

Miss May's Lecture

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I know of nothing that so urgently invites proof, that so tempts logicians and dialecticians to heap it with arguments and demonstrations, as those self-evident truths which people imagine to be too clear to require proof, too obvious to demand that the intellect labor to establish them. We are even told that some mathematicians doubt the axioms of mathematics; and who knows—perhaps their doubt will one day lead them to discover that these axioms are anything but axiomatic.

I was thinking of all this yesterday as I made my way to the American University to attend the lecture that the distinguished Miss May was to deliver. The subject of her lecture invited precisely such reflections. We were told that she intended to demonstrate the superiority of women in the making of human civilization. I confess that I have never doubted, not for a single moment, that women have rendered an undeniable service to human civilization—just as men have rendered a service no less undeniable, except in the minds of those mathematical skeptics who hesitate to affirm that four divided by two yields two.

I asked myself, then, what Miss May could possibly say to establish women's contribution to civilization—something so obvious that it seems to need neither proclamation nor proof. And yet, what do you think? I listened to the lecture and returned home overwhelmed by grave doubt as to whether women have any special claim upon civilization at all. I began to ask myself what Miss May truly intended by her delightful and valuable lecture. Did she wish to persuade us that women deserve credit for civilization? Or did she wish, instead, to sow doubt in our minds and subject us to the tyranny of skepticism? And who knows—perhaps one day a gifted writer will attempt to prove the superiority of men in civilization, and end by leaving me with the same doubt and perplexity that Miss May inspired yesterday.

I am therefore convinced that human civilization created itself, and that neither man nor woman can claim exclusive credit for it. Civilization is rather the benefactor of both, for it brought them into being as they are, and granted them the pleasures and the pains of life alike. They delight in suffering no less than in pleasure; for suffering inspires masterpieces of poetry, prose, and art, and awakens in the soul virtues and noble qualities that fill life with dignity, hope for the future, and love of existence.

Miss May informed us yesterday that it was woman alone who created civilization, fostered its development, and adorned it with sciences, arts, and letters. As for the claim that woman created civilization in the first place, there seems—at first glance—no reason to doubt it, since all religious books appear to tell us so. Had Eve not been tempted by Satan to eat from the tree and bite into that apple, Adam and his wife would not have been expelled from Paradise. Had they not been expelled, they would not have descended to earth; had they not

descended, they would not have labored; and had they not labored, civilization would never have come into being. Civilization, then, is one of Eve's consequences, since she ate the apple and brought this punishment upon herself and her husband.

Thus we men enjoy civilization unwillingly, compelled to do so by the sin of our mother Eve. Yet Eve did not eat the apple because she desired its taste alone; she ate because Satan guided her to the tree, adorned the fruit in her eyes, and drove her toward it. Stranger still, Eve did not eat alone—her husband ate with her. One may even suppose that they divided the apple between them, each taking a half. Civilization, therefore, is not the work of Eve alone, but of Eve and Adam together. We men thus have half of civilization, and women the other half.

But matters do not end there. Adam and Eve were both driven to the apple by Satan; and when they ate of it, their nakedness was revealed to them, and they were cast out of Paradise. Civilization, then, is not their work at all, but the product of Satan's instruction—and Satan is accursed. Should we therefore stone civilization along with him?

Is it really a source of pride for women that they established civilization in this fashion—erecting its lofty edifice upon sin, beginning it with disobedience to God and obedience to Satan? Is it not our right, we men, to reproach women for failing to resist Satan and for driving us, by force, into this guilty civilization? Who knows—had our mother Eve not committed this sin, not succumbed to temptation, not been seduced by the apple's taste, scent, and color—perhaps we would have been born into an entirely different condition.

There is little doubt that had Eve obeyed God and defied Satan, she would have spared us evil, shielded us from corruption, and protected us from every form of error, tyranny, and moral decay. In that case, did she truly do us a kindness by creating civilization? And since when has obedience to Satan been an act of beneficence?

Yet we men love justice and are charged with mercy. We reject tyranny, and we do not wish to burden women alone with the sins and weights of civilization. We share them, for Eve did not eat the apple alone. Had she done so, she alone would have been expelled from Paradise; and had she descended to earth alone, she could neither have labored nor lived, nor founded civilization at all. She needed man both to do good and to do harm. She lived with him in Paradise and descended with him to earth; she obeyed God with him and disobeyed Him with him.

Indeed, we men are more generous, more just, than Miss May imagines. We absolve our mother Eve of all blame and lay the entire burden of the apple upon our father Adam. There is no harm in this, for he later received words from his Lord and was forgiven. Eve was not created directly from clay as Adam was; she was created from him. He preceded her in existence and in life. If she inherited weakness, it came from him; if she possessed strength, it too came from him. Thus the burden of the apple and its consequences rests upon Adam—and after him, upon his sons, the men.

Do you see, Miss May, how just and magnanimous we are? Civilization is not a blessing but a calamity, for it is the work of Satan. We therefore relieve women of its burdens and carry its sins on their behalf. What would we ever withhold in order to protect women from evil and shield them from guilt?

And yet—woman's true merit in relation to civilization is immense: not that she created it, but that she endured it; not that she committed its sin, but that she softened it, lightened its weight, and helped us bear the daily hardships civilization imposes upon us. Is this not better than this modern craving for precedence and superiority that women now display?

Stranger still was Miss May's claim that we owe to women our upright posture and our walking on two legs, after once having walked on all fours. I confess I do not know how women managed to straighten our spines and set us upright. I cannot know, for I have never understood the theory of evolution—and I thank God for my ignorance of it.

Were we walking on all fours after we descended to earth? If so, why were our ancestors transformed, when Adam and Eve walked upright? Or were we walking on all fours before leaving Paradise? If so, Adam and Eve were not as we know them at all, but creatures who gazed at the ground rather than the sky—and we are therefore finer and more beautiful than our ancestors. The source of this confusion, it seems, is Miss May's attempt to reconcile religion with science—no easy task. Religion refuses to accept our descent from apes; science, or some of it, does not object to it. Miss May wishes us to be descended both from apes and from Adam and Eve. As for me, I prefer to descend from a man created upright, walking on two legs, gazing toward the heavens, rather than from an ape gazing at the ground.

The most charming part of the lecture came at its end: the beautiful Egyptian myth of Isis, whose tears formed the Nile. This was the most delightful and graceful moment of the lecture—but, alas, like all beautiful and graceful things, it cannot withstand critical analysis. Who knows who Isis was, or where she lived? Perhaps the Nile does not flow from her tears at all, but from beneath the Throne, as some of the righteous say. All evil comes from what scientists say—woe to humanity because of them! They claim the Nile flows from lakes which, however exalted they may be, are worth less than a single tear of Isis.

May God reward Miss May well. She delighted us yesterday beyond measure—with sweet humor, graceful speech, and a lovely voice. Yet I fear she may be angry with me—and woe to me if she is. Perhaps she grew angry from the very first line of this piece. I therefore call all readers of this journal to witness that I offer her my sincerest apology, humbly begging her forgiveness for this indiscretion.

Still, I am not alone to blame. She herself inspired this essay. She told us yesterday that Napoleon used to say of everything: "Look for the woman." If anyone must be blamed for this article, then it is Miss May herself. I shall bear this blame on her behalf, just as our father Adam bore the burden of the apple for our mother Eve. And I apologize to her, confident that by her nature she is too merciful and too close to tenderness to refuse

forgiveness.