

THE
Individuality of Woman.

BY
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"TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE."—*Shakespeare.*

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THE Norwegian dramatist Ibsen, in his powerful drama, "A Doll's House," treats of a subject which cannot but be of keen interest to woman, namely, her relations to man in married life. The heroine, Nora Helmar, is a melancholy example of the result of the subordination of individuality. Although thirty years of age, the womanly gifts and powers of the wife and mother are all stultified by the dominant will and egotism of her husband. She lives in and for him; his pleasure is her law; and when suddenly placed by circumstances in a responsible position, she is totally helpless. The play, which in its course shows her awakened to a sense of her humiliating and tragical position, we need follow no further; but we cannot help feeling that the writer has dealt with one of woman's greatest inherent dangers, namely, a tendency to sink her own individuality in that of the other sex. This is even considered right and becoming by many persons. Mrs. Sandford, in "Woman in her Social and Domestic Character", says: "Nothing is so likely to conciliate the affections of the other sex as a feeling that woman looks to them for support and guidance. In proportion as men are themselves superior, they are accessible to this appeal. On the contrary, they never feel interested in one who seems disposed to offer rather than to ask assistance. There is indeed something unfeminine in independence. In everything, therefore, that women attempt, they should show their consciousness of dependence." But is this a rational position? We are individuals. We

are responsible creatures, just as much as men. Are we not "fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the winter and summer"? Yet how common it is for women, after losing their names at the altar, to follow up that loss by abandoning their individuality also, and becoming the mere echoes of their husbands. As John Stuart Mill says: "By dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow; their capacities are withered and starved, and they are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth". Is the world really enriched by this deduction from it of half its energies? Is the husband's life really dignified by such flattering echo of himself? Is there not rather something in it suggestive of the mocking-bird or the parrot? Surely there can be no true comradeship where the woman takes the place of a courtier beside her husband? "I would rather have a thorn in my side than an echo", said Emerson. Many women shun the duty and effort of individuality from the terror of being dubbed "strong-minded females" or "men in petticoats"; but this is evading the question. "Because I like a little salt to my meat, there is no cause to suppose I wish to be pickled in brine."

There need be no fear of our losing our womanliness through retaining our individuality. Our sisters across the Atlantic are far more charming and winsome in manners than we, and are introducing into our dull conventional social life an *esprit* and brilliancy unknown among us before. Matthew Arnold says: "Almost everyone acknowledges that there is a charm in American women—a charm which you find in almost all of them, wherever you go." And this is simply because they live their *own* fresh natural lives, instead of tamely echoing those of others. The mind, freed from mental swaddling-clothes, begins to grow and become interested and interesting. There is one striking point in which American women recognise their own existence, with very happy results. American families are, owing to womanly influence, limited; with us they appear to be unlimited! There is no more astounding

experience than to hear a seemingly modest, fairly intelligent woman speaking complacently of her seven or eight children. Can she possibly be vain enough to imagine she is able to understand and guide the minds of so many differently constituted creatures, no two of whom should be trained and treated alike? One, for example, suffering from constitutional diffidence, needs almost to be flattered to develop his hidden capabilities; another should be sternly ignored, in order to repress his abnormal self-confidence; and a third is quick in brain but easily exhausted in body. Another, again, is apparently dull and stupid, but only needs to be left alone to grow at his own natural speed and in his own natural manner, and who most probably may prove like the tortoise in the race with the hare, the winner after all. A child may be apparently sullen, but is in reality only timid; or he who is seemingly frank is, in fact, only self-sufficient; and so on in infinite shades and varieties of character. One would imagine that when a woman had two or three such difficult studies to solve, she would say: "Hold! I can no more; here is the limit of my powers". But no, willingness and affection, they think, will make up for the absence of all else; or perhaps they don't think at all, or dimly remember something about fruitful vines, etc., and conclude that because in a struggling young nation like the Jews each male or fighter was of great value, therefore by adding citizens, no matter of what quality, to our congested over-peopled country they are fulfilling the British matron's highest functions. In this question of families the American woman bravely and gracefully becomes the guide of her husband, while the English wife is simply the echo of his wishes or egotism. Really one wonders sometimes if women *can* think, so wholly do they leave this part of their duty unpractised. Does it ever cross their minds that perhaps it is "cruel to summon new beings, as sensitive as themselves, into a world which to each fresh generation seems to loom more awful in the obscurity of its meaning and its end"?

