VII. *On the Distaff and the Spindle, as the Insignia of the Female Sex in former times.* By JOHN YONGE AKERMAN, F.S.A. Secretary.

Read 8 May, 1856.

“Antiquis temporibus ipsæ Reginae fuis usæ sunt.”

Spelman, *Aspilogia*, p. 115.

It is the especial province of the antiquary to collect and arrange, under one view, the scattered notices to be found in old writers, and to illustrate those notices by comparing them with the monuments which time has spared, and the usages which yet linger among us. By such means, passages in history, which are, in themselves, purely incidental and subordinate, are made to bear their share in the illustration of past ages, and thus to afford occasional glimpses of the manners and customs of the generations that have preceded us.

The following pages are attempted with this view. I propose, therefore, to review the history of a once highly honoured usage, the type and symbol of female industry, and the insignia of the softer sex in nearly every age and country; namely, the use of the distaff and spindle.

The knowledge of these implements may certainly be referred to the earliest times, since they are not unfrequently mentioned by the oldest authorities. Homer speaks of golden spindles as fitting presents for ladies of the highest rank,^a and Herodotus tells us that Euelthon's last and most significant gift to Pheretime was a golden spindle and a distaff with wool.^b

A very early allusion to spinning occurs in Proverbs. The passage is extremely curious, not only as being derived by Solomon from a still older authority, but also for its distinct mention both of the spindle and distaff. “She layeth her hands to the spindle, כִּישֹׁר, and her hands hold the distaff, כִּלְךְ.”^c It shows, also, that the distaff was used by the Jewish women, although, from the representation on the tombs of Beni-hassen, the Egyptians appear to have spun their thread without

^a Od. iv. 131.

^b Lib. iv. c. 162.

^c Prov. xxxi. 19.

it. One group of women spinners represents them as using a spindle in each hand,^a a proficiency which does not appear to have been ever attained by the moderns.

A male spinner, in the same monument, uses both hands to the spindle.

It will be observed, also, that the Egyptians affixed the vorticellum, or whirl, to the upper part of the spindle, contrary to the practice of other nations. Nevertheless, in the picture of Leda, on the walls of Pompeii, represented in the Museo Borbonico,^b we find two spindles and a calathus, but no distaff; moreover, the

^a Rosellini, mc. No. 41. See also Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, vol. ii. p. 60, and vol. iii. p. 136.

^b Vol. xii. taf. 3.

whirls of the spindle are affixed to the upper part, in the Egyptian manner; a very remarkable peculiarity, well deserving the attention of the archæologist.^a

Minerva, as the instructress of man in all the useful arts, is fabled as the author of the distaff and spindle; hence, as Apollodorus informs us, the Palladium held in its right hand a spear, and a distaff and spindle in the left, *τῇ δὲ ἑτέρῃ ἡλακάτην καὶ ἄτρακτον*.^b Tertullian, however, says that the ancients ascribed the invention of spinning to Mercury.^c

The story of the device of the Pæonian brothers to attract the notice of Darius, is so much to the purpose, that I shall be pardoned for glancing at it here. They caused their sister to be dressed in her best attire, and to pass in sight of the king, with a vase upon her head, and bearing a distaff and spindle, with which she worked as she led a horse to water. Darius, struck with a sight so unusual in Lydia, demanded of the brothers whence she came, and was told from Pæonia. To his second interrogatory, where was Pæonia situated, and whether all the women of that country were equally industrious, the brothers replied in the affirmative. The result, as Herodotus tells us, was the transportation to Asia of the Pæonians, the Syro-Pæonians, the Pæoplæ, and those who occupied the country as far as the Lake Prasias.^d

Ælian^e repeats the story of the Pæonian women generally, adding that, in addition to this, they suckled their children at the same time. Constantine Porphyro-

^a While these sheets were passing through the press, I was favoured by Dr. Lukis, F.S.A., with a drawing of a distaff used at this day in Nubia. An engraving, one-fourth of the actual size, is here given, and it will be seen that it is used without a spindle, or rather that it acts as a spindle, but is turned without leaving the hand. It seems probable that this is the distaff of primitive antiquity, and it explains the use of the implement held by a female figure on a Greek vase given by Panofka.

From the relative size of the object held by the figure on the Coins of Tarentum, given at page 87, it may possibly be one of these primitive distaffs, and not a spindle or *pensum*, which must have been an improvement upon the earliest method of spinning.

^b Lib. iii. c. 12, s. 3.

^c Credo jam de vestro, quod Egyptii narrant, et Alexander digerit, et mater legit ea tempestate Osiridis, qua ad illum ex Libya Ammon facit, ovium dives. Denique cum ipsis Mercurium autumant forte palpati arietis mollitie delectatum, deglubasse oviculum: dumque pertentat, et quod facilitas materiæ suadebat, tractu prosequente filum eliquat, in vestis pristini modum, quem philyræ tenus junxerat, exisse.—Tertullian, De Pallio, iii.

These different traditions may perhaps be reconciled by the fact that the spinning of wool, although as old as the days of Homer, was a later invention than that of flax, since the fibre of the latter would the more readily suggest its application.

