

THE DISTAFF

*Scripture references are to the NIV-UK), unless indicated otherwise.
To view texts not quoted, click on the citation.*

THE HISTORY of this world is to a remarkable degree the story of Woman. By turns praised, tolerated, and feared, she has been regarded as Doyenne, Diva, and Devil rolled into one.

A far nobler description is that assigned to her in [Genesis 3: 20](#): ‘mother of all the living’. Profound in its prediction of her influence on a world thenceforth under condemnation, and transcending the mere facts of reproduction, the ascription hints at the essence of compassion, care, and the complexities of nurturing, which would be her domain. More than a mere alter ego of the man, the woman would, in her own right, help to weave the rich tapestry of history, encouraging and supporting those who had a more immediate and visible role than she, even to bearing the Saviour and rocking His cradle.

When assuring Israel of His love for them, the Father employs the imagery of the mother ([Isaiah 49: 15](#)). In the shifting landscape of experience, what is wanted by the wayfarer, the lonely, the fearful – the child crying in the night – is the fixed point, the assurance of love unconditional. Such is a mother’s love, a hand-payment, as it were, of God’s love, a working model of the unflagging compassion that Jehovah, the Loving Father, feels for His children – not for Israel only, but in the wider, revealed Plan, for all who have ever lived, and for whom He sent His Son, *born of a woman*, to suffer and die, a guarantee of marvellous things to come.

Paradise Lost

The misrepresentation of the fall in Eden as one due to sexual misconduct has much to do with the vilification and suspicion of woman. There is no question that the narrative of that descent from grace contains enough information to diminish *both* male and female. And that first accusation of her by man (*it’s her fault* – [Genesis 3: 12](#)) was, perhaps, indicative of the trend to come. For it seems that the woman has received a double-dose of condemnation and she has been much put upon over the centuries. The conflict thus created lies at the root of the relationship between man and woman, at both the secular and religious levels.

There were theoretical elements in the subjection of women and a large contribution was made to them by the Church. In part this was a matter of its traditionally hostile stance towards sexuality. Its teaching had never been able to find any justification for sex except the link with the reproduction of the species. Woman being seen as the origin of Man’s fall and a standing temptation to

concupiscence, the Church threw its weight behind the domination of society by men. Yet this is not all there is to be said. Other societies have done more to seclude and oppress women than Christendom, and the Church at least offered women the only respectable alternative to domesticity available until modern times; the history of the female religious is studded with outstanding women of learning, spirituality and administrative gifts. The position of at least a minority of well-born women, too, was marginally bettered by the idealization of women in the chivalric codes of behaviour of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There lay in this a notion of romantic love and an entitlement to service, a stage towards a higher civilization.[\[fn1\]](#)

Fame, Fortune and Fumes

The dark satanic textile mills of nineteenth-century Britain brought smoke, wealth, and employment to the nation.[\[fn2\]](#) But long before the age of mass production, yarn was spun by hand from wool or flax, using a variety of primitive implements. The fibres were then woven together on a hand loom to produce linen and fabrics of various styles.

Spinning was usually a woman's occupation and is alluded to as such in the Bible ([Proverbs 31:19](#)). While thus engaged, she would rock the cradle and stir the cooking pot (an early example of 'multi-tasking'?). The woman who spent her days in this occupation, married or not, became known as a 'spinster', the word eventually acquiring the sense it has today by the early eighteenth century.

In the process of spinning, raw fibres were fed onto the spindle from a stick or paddle called a *distaff*. Thus it was that the feminine side of the family became principally associated with this work, and collectively styled the distaff side.[\[fn3\]](#) Distaff work came to define the place of the woman in the home and in society at large. For the woman to aspire beyond this station was regarded with disdain by men.

'She rampeth in my face,' writes Chaucer, 'and crieth, "I will have thy knife and thou shalt have my distaff and go spin".' Shakespeare puts into the mouth of his female character, Goneril, the words, 'I must change arms at home, and give the distaff into my husband's hands.'

[\[fn4\]](#)



WOMAN WITH DISTAFF

Elsewhere, and with little deference to female sensitivities, we are told that the making of linen was

an employment for the weakest people not capable of stronger work, being widows and aged and decrepit people, now the most chargeable, likewise for beggars and vagrants, who now live idly and by the sweat of other men's labours.[\[fn5\]](#)

Enter Cotton

By the seventeenth century the spinning wheel was in widespread use throughout Britain, making it easier to draw the thread. Still, it remained a cottage industry, and it was not until the latter part of the 1700's that the process was automated.[\[fn6\]](#) The cotton industry in Britain grew up in the north-west, mainly around Lancashire and its fringes. Here the dampish climate was most suitable for the operation of the machines.

The cotton plant had been grown in various areas of the world for hundreds of years. The burgeoning use of mechanised spinning machines now created a demand for it, especially of the type which was being grown in the United States. The subsequent trade enriched both the United States (*supplier*) and Great Britain (*finisher*). In the southern states, the trade accelerated the purchase and impressment of slaves, without whom the cotton might have gone unpicked. Nonetheless, the fortunes of Manchester were built on cotton, and the city rapidly became the world centre for the industry, earning the sobriquet, 'Cottonopolis'.

