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ISSUE



Did Improved Educational Opportunities for Women in the New Nation Significantly Expand Their Participation in Antebellum Society?

YES: Mary Kelley, from "Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic," University of North Carolina Press (2006)

NO: Lucia McMahon, from "Between Cupid and Minerva" and "Education, Equality, or Difference," Cornell University Press (2012)

Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you will be able to:

- Explain the role of social and cultural capital in Antebellum society.
- Compare and contrast feminine public and private spheres.
- Evaluate the benefit or cost to women in pursuing education and an expanded role in society.
- Draw connections and comparisons of the public life of women in Antebellum and modern society.
- Evaluate the effect of prescriptive literature on gender performance.

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Mary Kelley describes how expanding educational opportunities encouraged women to redefine themselves by opening doors to careers beyond the domestic sphere, economic self-support, and public participation in civil society that transformed their understanding of the rights of citizenship in the post-revolutionary and antebellum United States.

NO: Lucia McMahon concludes that the unprecedented access to education afforded women in the early national period fostered recognition of women's intellectual capacity, but she argues that most educated women confronted a limited range of opportunities in a society that remained largely committed to a social and political order rooted in notions of sexual difference and male hierarchy.

Issue Framing with H. Scottie Johnson, Ph.D

If we were to document the histories of our own families with a focus on the women in our lineage, it is likely that the core of the historical narrative would remain the same across time. This picture was one of women as domestics whose role is to care for the family. However, we are at an exciting historical moment. Perhaps our own

mothers and grandmother's stories have demonstrated shifts in the ways we understand woman's historical roles. Similarly, we have seen shifts new frameworks by which can understand women, gender, and agency. If we take a deeper historical look into the lives of the women we are likely to discover more than docile housewives.

Until the late 1960s, the serious student of American women's history could store all the important scholarly

studies of women on one shelf of a bookcase. These works typically fell into two categories: broad surveys based upon the limited sources available, such as Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 1959) and Andrew Sinclair's *The Better Half: The Emancipation of the American Woman* (Harper & Row, 1965); and "great women" biographies, studies of pioneering women in the fields of abolitionism, education, and the suffrage movement. The official literature on American women's history for the majority of time has remained passive (Flexner, 1959 & Sinclair, 1965) or only highlighting particular, exceptional women. Women's studies were forever changed in the 1960s. In 1963, journalist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a stinging indictment of sex inequality in the United States in which she characterized the traditional domestic sphere for women as "a comfortable concentration camp" that infantilized its female inhabitants. Friedan helped brake the normalized historiography of American women. However, what remained absent from the historical discourse was the agency of the everyday woman. Keber (1988) notes that the women writing in the wake of Friedan "argued that American women's history had to be understood not only by way of events but through a prism of ideology as well" (p.11). When we look at the history of American women through a prism of ideology, a richer story emerges; one that allows us to consider if improved educational opportunities for women in the new nation significantly expanded their participation in Antebellum society.

Therefore, in the 1960's and 1970's, the waves of feminist activism carried historical study into territories that had largely been ignored. Prior to this, the field of historical study, like society at large, had almost exclusively focused on the work of men. The very arenas where women were denied participation were practically the only topics considered worthy of serious historical investigation. When women had appeared in the historical narrative, it was almost always in terms of their binary relationship to men. Other pioneers such as Mabel Newcomer, Janice Law Trecker, and Barbara Miller Solomon uncovered the lives of women who had been erased and forgotten in history. They searched for glimpses of women in unexpected, non-traditional and indirect ways, expanding the boundaries of historical sources as well as creating new frameworks for understanding women's experiences.

However, much of the first work focused on White women while presenting their experiences as indicative of those of the rest of their gender. This generation of women's history filled in gaps to the dominant narrative and amplified some silenced voices, but it did not chal-

lenge the economic, racial or social structures of what was valued as topics of mainstream history. In the field of educational history, most attention was paid to the hard-won progress women made in establishing their right to an education and acknowledgement of their intellectual abilities. Milestones were celebrated such as the founding of the exclusive women's seminaries, academies, and colleges such as Vassar and Smith. Meanwhile, stories that did not fit into the framework of achievement seemed not to be heard amidst the celebration of great women. The strongest voices in the past have louder echoes through time, and, as such, historical study can replicate the same inequalities it is trying to investigate.

However as the field progressed, women's history has expanded to include more perspectives. The lives of "ordinary" women, distant from seats of power, from a myriad of regions, classes, races and experiences have now been legitimized as holding a valid place in the historical narrative. Historians such as Gilda Lerner, Linda Kerber, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich examined the past from the bottom up, highlighting commonplace women such as midwives, farmers, nurses, and servants. In pursuing this approach of uncovering the history of women, Lerner (1982) notes the value of asking appropriate questions for historical analysis – questions that consider the work of women reaching beyond the confines of a male-centric interpretation. Women become a hermeneutic for interpreting the past.

Lerner suggested that scholars of women's history should (1) search for women whose experiences deserve to be well known; (2) identify women associated with topics and issues deemed important to the American mainstream; (3) test familiar narratives and revise generalizations when they appear to be wrong; and (4) understand gender as a social construct, and rewrite and develop new frameworks and concepts to understand women's history. Joan Scott's work similarly helped create theories of the role gender plays in forming hierarchies and positions of power. Specifically, in the field of women's education, literature drew attention to who was included or excluded from education, what institutions were founded, succeeded, failed or were never built and, most importantly, why and for what purpose. This shift in perspective is critical to understanding the experiences of a broader range of women, not just a few.

Frameworks for analyzing women's historical essence now rejected the traditional binary view of gender and power. Informed by the ideas of Judith Butler and Joan Scott, gender is now understood as something performed, which shifts based on the needs of a society. The subjectivity and invalidity of essential definitions of gender and

patriarchy can be observed in the historic variation with which they manifest. Women are not all the same, their goals and definitions differ and their intersectionality with race and class position them in various ways in respect to voice and agency. These examinations of race, and class have troubled expansionist and progressive narration of women's opportunities by investigating the absences and exclusions within women's education. From this perspective, the story is not simply one of women gaining power in relation to men, but troubling the reality that White middle- and upper-class women gained power while ignoring or denying the oppression of other races and other classes of women. As Michel Foucault suggests, clear binaries of oppressed and oppressor do not always exist, as is the case when we examine the history of women. Historians taking this approach have opened up new opportunities for recognition, disruption, and agency forever transforming the master narrative.

In this issue, historians Mary Kelley and Lucia McMahon use these more nuanced frameworks to examine the causes and effects of the expanding opportunities for female education in post-revolutionary and Antebellum American society. Utilizing prescriptive works and cautionary tales from male and female authors, McMahon notes that educational curriculum for women was restricted and its main function was to "improve" women for their role as wives and mothers. Education became a vehicle for linking and limiting women's contribution by maintaining the boundaries of womanhood while minimizing their intellectual, rational or civic participation. Female academies were quick to reassure young women's parents that their educational model would reinforce rather than challenge traditional roles and duties.

Mary Kelly suggests that by the 1850s, women were understood to be the intellectual equals to men. Educated women gained leadership skills for activities outside their households by experiencing a course of study that, in many cases, matched their male colleagues. Women contributed to the national discourse on religious, political, sexual and racial matters. Kelley writes that, acceptance of traditional gender models became in and of themselves a form of agency for women; for how could women, left in

their "natural" state, engage in republican values or teach them to their children? Kelley argues that the feminine sphere was not isolated, nor simply a foil to the state, but that it played a critical civic role. To her, the education of women is an indicator of the progress of a civilization. Importantly, no educational system could completely control what was learned or how that learning was applied and enacted. Just as expansion of White men's suffrage spread past the elitist classical republican vision of many of the founding fathers, so too did ideas about women's power and role extend past a servile vision of true womanhood. In their homes, schools, salons, voluntary associations, and benevolence societies, most women remained part of what society understood to be acceptable feminine roles, but women also created their own roles, for their own purposes. These women slowly expanded rather than shattered traditional spheres of influence. Lucia McMahon suggests that the increased educational opportunities for women were largely designed to help them better serve men, rather than to provide increased opportunity for women. McMahon argues most supporters for the improved educational opportunities still demanded male hierarchy, and, as a result, American women did not achieve substantial equality or emancipation. For McMahon, women remained the victims of society's continued ambivalence.

It is from this perspective that we examine the impact of education on the status of women during a moment when common school education expanded throughout the United States. At this time, middle-class families began to understand the need for more advanced training for their daughters. However, many disagreed on what the curriculum would look like. Some felt the training should increase moral influence in society and women's performance in the domestic sphere. Others felt Women needed to be taught a wider range of social roles. Women were certainly limited to certain jobs, however there is no doubt that the common school movement helped to open a significant number of new professional opportunities for women, particularly as teachers. We therefore ask, to what extent did improved educational opportunities for women in the Antebellum period improve their status in the public sphere?