^d Lib. v. 12, 15.

^e *περι ξωων βιβ. 2. κεφ. 13.*

genitus,^a however, gives us a similar relation out of Nicholas Damascenus, but says the woman was the wife of a Thracian, γυνὴ τοῦ Θρακῶς—and the monarch Alyattes, King of Lydia. Be this as it may, it plainly shews that the story had taken deep root in the popular mind in an early age, and that tradition had preserved the fact without materially altering the narration.

Pliny, on the authority of an eye-witness, reports that the distaff and spindle of Tanaquil, or Caia, the wife of Tarquinius Priscus, was long preserved in the Temple of Sangus, whilst the royal robe she had made for Servius Tullus was preserved in the Temple of Fortune: hence, he continues, it was the custom to carry before the Roman bride a distaff, charged with flax, and a spindle likewise furnished.^b Cæcilia Caia is said to have been the Roman name for Tanaquil. That she was regarded as the model of a good housewife, appears from the custom of the newly married wife, on entering her husband's house for the first time and being asked her name, replying, "my name is Caia."

Plutarch says, that the name *Thalassius*, chaunted at the nuptials of the antient Greeks, had reference to their word for spinning, *ταλασία*, because they called a spindle *ταλασσοσ*; and that when the bride was introduced to her new home, she brought with her a distaff and a spindle, and hung her husband's door with woollen yarn.^c

From Pliny we learn that a rural law in Italy forbade the women to use their distaves abroad, or even to carry them openly, it being considered a bad omen to meet them thus employed.^d

Many passages from the ancient poets might be cited, in which the mode of

^a *περι θεμάτων*, βιβ. Α. κεφ. γ. Ed. 1698, p. 29.

^b Lanam in colo et fuso Tanaquilis, quæ eadem Caia Caecilia vocata est, in Templo Sangi durasse, prodente se, auctor est M. Varro: factamque ab ea togam regiam undulatam in æde Fortunæ, qua Servius Tullus fuerat usus. Inde factum, ut nubentes virgines comitaretur colus compta, et fusus cum stamine.—Hist. Nat. lib. viii. 74.

^c Quest. Rom. 31.

^d Pagana lege in plerisque Italiæ prædiis cavetur ne mulieres per itinera ambulantes torqueant fusos aut omnino detectos ferant, quoniam adversatur id omnium spei, præcipuèque frugum.—Hist. Nat. lib. xxviii. 5.

A similar superstition once obtained in France, and may have been derived from the Roman Conquerors. "Quant un homme chevauche par le chemin et il rencontre une femme filant, c'est très mauvais rencontre, et doit retourner et prendre son chemin par autre voie."—Les Evangiles des Quenouilles, Quatrième Journée, xxi. chapitre.

A Roman citizen mourned a deceased wife, whose virtues included spinning and staying at home. The inscription to her memory is given by Fabretti, p. 252, No. 35 :—HIC SITA EST AMYMONE MARCI • OPTIMA ET FVLCHERRIMA, LANIFICA • PIA • PVDICA • FRVGI • CASTA • DOMISEDA.—See also Orellius, Inscr. Lat. Select. vol. ii. Turici, 1828, Nos. 4639 and 4860.

spinning is described, but that of Catullus will suffice. The Parcæ are spinning the web of destiny :

Læva colum molli lana retinebat amictum;
 Dexterâ tum leviter deducens fila supinis
 Formabat digitis; tum prono in pollice torquens,
 Libratum tereti versabat turbine fusum.^a

Among the many beautiful coins of Tarentum in Calabria are several, of which I exhibit impressions, representing the mythic hero Taras, sometimes riding on a dolphin, and sometimes seated in a chair. In each of these representations he holds various objects, a shield, a vase, a lyre, a bunch of grapes, the cuttlefish, and, not unfrequently, a spindle with the yarn wound upon it. On one small coin the spindle appears as the reverse type, surrounded by a garland. I can find no trace in antient authors of the myth which associated this emblem of female industry with the demi-god so highly venerated at Tarentum. It probably has allusion to the manufacture of flax, wool, and especially the purple cloth, for which the Tarentines were so famous, and in exchange for which they obtained the luxuries of the ancient world.^b Strabo especially mentions the glossy wool of Tarentum.^c

Descending to later times, we find the distaff and the spindle still more conspicuous as the distinguishing badge of the female sex. Among our Saxon ancestors, the "spear half" and the "spindle half" expressed the male and female line, and the spear and the spindle are at this day found in their graves.^d It was the same

^a Epithalam. Pelei et Thetidos. Martial styles the Fates "*lanificæ sorores*." vi. 58.

^b Athenæus, lib. xiv. c. 16; Jul. Pollux, lib. vii. s. 77, voce *ραπαρτίδιον*.

^c Lib. vi. c. 3, s. 9.

^d See the will of Alfred the Great; Codex Diplomaticus Ævi Saxonici, vol. i. p. 116; Archæologia, vol. xxxv. p. 267; Remains of Pagan Saxondom, Intr. p. xii., and p. 48.

