

That was a savage time, when pillage and rapine followed victory as a matter of course in the right of might. All Scandinavia was in a constant state of turmoil in the incessant warrings of the kings and earls, while predatory excursions served to fill in the gaps of idleness of the sea-warriors. But in the comparative tranquillity of Iceland a literature sprang up which still excites our admiration and

shows us that the early Norsemen had also, even in that primitive age, great intellectual qualities.

Nor has the Norseman of to-day buried his ancient heritage in a napkin. The modern literature of Norway and the explorations of Nansen and Amundson stand out as monuments of his preëminence in literature and in adventurous discovery.

## THE LITERARY LADY

BY AGNES REPPLIER

“Peu de génie, point de grâce.”

In this overrated century of progress, when women have few favors shown them, but are asked to do their work or acknowledge their deficiencies, the thoughtful mind turns disconsolately back to those urbane days when every tottering step they took was patronized and praised. It must have been very pleasant to be able to publish *Paraphrases and Imitations of Horace*, without knowing a word of Latin. Latin is a difficult language to study, and much useful time may be wasted in acquiring it; therefore Miss Anna Seward (the Swan of Lichfield) eschewed the tedious process which most translators deem essential. Yet her paraphrases were held to have caught the true Horatian spirit; and critics praised them all the more indulgently because of their author's feminine attitude to the classics. “Over the lyre of Horace,” she wrote elegantly to Mr. Repton, “I throw an unfettered hand.”

It may be said that critics were invariably indulgent to female writers (listen to Christopher North purring over Mrs. Hemans!) until they stepped, like Charlotte Brontë, from their appointed spheres, and hotly challenged the competition of the world. This was a dis-

agreeable and a disconcerting thing for them to do. Nobody could patronize *Jane Eyre*, and none of the pleasant things which were habitually murmured about “female excellence and talent” seemed to fit this firebrand of a book. Had Charlotte Brontë taken to heart Mrs. King's “justly approved work” on *The Beneficial Effects of the Christian Temper upon Domestic Happiness*, she would not have shocked and pained the sensitive reviewer of the *Quarterly*.

It was in imitation of that beacon light, Mrs. Hannah More, that Mrs. King (called by courtesy Mrs., though really a virginal Frances Elizabeth) wrote her famous treatise. It was in imitation of Mrs. Hannah More that Mrs. Trimmer (abhorred by Lamb) wrote *The Servant's Friend, Help to the Unlearned*, and the *Charity School Spelling Book*, — works which have passed out of the hands of men, but whose titles survive to fill us with wonder and admiration. Was there ever a time when the unlearned frankly recognized their ignorance, and when a mistress ventured to give her housemaids a *Servant's Friend*? Was spelling in the charity-schools different from spelling elsewhere, or were charity-school children taught a limited vocabulary, from which all words of rank

had been eliminated? Those were days when the upper classes were affable and condescending, when the rural poor — if not intoxicated — curtsied and invoked blessings on their benefactors all day long, and when benevolent ladies told the village politicians what it was well for them to know. But even at this restful period, a *Charity School Spelling Book* seems ill calculated to inspire the youthful student with enthusiasm.

Mrs. Trimmer's attitude to the public was marked by that refined diffidence which was considered becoming in a female. Her biographer assures us that she never coveted literary distinction, although her name was celebrated "wherever Christianity was established, and the English language was spoken." Royalty took her by the hand, and bishops expressed their overwhelming sense of obligation. We sigh to think how many ladies became famous against their wills a hundred and fifty years ago, and how hard it is now to raise our aspiring heads. There was Mrs. Carter — also unmarried — who read Greek, and translated Epictetus, who was admired by "the great, the gay, the good and the learned;" yet who could with difficulty be persuaded to bear the burden of her own eminence. It was the opinion of her friends that Mrs. Carter had conferred a good deal of distinction upon Epictetus by her translation, — by setting, as Dr. Young elegantly phrased it, this Pagan jewel in gold. We find Mrs. Montagu writing to this effect, and expressing in round terms her sense of the philosopher's obligation. "Might not such an honour from a fair hand make even an Epictetus proud, without being censured for it? Nor let Mrs. Carter's amiable modesty become blameable by taking offence at the truth, but stand the shock of applause which she has brought upon her own head."