YES 

Mary Kelley

Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic

In an essay that appeared in the *School Gazette*, which students published at Hartford Female Seminary in the 1820s, one student took stock of the aspirations generated in becoming a learned woman and of the risks in claiming that mantle in post-Revolutionary and antebellum America. The author, who chose to remain anonymous, asked her classmates to consider an "Enigma." She introduces herself as "both the feminine and neuter gender." There are those who disdain her as a deviant, as "a good for nothing weed growing out of doors." Uneasy in her presence, they "would be glad to be rid of me." But she is not so easily dismissed and instead is always present in the hours devoted to schooling in the seminary's Study Hall. In those hours and in that setting, she reckons, "my company is welcome to all." Students reading their classmate's "Enigma" might have looked around the Study Hall to try to identify the author. Was she the current editor? Or was she instead one of the other contributors to the *Gazette*? Then they might have turned to an equally important project—deciphering the code and solving the riddle. Did the author's subject symbolize the promise of an advanced education for women? Did that education challenge conventional gender relations? Still playful and still elusive, the anonymous author might have answered both of these questions in the affirmative, telling her classmates that this was the "Enigma."

The student who calculated the potential benefits and costs was an actor in one of the most profound changes in gender relations in the course of the nation's history—the movement of women into public life. In asking how and why post-Revolutionary and antebellum women shaped their lives anew, *Learning to Stand and Speak* measures the significance of this transformation in individual and social identities. As the subtitle, *Women, Education, and Public Life*, suggests, it looks to

the role schooling at female academies and seminaries played in mediating this process. In recasting women's subjectivity and the felt reality of their collective experience, that education was decisive. Employing the benefits of their schooling, women redefined themselves and their relationship to civil society. As educators, as writers, as editors, and as reformers, they entered the "public sphere," or the social space situated between the institutions of the family and the nation-state. The large majority of the women who claimed these careers and who led the movement of women into the world beyond their households were schooled at these institutions.

Consider Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's parents, Lyman and Roxana Foote Beecher, had relatively little economic capital. The minister of the Congregational church at Litchfield, Connecticut, Lyman relied upon his parishioners for a modest salary, which included a yearly supply of firewood. But what Lyman and Roxana did command had a telling salience. The descendants of families who had migrated to New England in the seventeenth century, both had a large network of social connections. The skillful deployment of this form of capital accomplished its purpose for the Yale-trained minister, who was called from an isolated parsonage in East Hampton, Long Island, to Litchfield's prestigious Congregational church in 1810. Now at the center of a powerful network, Lyman and Roxana claimed the privileges of families long accustomed to leadership in their communities. Lyman substituted social capital for the economic resources typically needed to educate his daughter, Harriet, who was born the year after the family had moved to Connecticut. In return for pastoral services at Litchfield Female Academy, he was able to barter the costs of her education at one of the nation's most prominent academies. Harriet's schooling did not end at Litchfield. Having attended Sarah

Pierce's Academy for the four years between 1819 and 1824, Harriet was then sent to Hartford Female Seminary, which her sister, Catharine, had founded in 1821.

Educated at institutions that took the lead in providing a course of study that matched that of male colleges, Stowe was schooled in the competencies post-Revolutionary and antebellum Americans identified as the basis for cultural capital. Pierce and her nephew John Brace provided an education that certified Stowe's command of the canon of Western literature Alexis de Tocqueville identified as necessary for "remain[ing] civilized or to becom[ing] so." Familiarity with this canon was central to Stowe's education, both formal and informal. Well before she was sent to Litchfield Female Academy, Stowe had received from her family a cultural inheritance that predisposed her to books and ideas. She took to the printed page from the moment she was able to make meaning of the words and read widely in history, fiction, and poetry. As the child of a minister enthralled with his Calvinist predecessors, Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* was an obvious choice. Harriet leavened Mather's millennial visions with the novels of Scott and the poetry of Byron. The education did not stop there. Roxana and her sister, the beloved Harriet Foote, with whom the younger Harriet spent a year after her mother's death, disciplined her in the manners and bearing displayed by members of post-Revolutionary America's elite and aspiring middling classes. Six decades later, Stowe would inscribe this training on the pages of *My Wife and I* and its sequel, *We and Our Neighbors*, two novels that doubled as conduct manuals for the middling classes.

Was Stowe representative? No more nor less than other women schooled at a female academy or seminary. Some had more economic capital at their disposal. Others had less opportunity than Stowe to acquire cultural capital before they began their education at one of these schools. Still others came from families well supplied with both social and economic capital. However, if one compares them with other women of their generation, these differences matter relatively little. Two factors set these women apart, first, their parents' access to resources needed for the accumulation of capital in one or more of its forms and, second, their decision to commit that capital to the education of daughters.

Although there were a host of variables that shaped the decisions individual families made, certain patterns can be discerned. The convergence of a market revolution fueled by innovations in transportation and communication, capital accumulation, and increasing shortages in available land transformed the lives of all Americans. Nowhere was the impact more profound than in rural America, where 80 percent of the nation's population

resided between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Once able to provide sons with farms and daughters with dowries, parents found it increasingly difficult to sustain these traditions. Those who looked to education as an alternative endowment made the same commitment as Lyman and Roxana Beecher, contributing their economic, social, and cultural capital to the education of children. Some sons and daughters took their schooling at local academies that instructed men and women together. Others, whose families invested more of their capital in education, attended male colleges or female academies and seminaries. Some who attended these schools returned to their local communities. Many more populated the two migrations that marked these decades, one from East to West and the other from countryside to town or city.

Perhaps the most important article in the baggage these generations took with them, an advanced education opened the door to economic self-support. Men entered traditional professions as lawyers, doctors, and ministers or market-oriented careers as merchants, bankers, retailers, and manufacturers. Women, with these possibilities closed to them, took advantage of newly emerging opportunities to be writers and editors. An unprecedented number also embarked on careers as teachers. Many women pursued these opportunities simultaneously. Stowe's sister, Catharine Beecher, is emblematic in this regard. Not only did she establish three female seminaries, but she also published influential volumes on moral philosophy, physical health, and domestic economy. Compared with other women who attended a female academy or seminary, Stowe ranked as perhaps the most influential in the making of public opinion. But this difference matters not at all if compared with the influence wielded by these women as a whole. Thousands of women who had access to sufficient resources and who were educated at one of these schools followed the same trajectory as Stowe, entering civil society and taking its practice and discourse in an unprecedented direction.

Civil Society

. . . To the degree that this project is a study of social roles and institutions, it challenges the familiar model that divides the nineteenth century into private and public, feminine and masculine, household and marketplace. Teachers and students at female academies and seminaries simultaneously deployed and dismantled these binaries as they linked them to the reciprocal rights and obligations of citizenship inscribed in the nation's Constitution.

Women boldly entered civil society beginning in the 1790s and in increasingly large numbers in later

decades. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the *Lady's Book* (later, *Godey's Lady's Book*), spoke to the importance of the institutional and discursive spaces in which they exercised influence. In the aptly titled "Conversazione," which she published in January 1837, Hale called the public broadly conceived "civil society." In its most inclusive form, antebellum Americans defined civil society as a national public in which citizens were secured in basic freedoms before the law. Embodied in the Constitution's Bill of Rights, these freedoms included speech, press, and assembly. Hale and her contemporaries also invested civil society with a more specific meaning, marking it as a public inhabited by private persons. In addition, they set the boundaries of this public, excluding the operations of the market economy from its domain. If the post-Revolutionary compromise denied women access to participation in the public sphere of organized politics, it left civil society fully open as a public sphere in which first white and then black women were able to flourish as never before. Instead of restricting them to the household, the Republic's establishment facilitated the entry of women into this rapidly expanding social space.

Post-Revolutionary and antebellum European Americans constituted civil society at a series of sites, each of which emerged in a specific historical context. Free African Americans in the North and to a lesser extent in the South acted in parallel settings, challenging discriminatory premises and practices of European Americans. Despite differences in temporal identity and emphasis, European and African American sites were all linked in a common understanding of civil society as composed of private citizens meeting together. These discursive and institutional spaces emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century as institutions of sociability where the propertied gathered for conversation; they were transformed in the post-Revolutionary decades into entities more explicitly engaged in the making of public opinion; and they came to the fore yet again in the 1830s in the voluntary associations Tocqueville identified as the key medium for articulation of the citizenry's concern with cultural uplift and moral reform. From the post-Revolutionary academies to the antebellum seminaries, students prepared themselves for engagement in civil society. Most notably, they fashioned a subjectivity in which rights and obligations of citizenship were fundamental to their sense of self.

