

(Note: *Red* indicates instances in which the transcriber was unsure of a partly illegible word.)

WOMAN.

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Essay. –

by –

Charles J.A. Chapman.

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In behalf of the Washington L. Society.

Will it be esteemed the height of impudence for a young collegiate to present to this respected audience an Essay under the title of Woman? Were we but Poets, could we but rank ourselves among those who come out here and with lifted hands invoke the favour of their attendant Muse, we would hope to place this magic word upon our front and deal out poetry in mellifluous strains, if not “a feast of reason” at least “a flow of soul.”

But no! It pertains to us to move the rusty wheels of prose & oppose the *buckler* of truth to the attacks of malice or of ridicule upon the devoted head of “Heaven last, best gift to Man.” Are the trifles of Fashion to be weighed against the soothing tenderness of a sisters Affection, the deep all-absorbing passion of a mother’s love or even the natural ingenuousness of maiden innocence when kept beyond the blighting influence of the brainless, frivolous coxcomb?

And what is Woman? Shall we go back as usual to Greece & Rome? We may commence where Adam lost a rib & following down the list of dynasties & revolutions we shall find her the grand conservative principle, though often crushed to Earth by the tyranny of public opinion, yet always like the lowly chamomile rising in all her shining attributes and conquering by her meekness and virtue. But after all we shall find this blessed boon of Heaven unappreciated, sunk far beneath the station which the God of Nature designed she should occupy.

It is only after having gazed in a prior age upon the revolting spectacle of Woman, “a hewer of wood and drawer of water,” coming down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century & seeing her loved as a wife, cherished as a sister, revered as a mother, worshipped as a seraph by the love-sick swain and cordially hated as a nuisance by confirmed old bachelors, that we can ask exultingly the question, What is Woman?

When we look upon the bright eyes and bright faces assembled here this night in hushed suspense, to hang upon the words of hoary-headed wisdom & gather the precepts of experience and the *rudiments* of Oratory from venerable Ciceroes; then it is we can ask and proudly answer the question – What is Woman?

And is it only Echo answers – What? Comes there no response from the cold sods which cover the wives of the Pilgrim Fathers & the matrons & daughters of seventy-six? Aye they

speak (not in thunder tones, but) in the “still small voice” to which no American ear can be deaf. It has been said that in Ancient History, Sacred or Profane we cannot find a woman in her proper sphere, and this is too true: as Americans, as Freemen, as friends of Humanity we cannot behold without horror this sweet consoler of human sorrows reduced to the level of a beast of burden.

Because we are told in the sacred volume that “she is the weaker vessel” and “let her learn in silence with all subjection,” are we to conclude that she should hold an inferior station? Spurn the thought!

As one has beautifully observed “she was taken, not from the head to rule over Adam, nor from the feet to be his slave but from the side to be his ‘help-meet’” The whole course of Biblical History may show us that she was seldom admitted to a participation in the affairs of state, but is not the curtain often raised which shuts her from all but her little world? Here we can sympathize with the fond hearts in that little circle of our Savior the two sisters and Lazarus and there admire the unassuming labor of Lydia, Dorcas and Priscilla. And who would wish to see many Deborahs, many Miriams or (to come down to a later day) many Joan of Archs. Is the hall of state the forum or the Campus Martius the appropriate sphere of Woman? It is true that in ‘times which tried men’s souls’ “Mothers in Israel” have arisen. It is true we might rather chose to see the legislative halls filled with the daughters of Columbia going “Retrenchment & Reform” to a man than become arenas for boxers & gladiators, yet still this is not the position in which we love to contemplate her. We may admire a ???, a Joan or a Zenobia, but we must turn with horror from the Amazons in the French Revolution of yesterday, bearing upon pikes the bodies of the butchered Royalists or the Fanny Wrights of to day, reveling in the corruption of party strife and infidelity. It is not when we look upon such disgusting spectacles that we can speak the sweet sound Woman, nor yet when we seek the busy ball-room or the crowded levee do we find her as she is. Believe not him who says you will see Woman in her true colors amid the bustling whirl of fashion, charming some dozen beaux with a gold-washed necklace or catching a fop with a row of false teeth and an ounce of rouge. No! it is only when the ball-room is forsaken for the family altar and the social fireside that she is found the help-meet for man around whom the heart-strings of his affection are bound.

