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THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND

THEIR SOCIAL DUTIES,
AND DOMESTIC HABITS

SARAH STICKNEY ELLIS

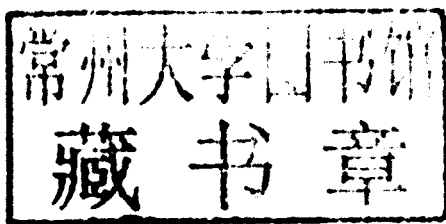


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The Women of England

Sarah Stickney Ellis (1799–1872) was a prolific writer on female education and women's role in the world. She established a school at Rawdon House, Hertfordshire, to give girls an intellectual and moral training, as well as purely domestic skills, since as future mothers they would be the primary teachers and moulders of the next generation of society. *The Women of England*, published in 1839, was one of her most successful works, and together with *Wives of England*, *Mothers of England*, and *Daughters of England*, was an important contribution to the growing debate on the position of women in society, particularly for the middle classes. Although she argues that women were equal to men, and morally superior, she does not question their legal and social subordination, but intends them to use their influence in their own sphere, and subtly, for the good of the family and society in general. For more information on this author, see http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=ellisa

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P R E F A C E.

At a time when the pressure of stirring events, and the urgency of public and private interests, render it increasingly desirable that every variety of labour should be attended with an immediate and adequate return; I feel that some apology is necessary for the presumption of inviting the attention of the public to a work, in which I have been compelled to enter into the apparently insignificant detail, of familiar and ordinary life.

The often-repeated truth—that “trifles make the sum of human things,” must plead my excuse; as well as the fact, that while our libraries are stored with books of excellent advice on general conduct, we have no single work containing the particular minutæ of practical duty, to which

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I have felt myself called upon to invite the consideration of the young women of the present day. We have many valuable dissertations upon female character, as exhibited on the broad scale of virtue ; but no direct definition of those minor parts of domestic and social intercourse, which strengthen into habit, and consequently form the basis of moral character.

It is worthy of remark also, that these writers have addressed their observations almost exclusively to *ladies*, or occasionally to those who hold a subordinate situation under the influence of ladies ; while that estimable class of females who might be more specifically denominated *women*, and who yet enjoy the privilege of liberal education, with exemption from the pecuniary necessities of labour, are almost wholly overlooked.

It is from a high estimate of the importance of this class in upholding the moral worth of our country, that I have addressed my remarks especially to them ; and in order to do so with more effect, I have ventured to penetrate into the familiar

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scenes of domestic life, and have thus endeavoured to lay bare some of the causes which frequently lie hidden at the root of general conduct.

Had I not known before the commencement of this work, its progress would soon have convinced me, that in order to perform my task with candour and faithfulness, I must renounce all idea of what is called fine writing; because the very nature of the duty I have undertaken, restricts me to the consideration of subjects, too minute in themselves to admit of their being expatiated upon with eloquence by the writer—too familiar to produce upon the reader any startling effect. Had I even felt within myself a capability for treating any subject in this manner, I should have been willing in this instance to resign all opportunity of such display, if, by so doing, I could more clearly point out to my countrywomen, by what means they may best meet that pressing exigency of the times, which so urgently demands a fresh exercise of moral power on their part, to win back to the homes of England the boasted felicity for which they once were famed.

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Anxious as I am to avoid the charge of unnecessary trifling on a subject so serious as the moral worth of the women of England, there is beyond this a consideration of far higher importance, to which I would invite the candid attention of the serious part of the public, while I offer, what appears to me a sufficient apology, for having written a book on the subject of morals, without having made it strictly religious. I should be sorry indeed, if, by so doing, I brought upon myself the suspicion of yielding for one moment to the belief that there is any other sure foundation for good morals, than correct religious principle; but I do believe, that, with the Divine blessing, a foundation may be laid in very early life, before the heart has been illuminated by Divine truth, or has experienced its renovating power, for those domestic habits, and relative duties, which in after life will materially assist the developement of the Christian character. And I am the more convinced of this, because we sometimes see, in sincere and devoted Christians, such peculiarities of conduct

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as materially hinder their usefulness—such early-formed habits, as they themselves would be glad to escape from, but which continue to cling around them in their earthly course, like the clustering of weeds in the traveller's path.