Elite white women took their places at tea tables and salons, institutions of sociability that along with male clubs, taverns, and coffeehouses were dedicated to making public opinion. The sociability the eighteenth-century elite practiced not only separated European

Americans from multiple others but also marked them as privileged relative to their counterparts in the lower ranks. Post-Revolutionary and antebellum European Americans established a host of institutions, ranging from organizations dedicated to benevolence to movements for social reform—including white women's rights and black people's emancipation—to institutions variously called literary societies, reading circles, and mutual improvement associations. Described by Tocqueville as "intellectual and moral" in their orientation, these voluntary associations were a powerful resource in the making of public opinion. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, antebellum European Americans who engaged in organized benevolence demarcated the elite and the emerging "middling classes" from the multiple others whom they defined as "uncivilized" objects of reform. European Americans and African Americans enlisted in movements calling for the rights of white women and the end of slavery took the opposite tack. In contrast to those who insisted upon conformity to the prevailing order, they protested sexual and racial discrimination.

In addition to editing *Godey's Lady's Book*, Hale published *Woman's Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women, from "the Beginning" till A.D. 1850*, a compilation of sixteen hundred individual biographies. In a volume that spanned the centuries from the birth of Christ to 1850, she devoted more than a third of the pages to women still living. Herself one of the nation's powerful makers of public opinion, Hale introduced readers to post-Revolutionary and antebellum America's most visible contributors to civil society. Although *Woman's Record* purported to sketch all women who had distinguished themselves in voluntary associations, it celebrated elite and middle-class Protestants with whom Hale shared social status and religious inclinations. African American and white working-class women were excluded, although these women were also prominent in associational life. The approaches taken by all these women illustrate the importance of class and race in defining an individual's engagement in organized benevolence, social reform, and associations devoted to reading and writing. In contrast to their elite and middle-class counterparts, white working-class women concentrated their energies on mutual aid societies. Free African American women in the North were likely to link mutual aid not only with benevolence but also with self-improvement and social reform. Free women of color in Savannah, Georgia, began to organize church-based benevolent societies in the 1830s. In the same decade, free African American women in the North organized literary societies. Doubling as acts of resistance, the collective acts of interpretation they produced

in these societies took as their subjects slavery and racial prejudice, both of which were excoriated in essays, stories, and poems that members published in antislavery newspapers.

Hale also introduced readers of *Woman's Record* to founders of female academies and seminaries, whom she celebrated as exemplars. Columns and articles in *Godey's Lady's Book*, which Hale edited for four decades, praised their counterparts, the teachers in the nation's common schools. In the decades before the Civil War, the proportion of women in the classroom was higher in urban than in rural America. By 1860, women constituted between 65 and 80 percent of the teachers in the towns and cities of every region. In rural America, where 80 percent of the population lived, the proportions of women teaching varied considerably. In New England, fully 84 percent of the region's rural teachers were female. The proportions were lower in the Middle Atlantic and in the South, 59 percent and 36 percent, respectively. In Michigan and Minnesota, 86 percent of the teachers were women. In the other seven states of the Middle West, the proportion was a significantly lower 58 percent. Regional differences aside, the trend was unmistakably clear: America's classrooms were rapidly becoming a woman's domain. The women who embarked on careers as teachers were largely responsible for the rapid increase in literacy between the American Revolution and the Civil War. The students whom they taught entered a world of print that enlarged the horizon of a reader's imagination and encouraged a reflective consciousness, both of which were crucial to participation in civil society. Conversely, readers shaped that world, not only by advancing the circulation of print but also by claiming careers as writers and editors.

Woman's Record included these writers and editors whom Hale presented as an increasingly influential presence in the literary marketplace. In terms of their social and cultural importance, she was right. Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, women in the North and the South emerged as leaders in the nation's lively trade in texts. The number of genres in which they wrote expanded rapidly, as did the role they took in shaping a distinctively American literature. In the novels, histories, poems, and biographies they published and in the magazines they edited, these women contributed to national discourses on religious doctrine and denominationalism, on politics and political parties, on women and domesticity, and on the nation and its potential as the world's redeemer. By the 1840s and the 1850s, the most successful of these writers and editors could expect to make a livelihood with their pen.

Remaining Civilized or Becoming So

Like Hale's "Conversazione," which appeared three years before the publication of *Democracy in America* in 1840, Tocqueville's foundational text in American exceptionalism focused on voluntary associations that were designed to cultivate an individual's intellectual and moral potential. Indeed, these organizations stood at the center of the civil society Tocqueville described in the second volume of his treatise. In contrast to associations devoted to commerce and politics, Tocqueville told readers, voluntary associations had received relatively little consideration. And yet for him, as for Hale, they were as critical, indeed "perhaps more so," to the success of the political democracy constituted by antebellum white males. Grounded in networks of social interaction, these associations were, according to Tocqueville, the key to "remain[ing] civilized or to becom[ing] so."

In ascribing this double purpose to voluntary societies, Tocqueville went to the crux of antebellum associational life. Like those who had led the institutions of sociability that preceded them, members of voluntary organizations aligned themselves with social and cultural values they insisted were required for "remain[ing]" a "civilized" people. In women's literary societies, reading circles, and mutual improvement associations, members engaged the culturally privileged knowledge European Americans had defined as the possession of "civilized" peoples. British American women established the precedent. Gathering in reading circles a decade before the American Revolution and dedicating themselves to reading and writing, they pursued history, biography, poetry, and fiction. Through conversation and presentation of essays, they disciplined their minds and sharpened their analytical faculties. Not least, they applied the knowledge they had garnered to social and political issues. In all, they laid the basis for women's claim to the public voice and intellectual authority necessary for the making of public opinion. Students at female academies and seminaries engaged in the same critical thought and cultural production in literary societies, which were designed to intersect with and serve as a supplement to classroom instruction. These institutions were a crucial resource as students crafted subjectivities inflected by the advanced education they were learning to command. Women whose schooling had been completed extended their education in the hundreds of organizations dedicated to reading and writing they founded in villages, towns, and cities in the nation. In these settings, as in literary societies at female academies and seminaries, women addressed the larger meanings of the knowledge they were pursuing, practiced the art of

persuasive self-presentation, and instructed themselves in the values and vocabularies of civil society.

Women in organized benevolence embarked on the project that Tocqueville had considered as critical as remaining "civilized"—schooling others in becoming "civilized," which they identified as the basis for citizenship. Those whom they marked as the other, or the yet-to-be elevated intellectually and morally, were expected to yield their principles to the values of reformers who claimed the right to define what it meant to be "civilized." That peoples as diverse as immigrant Catholics and native Americans resisted what we now label "cultural imperialism" should surprise no one. Others, if they suspected the motives of those who sought to impose their values, nonetheless welcomed the aid provided by evangelical Protestants, who rallied their communities on behalf of support for the indigent, education for the less privileged, aid for the widowed, and homes for the orphaned. Social reformers in the North, some evangelical, some not, took on the much more controversial issues of white women's rights and black people's emancipation.

The assemblage of associations that so impressed Hale and Tocqueville has long fascinated scholars investigating the foundations of political democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Leading neo-Tocquevillean Robert Putnam has argued that voluntary associations are a liberal society's linchpin in "making democracy work." Envisioned as socializing agents in the nation's communities, these associations reflect and reinforce a public-spiritedness akin to the republican virtue celebrated by the post-Revolutionary elite. In creating and consolidating shared values, these organizations also serve as a counterweight to the divisiveness of antebellum America's conventional politics. However, nineteenth-century voluntary associations also played an opposite role in relation to consensus, bringing individuals together to interrogate the dominant social and political order. Whether they defended or called into question dominant values, the thousands of women who participated in voluntary associations forged lives at the intersection of newly available educational opportunities and engagement with civil society in local, regional, and national communities.

If the neo-Tocquevillean model sees voluntary associations as providing support for the masculine state, the model presented here has as its center a civil society in which women and men engaged in individual action and critical thought. In its female voluntary associations, civil society was constructed as the feminine other of the masculine state. Of course, feminist scholars, and I include myself here, have been taught to beware of binary oppositions. I am introducing this opposition, however,

not as an exclusive or limiting binary, but as one among others. The household has been proposed as the binary opposite of the state, for example, and its counterpart domesticity as the feminine other to the masculine state. Introducing the concept of civil society as an additional complement to the state opens more possibilities. It also helps us to see that exclusion from one sphere of action does not necessarily imply confinement to another. The presence of women in the public sphere of civil society dismantles the false binary that identifies women exclusively with the household, even as it calls into question the symbiotic relationship between this institutional and discursive space and the masculine state. Not all women constituted this site any more than all men constituted the state. That certain women came to play leading roles in this public sphere and to shape the course it took in post-Revolutionary and antebellum America highlights the significance of education as the key both to women's entering civil society and to the influence they exercised as makers of public opinion. . . .

