

**WHY ARE WOMEN  
REDUNDANT?**

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Why are Women Redundant? by W. R. Greg

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## WHY ARE WOMEN REDUNDANT?

A STATE of society so mature, so elaborate, so highly organized as ours cannot fail to abound in painful and complicated problems. One after another these excite attention. The philosopher seeks to solve them; the philanthropist endeavours to relieve the suffering, and the moralist to cure the evil, they involve or imply. There is enough, alas, in the various forms of wrong, of error, and of wretchedness which multiply around us, not only to make our hearts bleed, but to bewilder our understanding, to disturb our conscience, to shame our indolence and ignorance, and almost to stagger and to strain our faith; and enough also to afford ample occupation to that vast amount of restless, prying, energetic, impatient benevolence, which is perhaps the most remarkable, as it is certainly the most hopeful, feature of this age. It would seem as if, in this respect, 'our strength was equal to our day,' and our resources to the work which lies before us: all that appears necessary is, that the diagnosis should be complete before the medicine is administered, and that the physician should be sure of his prescription before the surgeon begins to operate. For ourselves, we can say that we never 'despaired of the Republic;' we have never done the Creator the wrong of doubting (to use an expression we once heard from Dr Chalmers) 'that the world is so constituted that if we were morally right, we should

be socially and physically happy;’ we are profoundly convinced that, of all the evils which oppress civilization and all the dangers which menace it, none lie beyond the reach of human sagacity to analyze, or of human resolve and compassion to avert and cure. If we thought otherwise, there would be little joy in living, and little comfort in looking forth on life. The sensualist might revel in the pleasures which wealth or toil placed within his reach, till repetition brought early satiety and disgust; the lover might bask in his brief spring and sunshine of fruition; the human mill-horse might tread his weary rounds in the dull gray apathy of selfishness; the ambitious man might stun his nobler thoughts in the fierce struggle for power that could then be wielded for no hallowing end;—but the statesman worthy of his grand vocation, and the thinker capable of rising to the height of the great argument before him, would find both their occupation and their inspiration gone.

The British world—philanthropic as well as poetical—takes up only one thing at a time; or rather, and usually, only a fragment of a thing. It discovers an island, and proceeds to reason on it and deal with it as such; and it is long before it learns that the supposed island is only the promontory of a vast continent. WOMAN is the subject which for some time back our benevolence has been disposed to take in hand, fitfully and piecemeal. We have been grieved, startled, shocked, perplexed, baffled; still, with our usual activity, we have been long at work; beating about the bush; flying at this symptom; attacking that fragment; relieving this distress; denouncing that abomination. First it was the factory girls; then the distressed needlewomen; then aged and decayed governesses; latterly Magdalens, *in esse or in futurum*. The cry of ‘Woman’s Rights’ reached us chiefly from America, and created only a faint echo here. *We* have occupied ourselves more with ‘Woman’s Mission,’ and ‘Woman’s Employment;’ and, as usual, have been both more practical and

more superficial than our neighbours across the Channel and across the Atlantic: but the 'condition of women,' in one form or another—their wants, their woes, their difficulties—have taken possession of our thoughts, and seem likely to occupy us busily and painfully enough for some time to come. And well they may; for not only do the mischiefs, anomalies, and falsities in that condition unveil themselves more and more as we study the subject, but they are, we believe, every day actually on the increase.

The problem, which is so generally though so dimly perceived, and which so many are spasmodically and ambitiously bent on solving, when looked at with a certain degree of completeness,—with an endeavour, that is, to bring together all the scattered phenomena which are usually only seen separately and in detail,—appears to resolve itself into this: that there is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women—not to speak more largely still—scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes,—who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. In the manufacturing districts thousands of girls are working in mills and earning ample wages, instead of performing, or preparing and learning to perform, the functions and labours of domestic life. In great cities, thousands, again, are toiling in the ill-paid *metier* of sempstresses and needlewomen.