It was the custom of the Pagan Prussians to burn the distaff of the woman on the funeral pile. "*Si fœmina erat igne cremanda, Colus, insigne sexus fœminei, solebat simul comburi.*"—Hartknock, de Funerib. Vet. Prussor. m. 193. Diss. xiii.

with the Thuringians;^a and, among the Franks, the choice of a sword or a distaff decided the fate of a free woman who had attached herself to a slave.^b Even at this day it is said: “Le Royaume de France ne tombe point en quenouille,” and the German Jurisprudents still use the phrases “schwert magen,” and “spindel magen.”

This distinction obtained in England long after the Norman Conquest, when, however, the Saxon form of expression appears to have been changed. Thus Knyghton tells us that Henry the Third, on the death of John Earl of Chester and Huntingdon, gave to his sisters other lands in compensation, unwilling that such possessions should fall to the distaff, “Verum quia terra sua gaudebat regali prerogativa, comitatus ejus ad manus regis devenit, datis aliis terris heredibus sororibus suis in compensationem, ne tam præclara dominatio inter colos feminarum dividi contingeret.”^c

The science of the moderns has, however, banished (from this country at least) even the spinning *wheel*, an improvement on the simpler process of the distaff and the spindle. We are told that the spinning wheel was invented by a citizen of Brunswick, named Jurgen, in the year 1530. My authority is an obsolete French Cyclopædia, entitled “Dictionnaire des Origines,” printed in Paris in 1777. The statement appears to be, in some manner, supported by the Dictionary of Palsgrave, printed in 1530,^d where we find the phrase, “I spynne upon a rocke,” rendered, “je fille au rouet.” From this we may infer that the spinning wheel was certainly known as early as the year of its reputed invention.

In the Catholicon of Joannes de Janua, who lived in the thirteenth century, we find the word *Colus* glossed thus, “item invenitur hic colus pro rota feminarum.” This seems scarcely intelligible; and a friend suggests that the word *rota* may have originally been written *roca*, and that the scribe has converted it into *rota*. Be this as it may, we have good evidence that a wheel was actually used in spinning at a much earlier date than the sixteenth century. A manuscript in the British

^a Usque ad quintam generationem paterna generatio succedat. Post quintam autem filia ex toto, sive de patris sive matris parte, in hereditatem succedat, et tunc demum hereditas ad fusum a lancea transeat.—Lex Thuring. tit. vi. c. 8.

^b Lex Ripuar. tit. lviii. c. 18; Archæologia, vol. xxxv. p. 267, note.

^c De Eventibus Angliæ, lib. ii. p. 2431, apud Decem. Script. By indenture of bargain and sale, dated 13 July, 1669, Mathias Terry and Elizabeth his wife conveyed to the Corporation of London, as trustees for Christ's Hospital, certain pieces of land, &c. in or near *Maidenhead Street*, otherwise *Distaff Lane*. Rept. of Com. of Charities on the London Hospitals, 32, part vi. 1840, p. 139.

^d L'esclaircissement de la Langue Francoyse, composé par maistre Jehan Palsgrave. Fol. 1530.

Museum,^a written at the commencement of the fourteenth century, contains several representations of a woman spinning with a wheel, but she *stands* at her work, and the wheel is moved with her right hand, while with her left she twirls the spindle.^b The spinning-wheel said to have been invented in 1530, was doubtless that to which women *sat*, and which was worked with the feet.^c

The older French dictionaries supply us with several proverbs and allusions to these womanly implements. Cotgrave^d gives us a few, of which the following are examples :—

“Tenir de la Quenouille.” To be under petticoat government.

“Contes de la Quenouille.” Old wives’ tales.

“A la Quenouille le fol s’agenouille.” Fools kneel to distaves,—weak men to women.

^a This MS. belongs to the old Royal Collection, and is numbered 10 E. IV. It contains the Five Books of Decretals, and formerly belonged to Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital. At the end is written—

“Explicit hic totum, qui scripsit da sibi potum.”

The volume contains 628 pages, and is illustrated throughout with a profusion of illuminations representing the combats of knights, grotesques, and domestic occupations. The spinning scene is repeated at folios 137, 139, 146, and 147.

^b This is in fact the wheel called a “torn,” for spinning wool, still used in some districts of England.

^c I know not what to make of the following passage in Stowe’s Chronicle, p. 870, ed. 1631:—“About the 20th year of Henry VIIth Anthony Bonvise, an Italian, came into this land, and taught English people to spin with a distaff, at which time began the making of Devonshire kersies and corall clothes.” Aubrey, in his Natural History of Wiltshire, says, “The art of spinning is so much improved within these last forty years that one pound of wool makes twice as much cloath (as to extent) as it did before the civill warres.” Both these notices evidently allude to mechanical improvements.

^d Voce *Quenouille*.

Again :—" Le fuseau doit suyvre le gorreau." While the husband labours, the wife must not be idle.^a

In France, too, they have a saying expressive of days long passed away : "Au temps que la Reine Berthe filait;" paralleled in Italy by the phrase "Nel tempo ove Berta filava," and "Non è piu il tempo che Berta filava."