In the letter in which Lucy Stone recalled that she and Antoinette Brown Blackwell had "learned to stand and speak" as members of literary societies, she herself was speaking from the perspective of more than five decades of activism on behalf of women's rights. Stone, one of the movement's most influential leaders and a graduate of Mount Holyoke Seminary, understood the transformative potential of these societies and the schools that housed them. In cultivating reasoning and rhetorical faculties, modeling persuasive self-presentation, and disciplining the mind, literary societies reinforced the formal instruction provided in the classrooms of female academies and seminaries. We can be certain that Antoinette Brown Blackwell agreed with her friend. In an exchange of letters some forty years earlier, she told Stone about the impact of one such society. In the winter of 1847, the fifty members, including Brown, had organized themselves in typical fashion. In a weekly rotation, six submitted compositions for all to read and then led the debate at the meeting. "All take a deep interest in the exercises," Brown declared. Brown herself had "never before improved so rapidly in my life in the use of the tongue." The experience led her to repeat the claim that champion of female education Judith Sargent Murray had made a half-century earlier. With no little confidence, Brown predicted, "There is soon to be a new era in womans history." In 1798, when Murray told the *Gleaner's* readers that women who were attending the newly emerging female academies would inaugurate "a new era in female history," she looked forward to an exponential increase in women's influence in civil society. By the 1850s, women had transformed the face of civil

society, and Brown was ready to extend that influence to suffrage.

The subjectivities of thousands of women were shaped by their experience as students at a female academy or seminary. Educated at institutions created exclusively for women, they attended schools with a clearly articulated mission, a faculty that offered inspiring role models, and a curriculum that introduced them to female exemplars. In educational practices ranging from classroom instruction to literary societies to reading protocols to emulation of intellectually accomplished women, students were schooled in a curriculum that matched the course of study at male colleges. Embracing the convictions of principals and teachers who held that an improved mind was a woman's greatest treasure, they committed themselves to earning the mantle of learned women.

. . . Contributors to this discourse made advanced education integral to the role they projected for women in civil society. From the Judith Sargent Murrays to the Antoinette Brown Blackwells, post-Revolutionary and antebellum women asked themselves what it meant to be a learned woman. Initially, there were those who saw little reason for a female education that went beyond reading, writing, and ciphering. Ranking women as inferior to men in matters of the mind, they doubted that a woman could be truly learned. With the establishment of female academies in the 1780s, the issue of women's intellectual potential was debated for the next three decades. In catalogs, circulars, and plans of study that highlighted schooling in reason as a primary objective, educators asserted that women were fully able to engage in critical thinking and cultural production. They also called on the women who were attending these schools to "vindicate the equality of female intellect," as Sarah Pierce charged her students in 1818. Beginning in the 1820s, the introduction of a curriculum as rigorous as that in male colleges and the performance of students at hundreds of female academies and seminaries settled the question. There were exceptions, of course. But, in most circles, women were now regarded as the intellectual equals of men.

A second and related issue generated a debate that has yet to be fully resolved. More than two centuries ago, newly independent Americans asked themselves: What should a woman do with her learning? In linking the right to an advanced education to the fulfillment of gendered social and political obligations, post-Revolutionary Americans forged an enduring compromise. Instead of claiming that women had the right to pursue knowledge for individual ends, those who were constituting gendered republicanism debated the boundaries of the domain within which women ought to meet obligations

to the larger social good. Those who subscribed to the more conservative model insisted that they deploy their influence only as wives and mothers. Others pressed those boundaries. Although they acknowledged that responsibilities to one's family remained primary, they asked that women take the lead in instructing their nation in republican virtue. Even as women claimed the moral authority sanctioning their roles in the household and in the larger society and as the impact of their presence and power became increasingly visible in the latter domain, most chose not to challenge a social and political system that still rendered them subordinate to men. Instead, they proclaimed their loyalty to deference, one of the fundamental principles in systems of gender relations in which women are not accorded the same standing as men. "Woman," as Catharine Beecher declared in *Suggestions respecting Improvements in Education, Presented to the Trustees of the Hartford Female Seminary* in 1829, was "bound to 'honor and obey' those on whom she depends for protection and support." Claims to deference such as Beecher's masked women's newly acquired agency with the rhetoric of subordination. Behind this rhetoric existed a larger social reality in which thousands of women were steadily enlarging upon the power they wielded in civil society. By the middle of the 1850s, Beecher, who was founding her third and final seminary, could proclaim confidently that women had the mandate to "civilize the world." Mandate or not, women who had focused initially on their local communities were now claiming responsibility for schooling native American, South Asian, and Eastern European peoples in the tenets of republican virtue and its corollary, American exceptionalism.

The women who attended a female academy or seminary were white, and whatever their status in terms of property or income they had access to one or more forms of economic, social, and cultural capital. As its title indicates, *Notable American Women* recovers women who are "notable" in terms of social, intellectual, political, and cultural leadership. The three volumes of entries show that the large majority of the leaders of post-Revolutionary and antebellum America's organized benevolence and social reform attended a female academy or seminary. The same can be said for the educational reformers, who not only attended women's schools but also became founders and teachers. The correlation between being educated at a female academy or seminary and becoming a member of the nation's community of letters is equally strong for the writers and editors who came to maturity between 1790 and 1860. The combined privileges of skin color, social standing, and advanced education provided these women with an unparalleled opportunity to set the

terms of women's engagement with public life. In elaborating an increasingly expansive gendered republicanism and in calling women to the role they projected, they did exactly that.

. . . These schools institutionalized women's access to higher education. They established the foundations of a collegiate course of study. They provided models for negotiating between the aspirations generated by higher education and the feminine conventions women were expected to practice. And they extended to generations of women the rights and obligations of citizenship.

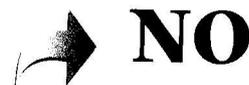
Let me return to the riddle with which we began. For the thousands of women whose subjectivities had been shaped at female academies and seminaries, the "Enigma" the student presented to her classmates was a deeply felt reality. With little or no hesitation, these women embraced an education wrapped in the values and vocabularies of gendered republicanism. In puzzling through the challenge to the prevailing system of gender relations entailed in that education, they tacked back and forth between

personal aspiration and social constraint. The paths they fashioned and the strategies they invented were multiple and complex. Decade by decade, they revised and elaborated the choices they had made. Acting on local, regional, and national stages, they became influential makers of public opinion. In all this they enacted a transformation in women's relationship to public life that has proved an enduring legacy.

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Lucia McMahon



Between Cupid and Minerva

In an 1802 essay provocatively titled, “Plan for the Emancipation of the Female Sex,” an anonymous author suggested that women “would willingly relinquish that authority which they have so long enjoyed by courtesy, in order to appear formally on the theatre of the world merely as the equals of man.” To achieve mere equality, women could “petition the legislature to sanction their emancipation by law.” To gain equality, women needed only to ask for it—equality was, in essence, already theirs for the taking because no “gallant man” would allow his wife or mother to “sue in vain.” This author recognized the law as one road to female emancipation, but he also underscored the early national connection between education and equality. As part of his “Plan for Emancipation,” he proposed that the nation “found a college for the instruction of females in the arts and sciences.” The faculty at this college would be women devoted entirely to their careers. “For the better preservation of female rights,” he insisted, “the professors should all be enjoined celibacy.” In addition to teaching, these “fair sages” would publish works on “the nobler subjects of civil polity or philosophy.” Yet female students would be trained not to emulate their professors’ public careers but to assume traditional domestic roles: “Young women entrusted to the tuition of female philosophers in this university, may when they become mothers, instruct their children; . . . and thus a gradual increase of wisdom, and consequently, of happiness, will be diffused throughout the community.”

By 1802, when this essay was published, scores of female academies were being established throughout the young nation, yet the idea of a college for women was still outside serious consideration. Indeed, it is difficult to discern if the essay’s author was principally serious or sarcastic. If the “Plan for Emancipation” was meant as a parody, its stance on women’s education did not contain enough true derision. The author presented the female college and its students in largely positive terms and failed, unlike most critics, to disparage educated women as

pedants or bluestockings. As another author noted, “Few men would (I imagine) wish their wives and daughters to prefer Horace and Virgil to the care of their families.” Whatever the intentions of this 1802 “Plan for Emancipation,” the fluid, nebulous nature of early national ideas about women’s education and gender roles made it difficult to distinguish where possibility ended and parody began.

