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A

VIEW

OF THE

PRINCIPLES AND CONDUCT

PREVALENT AMONG

WOMEN OF RANK AND FORTUNE.

CHAP. XIII.

The practical use of female knowledge, with a sketch of the female character, and a comparative view of the sexes.

THE chief end to be proposed in cultivating the understandings of women, is to qualify them for the practical purposes of life. Their knowledge is not often like the learning of men, to be reproduced in some literary composition, nor ever in any learned profession; but it is to come out in conduct. A lady studies, not that she may qualify herself to become

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an orator or a pleader; not that ſhe may learn to debate, but to act. She is to read the beſt books, not ſo much to enable her to talk of them, as to bring the improvement which they furniſh, to the rectification of her principles, and the formation of her habits. The great uſes of ſtudy are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be uſeful to others.

To woman, therefore, whatever be her rank, I would recommend a predominance of thoſe more ſober ſtudies, which, not having diſplay for their object, may make her wiſe without vanity, happy without witneſſes, and content without panegyriſts; the exerciſe of which will not bring celebrity, but improve uſefulneſs. She ſhould purſue every kind of ſtudy which will teach her to elicit truth; which will lead her to be intent upon realities; will give preciſion to her ideas; will make an exact mind; every ſtudy which, inſtead of ſtimulating her ſenſibility, will chaſtiſe it; which will give her definite notions; will bring

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bring the imagination under dominion; will lead her to think, to compare, to combine, to methodiſe; which will confer ſuch a power of diſcrimination, that her judgment ſhall learn to reject what is dazzling, if it be not ſolid; and to prefer, not what is ſtriking, or bright, or new, but what is juſt. That kind of knowledge which is rather fitted for home conſumption than foreign exportation, is peculiarly adapted to women.

It is becauſe the ſuperficial nature of their education furniſhes them with a falſe and low ſtandard of intellectual excellence, that women have ſometimes become ridiculous by the unfounded pretenſions of literary vanity: for it is not the really learned, but the ſmatterers, who have generally brought their ſex into diſcredit, by an abſurd affectation, which has ſet them on deſpiſing the duties of ordinary life. There have not indeed been wanting (but the character is not now common) *precieuſes ridicules*, who, aſſuming a ſuperiority

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riority to the ſober cares which ought to occupy their ſex, have claimed a loſty and ſupercilious exemption from the dull and plodding drudgeries

Of this dim ſpeck called earth !

who have affected to eſtabliſh an unnatural ſeparation between talents and uſefulneſs, inſtead of bearing in mind that talents are the great appointed inſtruments of uſefulneſs; who have acted as if knowledge were to confer on woman a kind of fantaſtic ſovereignty, which ſhould exonerate her from female duties; whereas it is only meant the more eminently to qualify her for the performance of them. For a woman of real ſenſe will never forget, that while the greater part of her proper duties are ſuch as the moſt moderately gifted may fulfil with credit, (ſince Providence never makes that to be very difficult, which is generally neceſſary,) yet the moſt highly endowed are equally bound to fulfil them; and the humbleſt of theſe offices,

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offices, performed on Christian principles, are wholesome for the minds even of the most enlightened, and tend to the casting down of those high imaginations which women of genius are too much tempted to indulge.

For instance; ladies whose natural vanity has been aggravated by a false education, may look down on *œconomy* as a vulgar attainment, unworthy of the attention of an highly cultivated intellect; but this is the false estimate of a shallow mind. Œconomy, such as a woman of fortune is called on to practise, is not merely the petty detail of small daily expences, the shabby curtailments and stinted parsimony of a little mind, operating on little concerns; but it is the exercise of a sound judgment exerted in the comprehensive outline of order, of arrangement, of distribution; of regulations by which alone well-governed societies, great and small, subsist. She who has the best regulated mind will, other