The personage here alluded to is identical with the *Frau Berchta* of German superstition. She is said still to live in the imaginations of the upper German races in Austria, Bavaria, Suabia, Alsace, Switzerland, and some districts of Thuringia and Franconia. "She appears in the Twelve Nights as a woman with shaggy hair to inspect the spinners, when fish and porridge are to be eaten in honour of her, and all the distaffs must be spun off."^b

This superstition was, very clearly, once common in England. Brand, in his "Popular Antiquities,"^c quotes some lines from a book entitled "Wit a sporting in a pleasant Grove of New Fancies, by H. B. 8vo. London, 1657." They are entitled "Saint Distaff's Day, or the morrow after Twelfth Day," and are, in fact, stolen from Herrick's "Hesperides :"—

"Partly work and partly play
You must on Saint Distaff's Day:
From the plough soon free your team;
Then come home and fother them.
If the maides a spinning goe,
Burn the flaxe and fire the tow;
Scorch their placquets, but beware
That ye singe no maiden haire.
Bring in pailles of water then,
Let the maids bewash the men.
Give Saint Distaff all the right,
Then give Christmas sport good night;
And next morning every one
To his own vocation."

It is easy to perceive in these lines an allusion to some heathen divinity whose worship was peculiar to women, although the honours were affected to be rendered

^a Voce *fuseau*. Proverbs allusive to the distaff and spindle are of course common to every country. Ducange gives one formerly common in Italy—"Fa d'una lancia uno fuso." In Portugal they say—

"Cada terra o seu uzo,
Cada roca o seu fuzo."

^b Northern Mythology, comprising the principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, &c. By B. Thorpe, vol. i. p. 278. London, 1851.—Grimm, D. Myth. p. 250.

^c art. Twelfth Day.

to a saint, and this can be no other than "Frau Berchta," who, under the various names of Holda, Waud, Wod, Frû Wösen, Frû Goden, Fricke, &c. still reigns among the peasantry of North Germany.^a Nares, not suspecting the heathenism which lurked in this custom, observes of Saint Distaff,—“No regular saint, but a name jocosely given to Rock or Distaff Day, which was the day after Twelfth Day.”^b

Brand^c falls into sad confusion in discussing Rock Day, which he evidently confounds with St. Roche's Day. "I have sometimes," he observes, "suspected that 'Roche Monday' is a misprint for 'Hock Monday,' for there is a passage in Warner's 'Albion's England,' edit. 1597 and 1602, p. 121, as follows:—

‘Rock and Plough Monday gams sal gang with saint feasts and kirk sights.’

And again, at p. 407, edit. 1602,—

“Ile duly keepe for thy delight Rock Monday^d and the Wake,
Have shrotings, Christmas gambols, with hokie and seed cake.”

The allusions are, however, obvious, and ought not to have escaped detection by so diligent an antiquary.

In the Northern mythology the three stars in the Belt of Orion are called Frigga Rock, or Frigga's Distaff. This, in the days of Christianity, was changed to Maria Rock. Superstitions regarding spinning still survive among all the Northern nations. There is a Swedish tradition that there must be no spinning on Thursday evening, nor in Passion Week, or there will be spinning in the night.^e Among the Danes, nothing that runs round must be set in motion from Christmas Day till New Year's Day; there must consequently be neither spinning nor winding.^f Among the traditions of North Germany is one that there should be no spinning on Saturday evening. They have a story that there were two old women, good friends, and the most indefatigable spinners in the village. Their work did not cease even on Saturday evenings. At length one of them died; but on the following Saturday she appeared to the other, busy at her usual employment, and showed her her burning hand, saying—

^a Northern Mythology, ut sup. vol. iii. p. 153.

^b Glossary, v. *Distaff*.

^c Vol. i. p. 193, edit. 1841.

^d It is suggested by a friend that the morrow of Twelfth Day would only occasionally be a Monday; but it may have been figuratively called so, being the first day after the feast of Christmas, as Monday was the first after the feast of the Sabbath.

^e Northern Myth. vol. ii. p. 111.

^f Northern Myth. vol. ii. p. 172.

"Sieh, was ich in der Hölle gewann,
Weil ich am Sonnabendabend spann!"

i. e.—

"See what I in Hell have won,
Because on Saturday I spun!"^a

All these superstitions are palpable remains of heathenism, which Christianity warred with, but has not entirely eradicated, though they have become confused, and at times difficult of identification.

In that very scarce and curious book "*The Gospels of Distaves*," printed by Wynkyn de Worde, a translation of "*Les Evangiles des Conoilles*," the joint production of Tourquart de Cambray, Antoine Duval, and Jean D'Arras, called Caron, first printed about the year 1475,^b the interlocutors bear names some of which strongly savour of heathenism. They are described as Dame Isengryne of Glory, Dame Transelyne of the Crook, Dame Abunde of the Oven, Dame Sibylle of the Mareys, Dame Gamber the Fay, and Dame Bertha horned. In the last personage we have an evident allusion to the Frau Berchta of Northern superstition, while in the third we discover Dame Abundia, another mythic lady, who, according to Grimm, is supposed still to take an interest in human affairs. I leave to the curious in Folk Lore the identification of the other ladies of this strange coterie.