It was very comforting to receive letters like this, to be called upon to brace one's self against the shock of applause, instead of against the chilly douche of dis-

paragement. Mrs. Carter retorted, as in duty bound, by imploring her friend to employ her splendid abilities upon some epoch-making work, — some work which, while it entertained the world, "would be applauded by angels, and registered in Heaven." Perhaps the uncertainty of angelic readers daunted even Mrs. Montagu, for she never responded to this and many similar appeals; but suffered her literary reputation to rest secure on her defense of Shakespeare, and three papers contributed to Lord Lyttelton's *Dialogues of the Dead*. Why, indeed, should she have labored further, when, to the end of her long and honored life, men spoke of her "transcendent talents," her "magnificent attainments"? Had she written a history of the world, she could not have been more reverently praised. Lord Lyttelton, transported with pride at having so distinguished a collaborator, wrote to her that the French translation of the *Dialogues* was as well done as "the poverty of the French tongue would permit;" and added unctuously, "but such eloquence as yours must lose by being translated into *any* other language. Your form and manner would seduce Apollo himself on his throne of criticism on Parnassus."

Lord Lyttelton was perhaps more remarkable for amiability than for judgment; but Sir Nathaniel Wraxall, who wrote good letters himself, ardently admired Mrs. Montagu's, and pronounced her "the Madame du Deffand of the English capital." Cowper meekly admitted that she stood at the head "of all that is called learned," and that every critic "veiled his bonnet before her superior judgment." Even Dr. Johnson, though he despised the *Dialogues*, and protested to the end of his life that Shakespeare stood in no need of Mrs. Montagu's championship, acknowledged that the lady was well-informed and intelligent. "Conversing with her," he said, "you may find variety in one;" and this charming phrase stands now as the

most generous interpretation of her fame. It is something we can credit amid the bewildering nonsense which was talked and written about a woman whose hospitality dazzled society, and whose assertiveness dominated her friends.

There were other literary ladies belonging to this charmed circle whose reputations rested on frailer foundations. Mrs. Montagu *did* write the essay on Shakespeare and the three dialogues. Mrs. Carter *did* translate Epictetus. Mrs. Chapone *did* write *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, which so gratified George the Third and Queen Charlotte that they entreated her to compose a second volume; and she *did* dally a little with verse, for one of her odes was prefixed — Heaven knows why — to Mrs. Carter's *Epictetus*; and the Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, even little Prince William, were all familiar with this masterpiece. There never was a lady more popular with a reigning house, and, when we dip into her pages, we know the reason why. A firm insistence upon admitted truths, a loving presentation of the obvious, a generous championship of those sweet commonplaces we all deem dignified and safe, made her especially pleasing to good King George and his consort. Even her letters are models of sapiency. "Tho' I meet with no absolutely perfect character," she writes to Sir William Pepys, "yet where I find a good disposition, improved by good principles and virtuous habits, I feel a moral assurance that I shall not find any flagrant vices in the same person, and that I shall never see him fall into any very criminal action."

The breadth and tolerance of this admission must have startled her correspondent, seasoned though he was to intellectual audacity. Nor was Mrs. Chapone lacking in the gentle art of self-advancement; for when about to publish a volume of *Miscellanies*, she requested Sir William to write an essay on "Affection and Simplicity," or "Enthusiasm and Indifference," and permit her

to print it as her own. "If your ideas suit my way of thinking," she tells him encouragingly, "I can cool them down to my manner of writing, for we must not have a hotch potch of Styles; and if, for any reason, I should not be able to make use of them, you will still have had the benefit of having written them, and may peaceably possess your own property."

There are many ways of asking a favor, but to assume that you are granting the favor that you ask shows spirit and invention. Had Mrs. Chapone written nothing but this model of all begging letters, she would be worthy to take high rank among the literary ladies of Great Britain.

It is more difficult to establish the claim of Mrs. Boscawen, who looms nebulously on the horizon as the wife of an admiral, and the friend of Mrs. Hannah More, from whom she received flowing compliments in the *Bas Bleu*. We are told that this lady was "distinguished by the strength of her understanding, the poignancy of her humor, and the brilliancy of her wit;" but there does not survive the mildest joke, the smallest word of wisdom to illustrate these qualities. Then there was Mrs. Schimmelpenninck, whose name alone was a guarantee of immortality; and the "sprightly and pleasing Mrs. Ironmonger;" and Miss Lee, who could repeat the whole of Miss Burney's "Cecilia" (a shocking accomplishment); and the vivacious Miss Monckton, whom Johnson called a dunce; and Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton, a useful person, "equally competent to form the minds and manners of the daughters of a nobleman, and to reform the simple but idle habits of the peasantry;" and Mrs. Bennet, whose letters — so Miss Seward tells us — "breathed Ciceronean spirit and eloquence," and whose poems revealed "the terse neatness, humor and gayety of Swift," which makes it doubly distressful that neither letters nor poems have survived. Above all, there was the mysterious "Sylph," who glides — sylph-like — through a misty atmosphere of

conjecture and adulation; and about whom we feel some of the fond solicitude expressed over and over again by the letter-writers of this engaging period.

