Helene Stöcker, "The Modern Woman" (1893)

Abstract

Although women faced many legal and social barriers in Wilhelmine Germany, Helene Stöcker's (1869–1943) "modern woman" is unencumbered by prevailing social prescriptions. Independent, educated, and forward-looking, she looks to the future for the freedom she wishes to obtain. Indebted to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), this essay captures the progressive vision of women in modern society.

Source

Say what you will, I know it for a fact: The modern woman does not as yet belong in this century. She is someone for whom there is still no name – nor man or place in society – for she belongs in all her being to the future. In short, she is premature.

I am speaking of a special kind of species which Frau Marholm[1] (and Frau Marholm is just about the only modern individual who knows anything about it) has also failed to identify. She is neither "la détraquée" nor entirely "la grande amoureuse" – although she probably comes closest to the latter. And with the "cérébrale" she has only intelligence in common. She is also not the "unspoiled girl from the working classes" about whom one raves nowadays. She is – and indeed a proper term is hard to find – the modern woman, usually unmarried, who in addition to Stuart Mill and Bebel also reads Nietzsche and Frau Marholm, who shares John Henry Mackay's individualism after being for a time in danger of joining the Socialist Party. She is someone who leaves the sheltering paternal household – much like another "Magda,"[2] but with greater sobriety and depth – in order to gain her financial independence, which is the necessary precondition for every kind of freedom. What further distinguishes her from Frau Marholm's carefully crafted typologies is her pronounced sense of individualism and the conflict-free nature of her spirit, which insists equally upon her right to freedom *and* her right to love – something that both Stuart Mill, on the one hand, and Frau Marholm, on the other, concede.

She does not think of becoming exactly like a man, but she does want to become a happier – and for *her* that means a *freer* – human being, forever advancing in her uniquely feminine way. She has long ceased bemoaning the fact, as she perhaps did as a child, that she is not a man. On the contrary, she has come to an appreciation of her feminine strengths as well as her uniqueness, of being something rare, apart, beyond traditional categorization, someone who has still to experience the full joy of personal independence. And finally that profound confidence opposite the man: she does not stand contemptuously and vengefully before him, but rather, with open eyes and heart. She is actually born to love with all the fires of her nature – with all her soul, heart, and senses – [and] as Mantegazza says, [is] more in need of intimacy than the man. But since the man she could accept has not as yet been born – at least, he has never revealed himself to her in any way – she bestows her gifts upon others. She worships the maternal friend who showed the temperamental child a shimmer of understanding. She embraces with the fire of indeterminate passion some sundry, sweet, young thing who – half flattered, half bemused – in exchange grants her the friendship she so hotly desires. She educates her sisters, who are similar in temperament and intelligence, with more than maternal pride. After all, she sees in them a common front, a world-conquering future. And finally, she finds herself in closest communion with like-minded, equally striving female compatriots.

Thus, it has become possible for her – despite the terrible realization "I must love because I live" – to survive the first passionate blush of youth without giving herself away, due to her need for intimacy, to

any man who may happen by but is not “her” man. And yet, while living free and independent in the heart of the big city, enjoying what she so craved – life with her intellectual equals – she has made an odd discovery. Formerly, she had always seen women as the more conservative force [in society] – but now she is forced to learn that, with respect to women, the man is far more conservative still, that in mind and nerves he more closely follows in the tradition of not only his grandparents, but also his great grandparents. In the most reactionary, narrow-minded sense, he can see in the “new, free” women no more than the whore and the housewife, so that he looks startled when she wants to speak to him about [Tolstoy’s] “Kreutzer Sonata.” [That said,] she has made the sobering discovery that women themselves view that which is modern and future-oriented as no more than a nebulous abstraction, and that even the most modern among them can, in practice, be terrible philistines who do not take their own ideas seriously.

[The modern woman] admittedly also makes an unprecedented demand: that she no longer be subjected to the petty humiliations of the ballroom nor viewed as man-like. Yes, she is an exacting creature. She wants to be a woman, to receive love and to give love, yet she wants to do more than listen in silence when clever men speak. No, no – no formula has as yet been found for such a creature. And yet, I know it for a fact: the salvation which a forlorn, anxious age seeks from a future redeemer must come from the woman, from the woman who, through her own strength and in total disregard of men, has laid claim to her own humanity!

As little as even the modern man is able to understand this woman, as infrequently as he thus takes her for his companion, however, so does the modern woman rarely give herself to the man. She demurs not for reasons of asceticism or aversion, but for a more external reason. All that awaits her, namely, under the still cumbersome, regressive domestic and economic conditions of our time suffices to keep her eyes wide open. Behind the joy [lurks] the kitchen and the playroom (not that she would not love her children); out of a free human being there emerges a beast of burden with the most unbelievably ponderous responsibilities. And [yet] she thirsts for freedom just as much as for love. Only the two combined can grant her the peace characteristic of the truly liberated human being. Thus, she possesses the necessary critical distance not to be overwhelmed by her young, impassioned senses and perhaps, after a brief thrill, to make herself and others miserable. And yet, she only knows too well: The best which life has to offer can only blossom within a community of two free human beings, between man and woman, without question, without a doubt! She encounters it often enough that others react with pity and surprise when she suggests that [the woman] must become more honest, open, natural, that she must finally be taught to be conscious of her womanhood. They look with a patronizing smile: “What an innocent you must be!”

Thus, she holds her very *self* for the great fortune after which she has so ceaselessly striven and has, beyond all expectations, finally found. She now knows that everyone who wants to become free can only do so through his own devices. She holds fast to what she has – to reason and art and science, the greatest of human strengths – so that no one should take her crown! Her goal is to be a fully human being to whom nothing is foreign! But she also hopes for a time when her association with a man can one day become a [true] union.

NOTES

[1] Frau Marholm: Laura M. (pseudonym for Laura Mohr, 1854–1905), writer, married to Ola Hansson; “la détraquée,” “la grande amoureuse,” and “cérébrale” are three of L. M.’s female typologies as described in her essay “On the Psychology of Woman” (*Freie Bühne*, vol. 1, pages 1094–1105, 1202–1214, 1304–1313). Information provided in footnote in Helene Stöcker, “Die moderne Frau,”; reprinted in Jürgen Schutte and Peter Sprengel, *Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, p. 152.
[2] Magda: heroine of the play *Heimat* (1893) by Hermann Sudermann. In Schutte and Sprengel (see above note), *Berliner Moderne*, p. 154.

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