Among the interrogatories of the Priest to the female Penitent, in the Decretals of Burchard of Worms, is one which has reference to certain superstitious practices observed by women engaged in spinning and weaving. The penitent is asked whether she has ever been present and taken part in the follies which some women commit in spinning and weaving, who, when they begin to weave, wish they may be able, by incantations, and by being the first to commence them, to manage that both the warp and the woof be so completely interwoven that the whole may not be spoilt by the devil's interfering with counter incantations. The penance for this offence is thirty days' fast on bread and water.^c

^a Ibid. vol. iii. p. 6. In Altmark there must be no spinning on Thursday evening, nor any dung carried out on that day. Ibid. p. 174.

^b A reprint of this singular work has just appeared in Paris. Apart from the passages of coarse humour, it contains notices of, and allusions to, many curious superstitions of the middle ages.

^c *Interfuisti aut consensisti vanitatibus quas mulieres exercent in suis laneficiis, in suis telis, quæ cum ordiuntur telas suas, sperant se utrumque posse facere cum incantationibus et cum aggressu illarum, ut et fila staminis et subteminis in invicem ita commisceantur, nisi his iterum aliis diaboli incantationibus e contra subveniant, totum pereat? Si interfuisti, aut consensisti, triginta dies pœniteas in pane et aqua.*—Burchardi Wormaciensis Decret. lib. xix.

The well-known couplet, said to have been the rallying cry on the occasions of popular risings in England,

“ When Adam dolve, and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman ?”

well expresses the notion which our forefathers entertained of human industry in primitive times. Some such homely distich was probably in the mind of him who sculptured the curious font in East Meon Church, Hants. An engraving of this font will be found in the *Archæologia*.^a The different groups represent,—1st, the Almighty forming Eve from the side of Adam; 2nd, the plucking of the forbidden fruit; 3rd, the expulsion of our first parents from Paradise; and 4th, the guilty pair sent forth to labour. Adam receives a spade from the angel, with a submissive and even abased air, while our common mother stalks away with head erect, plying her spindle and distaff.^b

In a play entitled “*Corpus Christi*,” performed in old times before the Grey or Franciscan Friars, we have a scene quite in character with the popular feeling of the middle ages. The expulsion from paradise is enacted, and Adam exclaims, as he hears his sentence to toil:—

“ But lete us walke forth into the lande
With ryth great labour our fode to fynde,
With delvyng and dyggyng with myn hond
Our blysse to bale and car to pynde;
And wyff, to spyne now must thou fonde
Our nakyd bodyes in cloth to wynde,
Tyll some comforth of Godys sonde
With grace releve our careful mynde.
Now, come, go we hens, wyff.”

Eve replies:—

“ Alas that ever we wrought this synne!
Our bodely sustenans for to wyne
Ze must delve and I xal spyne
In car to ledyn our lyff.”^c

^a Vol. X. Plates xx. xxi. and xxii.

^b One of the marble bas-reliefs on the façade of the cathedral of Orvieto has a similar subject.—*D'Agencourt*, *Sculpt.* Part i. Plate 32.

^c Dugdale's *Monasticon*, edit. 1830, vol. vi. pt. iii. p. 1539. From the Cott. MS. Vesp. D. viii.

In former times the distaff, or rock, was a formidable weapon in the hands of the gentler sex. The Rhyming Chronicle says :—

“Quinnor tager thereas hæst ock harnysk ifra,
Ok monde them med rockin sla.”^a

i. e.—

“Feminae viros equos et thoraces auferunt,
Illosque suis colis pulsan.”

And in the Digby Mysteries a woman exclaims, as she brandishes her distaff,—

“What! shall a woman with a Rocke drive thee away!”

In “*Le Compost et Kalendrier de Bergiers*,” printed at Paris by Guy Marchant,^b two armed men, and a woman armed with a distaff, are represented attacking a snail, who is addressed by the woman in these words :—

“Vuyde de ce lieu, tresor de beste,
Qui des Vignes les bourgons māges
Sur arbre et sur buysson
As tout māge iusques aux brāches,
De ma quenouille si tu tavances
Ic te donray tel horion
Quon sentendrai dicy a nantes.”

In the “*Winter’s Tale*,” Hermione exclaims,

“We ’ll thwack him hence with distaffs.”^c

Another passage from an old rhyme affords further evidence that the distaff could, in emergency, be converted into a cudgel :—

“Hands off, with gentle warning,
Lest I you knock with Nancy’s Rock,
And teach you a little learning.”^d

And Chaucer, describing the hue and cry after the fox, says,—

“Ran Colle our dogge, and Talbot, and Garland,
And Malkyn with a distaf in hir hand.”^e

The distaff served the purpose of a cudgel on the occasion of the collection of “*repsilver*” at Bury.^f

It must not be supposed, however, that, although the employment of the distaff and spindle may be referred to the remotest times, and more generally, perhaps, to the humbler classes, that they were not used by women of rank and condition, even down to a comparatively recent period. Lenoir found in the tombs of the

^a Chron. Rythm. p. 496, apud Ihre, Gloss. v. *Rocken*.