In 1819, less than two decades after the publication of the “Plan for Emancipation,” Emma Willard, educator, echoed many of its suggestions and strategies in her “Plan for Improving Female Education.” Willard petitioned the New York legislature not for female emancipation as such but, rather, for official improvements in and government support of women’s education. Willard insisted that schools for women needed the same “respectability, permanency, and uniformity of operation” that characterized male institutions. As Willard argued, “It is the duty of a government, to do all in its power to promote the present and future prosperity of the nation, over which it is placed. This prosperity will depend on the character of its citizens.” Women were citizens, and their proper education was vital to the success of the nation. Yet, according to her nineteenth-century biographer, Willard struggled “to find a suitable name for her ideal institution,” and reportedly asserted, “It would never do to call it a ‘college,’ for the proposal to send young ladies to college would strike everyone as an absurdity.” She instead decided upon the term “female seminary,” hopeful that such naming “will not create a jealousy that we mean to intrude upon the province of the men.” Willard was careful to insist that she had no desire to offer “a masculine education,” stressing that education needed to reflect men and women’s “difference of characters and duties.”

Whether presented as parody or possibility, early national articulations of women’s education were marked by this persistent tension between intellectual equality and sexual difference. In essence, proponents of women’s education insisted that women were at once equal to and

different from men. This paradox found expression in Willard's rejection of "masculine education" for women, as well as in the assertion in the 1802 "Plan for Emancipation" that education would put women in positions *merely* as the equals of man. Yet it is also striking that both plans proposed legal and educational measures as paths to women's equality. Women in post-Revolutionary America did not achieve substantial measures of equality or emancipation through legal channels. Early national women could not vote or hold office; and once married, women were subject to the doctrine of coverture, which made it challenging for them to hold property or acquire independent wealth. Within the educational landscape, however, progress was well underway. The period from approximately 1785 to 1825 represented a watershed moment in women's institutional access to education. Although colleges remained closed to them, women enjoyed unprecedented access to a variety of new educational opportunities.

As the institutional landscape changed, so did representations of educated women within the literary public sphere. Through a variety of forms—including engravings, poetry, essays, anecdotes, character sketches, and novels—prescriptive writers explored the place of educated women in early national America. Although many supported advancements in women's education, early national Americans were troubled by the idea that women's intellectual equality might disrupt the social, economic, and political frameworks that were sustained by the notion of sexual difference. Understanding how prescriptive writings articulated the tensions between education, equality, and difference is a crucial first step that will inform subsequent explorations of how individual women understood and experienced the boundaries of mere equality within their own lives.

"The Female Mind Shall Equal Prove"

Prior to the American Revolution, as one 1810 essayist recalled, women were "systemically shut out of Minerva's Temple." The young nation sought to expand women's access to education: "Thanks to the liberal and aspiring spirit of the age and country, the genius and education of women are not shamefully neglected." Educators established scores of new academies and seminaries for both women and men, insisting that education was an essential component of nation building. "It must therefore be a pleasure to all who wish for the prosperity and glory of this rising nation," the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported in 1786, "to observe the zealous and liberal exertions of its citizens, in promoting the cause of literature, and

providing for the instruction of youth in every useful and ornamental science." The need for well-educated men reflected political and social ideals about well-informed citizens who would take the lead in matters concerning the political, economic, and literary spheres of the nation. Yet many early national Americans asserted that the proper education of women was equally important. As advocates insisted, women's education involved nothing less than "the most effectual means of establishing, promoting, and securing, on the most solid foundation, the domestic and social happiness of the present and future ages." Education was both a symptom and cause of the commitment of the young nation to liberty, freedom, and independence.

Such enlightened faith in the powers of education was accompanied by an optimistic, and potentially radical, belief in the equality of women's and men's intellectual capacities. Educators asserted that women "were beings endowed with reason," who possessed intellectual capacity and "an equality of mind" with men. As one author contended, women "possess a strength of reason equal to ours . . . and can attain the knowledge of every thing they are required to do, with at least, an equal facility." Another essay on female education began with a poem that captured the era's optimistic faith in women's intellectual potential: "When'er the female mind shall equal prove . . . No longer shall it vauntingly be said /*Her's is inferior to the mind of man.*" This widespread belief in women's intellectual equality had promising potential, suggesting that women could perhaps live merely as the equals of man. As John Burton, author of *Lectures on Female Education and Manners*, argued, "it cannot be denied, that your sex have given equal proofs with the men, of genius, judgment, taste, and imagination." Burton tantalizingly intimated that women were, in theory, as capable of receiving the same education as men, perhaps for the same ends: "It is not necessary, neither it is expedient for the purpose of civil society, that girls should be educated in the same manner as boys: but were a similar plan to be adopted, the women, without doubt, would be as well informed in the system of human knowledge, as the men." As Burton suggested, women's station in society was a matter of custom and access to education, not due to any lack of intellectual ability. Yet, because it was deemed neither "necessary" nor "expedient" for women to be granted full access to political and economic equality, writers such as Burton repeatedly tempered their celebratory remarks about women's intellectual capacities by evoking prescribed gender roles: "The respective employments of the male and female sex being different, a different mode of education is consequently

required. For whatever equality there may be in the natural powers of their minds, which I shall not consider at present, yet the female sex, from their situation in life, and from the duties corresponding with it, must evidently be instructed in a manner suitable to their destination, and to the tasks which they will have to perform."

Despite their enlightened faith in women's intellectual equality, early national Americans continued to believe that men and women were dissimilar beings with contrasting manners, morals, and dispositions—and duties. Although the female mind was capable of intellectual equality, the female body apparently was not fitted for political equality: "'Tis Nature herself that prescribes for them a sedentary life, and devotes them to domestic occupations; 'tis Nature herself that secludes from public offices, the functions of which could not be combined with the duties of a mother and a nurse." The enthusiasm for women's educational accomplishments stopped well short of extending the rights of suffrage and direct political power to women. This tension produced the notion of mere equality that dominated early national discussions of women's education.

The belief that women were indeed mere equals of men, at least intellectually and socially, while at the same time profoundly different in body and station, generated conflicting models of womanhood. To negotiate this thorny realm of equality and difference, early national Americans explored complementary gender roles that celebrated certain elements of equality (intellectual and social) while simultaneously insisting that "natural" distinctions (gender and race) defined the parameters of full political citizenship. Stressing the mutuality of relations between the sexes, writers urged women to find contentment in a model of gender identity that remained inherently hierarchical. "Do not these facts justify the order of society, and render some difference in rank between the sexes, necessary to the happiness of both?" This complementary model of gender relations attempted to square the overriding insistence on prescribed gender roles with a positive characterization of women's intellectual capacities. In the process, the prescriptive literature obscured questions of power and authority inherent in this model of social organization. Although granting women intellectual capacity equal to that of men, prescriptive writers ultimately focused on maintaining a social and political order rooted in sexual difference and male hierarchy.

Discussions of women's education thus revealed a persistent contradiction between women's intellectual capacity (which many agreed was equal to that of men), and the decidedly different uses intended for education

in their everyday lives. In essence, once having agreed that women could learn, proponents of women's education could not agree about what women should learn because their universal faith in the capacity of women's intellectual abilities came into conflict with their adherence to conventional gender roles. As one author insisted, "A *good* education is that which renders the ladies correct in their manners, respectable in their families, and agreeable in society. That education is always *wrong*, which raises a woman above the duties of her station." Instead of selfishly acquiring knowledge for their own sakes, women were asked to educate themselves for the benefit of early republican society. "How much better it would be then, were females educated, in order to make useful and ornamental members of society." As John Burton stressed, "the accomplishments, therefore, which you should acquire, are those that will contribute to render you serviceable in domestic, and agreeable in social life." The main purpose of women's education, then, was not to provide women with the means to develop personal autonomy and ambition but, rather, to enable them to serve men and society. . . . [A]ccess to education dramatically affected how individual women made sense of themselves and the world around them. But such changes in women's identity formation were of little interest to most prescriptive writers. Instead, educated women's roles were defined almost exclusively in relationship to men; they were to exercise moral influence, to provide pleasing conversation, and to serve as attractive companions. Prescriptive writers expressed little regard for the individual aspirations of educated women; rather, they worried about how women's pursuit of education would affect men.

