

Matilda Joslyn Gage speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention, 1852

This Convention has assembled to discuss the subject of Woman's Rights, and form some settled plan of action for the future. Let Syracuse sustain her name for radicalism. While so much is said of the inferior intellect of woman, it is by a strange absurdity conceded that very many eminent men owe their station in life to their mothers. Women are now in the situation of the mass of mankind, a few years since, when science and learning were in the hands of the priests, and property was held by vassalage; the Pope and the priests claimed to be, not only the teachers, but the guides of the people; the laity were not permitted to examine for themselves; education was held to be unfit for the masses, while the tenure of their landed property was such as kept them in a continual state of dependence on their feudal lord.

*** It is but a short time, since the most common rudiments of education were deemed sufficient for any woman; could she but read tolerably, and write her own name, it was enough.

*** Trammeled as women have been, by might and custom, there are still many shining examples, which serve as beacon lights of what may be attained by genius, labor, energy, and perseverance combined. "The longer I live in the world," says Goethe, "the more I am certain, that the great difference between the great, and insignificant, is energy, invincible determination; an honest purpose once fixed, and then victory." Sir Isaac Newton said of himself, "that if ever he had been able to do anything, he had effected it by patient thinking only" and we are all familiar with the anecdote which narrates the starting occasion of that train of thought. Ik Marvel, in his *Dream Life*, says, Goethe is no genius in life, like the genius of energy and industry; that all the traditions, so current among young men, that certain great characters have wrought their greatness by inspiration, as it were, grow out of a sad mistake; and that there are no rivals so formidable, as those earnest, determined minds, which reckon the value of every hour, and which achieve eminence by persistent application.

Although so much is said against the unfitness of woman for public life, it can be seen, from Semiramis to Victoria, that she has a peculiar fitness for governing. In poetry, Sappho was honored by the title of the tenth Muse. Helena Lucretio Corano, a Venetian lady, who lived in the seventeenth century, was a woman of such rare scientific attainments, that the most illustrious persons, in passing through Venice, were more anxious to see her than all the curiosities of the city. She devoted herself, with intense perseverance, to literary pursuits; was made a Doctor, and received the title of Unalterable; and, with all, combined an unostentatious humility. She was but thirty-eight, when she died. Mary Cunitz, a native of Silesia, was one of the greatest geniuses of the sixteenth century. She understood many languages[,] was skilled in history, poetry, painting, music, and medicine; and these were but amusements. She particularly applied herself to Mathematics, and especially to Astronomy. She was ranked as one of the most able astronomers of her time, and formed astronomical tables, that acquired for her a great reputation. Another lady of the seventeenth century, Anne Maria Schureman, succeeded admirably in sculpture, engraving, and music. She was also learned in various languages; but in miniature painting she particularly excelled.

Constantia Grierson, an Irish girl, of poor parentage, was celebrated for her literary attainments, although she died at the early age of twenty-seven.

With the learning, energy, and perseverance of Lady Jane Grey, Mary, and Elizabeth, all are familiar. Mrs. Montague is spoken of by Cowper, as standing at the head of all that is called learned, and, that every critic veiled his bonnet at her superior judgment. Joannie Baillie has been termed the female Shakspeare (sic). Miss Caroline Herschell shares the fame of her brother, as an astronomer, having herself discovered planets and comets. The greatest triumphs of the present age, in the drama, music, and literature, have been achieved by females, among whom may be mentioned Miss Cushman, Jenny Lind, Miss Chesebro, Miss Carey, Miss Fennimore Cooper, Grace Greenwood, Mrs. Stowe, and Margaret Fuller Ossoli. Mrs. Somerville's renown has long been spread over both hemispheres, as one of the first astronomers of the present age. With this, she combines various literary acquirements; and to those who think them incompatible with feminine duties, it can be shown that she discharged, in an eminent degree, every social and family requirement.

To those who say women do not desire their rights, or think they have them already, I would say, converse with any intelligent woman on the subject, and you will not find them indifferent. Woman feels deeply, keenly, her degradation, but is bound by the iron hand of custom which so long has exercised tyrant rule over her. An ignorant woman is virtually in the same condition as the peasant who thinks it right that a king shall rule over him; and to keep him content, he is made to believe it would be blasphemy and treason in him to call in question this right.

*** I honor those noble women, who have been willing to pioneer in the path of duty and right, and bear the obloquy which always has, and always will, follow the first promulgation of unaccustomed truths: so suffered the martyrs of old; so suffers Kossuth. Obloquy is said to be a necessary ingredient of all true glory; it might be said to be a necessary concomitant of all great truths.

*** The question is, how can this mental and moral lethargy, which now binds the generality of women, be shaken off? They are educated to a state of entire dependence; taught before marriage, to expect a support from their fathers, and after, from their husbands; to suppress their convictions, if contrary to those of their fathers, brothers and husbands, and to allow others to act for them. This state of listlessness follows as a natural consequence.

