“On the Position and Rights of Women”\*

By Frederick Muench

Wherever man has reached that degree of cultivation on which perfections of the mind and heart are valued above mere rude physical power, he hesitates no longer to yield to Woman her natural rights. What these rights consist in [sic], seemed to be a pretty generally settled question among the civilized nations of our time, till lately some paradox [sic], ultra-liberal, and fantastic notions upon that subject have come to light.

He who in good earnest has devoted himself to the holy cause of progress, [sic] should be most careful not to overshoot his mark, else he will accomplish nothing. I allude to certain contributors to the Christian Rationalist, to the Univercoelum, and to the Spirit of the Age. They tell us a great deal about “Emancipation of Woman,” as though she was [sic] held by man in an unworthy state of dependence, while in a thousand instances our compassion should rather be on the side of Man, who seems to need being emancipated not less than his fair and all-powerful complement.

Christianity has done more than any other doctrine or institution to elevate the gentler sex to that regard which, for its many accomplishments, it deserves. Although in the view of the apostles women were at that time considered as inferior beings, yet it was the spirit of love and meekness pervading the doctrine of Christ, which by degrees wrought that alteration of public sentiment, which in the course of time elicited even that chivalrous spirit, which made strength and valor bow before the power of beauty, gentleness and love. But of a full *equality* of the of the natural destination of Man and Woman, an equality of their position in life, an equality of their rights and duties, very few, I guess, have as yet dreamed. Nature has not willed such a thing. The destination of every creature is shown forth by the native properties it was endowed with by its Maker; the rights of every human individual are corresponding with certain duties. Now I do not say, [sic] that Woman’s destination, position in life, rights, and duties are *inferior* to those of Man, but *different*, greatly different. This difference extends even to the moral sphere. Tolerance, for instance, although a praiseworthy virtue, can, if carried too far, become blamable feebleness in Man under circumstances, when Woman might be still justified, nay, morally obliged to exercise it; want of valor and of bravery would justly be excused in Woman under circumstances, when by it Man would deserve the name of coward; want of meekness or decency would in every instance more deeply degrade Woman than Man, &c. [sic] In short, the scene of action for either sex is distinctly marked by nature. Woman’s greatest perfections can only be manifested in Domestic life, Man’s in public – Man, of course, rules by the power of physical strength, prowess, and intelligence; Woman reigns by the irresistibility of love, innocence, tact, fineness, delicacy, in short, amiability. And who can say, [sic]which of both kinds of dominion is stronger or nobler?

I [sic] for one, would not have women engage in the more bustling affairs of public life, for which nature did not either bodily nor mentally prepare them, and in pursuit of which Woman’s highest ornament, decency and delicacy, would be subject to a thousand unavoidable violations.

Man is not superior to Woman, nor is she to Man. The truth is, neither of them represents the entire fulness [sic] of human perfection, but they are designed to do so by and in their *union*. Differently speaking, human perfections were by nature distributed between Man and Woman; either, as it were, exhibits or may exhibit one half of perfect humanity, and the several halves, therefore, strive to get united again. They are not *equal*, but *congenial*. Not between the equal, but the congenial, and often between real contrarieties has nature established a mutual attraction. The male and female peculiarities are in many respects true contrarieties, which are conciliated or neutralized by their intimate connection.

I must confess, [sic] that in the course of my life I never met a woman, virgin or wife, who seriously wished this natural order of things subverted. The more refined woman is, the more she thinks of the high calling of her own sex, of its duties, of the peculiar charms which attend their faithful accomplishment; she longs for no others, [sic] she does not envy Man for any distinction and honor he may win amid the turmoils of life: her only ambition is purity, love, and kindness. In these the true sublimity of feminine nature will shine forth; but she will always rather lose than gain by intruding upon the sphere properly assigned to the action of the stronger sex. – I therefore say: Woman should not have a direct voice or hand in the enactment and administration of our laws. In this, however, she is not wholly unrepresented, – she is represented by her father, husband &c. [sic] He is a mean lawgiver, who, in the enactment of laws does not consult the natural rights, honor, and welfare of both sexes equally. Thousands of constituents send but one man as their agent to the legislative halls. Do they expect him to make laws only to suit himself personally, or to suit his whole constituency? And may not Man be the agent of her, than whom he holds nothing dearer in the world? Is Woman’s influence on Man so insignificant, do we so little consult the just wishes of a beloved wife, daughter, sister, etc., as to make our laws under the mere influence of male egotism? I deny that, – I candidly believe that the female half of our population is better represented now in this very republic, than if females should make their appearance on the floor of Congress and General Assemblies, or take the Presidential chair, &c.

I do not, like the author of a communication in No. 2 of “the Spirit of the Age,” consider the mismanagement of the affairs of this country so enormous, as to *call upon women for aid*. Let us be *men*, real men, and we shall find means to cure all present evils and wants of our public affairs. In the application of female qualities, I, for one, see no help or rescue. – By the way, I cannot chime in with these often heard complaints of mismanagement or corruption which are said to prevail in the affairs of the “establishment called state,” while, in fact, this very state we live in, [sic] is undoubtedly better governed than any other in the world. I know that we still labor under many imperfections; I deplore to see so many outbreaks of passion, and signs of selfishness and ambition, and we ought to strive to mend these evils. But ladies too have happened to occupy thrones and hold the reigns of government in their tender hands. Have they proved angels? Have not the Elizabeths, the Marys, the Catharines, [sic] Isabellas, and Victorias, indulged their passions while they wore crowns of gold? Have they given no cause to complain of scandal? Shall we set up their way of managing affairs as a pattern for our imitation?

I say with all the firmness of religious conviction, if you truly value the lovely and charming properties of female character, keep your wives and daughters far from those scenes of life which might tend in the least to violate the delicacy of their feelings, the purity of their hearts, [sic] the propriety of their conduct. Scenes such as men often cannot avoid to appear in as actors, but where even they almost necessarily compromise their honor and degrade themselves [sic].

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\*Muench, Frederick. “On the Position and Rights of Women.” Channing, William Henry, ed. T*he Spirit of the Age*, vol. I, no. 18, Sat., 11/3/1848, p. 283.

Duplicated in: *Woman’s Place is in the History Books, Her Story: 1620-1980: A Civic Guide for American History Teachers.-+*