Thus, while recognizing that the acquisition of education could enable women to live as mere equals to men, writers repeatedly warned that too much intellectual "sameness" between men and women would jeopardize domestic and social harmony by creating rivalry and competition. Prescriptive writings asserted that there was "a line of character between the sexes, which neither can pass without becoming contemptible." Women overly interested in the "masculine attainments" associated with certain forms of education and knowledge were accused of selfishness, pedantry, and affectation, traits considered "repugnant to female delicacy, so derogatory to the natural characteristic of her sex." As another author, identified as "Alphonzo," insisted, "A strong attachment to books in a lady, often deters a man from approaching her with the offer of his heart. This is ascribed to the pride of our sex." Implicitly, men did not want women who were smarter than they were, women who would disagree with them,

or women who would seek opportunities in the spheres of government and business:

When a woman quits her own department, she offends her husband, not merely because she obtrudes herself upon *his* business, but because she departs from that sphere which is assigned *her* in the order of society—because she neglects *her* duties and leaves *her own* department vacant. . . . The same principle which excludes a man from an attention to domestic business, excludes a woman from law, mathematics, and astronomy. Each sex feels a degree of pride in being best qualified for a particular station, and a degree of resentment when the other encroaches upon their privilege. This is acting conformably to the constitution of society.

In promoting a separate spheres model, writers insisted that women could not occupy themselves with “masculine” concerns without necessarily neglecting their domesticity and desirability. Accordingly, the prescriptive literature urged women to make themselves “lovely” to men, and as Alphonzo insisted, “to be *lovely* you must be content to be *women*; to be mild, social and sentimental—to be acquainted with all that belongs to your department—and leave the masculine virtues, and the profound researches of study to the province of the other sex.” Prescriptive writings stressed the need for educated women to retain their feminine attractiveness and desirability to men, fearful of what might occur if educated women were no longer “content to be *women*”—in other words, if they sought to live *merely* as the equals of man.

“Knowledge, Combined with Beauty”

Part celebratory, part cautionary, prescriptive representations were important tools by which social commentators attempted to teach particular lessons about the proper content, forms, and effects of women’s education. The frontispiece of the 1791 volume of the *Massachusetts Magazine* presented an inspirational model of womanhood meant to guide educated women. Surrounded by mythological and material embodiments of education, this representative woman exhibited an aura of intellectual seriousness and attractive femininity. The editors offered an “Explanation of the Frontispiece”:

The Fair Daughters of Massachusetts, are collectively represented by the symbolic figure of an elegant and accomplished young Lady,

seated in her study, contemplating the various pages of the Magazine. Their general acquaintance with the necessary branches of reading and writing, and the more ornamental ones, of History and Geography, is happily depicted, by those instruments of Science, which adorn the Hall of Meditation. *Minerva*, the Goddess of Wisdom, assisted by *Cupid*, crowns her with a chaplet of Laurel: *Hymen’s* burning Torch is displayed aloft—a delicate intimation, that knowledge, combined with beauty, enkindles the purest flames of love.

In this representation, love and learning were coupled seamlessly in that both Cupid and Minerva crowned the achievements of this symbolic figure. “Knowledge, combined with beauty,” enabled women to spread happiness and harmony throughout the young nation. As Daniel Bryan, educator, insisted, “the influence of enlightened Beauty” was “inconceivable.” An attractive and intelligent woman, as a student at a female academy remarked, represented the ideal form of womanhood: “I do not know any thing which so nearly approaches the *acme* of human excellence, as a young female of an enlightened understanding, a well-informed mind, and a pure and virtuous heart, united in a fair-proportioned and beautiful form.”

An “enlightened beauty” presented no apparent contradiction between love and learning, yet prescriptive thinkers frequently expressed concern about the potentially negative effects of women’s education. In an 1809 essay titled, “On Female Education,” James Milnor, a trustee of the Philadelphia Academy, aptly described the merits, as well as the possible dangers, inherent in women’s pursuit of education. Milnor noted, “that as a polite and well-informed woman is the most welcome companion of the intelligent of our sex, a female pedant is in all respects the reverse.” By failing to acquire “useful” knowledge, a pedant was given to affectation and the “ostentatious display of the decorations of her mind.” But Milnor also recognized that in the effort to avoid pedantry, educators “may err on the contrary extreme.” Young women also had to fear the consequences of a poor education, produced most often by reading novels. “Instead of the evil of pedantry, these are calculated to seduce the unsettle minds of young persons into the adoption of erroneous and immoral principles.” Such women entertained “frivolity” and “false views of life” that often led to “disastrous course of conduct.”

In his essay, Milnor identified two extremes on a spectrum of ideas about educated women. Education and knowledge were presented as important antidotes to frivolity and coquetry (symptoms of undereducation), but the danger of overeducation (specifically, pedantry) was ever-present. In effect, educated women

were asked to perform a delicate balancing act. They constantly risked falling into one or the other of these perceived extremes—extremes that can be thought of as representing either too much love or too much learning. A poorly educated woman was in danger of becoming too coquettish, too sexualized, and too susceptible to seduction. On the other end of the spectrum was the woman with too much education, or more precisely, one who had gained knowledge considered inappropriate for women. Both the undereducated coquette and the overeducated pedant let their level of education interfere with their attractiveness to men—thus threatening compatibility between the sexes. The figures of the pedant and the coquette served as foils against which model republican wives and mothers were measured.

On one end of the spectrum was the pedant. Both supporters and critics of women's education agreed that the pedant was a dangerous figure—a woman who selfishly pursued knowledge to the detriment of her domestic and social duties. "Female pedantry is the object of my ridicule," one author remarked with obvious disdain. When a woman "applied herself to her study" too much, her actions resulted not in "that deference and respect which she had vainly expected" but, rather, "desertion and contempt." Instead of properly preparing herself for participation in early national society, the pedant exhibited behavior that was antisocial, selfish, and vain. It was best, as *The American Lady's Preceptor* recommended, for women to avoid "all abstract learning, all difficult researches, which may blunt the finer edges of their wit, and change the delicacy in which they excel into pedantic coarseness." Even the strongest proponents of women's education were careful to warn about the dangers of overeducating women. As Susanna Rowson, author of several books and founder of a female academy, underscored, "many are the prejudices entertained, and the witticisms thrown out against what are called learned women." Rowson summarized this mindset in her *Present for Young Ladies*: "The mind of a female is certainly as capable of acquiring knowledge, as that of the other sex; but if an enlightened mind must consequently be a conceited one it were better to remain in ignorance, since pedantry and presumption in a woman is more disgusting than an entire want of literary information, the one often awakens compassion, the other invariably excites contempt."

Pedantry was rooted in conceit and vanity. As John Burton warned, young women needed to avoid becoming "vain enough to imagine, that your boasted merit is held in the same estimation by others." Such affectation, he

asserted, implied that women were "so full of their own importance" as to exhibit an "egotism" that was "intolerable." Samuel Whiting, author of *Elegant Lessons*, agreed, remarking, "affectation of learning and authorship, in a woman with very little merit, draws upon itself the contempt and hatred of both sexes." . . .

"The Arts of Coquetry"

If a woman was too engrossed with education, she risked being labeled a pedant. Yet, if a woman's attention to education was too superficial, she could be criticized for that as well. Samuel Whiting, author, warned about the dangers awaiting any "utterly uncultivated" young woman: "What is there to correct her passions, or to govern her practice? What is there to direct her in the choice of companions and diversions; to guard her against the follies of her own sex, and the arts of ours?" As critics warned, the path to coquetry was most often laid "by a false Education, the folly of parents, or the flattery of a corrupted world." Unlike the pedant, who was preoccupied with learning, the coquette neglected her education, afraid that any overexertion might interfere with her beauty and charm. As one author quipped, "useful studies must by no means be attended to, as possibly it might damp Miss's vivacity."

Neglecting useful studies, coquettes instead were more likely to spend countless hours engaged in reading novels. Indeed, novel reading was perhaps the surest path to coquetry. Prone to coquettish behavior, novel readers were ill prepared for the realities of courtship and marriage, preferring instead to inhabit a dreamlike world of their own imagination. Such was the case for "Melissa," a young woman whose "invincible attachment to novels" turned her into a coquette. Melissa felt herself "well qualified for a heroine, as any, who shine in the page of romance. . . . Indeed she had charms, and her mind was well stored with modern female erudition; (for she had perused numberless novels)." Melissa replaced real education with romantic fancies, and through her voracious novel reading, "the arts of coquetry were. . . . carefully studied." Given to affectation and flirting, Melissa rejected many sound marriage proposals, "knowing that once sacrificed at the altar of Hymen, she could no longer enjoy the felicity of coquetry." Instead, Melissa spent her entire life an unmarried woman, and when her charms no longer worked, "she professed herself a *man hater*."