^b Anno 1500, sig. n. i.

^c Act i. scene 2.

^d Wits’ Interpreter, quoted by Nares, v. *Distaff*.

^e The Nonne Prest his Tale, 16869–70.

^f Vide the “*Chronica Jocelini de Brakelonda*,” edit. Rokewode, p. 73.

Queens of France significant proofs of their use, and of the light in which they were regarded, in the fourteenth century. He tells us, in his report of the desecration of the royal tombs in the abbey of Saint Denis in the year 1793, that he found in the coffin of Jeanne de Bourgogne, the first wife of Philip de Valois, the Queen's ring of silver, and her distaff and spindle.^a The tomb of Jeanne de Bourbon, wife of Charles the Fifth, also contained, among other relics, a spindle or distaff of gilt wood.^b

Nothing of this kind has, I believe, been discovered in England, but we cannot be certain that it was not the practice to bury women of distinction with the acknowledged insignia of their sex. Grose^c mentions the tomb of Alice, Prioress of the nunnery of Emanuel or Manuel, in Stirlingshire, on which was sculptured a distaff; and in Germany the spindle was suspended over the tomb of women of high rank, as the helm and sword were displayed above those of the knight and the noble. Ditmar tells us that a silver spindle was suspended above the tomb of the wife of Conrad Duke of Franconia, and daughter of the Emperor Otho, in the church of Saint Alban the Martyr at Mayence.^d

The use of the Distaff in England by the Recluses is shown by Aubrey. He says, "This country (Wiltshire) was full of religious houses. Old Jacques (who lived where Charles Hadnam did) could see from his house the nuns of Saint Mary's (juxta Kington) come forth into the Nymph Hay with their rocks and wheels to spin, and with their sewing work."^e The same author, in his MS. History of Wilts, in the Library of the Royal Society, says, "In the old time they used to spin with Rocks: in Staffordshire, &c. they use them still."

We here see, in these incidental notices, that the spinning-wheel had, in some instances, already superseded the more simple appliances of the spinster. From this, and the phrase already quoted from Palsgrave, we may infer that its general adoption was almost contemporaneous with its invention.

This change, singularly enough, appears to be almost coincident with an altera-

^a "Plus pres l'autel on ouvrit celui de Jeanne de Bourgogne, premiere femme de Philippe de Valois, dans lequel on trouva l'anneau d'argent qui portait cette princesse, *sa quenouille, et son fuseau.*" Notes historiques sur les exhumations faites en 1793, dans l'Abbaye de St. Denis, p. 354.

^b "Dans le cercueil de Jeanne de Bourbon sa femme (Charles V.) on a decouvert un reste de couronne, son anneau d'or, des debris de bracelets ou chainons, *un fuseau ou quenouille de bois doré*, des souliers de forme pointue, etc."—Ibid. p. 346.

^c Antiquities of Scotland, vol. ii. p. 236.

^d "Cujus fusum argenteum in ejus memoriæ ibidem est suspensum."—Ditmar. Chron. apud Script. Rer. Brunswic. edit. Leibnit. lib. ii.

^e Memoir of John Aubrey, by John Britton. 4to. London, 1845, p. 86.

tion in, or modification of, our legal phraseology, and to have abrogated the use of the word spinster when applied to single women of a certain rank. Coke says, "and *Generosus* and *Generosa* are good additions: and, if a Gentlewoman be named Spinster in any original writ, etc. appeale, or indictemente, she may abate and quash the same; for she hath as good right to that addition as Baronesse, Viscountesse, Marchionesse, or Dutchesse have to theirs."^a Blount, in his Law Dictionary, says of Spinster, "It is the addition usually given to all unmarried women, from the Viscount's daughter downward."^b In his Glosso-graphia he says of Spinster, "It is a term or addition in our law dialect, given in evidences and writings to a *feme sole*, as it were calling her *Spinner*: and this is the only addition for all unmarried women, from the Viscount's daughter downward."^c

I am unable to trace these distinctions to their source, but they are too remarkable, as indicating a great change of feeling among the upper classes in the sixteenth century, to be passed unnoticed. May we suppose that, among other causes, the art of printing had contributed to bring about this change, affording employment to women of condition, who now devoted themselves to reading instead of applying themselves to the primitive occupations of their grandmothers, and that the wheel and the distaff being left to humbler hands the time-honoured name of *Spinster* was at length considered too homely for a maiden above the common rank?