It may perhaps more fully illustrate my view of this important subject to say, that those who would train up young people without the cultivation of moral habits, trusting solely to the *future* influence of religion upon their hearts, are like mariners, who, while they wait for their bark to be safely guided out to sea, allow their sails to swing idly in the wind, their cordage to become entangled, and the general outfit of their vessel to suffer injury and decay; so that when the pilot comes on board, they lose much of the advantage of his services, and fail to derive the anticipated benefit from his presence.

All that I would venture to recommend with regard to morals, is, that the order and right government of the vessel should, as far as is possible, be maintained, so that when the hope of better

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and surer guidance is realized, and the heavenly Pilot in his own good time arrives, all things may be ready—nothing out of order, and nothing wanting, for a safe and prosperous voyage.

It is therefore solely to the cultivation of *habits* that I have confined my attention—to *the minor morals of domestic life*. And I have done this, because there are so many abler pens than mine employed in teaching and enforcing the essential truths of religion; because there is an evident tendency in society, as it exists in the present day, to overlook these minor points; and because it is impossible for them to be neglected, without serious injury to the Christian character.

SARAH STICKNEY ELLIS.

PENTONVILLE, Nov. 1838.

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THE
WOMEN OF ENGLAND.

CHAPTER I.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND.

EVERY country has its peculiar characteristics, not only of climate and scenery, of public institutions, government, and laws ; but every country has also its *moral characteristics*, upon which is founded its true title to a station, either high or low, in the scale of nations.

The national characteristics of England are the perpetual boast of her patriotic sons ; and there is one especially which it behoves all British subjects not only to exult in, but to cherish and maintain. Leaving the justice of her laws, the extent of her commerce, and the amount of her resources, to the orator, the statesman, and the political economist, there yet remains one of the noblest features in her national character, which may not improperly be

regarded as within the compass of a woman's understanding, and the province of a woman's pen. It is the domestic character of England—the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated. These I hope to be able to speak of without presumption, as intimately associated with, and dependent upon, the moral feelings and habits of the women of this favoured country.

It is therefore in reference to these alone that I shall endeavour to treat the subject of England's nationality; and in order to do this with more precision, it is necessary to draw the line of observation within a narrower circle, and to describe what are the characteristics of the women of England. I ought, perhaps, in strict propriety, to say what *were* their characteristics; because I would justify the obtrusiveness of a work like this by first premising that the women of England are deteriorating in their moral character, and that false notions of refinement are rendering them less influential, less useful, and less happy than they were.

In speaking of what English women were, I would not be understood to refer to what they were a century ago. Facilities in the way of mental improvement have greatly increased during this period. In connexion with moral discipline, these

facilities are invaluable; but I consider the two excellencies as having been combined in the greatest perfection in the general average of women who have now attained to middle, or rather advanced age. When the cultivation of the mental faculties had so far advanced as to take precedence of the moral, by leaving no time for domestic usefulness, and the practice of personal exertion in the way of promoting general happiness, the character of the women of England assumed a different aspect, which is now beginning to tell upon society in the sickly sensibilities, the feeble frames, and the useless habits of the rising generation.

In stating this humiliating fact, I must be blind indeed to the most cheering aspect of modern society, not to perceive that there are signal instances of women who carry about with them into every sphere of domestic duty, even the most humble and obscure, the accomplishments and refinements of modern education; and who deem it rather an honour than a degradation to be permitted to add to the sum of human happiness, by diffusing the embellishments of mind and manners over the homely and familiar aspect of every-day existence.

Such, however, do not constitute the majority of the female population of Great Britain. By far the