

Eminent Literary Ladies.

No. 3.

For the Calliopean.

Madame De Stael.

THE controversy has been long, concerning the comparative intellectual capabilities of the two sexes. From the time of Plato, who said, that there is no natural superiority of man over woman, except in strength, down to Professor Dugald Stewart, who thought, that the differences, which we observe are only the result of education, there has been an almost unceasing dispute.

Whatever influence a better education may have upon the future achievements of woman, it is certain, that man has hitherto held undoubted superiority. Splendid efforts have been put forth by females in every department of Literature—efforts, which entitle them to a rank far above mediocrity; yet they seem not to have attained the highest summit of genius. Homer, Demosthenes, Milton, Newton, Locke and Burke, walk in a sphere into which the step of the female has never intruded.

The one who has approached nearest to the exalted few, and borne away the brightest laurels of her sex, is Madame De Stael. There was no subject too profound for her penetrating genius; and she could plunge into the mysteries of politics and literature, with as much ease and delight, as she could describe the glowing scenery of Italy, or the sorrows of a deserted heroine.

She was born in Paris, on the 22d April, 1766—the daughter of Necker, the celebrated minister of finance under Louis XVI. Her mother, a pious and strong-minded woman, desirous of giving her a perfect education, fostered her rising talents with unceasing care, and stored her mind with knowledge at a very early period. It is a striking coincidence in the lives of Napoleon and Madame De Stael, who were born about the same time, and became the two mightiest spirits of the age, that both were accustomed to ascribe their subsequent elevation to the instruction and precepts of their mothers. Had they instilled more deeply the principles of virtue and piety into the minds of their offspring, how different might have been the condition of the world and themselves. Instead of spreading desolation and a vitiated morality over Europe, and being wretched and miserable themselves, they might, with the same energies have almost Christianized the world, and been fitted for a glorious eternity hereafter. Should not mothers then be careful, that they bring up their children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord”? The destinies of a country or a world, as well as of immortal souls, may be depending on the instructions they impart, at a time when those plastic minds receive a form which can never be remodeled.

But the drawing room was her principal school-room. Here, amid the sprightly sallies and learned conversation of the *savans* and *élite* of Paris, her soul drank in its inspiration, and soon became itself the centre of attraction.

Her powers were taxed to the utmost. Bacon has said, that reading makes the full man, conversation the ready man, and writing the exact man. In her they were all combined. Her thirsting avidity for books was only equalled by her passionate attachment to conversation, and this only by her wonderful facility in composition! Her insatiable mind devoured and lived upon the works of genius, while her burning thoughts found vent in the *melée* of the literary circle, or in writings which astonished the assembled listeners, to whom she declaimed them. Her very existence seemed to be bound up in the excitement of literary intercourse.

Another passion, and it was far more commendable, was her ardent and devoted attachment to her father. Overwhelmed by the weight of a tottering kingdom, M. Necker delighted to find relief in the conversation of his daughter, whose affection and vivacity dispelled every care from his brow.

At the age of twenty, she was married to the Baron De Stael Holstein, a Protestant nobleman, and Swedish Ambassador at the Court of France: but her marriage seems to be a subordinate event in her life. Her letters on the writings and character of Rousseau, published about this time, commenced the dazzling career of her authorship.

France was now on the verge of its great Revolution.—Groaning under the shackles of despotism, the whole nation, nobles, ecclesiastics, lawyers, plebeians, rose up in the might of its strength, and proclaimed the voice of Liberty. It was a noble enterprise at first, and the patriotic La Fayette, and the disinterested Necker helped it on; but alas, it was carried too far. Dark and gloomy was the retribution which awaited it—when its mobs, tearing away the very landmarks of society, waded to power through oceans of blood. The helm of established authority once destroyed, the boisterous waves of popular commotion tossed and shattered in pieces the vessel of State.

It was amid such stirring times Madame De Stael passed her womanhood. Enthusiastic hopes at first animated her bosom, that freedom was about to smile on her country—but they were bitterly blasted, as scene after scene of the terrible drama was enacted. “She saw the noble La Fayette forced to fly into foreign lands—the ambitious and hard-hearted Danton and Robespierre bathing their hands in innocent, and even in royal blood—a furious populace careering in bloodshed and trampling down every thing above them—party after party overthrown and destroyed—and finally, Napoleon rising on the ruins of his fallen country. Sometimes she was employed in rescuing an ill-fated victim from the hands of the executioner—sometimes in making eloquent appeals in behalf of the royal family, and especially of the heroic Queen, Marie Antoinette—sometimes, when crime had ceased its havoc, in opening her splendid saloon for the witty and learned—and sometimes in visiting her beloved father at his beautiful residence on the lake of Geneva.

But the bitterest portion of her existence now approached.—Napoleon had reached the summit of power. Looking down from his height to see who were able and inclined to oppose him, he saw in Madame De Stael one, who penetrated at a glance his daring and ambitious designs, and one, who would never stoop to become his partisan. He aimed at her a shaft, which he knew too well would pierce her to the heart. He banished her from Paris. To her, this seemed like a death-stroke. Murat was not more wretched away from the roar of the cannon and the wild tumult of war, than was Madame De Stael when deprived of the excitement of literary warfare. Sometimes she would approach the capital, as near as was permitted, to see some of her friends; but it served only to render more painful, the pangs which a new separation inflicted. Thrice the inexorable persecutor banished her from the scenes she loved. He little thought that he too would have to drink the same bitter cup to the very dregs, on the lonely shores of St. Helena.

Thrown back upon her own mind by these trying events, she found there nothing to elevate, nothing to support her. It was like the existence of the inebriate—happy and joyous in the moment of intoxication, but wretched and gloomy in the interval.—Misery and melancholy, like a blighting mildew, settled upon her mind, and the rest of her life seemed like a fearful vigil on the verge of the grave.

Her husband died in 1802, and her father in 1804, a loss, which deeply affected her sensitive mind. In 1810 she was again married to a young officer, who had retired to Geneva on account of his wounds, and had been charmed by her talents and powers of conversation, (for she was not prepossessing, except in the expression of her eyes.)

Her principal enjoyment in the latter part of her life was derived from the society of her amiable family and a few friends, who still lingered around her. The marriage of her eldest daughter, a pious and talented lady, to the celebrated Duke de Broglie, was also the source of great pleasure to her in her declining years.

In order to dispel the *ennui* which haunted her, she travelled a good deal; and the emotions she experienced in the various countries which she visited, gave rise to many of her writings.—“Corinne or Italy,” her most celebrated work, though a novel, embodies the deep feelings and thrilling associations which that sunny clime, hallowed by so many relics of former times, awakened in her vivid imagination. In the same manner, her visit to Germany and the other countries adjacent produced two of her most masterly performances, “Germany,” and the “Six years of