Translated into prose, the Sylph becomes Mrs. Agmondesham Vesey, —

“Vesey, of verse the judge and friend,” — a fatuous deaf lady, with a taste for literary society, and a talent for arranging chairs. She it was who first gathered the “Blues” together, placing them in little groups — generally back to back — and flitting so rapidly from one group to another, her ear-trumpet hung around her neck, that she never heard more than a few broken sentences of conversation. She had what Mrs. Hannah More amiably called “plastic genius,” which meant that she fidgeted perpetually; and what Mrs. Carter termed “a delightful spirit of innocent irregularity,” which meant that she was inconsequent to the danger point. “She united,” said Madame d’Arblay, “the unguardedness of childhood to a Hibernian bewilderment of ideas which cast her incessantly into some burlesque situation.” But her kind-heartedness (she proposed having her drawing-room graveled, so that a lame friend could walk on it without slipping) made even her absurdities lovable, and her most fantastic behavior was tolerated as proof of her aerial essence. “There is nothing of mere vulgar mortality about our Sylph,” wrote Mrs. Carter proudly.

It was in accordance with this pleasing illusion that, when Mrs. Vesey took a sea voyage, her friends spoke of her as though she were a mermaid, disporting herself in, instead of on, the ocean. They not only held “the uproar of a stormy sea to be as well adapted to the sublime of her imagination as the soft murmur of a gliding stream to the gentleness of her temper” (so much might at a pinch be said about any of us); but we find Mrs. Carter writing to Mrs. Montagu in this perplexing strain: —

“I fancy our Sylph has not yet left the coral groves and submarine palaces in which she would meet with so many of

her fellow nymphs on her way to England. I think if she had landed, we should have had some information about it, either from herself, or from somebody else who knows her consequence to us.”

The poor Sylph seems to have had rather a hard time of it after the death of the Honorable Agmondesham, who relished his wife’s vagaries so little, or feared them so much, that he left the bulk of his estate to his nephew, a respectable young man with no unearthly qualities. The heir, however, behaved generously to his widowed aunt, giving her an income large enough to permit her to live with comfort, and to keep her coach. Mrs. Carter was decidedly of the opinion that Mr. Vesey made such a “detestable” will because he was lacking in sound religious principles, and she expressed in plain terms her displeasure with her friend for mourning persistently over the loss of one who “so little deserved her tears.” But the Sylph, lonely, middle-aged, and deaf, realized perhaps that her little day was over. Mrs. Montagu’s profuse hospitality had supplanted “the biscuit’s ample sacrifice.” People no longer cared to sit back to back, talking platitudes through long and hungry evenings. The “innocent irregularity” deepened into melancholy, into madness; and the Sylph, a piteous mockery of her old sweet foolish self, faded away, dissolving like Niobe in tears.

It may be noted that the mission of the literary lady throughout all these happy years was to elevate and refine. Her attitude towards matters of the intellect was one of obtrusive humility. It is recorded that “an accomplished and elegant female writer” (the name, alas! withheld) requested Sir William Pepys to mark all the passages in Madame de Staël’s works which he considered “above her comprehension.” Sir William “with ready wit” declined this invidious task; but agreed to mark all he deemed “worthy of her attention.” We hardly know what to admire the most in a story like this, — the lady’s modesty, Sir Wil-

liam's tact, or the revelation it affords of infinite leisure. When we remember the relentless copiousness of Madame de Staël's books, we wonder if the amiable annotator lived long enough to finish his task.

