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A WOMAN'S THOUGHTS ABOUT WOMEN

DINAH MARIA MULOCK CRAIK



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A Woman's Thoughts About Women

Dinah Craik (1826–87) was a prolific writer of fiction, poetry and essays. She was best known for her novels, which appropriated well-worked narratives of individuals triumphing over adversity through hard work and moral integrity against a backdrop of industrialisation and the ascent of the middle classes. The most successful, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, tells the tale of a boy who works his way out of poverty. Craik herself was familiar with hardship: her father Thomas Mulock, a nonconformist minister, had spent periods confined to a lunatic asylum, and abandoned his children after his wife's death in 1854. In this work (originally published serially in *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*), Craik provided support and advice for single women like herself. She was highly critical of learned helplessness and advocated independence and cross-class sympathy, believing women should 'lead active, intelligent, industrious lives: lives complete in themselves'. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=craidi

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A WOMAN'S THOUGHTS

ABOUT

WOMEN.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,”

&c. &c.

“He that good thinketh, good may do,
And God will help him thereunto :
For was never good work wrought
Without beginning of good thought.”

IN ONE VOLUME.

LONDON
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1858.

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PREFACE.

THESE "Thoughts," a portion of which originally appeared in "Chambers' Journal," are, I wish distinctly to state, *only* Thoughts. They do not pretend to solve any problems, to lay down any laws, to decide out of one life's experience and within the limits of one volume, any of those great questions which have puzzled generations, and will probably puzzle generations more. They lift the banner of no party; and assert the opinions of no *clique*. They do not even attempt an originality,

which, in treating of a subject like the present, would be either dangerous or impossible.

In this book, therefore, many women will find simply the expression of what they have themselves, consciously or unconsciously, oftentimes thought ; and the more deeply, perhaps, because it has never come to the surface in words or writing. Those who do the most, often talk — sometimes think — the least : yet thinkers, talkers, and doers, being in earnest, achieve their appointed end. The thinkers put wisdom into the mouth of the speakers, and both strive together to animate and counsel the doers. Thus all work harmoniously together ; and verily

“ Was never good work wrought,
Without beginning of good thought.”

In the motto which I have chosen for its title-page, lies at once the purpose and preface of this my book. Had it not been planned and completed, honestly, carefully, solemnly, even fearfully, with a keen sense of all it might do, or leave undone; and did not I believe it to be in some degree a good book, likely to effect some good, I would never have written or published it. How much good it may do, or how little, is not mine either to know, to speculate, or to decide.

I have written it, I hope, as humbly as conscientiously; and thus I leave it.

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. SOMETHING TO DO	1
II. SELF-DEPENDENCE	22
III. FEMALE PROFESSIONS	41
IV. FEMALE HANDICRAFTS	65
V. FEMALE SERVANTS	90
VI. THE MISTRESS OF A FAMILY	122
VII. FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS	165
VIII. GOSSIP	189
IX. WOMEN OF THE WORLD	219
X. HAPPY AND UNHAPPY WOMEN	254
XI. LOST WOMEN	285
XII. WOMEN GROWING OLD	315

A WOMAN'S THOUGHTS ABOUT WOMEN.

CHAPTER I.

Something to do.

I PREMISE that these thoughts do not concern married women, for whom there are always plenty to think, and who have generally quite enough to think of for themselves and those belonging to them. They have cast their lot for good or ill, have realised in greater or less degree the natural destiny of our sex. They must find out its comforts, cares, and responsibilities, and make the best of all. It is the

single women, belonging to those supernumerary ranks, which, political economists tell us, are yearly increasing, who most need thinking about.

First, in their early estate, when they have so much in their possession—youth, bloom, and health giving them that temporary influence over the other sex which may result, and is meant to result, in a permanent one. Secondly, when this sovereignty is passing away, the chance of marriage lessening, or wholly ended, or voluntarily set aside, and the individual making up her mind to that which, respect for Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve must compel us to admit, is an unnatural condition of being.

Why this undue proportion of single women should almost always result from over-civilisation, and whether, since society's advance is usually indicated by the advance, morally and intellectually, of its women—this progress, by raising women's ideal standard of the "holy es-

tate," will not necessarily cause a decline in the very *unholy* estate which it is most frequently made—are questions too wide to be entered upon here. We have only to deal with facts—with a certain acknowledged state of things, perhaps incapable of remedy, but by no means incapable of amelioration.

But, granted these facts, and leaving to wiser heads the explanation of them—if indeed there be any—it seems advisable, or at least allowable, that any woman who has thought a good deal about the matter, should not fear to express in word—or deed, which is better,—any conclusions, which out of her own observation and experience she may have arrived at. And looking around upon the middle classes, which form the staple stock of the community, it appears to me that the chief canker at the root of women's lives is the want of something to do.

Herein I refer, as this chapter must be understood especially to refer, not to those whom ill or

good fortune—*query*, is it not often the latter?—has forced to earn their bread; but “to young ladies,” who have never been brought up to do anything. Tom, Dick, and Harry, their brothers, has each had it knocked into him from school-days that he is to do something, to be somebody. Counting-house, shop, or college, afford him a clear future on which to concentrate all his energies and aims. He has got the grand *pabulum* of the human soul—occupation. If any inherent want in his character, any unlucky combination of circumstances, nullifies this, what a poor creature the man becomes!—what a dawdling, moping, sitting-over-the-fire, thumb-twiddling, lazy, ill-tempered animal! And why? “Oh, poor fellow! ’tis because he has got nothing to do!”

Yet this is precisely the condition of women for a third, a half, often the whole of their existence.

That Providence ordained it so—made men to work, and women to be idle—is a doctrine that

few will be bold enough to assert openly. Tacitly they do, when they preach up lovely uselessness, fascinating frivolity, delicious helplessness — all those polite impertinences and poetical degradations to which the foolish, lazy, or selfish of our sex are prone to incline an ear, but which any woman of common sense must repudiate as insulting not only her womanhood but her Creator.

Equally blasphemous, and perhaps even more harmful, is the outcry about “the equality of the sexes;” the frantic attempt to force women, many of whom are either ignorant of or unequal for their own duties — into the position and duties of men. A pretty state of matters would ensue! Who that ever listened for two hours to the verbose confused inanities of a ladies’ committee, would immediately go and give his vote for a female House of Commons? or who, on the receipt of a lady’s letter of business—I speak of the average — would henceforth desire to have our

courts of justice stocked with matronly lawyers,
and our colleges thronged by

“ Sweet girl-graduates with their golden hair ? ”

As for finance, in its various branches—if you pause to consider the extreme difficulty there always is in balancing Mrs. Smith’s housekeeping-book, or Miss Smith’s quarterly allowance, I think, my dear Paternal Smith, you need not be much afraid lest this loud acclaim for “ women’s rights ” should ever end in pushing you from your stools, in counting-house, college, or elsewhere.

No ; equality of the sexes is not in the nature of things. Man and woman were made for, and not like one another. One only “ right ” we have to assert in common with mankind—and that is as much in our own hands as theirs—the right of having something to do.

That both sexes were meant to labour, one “ by the sweat of his brow,” the other “ in sor-