Whereas the pedant was cast as an unattractive, masculine figure, the coquette represented disorder in the form of excessive female sexuality. The "ultimate aim" of the coquette was to gain "power" over male admirers

and the surrounding social scene. Ultimately, however, this power was chimerical: "However flattering it may be to the vanity of the female sex, to make conquests, or to have many admirers, yet it betrays a kind of coquetry by no means admirable." Although coquettes reveled in their ability to attract men, they represented a disruptive form of desirability—one that ultimately led to rejection and embarrassment for men. Expecting to meet heroic men who resembled characters from novels, coquettes hesitated to accept "several offers that would otherwise have appeared highly advantageous and proper." By rejecting marriage proposals from respectable men, coquettes eventually found themselves alone and unwanted. As critics repeatedly warned, any worthy man would come to recognize the insincere flirtations of a coquette and would refuse to consider her as an ideal mate. "How faint and spiritless are the charms of a coquet [sic], with the real loveliness of . . . innocence, piety, good-humour, and truth." By disrupting marital models, coquettes were as problematic as pedants. . . .

"On an Equal Footing"

Through myriad warnings and cautionary tales, the literary public sphere revealed a continued sense of ambivalence about educated women's roles in society. Rather than clarifying the relationship among education, equality, and difference, such prescriptive models may have created confusion for any woman who was relying on them to guide her behavior. As one proponent of women's education rhetorically asked, "How can a pretty woman fail to be ignorant, when the first lesson she is taught, is that beauty supersedes and dispenses with every other quality; . . . [and] that to be intelligent is to be pedantic?" Women recognized that the charge of pedantry could be used to discredit their intellectual pursuits. Yet, by stressing the need for women to remain desirable and attractive to men, prescriptive writers could be guilty of encouraging coquettish practices. "Shall we blame her for being a coquette," this author continued, "when the indiscriminate flattery of every man teaches her that the homage of one is as good as that of another?"

The censure of both coquettish and pedantic behavior reflected two extremes on a spectrum of fears about the implications of women's education. . . . Both the pedant and coquette challenged gender roles by insisting on living merely as the equals of man on their own misguided terms.

. . . [I]t was not educated women themselves but rather early national society as a whole that was unready for woman to explore the possibilities of mere

equality. . . . Early national woman eagerly embraced opportunities to acquire education and put it to good use. As a student at a female academy in New York insisted, "Since we have the same natural abilities as themselves, why should we not have the same opportunity of polishing and displaying them by the principles of an independent and virtuous education." This young woman rejoiced that enlightened Americans "wish to see the fair sex on an equal footing with themselves, enjoying all the blessings of freedom."

Inspired by this equal footing, educated women began to imagine what it would be like to live merely as the equals of man—at least in their personal and social relationships. . . . Female academies inspired women to develop identities that celebrated their intellectual ambitions. Enthusiastic about their studies, young women were determined to defend their ardent interest in education against prescriptive warnings about both coquettish and pedantic behavior.

When they left the safe, nurturing space of the female academy, educated women searched for new ways to enact identities founded in the promise of mere equality. . . . In all stages of their lives, women self-consciously crafted personal and social relationships in which their intellectual achievements were valued, appreciated, and celebrated. Through relationships with like-minded individuals, educated women searched for mere equality, inextricably linking their intellectual, emotional, and social aspirations. In particular, women believed that egalitarian relationships between men and women *were* possible, and to their credit, they found men willing and eager to enact relationships that emphasized shared intellectual and emotional interests.

Despite prescriptive fears about masculine, pedantic women, early national men did not seem troubled by the intellectual women in their lives, nor did early national women reject their domestic roles after acquiring education. In fact, we could argue that most educated women faced the inverse of the disruptive scenarios envisioned by prescriptive writers: Could they sustain the promise of mere equality when faced with the increasing demands of family life and domesticity? That is, could individual women enact identities and relationships rooted in expressions of mere equality *within* their assigned gender roles? The first generation of educated women did not, as a whole, make larger claims for political equality—they asked primarily for the right to be educated. Accepting the constraints of prescribed gender roles with respect to the law and politics, women who acquired education channeled those energies primarily toward their individual identities and relationships. "Ask those gentlemen of this assembly whose

wives have been the best educated whether they find them to be less attentive to domestic concerns," Anna Harrington suggested to the audience of a Ladies' Exhibition held at an academy in Lincoln, Massachusetts. "May not more women be trusted with knowledge, as well as these. Or is there any fear that women shall gain too much influence; and become mistresses of the world in spite of man?" The fear that intellectual equality would lead women to seek "too much influence" was not borne out by the everyday lives of educated women. "When we shall quit our domestic employments, put on offensive armor, and become fond of the art of war," Anna asserted, "then such an event may be feared." While accepting (for the time being) the limited range of such efforts, educated women began to explore—and without "offensive armor"—what the promises of mere equality might entail in their individual lives. . . .

Education, Equality, or Difference

Pray you excuse me, if I have gone too far
In telling you what we've learnt: and what we are
We'll strive to show, if you will deign to hear us;
If worthy, let your approbation cheer us.

Miss A. M. Burton read this poem at commencement exercises held at Susanna Rowson's Female Academy in October 1803. The poem was published in the *Boston Weekly Magazine*, making Burton's acquisition of education at once a lived experience and a literary representation. The interplay between the personal and prescriptive was also reflected in the poem itself, which asserted women's steadfast determination to acquire and demonstrate knowledge ("we'll strive to show"), along with persistent concerns about male reception ("if you will deign to hear us"). Such worries about male criticism were not unfounded, but the story is more complicated than that. As early national women acquired education, many advocates expressed confidence that women would easily achieve a state of near, or mere, equality with men. "By giving *mind* to the fair sex," as one author asserted, "we shall make them equal to any thing that is attainable by rational beings." Another essayist proudly noted that human qualifications, "when properly cultivated and exerted, put men and women nearly on an equal footing with each other, and share the advantages and disadvantages of life impartially between them."

Left unresolved were more precise discussions of what it meant for women to live merely as the equals of man—how near an equal footing was possible, given the

legal, political, and economic realities of early American life? Many women succeeded, as one essayist noted, in achieving "moments of transient equality," demonstrating intellectual "ability equal to ours." But those moments remained transient. After promoting women's intellectual capacities and celebrating their importance to civic society, prescriptive writers failed to advocate for women's legal, political, and professional equality with men. Unable to concede the possibility of women's full participation in political and economic spheres, social and political thinkers instead relied on the murky notion of mere equality in an effort to contain the potentially liberating aspects of their own rhetoric. Educated women learned to settle for social and cultural expressions of "approbation" rather than more expansive opportunities to fully utilize their intellectual capacities.

Despite these tensions, early national Americans clearly recognized that women's acquisition of education represented a critical step in their path to equality. Yet more than fifty years later, the subject of women's intellectual equality remained open to debate. In an 1840 essay published in *Godey's Lady Book*, author Mary Hale echoed sentiments expressed half a century earlier, insisting, "with proper cultivation, with the enjoyment of equal advantages, the intellectual attainments of women may equal those of men." Over the course of fifty years, educated women had proven their intellectual capacities in ever-increasing number and in an ever-expanding variety of subjects. "Has the short space of a half century given woman new powers," Hale wondered, "or is the spirit of our institutions more favourable to an enlarged cultivation of those she already possessed?" According to Hale, the answer was obvious: expanded access to educational opportunities had clearly led to women's increased attainment of knowledge and understanding.

Women had repeatedly demonstrated that they possessed intellectual capacity equal to that of men; why, then, did Hale still have to defend this assertion? Moreover, why had expanded access to education not led to even more expansive opportunities for women? In 1840, when Hale's article was published, only a handful of colleges admitted women. The clergy, law, and legislature all remained closed to women. Women continued to occupy "a less *public* station" than men, not from lack of intellectual capacity but from lack of access and opportunity. Despite her ardent support of women's educational capacities, Hale largely accepted these constraints as the will of Providence. Yet her essay also pointed to a more secular explanation—the continued criticism leveled against "a literary lady." Any woman who appeared too interested

in education risked being tainted with the stain of “pedantry, self-sufficiency and insipidity.” Nineteenth-century Americans remained deeply suspicious of women’s intellectual accomplishments.

Reading Hale’s essay, we may wonder whether little had actually changed in the course of fifty years. Fears of educated women continued to proliferate in the literary public sphere, perhaps in part because women’s access to education continued to expand exponentially. By 1840, scores of academies, seminaries, and collegiate institutes existed, offering a variety of advanced educational opportunities for women. Schools such as the Troy Female Seminary (founded by Emma Willard in 1821), the Hartford Female Seminary (founded by Catherine Beecher in 1823), and Mount Holyoke (founded by Mary Lyon in 1837) offered women the equivalent of a college education—although without explicitly referring to it as such. In 1837, Oberlin College admitted its first female students, paving the way for women’s admission to other colleges in the decades to follow. Well-educated women filled the ranks of teachers, authors, missionaries, and reformers. In essence, educated women attended institutions and engaged in the types of activities proposed in the 1802 “Plan for the Emancipation of the Female Sex”—yet without resolving the thorny issue of mere equality.