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things being equal, have the beſt regulated family. As in the ſuperintendence of the univerſe, wiſdom is ſeen in its *effects*; and as in the viſible works of Providence that which goes on with ſuch beautiful regularity is the reſult not of chance but of deſign; ſo that management which ſeems the moſt eaſy is commonly the conſequence of the beſt concerted plan: a well-concerted plan is ſeldom the offſpring of an ordinary mind. A ſound œconomy is a ſound underſtanding brought into action; it is calculation realized; it is the doctrine of proportion reduced to practice; it is foreſeeing conſequences, and guarding againſt them; it is expecting contingencies and being prepared for them. The difference is, that to a narrow-minded vulgar œconomiſt the details are continually preſent; ſhe is overwhelmed by their weight, and is perpetually beſpeaking your pity for her labours and your praiſe for her exertions; ſhe is afraid you will not

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not ſee how much ſhe is haraſſed. Little events and trivial operations engroſs her whole ſoul; while a woman of ſenſe, having provided for their probable recurrence, guards againſt the inconveniencies, without being diſconcerted by the caſual obſtructions which they offer to her general ſcheme. Subordinate expences and inconſiderable retrenchments ſhould not ſwallow up that attention which is better beſtowed on regulating the general ſcale of expence, and correcting and reducing an overgrown eſtabliſhment.

Superior talents, however, are not ſo common, as, by their frequency, to offer much diſturbance to the general courſe of human affairs; and many a lady, who tacitly accuſes herſelf of neglecting her ordinary duties becauſe ſhe is a *genius*, will perhaps be found often to accuſe herſelf as unjuſtly as good St. Jerome, when he laments that he was beaten by the angel for being too Ciceronian in his ſtyle *.

* See Dr. Owen.

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The truth is, women who are ſo puffed up with the conceit of talents as to neglect the plain duties of life, will not frequently be found to be women of the beſt abilities. And here may the author be allowed the gratification of obſerving, that thoſe women of real genius and extenſive knowledge, whoſe friendſhip have conferred honour and happineſs on her own life, have been in general eminent for œconomy and the practice of domeſtic virtues; and greatly ſuperior to the poor affectation of neglecting the duties and deſpiſing the knowledge of common life, with which literary women have been frequently, and not always unjuſtly, accuſed.

A romantic girl with a pretenſion to ſentiment, which her ſtill more ignorant friends miſtake for genius, (for in the empire of the blind the one-eyed are kings,) and poſſeſſing ſomething of a natural ear, has perhaps in her childhood exhauſted all the images of grief, and love, and

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and fancy, picked up in her desultory poetical reading, in an elegy on a sick linnet or a dead lap-dog; she begins thenceforward to be considered as a prodigy in her little circle; surrounded with flatterers, she has no opportunity of getting to know that her fame is derived not from her powers, but her position; and that when an impartial critic shall have made all the necessary deductions, such as—that she is a neighbour, that she is a relation, that she is a female, that she is young, that she has had no advantages, that she is pretty perhaps—when her verses come to be stripped of all their extraneous appendages, and the fair author is driven off her 'vantage ground of partiality, sex, and favour, she will commonly sink to the level of ordinary capacities; while those quieter women, who have meekly sat down in the humble shades of prose and prudence, by a patient perseverance in rational studies, rise afterwards much higher in the scale of intellect, and acquire a stock

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a ſtock of ſound knowledge for far better purpoſes than mere diſplay. And, though it may ſeem a contradiction, yet it will generally be found true, that girls who take to ſcribbling are the leaſt ſtudious, the leaſt reflecting, and the leaſt rational. They early acquire a falſe confidence in their own unaſſiſted powers; it becomes more gratifying to their natural vanity to be always pouring out their minds on paper, than to be drawing into them freſh ideas from richer ſources. The original ſtock, ſmall perhaps at firſt, is ſoon ſpent; and the ſubſequent efforts grow more and more feeble, if the mind which is continually exhauſting itſelf, be not alſo continually repleniſhed; till the latter compoſitions become little more than reproductions of the ſame ideas, and fainter copies of the ſame images, a little varied and modified perhaps, and not a little diluted and enfeebled.

Theſe ſelf-taught, and ſelf-dependent ſcribblers pant for the unmerited and unattain-

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