Self-reliance is one of the first lessons to be taught our daughters; they should be educated with our sons, and equally with them taught to look forward to some independent means of support: either to one of the professions, or the business best fitted to exercise their talents. Marriage has been looked to as the acme of hope, by women; and why? Because all lucrative and honorable means of support have been seized by men, and women have been driven to marriage, as a necessity. To what more fertile cause can be attributed the uncongeniality frequently existing between married parties? Women have been instructed in showy accomplishments, while literature has been nearly cast aside, as unnecessary; men have been educated not to expect companionship in their wives. At the proposition of equal education and rights, man starts up and says, if women are admitted as equals, you ruin domestic harmony. If a woman is permitted to think for herself, forsooth, she may disagree in her views with her

husband, and family peace be destroyed. A fig for such reasoning! Were refined, intelligent conversation in the home circle appreciated, club-rooms, secret societies, taverns, and stores, where man's leisure is generally spent, would be less frequented; for where all are educated, it is a disgrace to be ignorant, and time now wasted, would be spent in improvement.

*** Being placed in a position compelling them to act, has caused many persons to discover talents in themselves they were before unaware of possessing. Great emergencies produce great leaders, seemingly fitted by Providence, while it is but the arousing of some energy, hitherto dormant.

*** Those who fear woman's incapacity to cope with the trials of life, should consider what is now actually thrust upon her by existing customs. Thousands of women are driven to a life of pollution, by the insufficiency of wages in those departments of labor which she is legitimately permitted to enter. Let any who doubt, read the statistics of London, New York, or any other great city – or the confessions of the poor creatures themselves! One, (in a report, a while since, on the London seamstresses,) says, "if I was never allowed to speak more, it was the meager pay I received by labor, that led me to go astray. I struggled very hard to keep myself chaste, but found I could not get food and clothing for myself and mother. Could I honestly have earned enough to have subsisted upon-to feed and clothe myself; I should have remained virtuous."

Nor is the condition of this class much better in our own country. In the reports of those missionaries who have recently directed their efforts of reform to the vilest sinks of infamy in New York, we perceive the cause which operates to keep the ranks of iniquity filled. Earning but a scanty subsistence, totally inadequate to provide the commonest necessaries of life, these women have, as constant accompaniments, want, labor unceasing, broken rest, and in the end a chance of starvation. With nothing to cheer, nothing to encourage, and driven by task-masters as merciless as those of Pharaoh, or of the Southern cotton and rice plantations; while opposed to this, is offered a life of ease, plenty, society, and amusement. Instead of the damp, dark, confined, noisome room, occupied by the sewing girl, are presented to her imagination, large, high, airy, and commodious dwellings, adorned with flowers, and enlivened by music; and is it strange she falls.

*** Custom has been, and is now, the mistress who plants her foot on the too willing neck of prostrate womanhood. Of custom, which has been termed unwritten law, "it is our first duty," says Blackstone, "to make enquiries as to its legality; for if it is not a good custom, it ought no longer to be used." In all governments, it would be the dictate of policy, for the governed to submit to what the governors decree, provided they decree nothing inconsistent with their natural rights; but as soon as any government stretches its powers so far as to destroy the natural rights, to which the members of a community are entitled, these last are justified, by all the laws of God and man, in opposing such a government. We claim, as a natural right, the same privilege of acting as we think best, which is accorded to the other half of mankind – right bestowed upon us by God, when he created man in his own image, after his own likeness, both male and female, and gave them equal dominion: Genesis, 1st chap., 26th, 27th, and 28th verses.

*** Although our country makes great professions in regard to general liberty, yet the right to particular liberty, natural equality, and personal independence, of two great portions of this country, is treated, from custom, with the greatest contempt; and color in the one instance, and sex in the other, are brought as reasons why they should be so derided; and the mere mention of such, natural rights is frowned upon, as tending to promote sedition and anarchy.

*** Let us look at the rights it is boasted women now possess. After marriage, the husband and wife are considered as one person in law, which I hold to be false, from the very laws applicable to married parties. Were it so, the act of one would be as binding as the acts of the other, and wise legislators would not meet to enact statutes defining the peculiar rights of each; were it so, a woman could not legally be a man's inferior. Such a thing would be a veritable impossibility. One half of a person can not be under the protection or direction of the other half. Blackstone says, "a woman may indeed be attorney for her husband, for that implies no separation from, but rather a representation of her lord. And a husband may also bequeath any thing to his wife, by will; for it can not take effect, till the coverture is determined by his death." After stating at considerable length, the reasons showing their unity, the learned commentator proceeds to cut the knot, and show they are not one, but are considered as two persons, one superior, and one inferior – and not only so, but the inferior, in the eye of the law, as acting from compulsion. A wife can not, by will, devise lands to her husband; for at the time of such act, she is supposed to be under his coercion, and therefore all deeds executed, and acts done by her, during her coverture, are void, except it be those where she is solely and directly examined, to learn if her act be voluntary! How degrading! how humiliating! and carrying on the face of it, crying injustice, is the position woman is compelled to assume, when thus taken aside, by the magistrate, and asked, "Do you sign this deed of your own free will and accord, and not by fear and compulsion of your husband?" Out upon it! Why the very stones would cry out, should woman longer hold her peace.

