Francis Parkman was born the son of a well-off Unitarian minister in Boston in 1823 and graduated from Harvard College in 1844. Sickly throughout his life, he nonetheless managed to break into writing with an account of his travels in the Western frontier. He subsequently became one of the most significant antebellum historians of the frontier and the conflicts between Native Americans and the European settlers in the United States and Canada. With the outbreak of the Civil War, he began to write more about political issues from a distinctly conservative position. He was a prominent voice opposing female suffrage in the postbellum years. As with many critics of female suffrage, Parkman thought the particular question of suffrage raised more general questions about the role of women in society.

The order of Nature is marked by a prevailing consistency. Over all her great fields of action, she is at one with herself, though irregularities and contradictions appear in special cases. Individual men and women are often inharmonious in physical and mental structure, but it is not so with men as a whole, or women as a whole. The typical man or woman is perfectly self-consistent. The one is made for conflict—whether the physical conflict of actual war, or that sometimes no less bitter and cruel, of the competitions of business and ambition. His greater stature and firmer muscles are matched with a sterner spirit, less tender sensibilities, and susceptible nerves, a ruder hardihood, and, in nearly all strongly masculine natures, with a certain remnant of primitive ferocity, which lies latent in the bosom of the highest civilizations and impels their male offspring to adventures in war, the chase, and travel in savage and perilous lands.

There is equal harmony on the other side.

... It will not do to deal with women only as if they were smaller and weaker men. Yet these have been the tactics of the agitators for female suffrage.

The immense disadvantages under which women are placed; the cruel hardship and injustice to which many of them are often subjected; the terrible and crushing penalties, sometimes grievously disproportioned of a numerous class, resulting in many cases more from circumstance than from intrinsic viciousness—all these taken together form the most perplexing and painful problem in human life. A remedy is looked for in a change of public opinion which shall visit the breach of chastity with equal condemnation in men and women. The difference is due to the structure of civilized society, which, on both its political and its social side, is built on the family. Women, and not men, are of necessity the guardians of the integrity of the family and the truth of succession, with all the interests of affection, of maintenance, and of inheritance involved in them. Hence the virtue in question is far more important in them than in men.
Whatever liberty the best civilization may accord to women, they must always be subject to restrictions unknown to the other sex, and they can never dispense with the protecting influences which society throws about them. A man, in lonely places, has nothing to lose but life and property; and he has nerve and muscles to defend them. He is free to go whither he pleases, and run what risks he pleases. Without a radical change in human nature, of which the world has never given the faintest sign, women cannot be equally emancipated. It is not a question of custom, habit, or public opinion; but of an all-pervading force. . . . A woman is subject, also, to many other restrictions, more or less stringent, necessary to the maintenance of self-respect and the respect of others, and yet placing her at a disadvantage, as compared to men, in the active work of the world. . . .

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There is a strange want of dignity in the attitude of some of these reformers toward the question of the relations of their sex to society. Instead of claiming for them what is theirs, a nature of their own, with laws of its own, and a high capacity of independent development, they propose, as the aim of their ambition, the imitation of men. . . .

. . . What do certain women demand for the good of their sex? To add to the excitements that are wasting them other and greater excitements, and to cares too much for their strength other and greater cares. Because they cannot do their own work, to require them to add to it the work of men, and launch them into the turmoil where the most robust sometimes fail. It is much as if a man in a state of nervous exhaustion were told by his physician to enter at once for a foot-race or a boxing-match.

This brings us to our object, the consideration of the movement for female suffrage. It has been claimed as a right that women should vote. It is no right, but a wrong, that a small number of women should impose on all the rest political duties which there is no call for their assuming, which they do not want to assume, and which, if duly discharged, would be a cruel and intolerable burden. . . .

Government by doctrines of abstract right, of which the French Revolution set the example and bore the fruits, involves enormous danger and injustice. No political right is absolute and of universal application. Each has its conditions, qualifications, and limitations. . . . The object of government is the accomplishment of a certain result, the greatest good of the governed; and the ways of reaching it vary in different countries and different social conditions. Neither liberty nor the suffrage are the end; they are nothing but means to reach it; and each should be used to the extent in which it is best adapted to its purpose. If the voting of women conduces to the greatest good of the community, then they ought to vote, and otherwise they ought not. The question of female suffrage thus becomes a practical question, and not one of declamation.

High civilization, ancient and modern, has hitherto rested on the family. The family, and not the individual, has been the political unit, and the head of the family, in esse or in posse, actual or prospective, has been the political representative of the rest. To give the suffrage to women would be to reject the principle that has thus far formed the basis of civilized government.

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A certain benign influence, indefinite and almost mystical in character, has been ascribed to “woman,” which, it is proclaimed, will purify our politics. That, in some relations of life, the instincts of women are preeminently delicate and true; that in them the moral nature and the better emotions are more apt to rule than in the other sex; that their conscience is more sensitive, and their religious susceptibilities quicker and more controlling—is, happily, not to be denied; but they are no whit less human than men. Like them, they have “the defects of their qualities.” . . .

. . . Many countries of Europe have been governed by queens, and this at a time when to wear a crown meant to hold a dominant power. According to the theory, these female reigns ought to have shown more virtuous and benign government than is generally found under the rule of men. The facts do not answer to the expectation. . . .
Finally . . . the women of the South were more ardent for secession and slavery than the men; and, when the men knew that the cause was lost, their weaker partners refused to yield. Fighting was useless; but fair lips still cried, “Fight on!” It was the action of those two very different qualities—a woman’s will and a man’s resolution. The one can be argued with, and the other can not. The one is subject to reason; the other sees nothing but the object on which its heart is set, and strains after it in the teeth of ruin. . . .

One of the chief dangers of popular government is that of inconsiderate and rash legislation. In impatience to be rid of one evil, ulterior consequences are apt to be forgotten. In the haste to redress one wrong, a door may be opened to many. This danger would be increased immeasurably if the most impulsive and excitable half of humanity had an equal voice in the making of laws. And, in the administration of them, abstract right would then be made to prevail after a fashion somewhat startling. . . . In politics, the virtues of women would sometimes be as dangerous as their faults.

But it is not their virtues that we should see in the dust and scramble of the political arena. . . . It has been said, and too truly, that the best men shun politics. Their endless complication, the innumerable wires that guide their machinery, and the dexterity required to work it, give to the practiced trickster who has made them his trade an advantage over far abler men who have not. . . . They would deter the best women far more. All that is repulsive to the one would be incomparably more so to the other. . . .

Women as a whole may be said to be in the condition of persons devoid of this training [in self-government], and of the sense of political responsibility that grows out of it, excepting a minority composed of the more thoughtful, who have acquired it by education, conscientiousness, and association with the better sort of men. But the vast majority have little or none of it; and hence, if they are to be admitted at all to a share in public affairs, they should be admitted very gradually. We say nothing of those differences of nature that have hitherto in all ages, countries, and races, made men the governing half of the race. . . .

If the better class of women flatter themselves that they can control the others, they are doomed to disappointment. . . . It is here that the male vote alone threatens our system with its darkest perils. The female vote would enormously increase the evil, for it is often more numerous, always more impulsive, and less subject to reason; and, through causes which we gave above, almost devoid of the sense of responsibility. Here the bad politician would find his richest resources. . . .