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A DIGRESSION OF WOMEN READERS

Of these adventures and exercises and recreations among books, many, as I have tried to make plain, properly belong to men, but at all times, as I shall now show, women have followed them close, for in reading, as in other recreations, they are not to be gainsaid, and with good reasons, for what more opportune to their wonted seclusions and limitations (especially in times past), their reveries, meditations and introspections, which often for them are substitutes for more active life, nay, life itself, than the tender and beneficent intermediation of books? Thus in all ages have they read and studied not so much to inform their minds (though that was ever their advice to themselves) as to fill or kill the time, cram the vacuities between more passionate moments; to stake out a claim in masculine activities, or link, chain, tie, themselves in this wise, or to console themselves in those gaps and desolations when men or the man has departed:

Now deep in Taylor and the Book of Martyrs,
Now drinking Citron with his Grace and Chartres.¹

How far these perturbations and delinquencies pervade it would be hard to tell. Yet they have been observed

¹ Pope, *Moral Essays*. ii, 63-4.

in several periods, and many opinions as a result of such observations are recorded by trustworthy witnesses. I may recall from among them some references to Christina, Queen of Sweden, made by Huet in his autobiography. This queen ever made a forward virtue of learning, and would entice to her court at Stockholm savants and scholars from distant cities: thus came Descartes, Saumaise, Isaac Vossius (who became her guide in Greek), Bochart, Peter Daniel Huet, and many others to a land which was then considered barbarous. *Christina did not suffer a day to pass without devoting some of her best hours to reading with Vossius, in which she engaged so eagerly as to neglect the usual time for repose.*¹ The question which insinuates is whether or no Christina was suffering from *Prossy's complaint*.² Such a conclusion might be inferred from Bishop Huet's account of her behaviour, for she was notoriously capricious and willing to be swayed this way or that way by her latest masculine enthusiasm. Thus, *when during her passion for letters she had resigned herself to the tutelage of Saumaise or Vossius, she conformed implicitly to their judgments;*³ and *after she had thrown herself into a state of languor by her intense application to those studies, and, later, fallen under the influence of a French*

¹ Huet, *Memoirs*. Trans. Aikin. i, 119. ² MORELL. *Prossy's complaint!* What do you mean, Candida? CANDIDA. Yes, Prossy, and all the other secretaries you ever had. Why does Prossy condescend to wash up the things, and to peel potatoes and abase herself in all manner of ways for six shillings a week less than she used to get in a City office? She's in love with you, James: that's the reason. They're all in love with you. And you are in love with preaching because you do it so beautifully. And you think it's all enthusiasm for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; and so do they. You dear silly! 'Candida', *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. Bernard Shaw. ii. ³ Huet, *Op. cit.* i, 150.

physician, called Bourdelot, she was equally willing for him to remove all books from her sight and to believe that a learned woman was regarded in a ridiculous light by the elegant ladies of the French court. This ruse of the crafty doctor was successful, and as he besides amused her with his pleasantry and jocularly, he gained so great an ascendancy over her youthful mind, that she began to lose all relish for serious learning, her flexible and wavering disposition being such that she entirely depended upon the opinions of others, especially of those who had acquired her esteem by any species of merit; and from this period, says Huet, she gave so much credit to this buffoon, that she almost repented of having learned anything.¹

I know that this notion will be contested by some members of both sexes, and I shall be told not to generalise about women, even from more particulars than I have summoned up, yet I shall let it stand as a legitimate bone of contention, for, say what you will, those who provide us with arguments are also benefactors. *A good fight justifies any cause.*² Neither am I blind to the fact that there have been, and still are, great women readers, even though I hedge it about with buts. But, whether confessed or not, the majority of women find books no more than stop-gaps, as Mary Coleridge her diary; if she dies or gets married, she says, *the work will be discontinued*, for, *no one writes diaries in Paradise.*³

If this is not a sufficient proof, add to it the story of Madame de Charrière.⁴ When the door was closed against Benjamin Constant, *she who had always been lonely saw herself, at last, alone*, seeming to those around her like one

¹ Huet, *Op. cit.* i, 148-50. ² Nietzsche. ³ *Gathered Leaves*. 24. ⁴ *The Portrait of Zelide*. Geoffrey Scott. 190-1.