The observation of Coke stands in singular contrast with the fact mentioned by Spelman, who says that Pollard, a judge, was represented on his monument with eleven sons, each girt with the sword, and the like number of daughters with their spindles.^d Sir Lewis Pollard was constituted a Judge of the Common Pleas on the 29th May, the 6th of Henry VIII.^e and he died in 1540. Whether the mode of decorating his monument was his own choice or direction, or those of his family, the fact is equally interesting, as furnishing incontestable evidence that the spindle was regarded as the badge of the sex in the first half of the sixteenth century.^f

^a Instit. Stat. de Hen. V. cap. 5, of Additions, p. 668, edit. 1797.

^b Voce *Spinster*.

^c Ibid.

^d Pollard, miles et justic. habuit xi. filios gladii cinctos in tumulo suo, et totidem filias fuis depinctas.—Gloss. voce *Spinster*.

^e Dugdale, Origines Juridicales, Chronica Series, pp. 78-9.

^f Fuller says, in his "Worthies of England,"—"Sir Lewis Pollard, of King's Nimet, in this county (Devon), Serjeant of the Law, and one of the Justices of the King's Bench in the time of Henry VIII., was a man of singular knowledge and worth, who by his Lady Elizabeth had eleven sons, four of whom attained to the honour of knighthood, and eleven daughters, married to the most potent families in this county."

"The portraiture of Sir Lewis and his lady, with their two and twenty children, are set up in a glass

In the "Boke of Husbandry," said to have been written by Antony Fitzherbert, a Judge of the Common Pleas, temp. Henry VIII. the writer urges attention to the growth and preparation of flax, which, he observes, should be among the cares of the good housewife. "Thereof," he says, "maie they make shetes, bordclothes, towells, sherts, smockes, and such other necessities, and therefore let thy distaffe be alwaye redye for a pastyme, that thou be not ydle. And undoubted a woman can not gette her lyvinge honestly with spynnyng on the dystaffe, but it stoppeth a gap and must nedes be had."^a In another place, speaking of sheep, he remarks, "And then maye his wife have part of the wool, to make hir husband and herself some clothes. And at the feast waye she may have the lockes either to make clothes or blankettes and coverlettes, or bothe, and if she have no woll of her owne, she may take woll to spynne of clothe makers,^b and by that meanes she may have a convenient livynge, and many times to do other warkes."^c

window at Nimet Bishop. There is a tradition continued in this family, that the lady glassing the window in her husband's absence at the term in London, caused one child more than she had to be set up, presuming (having had one and twenty already) she should have another child, which inserted in expectance, came to pass accordingly. This memorable knight died anno 1540." P. 255, ed. 1662. This window has disappeared, and the memory of it is entirely forgotten.

Gwillim, in his Display of Heraldry, gives a coat of Hoby, of Neath Abbey, the bearings of which are three fusils or spindles.

Of the family of Trefusis, he says, they bear, Argent, a chevron between three wharrow spindles sable, adding—"This spindle differeth much from those preceding in respect of the crook above, and of the wharrow imposed upon the lower part thereof. This sort of spindle women do use most commonly to spin withall, not at the torn, as the former, but at a distaff put under their girdle, so as they oftentimes spin therewith going. The round ball at the lower end serveth to the fast twisting of the thread, and is called a wharrow; and therefore this is called a wharrow-spindle, where the others are called slippers that pass through the yarn as this doth." A friend informs me that on one occasion he saw in the Highlands of Scotland a small potato serving the office of a wharrow, or spindle-whirl.

^a Fol. 67.

^b He might have added, that she had need be on her guard against a description of roguery described by the Monk of Malvern. Covetise says :

" My wif was a webbe,
And wollen cloth made;
She spak to spynnesteres
To spynnen it oute,
Ac the pound that she paied by
Peised a quatron moore
Than myn owene auncer
Who so weyed truthe."

Vision of Piers Ploughman, l. 2904.

^c Fol. 68.

This is, perhaps, one of the most significant notices to be found in our literature, of the use of the distaff and spindle. It shows that spinning, although a needful art, was the occupation of female leisure, the employment of the rich and the poor in the intervals of more important business, and in the long nights of winter. Hence Chaucer sarcastically makes it one of the three resources of women at all times :—

“ Decepect, wepynge, spynnynge, God hath give
To wymmen kyndely, whil thay may live.”^a

The distaff was, in fact, like the fancy-work and crochet of our day, a remedy against idleness, and was rarely abandoned, except when other duties demanded attention and forbade its use. This is plainly shown in the life of Saint Bertha, who, though engaged in the important office of founding a religious house, carried her distaff with her, using it in the manner of a plough, to trace a channel from the well which she had purchased, to the monastery, the water filling the trench and flowing after her as she desired !^b

The distaff and spindle afforded light and not irksome employment even to the invalid and the blind. Nothing, perhaps, shows more clearly their constant and inveterate use than the vulgar superstition recorded in the “*Evangiles des Quenouilles*,” where the thread spun by a woman in childbed is directed to be tied around warts in order to charm them away.^c

By the kindness of Mr. William Tooke, F.R.S., I am enabled to exhibit a very fine example of a marriage medal, one of a class of memorials once very common in Holland and parts of Germany in the 17th century. The devices of these medals are, of course, various, but that on the specimen exhibited very aptly illustrates the popular notion as to the portion of labour assigned to either sex. A man and a woman, clad in primitive costume, and linked together by the arms and legs, support between them the trite emblem of a pair of burning hearts, while a child

^a Prol. to the Wyf of Bathe's Tale, 5983-4.

