on the same bench with the labourer's son, has been corroborated by all who have tried mixed classes, or have, like the Cambridge local examiners, applied to the powers of girls the same tests as they applied to boys; and still more strikingly by the results of admitting women to the Royal College of Science in Ireland, where young ladies have repeatedly carried off prizes for scientific knowledge against young men who have proved themselves, by subsequent success in life, to have been formidable rivals. On every side the conviction seems growing (a conviction which any man might have arrived at for himself long ago, if he would have taken the trouble to compare the powers of his own daughters with those of his sons), that there is no difference in kind, and probably none in degree, between the intellect of a woman and that of a man; and those who will not as yet assent to this are growing more willing to allow fresh experiments on the question, and to confess that, after

all (as Mr. Fitch well says in his report to the Schools Inquiry Commission), 'The true measure of a woman's right to knowledge is her capacity for receiving it, and not any theories of ours as to what she is fit for, or what use she is likely to make of it.'

This is, doubtless, a most important concession. For if it be allowed to be true of woman's capacity for learning, it ought to be—and I believe will be—allowed to be true of all her other capacities whatsoever. From which fresh concession results will follow, startling no doubt to those who fancy that the world always was, and always will be, what it was yesterday and to-day: but results which some who have contemplated them steadily and silently for years past, have learnt to look at not with fear and confusion, but with earnest longing and high hope.

However startling these results may be, it is certain from the books, the names whereof head this article, that some who desire their fulfilment are no mere fanatics or dreamers. They evince, without exception, that moderation which is a proof of true earnestness. Mr. Mill's book it is almost an impertinence in me to praise. I shall not review it in detail. It is known, I presume, to every reader of this Magazine, either by itself or reviews: but let me remind those who only know the book through reviews, that those reviews (however able or fair) are most probably written by men of inferior intellect to Mr. Mill, and by men who have not thought over the subject as long and as deeply as he has done; and that, therefore, if they wish to know what Mr. Mill thinks, it would be wisest for them to read Mr. Mill himself—a truism which (in these days of second-hand knowledge) will apply to a good many books beside. But if they still fancy that the advocates of 'Woman's Rights' in England are of the same temper as certain female clubbists in America, with whose sayings and doings the public has been amused or shocked, then I beg them to peruse the article on the 'Social Position of Women,' by Mr. Boyd Kinnear; to find any fault with it they can; and after that, to show cause why it should not be reprinted (as it ought to be) in the form of a pamphlet, and circulated among the working men of Britain to remind them that their duty toward woman coincides (as to all human duties) with their own palpable interest. I beg also attention to Dr. Hodgson's little book, 'Lectures on the Education of Girls, and Employment of Women;' and not only to the text, but to the valuable notes and references which accompany them. Or if any one wish to ascertain the temper, as well as the intellectual calibre of the ladies who are foremost in this movement, let them read, as specimens of two different styles, the Introduction to 'Woman's Work, and Woman's Culture,' by Mrs. Butler, and the article on 'Female Suffrage,' by Miss Wedgewood, at p. 247. I only ask that these two articles should be judged on their own merits—the fact that they are written by women being ignored meanwhile. After that has been done, it may be but just and right for the man who has read them to ask himself (especially if he has had a mother), whether women who can so think and write, have not a right to speak, and a right to be heard when they speak, of a subject with which they must be better acquainted than men—woman's capacities, and woman's needs?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.