In matters of morality, however, the female pen was held to be a bulwark of Great Britain. The ambition to prove that — albeit a woman — one may be on terms of literary intimacy with the seven deadly sins ("Je ne suis qu'un pauvre diable de perruquier, mais je ne crois pas en Dieu plus que les autres") had not yet dawned upon the feminine horizon. The literary lady accepted with enthusiasm the limitations of her sex, and turned them to practical account; she laid with them the foundations of her fame. Mrs. Montagu, an astute woman of the world, recognized in what we should now call an enfeebling propriety her most valuable asset. It sanctified her attack upon Voltaire, it enabled her to snub Dr. Johnson, and it made her, in the opinion of her friends, the natural and worthy opponent of Lord Chesterfield. She was entreated to come to the rescue of British morality by denouncing that nobleman's "profligate" letters; and we find the Reverend Montagu Pennington lamenting years afterwards her refusal "to apply her wit and genius to counteract the mischief which Lord Chesterfield's volumes had done."

Mrs. Hannah More's dazzling renown rested on the same solid support. She was so strong morally, that to have caviled at her intellectual feebleness would have been deemed profane. Her advice (she spent the best part of eighty-eight years in proffering it) was so estimable that its general inadequacy was never ascertained. Rich people begged her to advise the poor. Great people begged her to advise the humble. Satisfied people begged her to advise the discontented. Sir William Pepys wrote to her in 1792, imploring her to avert from England the threatened danger of radi-

calism and a division of land by writing a dialogue "between two persons of the lowest order," in which should be set forth the discomforts of land ownership, and the advantages of laboring for small wages at trades. This simple and childlike scheme would, in Sir William's opinion, go far towards making English workmen contented with their lot, and might eventually save the country from the terrible bloodshed of France. Was ever higher tribute paid to sustained and triumphant propriety? Look at Mary Wollstonecraft vindicating the rights of woman in sordid poverty, in tears and shame; and look at Hannah More, an object of pious pilgrimage at Cowslip Green. Her sisters, awe-struck at finding themselves the guardians of such preëminence, secluded her from common contact with mankind. They spoke of her as "she" (like Mr. Rider Haggard's heroine), and explained to visitors how good and great she was, and what a condescension it would be on her part to see them, when two peeresses and a bishop had been turned away the day before. "It is an exquisite pleasure," wrote Mrs. Carter enthusiastically, "to see distinguished talents and sublime virtue placed in such an advantageous situation;" and the modern reader is reminded against his will of the lively old actress who sighed out to the artist Mulready her unavailing regrets over a misspent life. "Ah, Mulready, if I had only been virtuous, it would have been pounds and pounds in my pocket."

"Harmonious virgins," sneered Horace Walpole, "whose thoughts and phrases are like their gowns, old remnants cut and turned;" and it is painful to know that in these ribald words he is alluding to the Swan of Lichfield, and to the "glowing daughter of Apollo," Miss Helen Maria Williams. The Swan probably never did have her gowns cut and turned, for she was a well-to-do lady with an income of four hundred pounds, and she lived very grandly in the bishop's palace at Lichfield, where her

father ("an angel, but an ass," according to Coleridge) had been many years a canon. But Apollo having, after the fashion of gods, bequeathed nothing to his glowing daughter but the gift of song, Miss Williams might occasionally have been glad of a gown to turn. Her juvenile poem "Edwin and Eltruda" enriched her in fame only; but "Peru," being published by subscription (blessed days when friends could be turned into subscribers!), must have been fairly remunerative; and we hear of its author in London, giving "literary breakfasts," a popular but depressing form of entertainment. If ever literature be "alien to the natural man," it is at the breakfast hour. Miss Williams subsequently went to Paris, and became an ardent revolutionist, greatly to the distress of poor Miss Seward, whose enthusiasm for the cause of freedom had suffered a decline, and who kept imploring her friend to come home. "Fly, my dear Helen, that land of carnage!" she wrote beseechingly. But Helen could n't fly, she being then imprisoned by the ungrateful revolutionists, who seemed unable, or unwilling, to distinguish friends from foes. She had moreover by that time allied herself to Mr. John Hurford Stone, a gentleman of the strictest religious views, but without moral prejudices, who abandoned his lawful wife for Apollo's offspring, and who, as a consequence, preferred living on the Continent. Therefore Miss Williams fell forever from the bright circle of literary stars; and Lady Morgan, who met her years afterwards in Paris, has nothing more interesting to record than that she had grown "immensely fat," — an unpoetic and unworthy thing to do. "For when corpulence, which is a gift of evil, cometh upon age, then are vanished the days of romance and of stirring deeds."