wasting life and soul, gathering the scantiest subsistence, and surrounded by the most overpowering and insidious temptations. As we go a few steps higher in the social scale, we find two classes of similar abnormal existences; women, more or less well educated, spending youth and middle life as governesses, living laboriously, yet perhaps not uncomfortably, but laying by nothing, and retiring to a lonely and destitute old age: and old maids, with just enough income to live upon, but wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing, and their hearts withering, because they have nothing to do, and none to love, cherish, and obey. A little further upwards, how many do we daily see, how many have we all known, who are raised by fortune above the necessity of caring for their own subsistence, but to whom employment is a necessity as imperious as to the milliner or the husbandman, because only employment can fill the dreary void of an unshared existence;—beautiful lay nuns, involuntary takers of the veil,—who pine for work, who beg for occupation, who pant for interest in life, as the hart panteth after the water-brooks, and dig for it more earnestly than for hid treasures. With most women, probably, this phase comes at some epoch in their course; with numbers, alas, it never passes into any other. Some rush to charity, and do partial good or much mischief; some find solace in literary interests and work, and these, though the fewest, are perhaps the most fortunate of all; some seek in the excessive development of the religious affections a pale ideal substitute for the denied human ones,—a substitute of which God forbid that we should speak slightly, but which is seldom wholly satisfactory or wholly safe. Lastly, as we ascend into the highest ranks of all, we come upon crowds of the same unfulfilled destinies—the same *existences manquées*,—women who have gay society, but no sacred or sufficing home, whose dreary round of pleasure is yet sadder, less remunerative, and less satisfying, than the dreary round

of toil trodden by their humble sisters. The very being of all these various classes is a standing proof of, and protest against, that 'something wrong,' on which we have a few words to say,—that besetting problem which, like the sphinx's, society must solve or die.

It is because we think there is a tendency in the public mind at this conjuncture to solve it in the wrong way, to call the malady by a wrong name, and to seek in a wrong direction for the cure, that we take up our pen. In all our perplexities and disorders,—in social perplexities and disorders more perhaps than in any others,—there is one golden rule if we will but apply it, which will suit great things as well as small, which is equally sound for all ages and all climes:—*consult Nature*; question her honestly and boldly, with no foregone determination as to what answer she shall give, with no sneaking intention to listen only to a fragment of her oracle, or to put a forced construction on her words. Thus interrogated, be confident that she will give forth no mistaken or ambiguous reply. Nature, as soon as we have learned to love her and to trust her, and to understand her language, is always right, and most commonly speaks intelligibly enough. In our difficulties, then, let us consult her; in the remedies we apply let us study her, assist her operations, return to her paths. Let us search out the original causes of social evils and errors, so that we may not *counteract* them, but *undo* them and *retrace* them. The mischiefs wrought by one departure from the dictates and the laws of nature, do not endeavour to cure or compensate by another. Shun, as the most fatal of blunders, the notion that the first *égarement* can be rectified by a second. Above all, be very slow to accept any anomalies or sufferings as necessary or irremediable, and to treat them with the anodynes prescribed by hoplessness or incapacity. Palliatives and narcotics are for ineradicable and inevitable maladies: Nature knows few such in the physical, fewer still in the

political or the social world. When we have discovered wherein we have erred and why we are diseased, and have stepped back into the honest and the healthy way, and cut off the source of the disorder,—when the *fons et origo mali* has been thus dried up,—then, and not till then, may we proceed to relieve the symptoms, and mitigate the pain, and countervail the mischiefs produced by the wide-spread and long-fostered disease, with a hearty and enlightened zeal,—provided only we are sedulously watchful that the lenitives we administer shall not be of a character to interfere with the remedy we have discovered and prescribed.

Now, what does Nature say in reference to the case before us? By dividing and proportioning the sexes, by the instincts which lie deepest, strongest, and most unanimously in the heart of humanity at large in all times and amid all people, by the sentiments which belong to all healthy and unsophisticated organizations even in our own complicated civilization, marriage, the union of one man with one woman, is unmistakably indicated as the despotic law of life. This is *the rule*. We need not waste words in justifying the assumption. As the French proverb says, 'On ne cherche pas à prouver la lumière.' But Nature does more than this: she not only proclaims the *rule*; she distinctly lays down the precise amount and limits of the *exception*. In all countries of which we have any accurate statistics, there are rather more women than men; the excess varying from two to five per cent. Wherever, from accidental or artificial causes, this proportion is much disturbed, the saddest results ensue. Whether this very moderate excess points towards polygamy or celibacy is a question which on these bare facts alone might be open to controversy. In either case, the *limit* of the divergence permissible from the general law is definitely fixed. In arguing before an English audience we need not discuss the former supposition; here, at least, we shall not be accused of going one step beyond the bound-