moving in an empty room; so back to her books and her writing, playing *Providence to the obscure folk who had drifted to Colombier as the stray leaves drifted from the courtyard*; for the most part they were women, often lonely as herself: Henrietta L'Hardy, *handsome as a Van Dyk, on whom Monsieur de Charrière from behind his folio of mathematics would sometimes covetously peer*, Isabella de Gélien, *a romantic dark-eyed beauty of peasant stock with a gift for poetry*, Marianne Ustrich, an Austrian girl abandoned by her parents, discovered in a forest tending a herd of goats and reading the *Télémaque* of Fénelon, and Henriette Monachan, with whom she read Locke. *But the fancies of Henriette, while her brows were knit over 'The Human Understanding', strayed elsewhere; they were in the stables with Racine, Monsieur de Charrière's handsome coachman. For Racine had seduced her, and Henriette for the second time was about to scandalize the Canton of Vaud with an illegitimate baby.*¹

Many authorities believe that women read with less method than men. *Except some professed scholars, Gibbon asserts,*² *women in general read much more than men, but, for want of a plan, a method, a fixed object, their reading is of little benefit to themselves, or others. Others think they are less inclined to adventure among the drier sort of document. It is so rare, said Lord Rosmead, to find a lady who is as much at home in a Blue-book as in a drawing-room.*³ Some, Addison among them, believe that they read for show, as that lady whose books, *most of them, were got together either because she had heard them praised, or because she had seen the authors of them.*⁴ The first of these reasons is not in

¹ *Ib.* 199. ² *Memoirs.* ³ *The Times.* 28:i:1929. ⁴ *Spectator.* 37.

our time peculiar to women, and the second has often a negative effect, for I hear it said that to see authors is to reduce inclination for their books. Authors should be read and not seen. But there was something *feminine*, again in the past tense, in the ordering and arrangement of his lady's library where, *at the end of the folios (which were finely bound and gilt) were great jars of china placed one above another in a very noble piece of architecture, the quartos separated from the octavos by a pile of smaller vessels, which rose in a delightful pyramid; the octavos bounded by tea-dishes of all shapes, colours, and sizes, so disposed on a wooden frame, that they looked like one continued pillar indented with the finest strokes of sculpture, and stained with the greatest variety of dyes; and so he proceeds, showing how books were but part of a decorative scheme made up of architecture, paintings, ornaments; scaramouches, lions, monkeys, mandarins, trees, shells, and a thousand other odd figures in china ware.*¹

In a subsequent paper² he gives a catalogue of the sort of books his men readers think women should read. It is written in the elegantly contemptuous manner of that day, and concludes with a recital from letters he had received from women readers inviting the inclusion of favourite tomes in his hypothetical library for a lady. One is for *Pharamond*, to be followed by *Cassandra*; Coquetilla begs him *not to think of nailing women upon their knees with manuels of devotion, nor of scorching their faces with books of housewifery*; Florella desires books *written against prudes*. Plays of all sorts have their advocates: *All for Love* is mentioned in some fifteen letters, *Sophonisba*, or

¹ *Spectator*. ² *Ib.* 92.

Hannibal's Overthrow, in a dozen, *The Innocent Adultery* is highly approved of, so also *Mithridates, King of Pontus*, and *Alexander the Great*; the *Aurengzebe* has supporters, but *Theodosius*, or *The Force of Love*, carries it from all the rest. William Law, in his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*,¹ has no great opinion of the women readers of his time: *Flavia buys all books of wit and humour, and has made an expensive collection of all our English poets*; which in our days would not have been accounted sinful; but she only sometimes reads a book of piety, and then only if it be short and commended for its style and language, and she can tell where to borrow it. Methinks there would be fewer readers of even our Dean of St. Paul's (men as well as women) if such rules did not still rule our ordinary book-folk. But, doubtless, they were hitting at their Lydia Langushes,² who are not of a day but of all time, although in our later times they would not trouble to hide *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, and *The Sentimental Journey*, or anything half so good, if they had it, behind *The Whole Duty of Man* and Fordyce's *Sermons*. So for the rest I stiffly maintain that at their best women read as finely as men, if not always, or even often, for the same reasons.

But to make a plain and full answer we need go no further than some of those memoirs in which they have recorded their adventures among books, or those others in which fair minded men have awarded them full honours in this respect. Notable among those men is Roger Ascham in his treatise of *The Schoolmaster*, where he upholds the wisdom of kindness in the instruction of youth, *for, beate a child, if he daunce not well, and cherish*

¹ Ch. vii. ² *The Rivals*. Sheridan.