Yet sentiment, if not romance, clung illusively to the literary lady, even when she surrendered nothing to persuasion. Strange shadowy stories of courtship are

told with pathetic simplicity. Mrs. Carter, "when she had nearly attained the mature age of thirty," was wooed by a nameless gentleman of unexceptionable character, whom "she was induced eventually to refuse in consequence of his having written some verses, of the nature of which she disapproved." Whether these verses were improper (perish the thought!) or merely ill-advised, we shall never know; but as the rejected suitor "expressed ever after a strong sense of Mrs. Carter's handsome behavior to him," there seems to have been on his part something perilously akin to acquiescence. "I wonder," says the wise Elizabeth Bennet, "who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love." It is a pleasure to turn from such uncertainties to the firm outlines and providential issues of Mrs. Hannah More's early attachment. When the wealthy Mr. Turner, who had wooed and won the lady, manifested an unworthy reluctance to marry her, she consented to receive, in lieu of his heart and hand, an income of two hundred pounds a year, which enabled her to give up teaching, and commence author at the age of twenty-two. The wedding day had been fixed, the wedding dress was made, but the wedding bells were never rung, and the couple — like the lovers in the story-books — lived happily ever after.

It was reserved for the Lichfield Swan to work the miracle of miracles, and rob love of inconstancy. She was but eighteen when she inspired a passion "as fervent as it was lasting" in the breast of Colonel Taylor, mentioned by discreet biographers as Colonel T. The young man being without income, Mr. Seward — who was not altogether an ass — promptly declined the alliance; and when, four years later, a timely inheritance permitted a renewal of the suit, Miss Seward had wearied of her lover. Colonel Taylor accordingly married another young woman; but the remembrance of the Swan, and an unfortunate habit he had acquired of openly bewailing her



loss, "clouded with gloom the first years of their married life." The patient Mrs. Taylor became in time so deeply interested in the object of her husband's devotion that she opened a correspondence with Miss Seward — who was the champion letter-writer of England — repeatedly sought to make her acquaintance, and "with melancholy enthusiasm was induced to invest her with all the charms imagination could devise, or which had been lavished upon her by description."

This state of affairs lasted thirty years, at the end of which time Colonel Taylor formed the desperate resolution of going to Lichfield, and seeing his beloved one again. He went, he handed the parlor-maid a prosaic card; and while Miss Seward — a stoutish, middle-aged, lame

lady — was adjusting her cap and kerchief, he strode into the hall, cast one impassioned glance up the stairway, and rapidly left the house. When asked by his wife why he had not stayed, he answered solemnly, "The gratification must have been followed by pain and regret that would have punished the temerity of the attempt. I had no sooner entered the house than I became sensible of the perilous state of my feelings, and fled with precipitation."

And the Swan was fifty-two! Well may we sigh over the days when the Literary Lady was not only petted and praised, not only the bulwark of Church and State, but when she accomplished the impossible, and kindled in man's inconstant heart an inextinguishable flame.

---

## THE BLACK FOG

BY HERMAN SCHEFFAUER

THE black fog has come. Over all the city it lies intact and deep. An absolute midnight reigns. Almost material, almost tangible, almost massive, seems this envelope of sulphurous gloom. It invests the city like a flood; within the streets, within the houses, and within the lungs of all its denizens, it lies intrenched and pitiless. The chimneys pour forth their smoke, but the leaden air oppresses and repels it, and it sinks to the ground, making the darkness denser. The gloom seems to have risen from the shores of those streams of wailing and lamentation, baleful Acheron and Cocytus environing Tartarus, where the thin shades cluster and move, like those who are now pent in this city on the Thames.

The darkness is not black, but of a deep brown. It is as though one walked at the bottom of a muddy sea. The farther wall of this chamber is almost invisible — at ten o'clock in the morn-

ing. Above this dreadful pall that hides his rays, the life-giving sun, bursting with useless fire, now beats upon the surface of the sea of shadow, but his baffled light is repelled or smothered in the misty deeps. Difficult is it for him who walks in an unlifted night to believe that the sun still shines.

Let us forth into the streets so still and sorrowful. With our hands we grope our way past garden-railings, feeling with adventurous foot for the steps or curbs. A glowing patch appears above us; it seems incredibly far away. We put forth our hand and touch the dank iron of a lamp-post. Not even fire and light avail against the almighty fog. Footsteps resound about us, but they are the footsteps of ghosts, for one beholds no body. Now and then some human being brushes by — a woman, announced, perhaps, by rustling skirts or by some perfume cast from her clothes; perhaps a man, declared by