Forced Employment

This commerce and the source of essentially free and abused labour allowed the plantation system in the southern U.S. to flourish for decades. During the American Civil War (1861-1865) the Union navy blockaded southern ports to prevent exports of the bales to Britain, and this engendered tension between America and Britain. The sentiments of the British population were broadly against slavery. Indeed, workers on the Manchester and Liverpool docks expressed their support of President Lincoln's efforts to abolish slavery and refused to unload the southern cotton from the ships, even to the detriment of their own livelihood.

In acknowledgement, Lincoln wrote (1863):

... I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working people of Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this Government [the USA] which was built on the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of slavery, was likely to obtain the favor of Europe.

Through the action of our disloyal citizens, the working-men of Europe have been subjected to severe trials for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under the circumstances I cannot but regard your decisive utterances on

the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country. It is indeed an energetic and re-inspiring assurance of the inherent power of truth, and of the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity, and freedom. . . . I hail this interchange of sentiment, therefore, as an augury that whatever else may happen, whatever misfortune may befall your country or my own, the peace and friendship which now exist between the two nations will be, as it shall be my desire to make them, perpetual.[\[fn7\]](#)

Full Steam Ahead

Building on its early lead in industrialisation and backed by its established strength in finance, maritime power, and in possession of captive colonial markets, Britain surged ahead in the production of textiles, iron and steel, in what has become known as the Industrial Revolution, its ample supplies of coal and iron ore feeding the factory maw. Dirty work it may have been, but it brought prosperity to the nation on an unprecedented scale.

From the exigencies of this astonishing period of economic expansion arose many of the inventions which would help to lay the foundation for the technology of our modern capitalist world.

The development of the railway, too, introduced mobility to the population. Easier and quicker travel and the better wages on offer in the big city enticed rural populations into London, Sheffield, Liverpool, and Manchester and their satellite mill towns. Sprawling suburbs and urban poverty followed as a consequence, and it was not long before socially conscious reformers began to see that along with the benefits of the mechanisation, there were many disadvantages. Women and their children now toiled in enormous brick buildings, operating and maintaining huge, dangerous machines, with hourly threats to life and limb.

This further migration of woman into the broader domain of the man had begun and could not be reversed, though decades would pass before she would be considered his practical equal. The effects of the Industrial Revolution on the status of woman would be felt long after the close of the nineteenth century.

Fin De Siècle

Rapid industrialisation followed in Europe and North America, and by the end of the nineteenth century, Germany and the United States had caught up with and, in some respects, overtaken Britain. Notwithstanding the disruptive technology and the problems which came with it, there was widespread optimism that the new century would bring a new world, an automated demi-paradise with justice for all. Politics and national interests declared otherwise, and there were ominous signs of war on the horizon. And, like the age that spawned it, this war would be different from all others. Armoured battleships,

long-range cannon, and vehicles powered by the internal combustion engine would be the new harbingers of destruction. The anticipated cataclysm broke forth in August 1914.

As men from around the world were sent out in their millions onto the battlefields and into the trenches of the Great War, waves of women moved in to take their place in the factories and offices. This further movement from home into industry enhanced the woman's role in the social structure of the new century, one in which she would win greater freedom and respect, albeit through difficult twists and turns.

For a longer read, see *Woman in Society and Church* (eight instalments), to which this article is an introduction.

△[fn1] P. 416, *History of the World* (J.M. Roberts, Oxford University Press, 1993)

△[fn2] 'Jerusalem', a poem written by William Blake (1757-1827), refers to 'those dark satanic mills', contrasting them with the 'green and pleasant land' of England. It evokes the early influence of Christianity on the island (including the speculative assertion of a visit by Jesus). The words were later set to music by Sir Charles H.H. Parry (1848-1918). The hymn has become a quasi-national anthem and is a firm favourite on the last night of Henry Wood's Promenade Concerts, broadcast annually by the BBC in the summer.

Lyrics: <http://www.artofeurope.com/blake/bla21.htm>

△[fn3] The opposite term, applying to the male, is 'the spear side'. In defining 'distaff', the Oxford English Dictionary has: 'Old English *distaef*: the first element is apparently related to Middle Low German *dise*, *disen* 'distaff, bunch of flax'; the second is *staff*.'

△[fn4] From *The Monk's Tale* (*The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400); Goneril to Edmund, *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 2, by William Shakespeare.

Lyrics: <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/act4-script-text-king-lear.htm>

△[fn5] *England in Transition*, Dorothy George (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 104.

△[fn6] Notable innovations in mechanisation were made by **James Hargreaves** (1720-1778; the Spinning Jenny); **Richard Arkwright** (1732-1792; the Water or Spinning Frame); **Edmund Cartwright** (1743-1823; power loom for weaving); **Samuel Crompton** (1753-1827; Spinning Mule). In the United States, **Eli Whitney** (1765-1825) invented the Cotton Gin (en-*gin*-e), which reduced the time needed to clean the cotton before spinning. Whitney helped to lay the foundation for the later development of the textile industry in the United States. Of all the inventors in this field, Whitney may be the only one memorialised in contemporary song. The American lyricist, Ira Gershwin, alludes to him with the line, 'they all laughed at Whitney and his cotton gin'. ('They All Laughed'; lyrics by Ira Gershwin, music by George Gershwin; published 1936).

△[fn7] https://acws.co.uk/archives-misc-lincoln_letter

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