The very quality of their chosen reading lulls their brains to sleep. They avoid all literature which has

any strenuousness or wrestling in it. It is this indolence of mothers which in religious questions so frequently alienates their children's mental lives from them as they develop. Each generation must have some new movement of thought. "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, lest one good custom should corrupt the world." But the woman who has kept her mind in a paralyzed condition will not know or admit this. What she was taught as true *is* true, and if her children follow other teaching they must be wrong. Strangely enough, while in all other subjects, literary, artistic, or mildly political, she is but her husband's echo, here, should his religious views develop and become more liberal, she makes a stand, and one might think by this attitude of resistance that at last her individuality was asserting itself. Alas! no; she is only leaning on another mental prop—her clergyman or minister.

I have said that the mental separation from her children is often the result of the mother's indolence of mind, an indolence which is quite compatible with any amount of bodily and social activity. But there is sometimes another and a sadder effect, especially where great affection exists, and innate mental activity in the child is lacking. I remember putting into the hands of a young friend of mine Cotter Morison's "Service of Man". After reading it she quietly remarked: "It seems a clever book, but of course I don't agree with it". A more naturally modest girl does not exist; yet without during her young life having made even a desultory acquaintance with the varied shades of thought in modern life, she conceives that because the thoughts broached in the book are not in accordance with those she has hitherto heard of they are necessarily false. John Stuart Mill analyses this condition of mind thus: "Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they knew; they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such person may have to say, and consequently they do not in any proper sense of the word know the doctrine which they themselves profess." At first sight it may seem as if the mother had mental energy and individuality, since

her child so fixedly follows her belief; but it is not really so. Had the mother's mind been full of vitality, she would have taught her child to search for herself, and not have fixed her to a belief which after all was only the echo of her own clergyman.

Speaking of the clergy reminds one of a new danger which menaces us from the lack of independence of thought in women. I have spoken of the married woman being often but the echo of her husband's mind, but the unmarried woman taking her opinions from her clergyman is a much more humiliating spectacle. If the suffrage be extended to women, what does it mean but that the votes of the clergy will be enormously augmented! I know, of course, there are clear-headed, original women, but I speak here of the many ordinary women who are under clerical influence, and are as dough in the hands of their minister. A lively and, I fear, discerning writer in one of our weekly journals says: "It is the fashion to laugh at clerical influence as a thing of the past, and past it may be as far as men are concerned, but with us women it was never more rampant. In small country towns and villages—and these send members to Parliament as well as our great intellectual centres—the ordinary unmarried woman turns instinctively to her rector or minister for guidance upon all occasions. Probably he is the only man of education to whom she can appeal; he listens to her patiently, and earns his reward—her blind, unquestioning obedience. The net result of the women's franchise will be to quadruple, nay, centuple, the political powers of the clergy in England. Now, the clergymen—though endowed with many virtues, no doubt—are after all but human; why then should they receive this sudden accession of power? If it were proposed to give it to the members of the military, legal, or any other profession, what an outcry there would be!" In all ages of the world, when the influence of the clergy has not been sharply restricted, danger and deterioration have followed to the nations. This is almost too self-evident a fact to insist on, but it is, alas! too true that many persons, especially women, do not recognise it. Who but the clergy of all sects, by their teachings that it is God who sends illness

and plagues, have hindered the spread and practice of sanitary measures? Is it not always the clergy who are against any growth of knowledge, whether it be the fact of the world moving—they having said it did not—or that this same world was made in a different way and time from their averred six days of twenty-four hours each? Who but Saint Chrysostom taught the degrading theory that “woman is a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic peril, a deadly fascination, and a painted ill”?

If woman with her duty-doing desires could once realise the truth that “in proportion to the development of her individuality each person becomes more valuable to herself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others”, she would surely not feel herself justified longer in stultifying her usefulness by mental languor and acquiescence. How womanly one feels the rule made and kept by Margaret Fuller’s sister, who, no matter how much her children absorbed her, would rescue one hour each day for reading, in order that her mind should be kept fresh for them, and that she should not simply be to them a mere source of physical nurture. And, indeed, how, unless they keep themselves in constant vigorous mental action, can they guide the young ones about them? for of what value is a succession of echoes? What vigor there might be in the rising generation if the mothers taught their girls (girls particularly, for boys escape earlier from the torpor of home) to think about the life they are called into, instead of simply accepting, as for the most part is the case, a conventional set of statements told them by half-educated men—for the ordinary clergyman can be but half-educated, his business being to be sectional or one-sided! The dulness and philistinism of our homes are mainly owing to the sleepy accept-what-is-accepted temper of the mother’s mind, instead of households becoming by her influence centres of fresh and vital atmosphere.