him, though he learne not well, ye shall have him unwilling to go to daunce, and glad to go to his booke;¹ and immediately annexed to this passage is the instance of Lady Jane Grey, a devoted lover of books from tender age, to which passion she was inspired by the kindly teaching of John Elmer, whose excellence in this kind shone out because of the dull severity of her parents; but you shall have the story as he relates it himself: *Before I went into Germanie, I came to Brodegate in Lecetershire, to take my leave of that noble Ladie Jane Grey, to whom I was exceding moch beholdinge. Her parentes, the Duke and the Duches, with all the household, Gentlemen and Gentlewomen, were huntinge in the Parke: I found her, in her Chamber, readinge 'Phaedon Platonis' in Greeke, and that with as moch delite, as some gentleman would read a merie tale in 'Bocase'. After salutation, and dewtie done, with som other taulke, I asked her, whie she wold leese soch pastime in the Parke? Smiling she answered me; I wisse, all their sporte in the Parke is but a shadoe to that pleasure, that I find in 'Plato': Alas good folke, they never felt what trewe pleasure ment.* She goes on to tell him, in answer to his questions, how she acquired this taste from *M. Elmer*, who teacheth me so jentlie, so pleasantlie, with soch faire allurements to learning, and she thinks all the tyme nothing while she is with him;² but this is not to my theme, suffice it that in one instance, and there are more in like kind, a young and high-born woman preferred reading to hunting, being moved to do so by the kindliness of a man, as in the more notable and more passionate case of Héloïse and Abélard. In order to show that such an incident could not have happened only in England, I

¹ *The Schoolmaster*. Ed. Mayor. 30. ² *Ib.* 33-4.

may mention an instance out of *Huet* which proves that women in France at a time when, as I have shown, learning was considered unladylike and inelegant, surreptitiously courted the classics. On one of his periodical visits to Bourbon, where he went to take the waters, Huet met Mary Elizabeth de Rochehouart, *an elegant and modest young lady*, whom he afterwards *celebrated in verse*. She was with her aunt, the Abbess of Fontevraud, and one day when all the rest of the young people were playing games, the good Bishop was pleased to discover his new acquaintance hidden *in a corner of a private closet, attentively reading a book, which she attempted to conceal*. With much reluctance and many blushes she at length submitted to Huet's request, and *produced a book containing some of the smaller works of Plato*. She implored him to *keep the thing a secret*, and, *since chance had brought him thither, to read over with her from beginning to end the Crito, of which she had made a commencement*. This was done, whilst all the time Huet remained fixed in astonishment, at the discovery of so much erudition, with so much modesty, in one of her tender sex and age.¹

Lady Mary Montague, a great and lively reader at all times, carefully cherished her love of reading, and she longed for *relays of eyes* like the hiring of post-horses, so that she could indulge her passion still further: she longs to continue it to *valuable books*, but *these are almost as rare as valuable men*, so must needs be content with what she finds. She keeps abreast of the books of the day, which when she is abroad, as she mostly is, are supplied to her by her daughter. One of them is *Pamela*, whose extraordinary

¹ Huet, *Memoirs*. Trans. Aikin. ii, 346-7.

success she thinks undeserved: *it has been translated into French and into Italian; it was all the fashion at Paris and Versailles, and, she adds maliciously, is still the joy of the chambermaids of all nations.*¹ Henry Fielding is more to her liking, but she prefers *Joseph Andrews* to his *Foundling*. The night the books arrived she had been out riding in the moonlight; arriving back at ten, she opened the box and, *falling upon Fielding's works, was fool enough to sit up all night reading;*² she is not averse from asking her daughter to send her books named in the newspapers, which no doubt for the greater part will be trash, lumber, etc., but will serve to pass the idle time: the *Fortunate Mistress*, *Accomplished Rake*, *Mrs. Clarke's Memoirs*, *Modern Lovers*, *History of Two Orphans*, *Memoirs of David Langer*, *Miss Mostyn*, *Dick Hazard*, *History of a Lady Platonist*, *Sophia Shakespeare*, *Jasper Banks*, *Frank Hammond*, *Sir Andrew Thompson*, *Van; a Clergyman's Son*, *Cleanthes and Celimena*.³

That other great reader among eighteenth-century women, Mrs. Piozzi, brought up as she was in the Johnsonian school, rails against the popular novel: *Have you read all these new Romances?* she asks Penelope Pennington:⁴ *The Knights of the Swan, the terrific Leonore, and a Ballad of Alonzo the Brave?* And noting a great change in popular reading, she supposes people grow tired of *Master Jacky* and *Miss Jenny*, and *fly from insipid diet of water-gruel and chicken broth to Caviare and Cayenne, and Peppermint water*, concluding that it is wholesomer to study stories of *little Eugenia tumbling off the plank, out from old simple Sir Hugh's arms, than following the frightful Monk to his precipice.*

¹ *Letters* (Everyman Ed.). 392. ² *Ib.* 380. ³ *Ib.* 477. ⁴ *Intimate Letters*. 140.