

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—At p. 123 of THE LANCET of the 2nd inst., you have an article on the singular and extravagant proposal that women shall be admitted to education and position for the practice of the medical profession; and although that proposal has been ignored in certain quarters by a majority so small as to give at least a temporary quietus to the project, yet the issue of the question must excite, as I apprehend, in the minds of thinkers a degree of surprise that the suggestion should have been entertained by those who were favourable to this incongruous innovation.

I quite concur with you in your proposal that our ladies may with equal consistency claim the professions of law and divinity, as well also the elective franchise, and even the position of members of Parliament; although our authorities upon the English language have not yet found the feminine gender for the nouns physician, surgeon, lawyer, senator, &c.

It seems in the present state of the question that it is not solicited for the softer sex that they shall exercise the healing art amongst the adult male portion of our people, for reasons which it would be at once absurd and even offensive to female delicacy to assign, but that their practice shall be confined to midwifery and the diseases of children.

If such female obstetricians and medical practitioners, in entering upon practice, are prepared also to enter upon celi-

bacy, then one objection (out of many) to their admission might be removed. But we are not ready to believe that women generally are so like the Amazons of fabulous history as to deprive themselves of their natural functions for the exercise of an assumed occupation; and supposing I am right in my conjecture as to the dispositions and right places of women, I think a lady accoucheur far advanced in pregnancy would be placed in an awkward predicament if called upon in a winter's night to leave her bed for the purpose of conducting a difficult or an unnatural labour, to say nothing of the well-known influence of sympathy on the part of a gravid woman on witnessing a labour. I give the words of Vaerhelmont: "Propter uterum solum mulier est id quod est."

It is true that a woman of unusual taste or constitution may enter upon this branch of our profession with success, and even distinction, as is seen in Madame Boisin's life; but this I take to be an exceptional case; and I cannot refrain from quoting the language of Richmond in his "Elements of Physiology," which I read in my younger days:—"The reproduction of the species is, in woman, the most important object of her life; it is almost the only destination to which nature has called her, and the only duty she has to fulfil in human society. Wherever the earth is fruitful, and furnishes man with abundant means of providing for his wants, he dispenses with the services of woman in obtaining from it means of subsistence, he releases her from the burden of social obligations. The Asiatic expects from the women he maintains in his seraglio, in a state of inactivity, nothing but pleasures and children to perpetuate his race. The women of Otaheite have no employment but pleasures and the duties of mothers. Among some of the savage tribes of America, man, abusing the right of power, tyrannizes, it is true, over woman, and, reserving to himself all the advantages of social life, makes her bear all its weight; but this does not invalidate the general law deduced from all nations. Whatever withdraws woman from this primitive destination, whatever diverts her from this end, is to her injury: it is the scope of all her actions; everything in her physical organization has evident reference to it."

Disturbed and unsettled as the medical profession is by dissatisfaction at its status, yet we are not prepared to believe that the ladies will be admitted to our field of action and responsibility. If, however, a future day should show that they are to take the duties of medical practitioners, then it will be time for men to think of men becoming wet-nurses.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

St. Columb, Cornwall, Aug. 1862.

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