

**VARIA**

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Varia by Agnes Repplier

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**AGNES REPPLIER**

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# V A R I A

By AGNES REPPLIER



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## VARIA.

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### THE ETERNAL FEMININE.

THERE are few things more wearisome in a fairly fatiguing life than the monotonous repetition of a phrase which catches and holds the public fancy by virtue of its total lack of significance. Such a phrase — employed with tireless irrelevance in journalism, and creeping into the pages of what is, by courtesy, called literature — is the “new woman.” It has furnished inexhaustible jests to “Life” and “Punch,” and it has been received with seriousness by those who read the present with no light from the past, and so fail to perceive that all femininity is as old as Lilith, and that the variations of the type began when Eve arrived in the Garden of Paradise to dispute the claims of her predecessor. “If the fifteenth century discovered America,” says a vehement advocate of female progress, “it

was reserved for the nineteenth century to discover woman ;” and this remarkable statement has been gratefully applauded by people who have apparently forgotten all about Judith and Zenobia, Cleopatra and Catherine de Medici, Saint Theresa and Jeanne d’Arc, Catherine of Russia and Elizabeth of England, who played parts of some importance, for good and ill, in the fortunes of the world.

“Les Anciens ont tout dit,” and the most curious thing about the arguments now advanced in behalf of progressive womanhood is that they have an air of specious novelty about them when they have all been uttered many times before. There is scarcely a principle urged to-day by enthusiastic champions of the cause which was not deftly handled by that eminently “new” woman, Christine de Pisan, in the fourteenth century, before the court of Charles VI. of France. If we read even a few pages of “La Cité des Dames,” — and how delightfully modern is the very title ! — we recognize the same familiar sentiments, albeit disguised in archaic language and with many old-time conceits, that we are accus-



toned to hearing every day. Christine is both amused and wearied, as are we, by the foolish invectives of men against our useful and necessary sex. She is forced to conclude that God had made a foul thing when He made woman, yet wonders a little — not unnaturally — that “so worshipful a Workman should have deigned to turn out so poor a piece of work.” This leads her to reflect on our alleged weakness and incapacity, of which she finds, as do we, but insufficient proof. She is firm to insist, as do we, that if little maidens are put to school, and carefully taught the sciences like men-children, they learn as well, and make as steady progress. What is more, she is able to prove her case, which we often are not, by writing a grave, solid, and systematic treatise on arms and the science of war; a treatise which handles every topic from the details of a siege to safe conducts, military passports, and the laws of knightly courtesy. And this complete soldier’s manual was held to be of practical value and an authority in those battle-loving days. It may also be worth while to mention that Christine de Pisan

supported an invalid husband, two poor relations, and three children by her pen; and what more could any struggling authoress of our own century be reasonably expected to accomplish?

Another interesting fact presented for our consideration, in these days of Civic Clubs and active training for citizenship, is that one of the first Englishwomen who entered the field of letters professionally, as a recognized rival of professional men writers, entered it as a politician, and a very acrid and scurrilous politician at that, who made herself as abhorrent and abhorred as any law-giver in England. This was Mary Manley, who, in the reign of Queen Anne, wrote the "New Atalantis," allying herself vigorously with the Tories, and pouring forth the vials of her venom on the Duke of Marlborough, and — what is harder for us to forgive — on Richard Steele, whom all women are bound to honor a little and love a great deal, as having been, in spite of many failings, our true and chivalrous friend. Not one of all the modern apologists who prate about us endlessly to-day in print, in pulpit, on the platform, and on the

stage, has reached the simple tenderness, the undeviating insight of Steele.

These things, however, counted for little with Mary Manley, who had less sentiment and less reticence than most party writers of even that outspoken and unsentimental age. Perhaps to attack those high in power who have done their country such priceless service as did the Duke of Marlborough, and to attack them, moreover, with an utter lack of decency and self-respect, is not precisely the kind of deed which warms our hearts to female politicians; but it must be confessed that if this vehement partisan in petticoats had all the acerbity of a woman, she had all the courage of one too. When her publisher was prosecuted for the scandalous libels of the "New Atalantis," she did not seek to shelter herself behind his responsibility; but appeared briskly before the Court of King's Bench, acknowledged the authorship of her book, and, with magnificent feminine effrontery, asserted it was entirely fictitious. Lord Sunderland, who examined her, and who appears to have been vastly diverted by the whole proceeding, pointed out urbanely certain passages of a dis-