There are those who make broad mountains out of mole hills who want the discernment to discover the gems and pearls hidden in the depths of woman’s affection and can see naught but the empty bubbles, “trifles light as air” which swim upon the surface. And now for the sober allegations which are brought against her character. We are told she is vain vain of her place in the aristocracy of fashion, as one in that little circle of exclusives; vain in her condescension, in the stare with which she checks an inconvenient acquaintance & the delight which exhibits itself in possessing the ability to tire you with a ceaseless round of small-talk & gossip. And what shall be said to all these weighty charges? Is vanity an evil? Where do we look for the agent which excites and renders it disgusting? Behold it in the affected adulation which issues from the lips of man!

Where is the nice discrimination which can draw the line between ambition and vanity? between the spirit exhibited at the Nile and worshipped as patriotism in a Nelson and that which impels the goddess of the brilliant circle to spurn a dozen prostrate suitors from her feet? We can land the man who exerts all his powers of mind & body to spread his name among his fellows, we can see him toiling as a subtle politician of a military hero & render the homage he requires, but if she to whom all public honors, all sounding fame is denied ventures to use the endearments which Nature has placed in her power to gain a little flattery or a little triumph, all her virtues are at once overlooked and she becomes the heartless coquette or the trifling flirt.

But what comes next in the list of vices & of follies? We ask not what has been alleged against her, for we all know, the foibles fashion and not the errors of her heart have been dwelt upon and ridiculed.

Female Romance! What is this? Speak candidates for Hymen what draws you from your proud temple of science long after it's signal bell has struck the 7<sup>th</sup> hour? Is it not that you <sup>^</sup>may bathe your enchanted spirits in some sweet flood of romantic affection? Come ye not forth to wander by moonlight up the bank of Delaware, to hear the adored mingle the dreamy fancies of love with the rippling of it's waters and discourse of 'love in a cottage' or 'love in a **tule**'? We do not pretend to advocate the affected sentimentalism often in this day called Romance which exists on no food but mouldering castles and enchanted moons; we ask not the flashy imagination which **snakes** itself the Thisbe or the Juliet of every play; which dreams of nought by night but wy-clad towers true-love and rope ladders and devours naught by day but the latest novel or the news from 'Gretna Green' No would we could find a Cervantes to wield the mighty pen of ridicule against these follies of our age; but though we can smile at all this we must delight to feel there is a race of Sylphs who can throw around our earthly path a halo of delight and help us at times to "shuffle off this mortal coil" & mount & burn in all the ardor of Fancy.

Have we now enumerated all her faults? If so what have been and are her virtues? Ah what human art can depict what human tongue can tell them? What was the lonely, cheerless state of man before that magnetic slumber closed his eyes?

"Alone and e'en in Paradise unblessed,  
With mournful looks the blissful scene surveyed  
And wandered in the solitary shade,  
The maker saw, took pity and bestowed  
Woman the last, the best reserved of God."

Though not even under the Jewish Dispensation enjoying all her rights, yet she is presented to our view, virtue the rule and vice the exception. If we find now and then a Jezebel or a Herodias, how few compared with the Esthers, the Annas and the Maries! Would you be told of maternal solicitude and affection? On what page of the Bible is it not written? Here a Hebrew woman braves the vengeance of Pharaoh and at last trusts her offspring to the tender mercies of the Nile, and there a young mother flees by night into Egypt to save the Infant Savior from the monster Herod. And is Sacred History without it's Heroines? Turn for an answer to Deborah leading to victory the armies of Israel, to Judith and Michal and Rahab! Through the whole course of Jewish History, whether employed as righteous Hannah in training the youth for the Lord's service, nourishing his prophets as the blessed **Shulamite** or ministering to his Apostles as Dorcas, she is still the same. Though first in sin yet "last at the cross and first at the sepulchre" Unravel the intricate thread of Profane History! Here a **Corinthia** shakes foul Rome to it's centre by instilling into the minds of the Gracchi a love for Freedom and there an Elizabeth sways with manlike policy the sceptre of the greatest nation upon earth. Here we find a Maid of Orleans & there an Isabella of Castile. Now a lovely Matron of Rome bows at the feet of her Coriolanus and now the wife of Edward drops the tear of intercession for the burglurs of Calai. Shall naught be said of our own fair land? From the moment the May Flower discharged the nucleus of another world upon Plymouth Rock to the moment the 'Cross of St. George' fell from the ramparts of Yorktown, what were the toils privations and noble deeds of American Women? Throughout the course of our Revolution "flashed woman's fearless <sup>^</sup>eye lit by her deep love's truth" and what man with a spark of patriotism in his breast has not burned with emulation as he saw her melting her domestic utensils into bullets and changing without a murmur the worship of

Juno for that of Bellona? Americans what would have been the issue of that bloody and protracted contest had not the constant thought of the loved Lares of their native hearth **newed** the arms of your barefooted, suffering soldiery?

