1946

The Authoress

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The Collegian is a literary magazine published by the Belles Lettres and Union Philosophical Societies at Dickinson College in 1849. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
and sometimes he is, ridiculously, the principal actor in scenes which were extant before nature blessed the world with his existence. The youth, who was never admitted above the grammar school, relates what occurred during his college days, with a face so straight that his more credulous friends almost believe that he received the honors of the graduating class. The minds of such have not yet expanded sufficiently to receive an idea more weighty than their diminutive selves. True it is, if men do not respect themselves they cannot expect to be respected; but it is equally true, that not all who value themselves are valued. Words are not heard when actions speak louder. Although Bathyllus imposed himself upon Cesar, and received the honors due to Virgil, yet this deception, when discovered, only rendered him the more odious. Actions are believed: so when any are observed to delight in display and show, it may be well inferred that they possess but little else.

That excessive tameness and innocence, which would make the possessor bow to received opinions without examination, are quite as injurious to society as that confidence which makes him think his own opinions right and true, and that he has already acquired that amount of knowledge which precludes further improvement; "medio tutissimus ibis." This happy medium can only be preserved by a sound and well-regulated mind. Due deference to the opinions of others is to be preserved, and still humanity should not be degraded by dethroning reason, which ought to sit in judgment upon every question.

THE AUTHORESS.

On looking over the Collegian for April, we observed a piece entitled "The Authoress," which, as far as we could comprehend its bearing, undertook to prove that the penchant for writing, with which women are from time to time seized, is very naughty and should be discontinued; that the pen should be resigned exclusively to the male portion of the human family, whilst the ladies should bestow undivided attention on those "heavenly gifts" wherewith they have been endowed, and also, that "magic influence" which, as "reflected on society, gives it a charm which would else be unknown."

Now, this may be a very happy and comfortable doctrine for an aspiring youth who doubtless anticipates setting aside with his pen an Ellis or a de Stael; but then, we have a slight fault to find with his theory, which is, that it doesn't contain a word of truth. And, inasmuch as the Collegian is "at all times open to free expression of thought and opinion," and lest silence should imply a prevalence of the sentiment in college, we beg leave to notice a few of the arguments adduced in the piece.
After an extended series of awkward compliments to the ladies, the writer gives us the remarkable information, that woman exerts a very potent influence on men and manners; and that she shouldn’t do away with this influence by writing books—implying the loss of influence in society as the inevitable consequence of female authorship! Now it appears to us quite an outré specimen of logic, this. We have not studied any but Whately’s, it’s true, but then we’ve learned sufficient from that, to prohibit our admitting any such premise as this—which, by the way, is apparently the hypothesis upon which the whole argument rests in this piece. Now, we not only deny it, but insist that her influence is in this manner increased, not only in her personal relations, but extended beyond her own fireside; as being a woman of acknowledged talent and taste. Who has exerted a greater influence for refinement and amiability among the youth of our country than Mrs. Sigourney? And what a desideratum would have been occasioned in every family, had Miss Edgeworth been content to shine only at her own hearth; whereas her works are now the Penates of every household.

Would this writer have us believe that a woman cannot be influential in society, and at the same time an authoress, any more than a man can serve God and Mammon? Why, we contend that this authorship is one of the surest assistants to this “magic influence,” which we are told is of such importance in the development of national and individual character.

But we come now to notice the second argument, which is embodied in the following words: “But as an authoress in any department of literature, she can profess only equality with man, and as such, her influence is only what man has upon man. The experience of the past teaches that this is not her proper influence, &c.” Now, is it not plausible and proper to suppose, since woman and man exert the same influence in this department, that woman is the very one that should exert it? Is not the mild and refining influence which literature ever has, and ever should exert over men, more consistent with her employment of inculcating moral precepts to the young, and in giving care to their early instruction; whilst to the ruder being should be left the fierce strife of the political world, the attainment of wealth and honor? We were rather amused at the writer’s speaking of woman as engaging in the “coarser pursuits” of man, i.e., literature. Now, literature should not be rough, and if it is thus in the hands of the “ruthless tyrant,” it should be taken away from him, and given into the more refined hands of woman. But the most amazing thing relative to this very queer composition, is, that it is headed with the line—

“O woman, best are all things as the will
Of God ordained them;—”

Are we to infer from this that the remarkable talent for writing, which God had “ordained” to a Hemans, a Norton, or a More, should have remained buried in a napkin, or should have been set on a hill to give light to the world—which was the will of God?