Every father has a right to bind, or give away, any of his children, while minors, without the consent, or even knowledge of the mother; and when he dies, she is not considered a competent guardian for the child, and the father can, by Part 2d, Title 3, Sec. 1st, of Vol. 2d, Revised Statutes, in his will, or deed, exclude the mother from participation in such guardianship; for though called one, the father alone has legal power over the children. A mother, as such, is entitled to no power over her own children.

A woman's personal property, by marriage becomes absolutely her husband's, which, at his death, he may give away from her; while at her death she has no such power, or any power, of disposing of his personal property. The law very kindly allows a woman her wearing apparel, as well as jewels and ornaments, provided the latter were not disposed of by her husband, previous to his death; and provided the children do not live with her, she is allowed one bed, bedstead, and bedding.

*** Man may not only bid her stand aside from all that is lucrative, but when, by patient industry, she has accumulated a sustenance, he seizes the control of the whole. Even now, a case arises to mind, of a woman who, by daily washing, had earned enough to buy a house for herself and dissipated husband. A short time since, the husband was taken sick, and not being expected to live, bequeathed the whole to his brother; and all the wife could get, was the interest of one third, during her natural life. And where

was her redress? She had none. A shame on such laws! a SHAME on such men. A woman not only (till recently) lost all right of holding property by marriage, but she lost her personal identity. In this act, she becomes absorbed in another. At the death of her husband, she is left a queen, or a beggar, as the option of her lord dictates; while, should she die first, she has no right to the disposition of any of the property accumulated by their united industry; for by Title 1st, Part 2d, Sec. 1st, 2d Vol. Revised Statutes, of this State, Idiots, persons of unsound mind, married women, and infants, are declared incompetent to devise real estate. Well classed, truly!

The present laws are deleterious to the moral sensibilities of both husband and wife. Woman has no inducement to prudence and industry, and she is obliged seemingly to acquiesce in the wishes of her husband, however repugnant to her, as the only means of obtaining, in even a small degree, her own; or she is allowed to follow her own plans and views as a favor, and not from the lack of power to compel her to do otherwise.

*** In the present posture of our national affairs, when the instruments of power, although professedly in the hands of the people, are, in reality, lodged in the hands of a moiety, thereby forming an Aristocracy, rather than a Republic – what are we to expect, but that one portion of the nation will be sunk in ignorance and grovelling (sic) submission.

*** We are invited to acquire a knowledge of government, not only by many immediate benefits, but by a multitude of future ones; and who can say it will not end in the full maturity of public happiness? Nothing is a stronger proof how natural the love of liberty is to mankind, than the efforts made to attain it. Let wives cast aside the thought that their highest duty consists in gratifying their husbands palates, by some delicacy; or listening with smiling countenance, to what he may please to relate of the day's occurrences, while placidly darning his stocking, with no higher ambition than to have it well done. I do not, by any means depreciate these necessary employments, in their proper place; but they should not be the chief business of their lives. The duty to please, devolves equally on both parties. Remember your duty to God, and your own sex, as well as to man. Let us make such use of our talent, as to receive the plaudit of our Maker, of well done, good and faithful servant.

To mothers we look, especially to young mothers, for the instruction of their children in the principles of justice and right, and to see that equal justice is granted to both; not giving one every advantage, and according none to the other.

***We need not expect the concessions demanded by women will be peaceably granted; there will be a long moral warfare, before the citadel yields; in the meantime, let us take possession of the outposts. The public must be aroused to a full sense of the justice of our claims. Beside the duty of educating our children, so as to make the path of right, easy to their feet, is that of discussion, newspaper articles, petitions: all great reforms are gradual. Fear not any attempt to frown down the revolution already commenced; nothing is a more fertile aid of reform, than an attempt to check it; work on.

“Work sows the seed:

Even the rock may yield its flower:

No lot so hard, but human power,
Exerted to one end and aim,
May conquer fate, and capture fame!
Press on!
Pause not in fear:
Preach no desponding, servile view –
What ever thou will'st thy WILL may do.
Work on, and win!
Shall light from nature's depth arise,
And thou, who mind can grasp the skies,
Sit down with fate, and idly rail!
No "ONWARD! Let the Truth prevail!"

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