But enough! Turn we for a moment to the Literary world. Where begins and ends the bright galaxy of fair ones patronized by Thalia and **Essato** To estimate the influence of a DeStael or a Hannah More! To find the reader whose heart has not responded to the sentiments of Mitford a **He\_\_\_** or a Sigourney and from the child of five to the patriarch of eighty what mind so strong and so original that it can draw no instruction from the pen of an Edgeworth? Even now a star is rising over the bleak mountains of Sweden which promises to cast a new light upon the path of Literature. Perhaps within the bounds of your own community you could tell of many whose pens have been dipped in the waters of Helicon. But what is woman in the U.S.? Thank Heaven the ladies of America occupy a high and ennobling station “Man (say they) holds the reins, but we tell him how to drive,” and it must be almost admitted. Yes, he may be the ‘Lever’ but she is ‘Archimedes’! She is not found here, as in China, drawing the plough while her master sows the seed, nor yet the toy of a voluptuous Oriental! No! She stands the bulwark of her family and waves the dread poker of authority over the head of the devoted Benedic!

But we are again assailed and driven far back to the time when the dames of yore acted their parts upon the stage of life, to hear the changes sung upon their iniquities. While we are asked can we find no heinous crimes recorded against her we hear the assertion that

“Heaven gave to Woman the peculiar grace  
To spin to weep and cully human race”

Now we find Rebecca deceiving her old gentleman with a goat skin, now Jael refreshes the weary Sisera and sends him to his long home & now Delilah dandles Sampson upon her lap ‘til he destroys himself with the same wepon used upon the Philistines. Who opened her reticule and let out upon the world all the evils and patent medicines which curse it? The lovely Pandora. Three little mermaids destroyed all passing the Sicilian coast, ‘til the wise Ulysses filled his ears with wax and now they have changed the rocks of Scylla for the Parlor, they have added Pianos to their voices and woe to the luckless student who lingers after night in town, unless Nature and his own uncleanly habit have applied the antidote used by the Grecian Hero!

A little vixen on the Hellespont destroyed poor Leander and a dear Woman ducked Socrates in soapsuds

“Who took it patiently and wiped his head  
Rain follows thunder that was all he said.”

To prove Woman a friend (they tell us) turn to Salem, Massachusetts; ah! How many cattle were killed, how many bachelors pinched with unseen hands in that venerable town and all by those horn’d creatures Women, and to cap the climax of their crimes, behold the ~~Alumii~~ Tyroes of La Fayette drawn down the steep Parnassus, to drink, (not from the Pierean Spring but), the maddening chalice of the witching Circe!

Fair are all the precepts of Reason and the College Laws, vain “the works of Newton and the fusty-musty rules of Lock & Bacon antiquated fools” in their endeavours to separate these valorous Knights and their Dulcineas!

“Though watched & captive yet in spite of all  
They find the art of kissing through a wall”

But the storm is over & these are all the weighty charges the assailants can bring against the Monster Woman. And now would we had time to say a little that might be said upon man that pink of all infallibility, but too much has already been spoken and it is left not to your

imagination, but to your observation to expose the corruption of **some** and hold up to ridicule that most contemptible and yet pitiable of all beings the modern Dandy

“Who drew the Lion vanquished? ‘twas a Man

But could all women write as Poets can,

Man should stand dressed in far more wickedness

Than all the sons of Adam could redress”

Behold that dried-up misanthrope an outcast from society with none to share his sorrows and no precious responsibilities to harry upon his skirts! If that is an ‘Old Bachelor’ deliver us from his fate! No! without Woman what worth this vale of tears? Rejoice not against them O Man! if they conquer not with a Sob and a kiss there is never wanting a Slipper or a Broom-Stick.

--Finis.--

Transcribed by the Author

His opponent was James. E. Miller.