^b The passage is so curious that I transcribe it for the reader's edification :—“*Tunc sancta mater Deo plena, colo, quam manu tenebat, cœpit terram fodere, et in modum sulci rigam facere, orans ac dicens: Ostende nobis Domine misericordiam tuam, et salutare tuum da nobis. Revertens namque ad Monasterium, colum eadem post se trahebat, tantaque abundantia aquæ eam sequebatur, ut ad usus omnes hominibus pertinentes sufficeret: sicut usque hodie apparet.*”—*De S. Bertha Martyre Abatissa Avennaci. Acta Sanctorum*, Maij, tom. i. p. 114.

^c Pour etre quite des poirions, il fault prendre du fille qui une femme a filé tandis qu'elle couche d'enfant, et en loyer les poirions, et incontinent ilz cherront tous, sans aucune remède.—*Les Evangiles des Quenouilles*, App. B. Quatrième serie, p. 158, edit. 1855.

dances on their fetters. The man holds a spade of mediæval shape, the woman a distaff and spindle.

The distaff and spindle on the table, for the loan of which I am indebted to Mr. Winter Jones, are in use in the neighbourhood of Pau. It was originally six inches longer, but was abridged of its length for the convenience of carriage. The owner, a lady, has kindly favoured me with the following remarks on the use of these primitive implements :—

“The distaff in use in the Pyrennees is about three feet long, and made of a stalk of maize stained. In the more mountainous parts bordering on Spain, it is formed with a bow across the top, sometimes twice crossed, through which the flax is passed and tied in the centre with a band of tow. In the more northern villages of the Lower Pyrennees (and I believe it is the same in the other provinces which are on the borders of Spain) the flax is kept in its place, not by being passed through a loop, but by a piece of coloured paper slightly pinned around it. The spindle is sometimes made entirely of wood, and sometimes it is pointed with iron,^a and at other times made steady by a large bead of earthenware passed over the lower end. The distaff is supported in various ways to suit the convenience of the spinner; sometimes steadied merely by the arm, sometimes held firmly between the knees, and at others passed through a girdle round the waist.”

This description would probably apply to the distaff in nearly every age, but we have already seen that in Western Europe it could in emergency be converted into a weapon of offence, of which the fragile and delicate example on the table is not susceptible. That it was stuck in the girdle we find from mediæval representations. In the Loutrell Psalter the good wife comes out to feed the hen and her chicks from a platter, her distaff in her girdle; and in the very beautiful MS. of Valerius Maximus, in the British Museum,^b Sardanapalus^c is depicted spinning among a company of women whose distaves are secured in the same way.

^a It is thus rendered a stiletto, with which the woman of the South could defend herself. In the North of Europe the distaff might be converted into a club.

^b MS. Harl. 4375.

^c O! dist Spadassin, par Dieu voicy ung bon resveux; mais allons nous cacher au coign de la cheminée; et la passons avec les dames nostre vie et nostre temps à enfiler de perles, ou à filer comme Sardanapalus.—Rabelais, liv. i. c. 33.

Among the numerous objects of ancient art preserved in the Hotel de Cluny at Paris is a Quenouille de Mariage in sculptured wood of the sixteenth century. Another exists in the collection of M. Ledicte Duflos of Clermont (Oise). Both these interesting objects have been beautifully represented in the work of M. Sere.

I exhibit examples of the Vorticellum, or spindle-whirl. Though well known on the Continent, where the simpler means of spinning still survive, this object is not so easily recognized in this country. It has been not unfrequently found in the graves of Anglo-Saxon women. Several whirls were discovered in the ruins of Caerwent last year, and specimens have recently been exhibited to the Society by Colonel Munro, by whom they were found among the ancient remains near Sebastopol. We may, in fact, expect to find them wherever the older traces of human settlements and human industry are explored, since they are inseparably associated with the sex whose habits restricted them chiefly to the limits of their dwellings.

The art of spinning, in one of its simplest and most primitive forms, is yet pursued in Italy, where the countrywomen of Caia still twirl the spindle, unrestrained by

that ancient rural law which forbade its use without doors. The Distaff has outlived the Consular fasces, and survived the conquests of the Goth and the Hun. But rustic hands alone now sway the sceptre of Tanaquil, and all but the peasant disdain a practice which once beguiled the leisure of highborn dames.

The foregoing are among the illustrations of an art the origin of which is lost in the mist of ages, although the memory of it yet survives among us in the epithet Spinster. The inquiry is not unworthy of the antiquary, and may be still further pursued by those whom leisure or inclination may incline to the task. To any one so disposed I can only say with a poet of the 17th century :—

“ Weave thou to end this web which I begin,
I will the distaff hold, come thou and spin.”^a

J. Y. AKERMAN.

^a Fairfax, Jer. lib. iv. 24.

NOVEMBER.

From a Book of Hours in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of London.