As women’s access to education expanded, nineteenth-century Americans remained at once celebratory and cautious about educated women’s influence in society. Articles proudly boasted that the United States “can vie with any nation on earth in a good proportion of intelligent and pious females.” To those skeptics who doubted the need for women’s education, one author suggested that such critics undoubtedly held “very limited views” of the importance of education or that they had conflated education with affectation: “Perhaps their idea of an ‘educated lady’ is associated in their mind with nothing better than some starched nun, or round-mouthed pedant.” Despite impressive institutional advancements and individual achievements in women’s education, prescriptive writers still relied on the figure of the pedant to discredit women’s intellectual ambitions. Improperly educated women could still be dismissed as “trifflers and silly women,” as one female essayist noted, “but if any of us have resolution enough to soar beyond those narrow limits, . . . we are called critics, wits, female pedants, &c.” For over half a century, women steadfastly acquired education, but the potential uses of their intellectual capacities remained constrained by custom, law, and prejudice. Accordingly, the prescriptive literature continued to define women’s education through a series of contradictions—between

capacity and utilization, between learning and desirability, between coquetry and pedantry.

In their everyday lives, educated women attempted to sort through competing sets of discourses, resisting negative representations while favoring models that validated their intellectual interests. Skeptical of both the pedant and the coquette, women refashioned narrow representations of womanhood into more expansive models. Women experimented with personal interpretations of print, reshaping discourses to suit their individual needs and aspirations. At every stage of their lives, women explored the boundaries of mere equality. In particular, educated women sought relationships with like-minded individuals willing to accept them as their intellectual and social equals. Women such as Eunice Callender, Sarah Ripley Stearns, Elizabeth and Margaret Shippen, Linda Raymond Ward, Jane Bowne Haines, and Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick all enjoyed platonic or romantic relationships with men who valued their intellectual attainments. Shared intellectual interests became a key means by which men and women crafted fulfilling relationships that celebrated areas of affinity and mutuality, in contrast to prescriptive ideas that insisted on models of gender difference and hierarchy. These women’s efforts remind us that prescriptive literature can tell us only part of the history of an era, and they illustrate the continued interplay between prescriptive literature and lived experience that informed women’s emotional and intellectual lives.

It is important to underscore, and tempting to celebrate, how early national women achieved some measures of mere equality in their everyday lives and relationships, even as we recognize that their efforts failed to challenge structural systems of inequality and inequity. That early national women did not advocate more fully for political rights may be seen as a lost opportunity, yet the paradoxical nature of mere equality offered them few avenues to pursue such broad goals. The narrow expressions of mere equality that educated women achieved reflected not just their own individual limitations but also larger cultural and prescriptive constraints. Despite their enlightened faith in women’s intellectual capacity, early national Americans struggled to sustain the malleable and elusive concept of mere equality. Ultimately, when faced with the fundamental question of whether women could be simultaneously equal to and different from men, nineteenth-century Americans could not square the search for mere equality with their overriding belief in sexual difference. In their own lives, women accepted these constraints even as they bristled against them. “I think if we had the advantages of the other sex, we should be equally as

reasonable and orderly a set of beings as they are." Elizabeth Lindsay mused to her friend Apphia Rouzee in 1806. Yet, like most of her contemporaries, Elizabeth stopped short of articulating a more radical call for equality: "but enough on the superiority of the sexes, for after all, I believe it is the best way to content ourselves with the station of life in which we have been placed." To best serve society, Elizabeth reflected, educated women needed to learn a final lesson—to "bend all our ambition on becoming as useful as we can." It can be argued that the women of this study bent their ambition, living quiet lives that until recently warranted little historical inquiry. They were well educated and determined to enact useful lives as learned women, but they had few avenues to directly challenge patriarchal systems of inequity.

The more well-known stories in women's history often revolve around those women who were able to express their desires for equality in more ambitious ways. These women, it should be noted, typically enjoyed access to educational opportunities pioneered by the early national generation. In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton—a graduate of Emma Willard's Troy Seminary—presented her *Declaration of Sentiments* at the Seneca Falls convention. Recognizing the link between knowledge and power, Stanton argued that women's educational status contributed to their subordinated place in American society: "He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her." Women's rights activists understood that the franchise was only one path to equality; thus, they sought not only the right to vote but further access to education, reforms to divorce and property rights legislation, and expanded economic opportunities, including "an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce." Women's rights activists called for something greater than mere equality—they sought a comprehensive vision of gender equality largely unconstrained by narrow representations of difference. Perhaps it was, in part, the limits of mere equality that inspired these activists to develop a more expansive women's rights agenda.

We know that most nineteenth-century Americans sharply resisted women's efforts to claim a more fundamental equality with men, as they evoked reformulated arguments about separate spheres and sexual difference in their efforts to maintain patriarchal systems of power. As the idea of mere equality evolved into struggles for wide-ranging forms of equality, the reactions against women became more vigorous. Indeed, the doctrine of separate spheres found its fullest expression in the prescriptive literature *after* women began to assert larger

claims for political and economic equality. Writers articulated a narrowly defined private sphere of domesticity at the very time that numerous women were carving out public roles for themselves and making demands for equal access to educational and economic opportunities. Thus, the notion of separate spheres that has dominated the historiography for decades can be better understood as a *reaction* to early national women's experiments with mere equality rather than as an accurate depiction of women's lives during this time period. The sharp emphasis of the antebellum era on difference came to dominate after women had attempted to live merely—and then more fully—as the equals of man.

Perhaps most worthy of future study are the thorny questions of how and why so many women learned to adopt the rhetoric of difference and, indeed, often did so as a conscious, deliberate strategy to justify their public roles. "On the whole, (even if fame be the object of pursuit)," Hannah More, author, argued, "is it not better to succeed as women, than to fail as men?" A leading advocate of women's education, More promoted a model of female excellence sustained not by mere equality but by sharp delineations of difference. She asked women to consider whether it was better "to shine, by walking honorably in the road which nature, custom, and education seem to have marked out, rather than to counteract them all, by moving awkwardly in a path diametrically opposite?" Like other prescriptive writers, More urged women to find cultural authority by seeking "to be excellent women, rather than indifferent men." Such arguments proved persuasive, and as the nineteenth century progressed, many women rejected the complex challenges of mere equality for such clear articulations of difference.

Why did women retreat from the idea of becoming merely the equals of man and embrace a social order rooted in sexual difference? What did the rhetoric of difference offer women that mere equality failed to provide or sustain? As scholars have shown, the prescriptive rhetoric promoting women's "sphere of influence" enabled women to enact a number of expanded roles for themselves as reformers, missionaries, educators, and authors. "There is an influence spread abroad in society," wrote M. H. S. Brown, a member of the Young Ladies' Association of the New Hampton Female Seminary, in 1840. "It is felt, though it may be unacknowledged, in the halls of legislation, as well as in the drawing room, and exerts itself powerfully upon the most gifted as upon the most unintellectual of men. . . . This influence is woman's." Yet such influence came at a price—it was sustained by the explicit notion that

women were acting in these influential roles as *women*, not as the mere equals of men.

The abandonment of mere equality was perhaps inevitable, in that it represented a paradoxical expression of gender identity that simultaneously reified sexual difference even as it promoted intellectual equality. Faced with this contradiction, . . . educated women often experienced a sense of ambivalence that complicated their understandings of the connections among education, equality, and difference. Although their efforts met with only limited success, the stories of how individual women attempted to live merely as the equals of man raise fundamental questions about the place of difference in a nation

dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Such questions have resonance today, as we consider the ways in which women continue to achieve certain measures of equality that have not required men to cede significant power or privilege. At stake, then and now, has been nothing less than (mere) equality.

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EXPLORING THE ISSUE



Did Improved Educational Opportunities for Women in the New Nation Significantly Expand Their Participation in Antebellum Society?

Critical Thinking and Reflection

1. What impact did female education have on women's status in antebellum American public life?
2. In what specific ways were American women able to use their education to participate in civil society?
3. In what ways were the ideals of the New Republic reflected in the educational opportunities for women?
4. Explain the difference class and race had on antebellum women's public participation. Compare and contrast the ways these same factors impact the civic involvement of women today.
5. Consider what women were left out of higher education as well as who was let in. In what ways does this reinforce society's ideas of gender, race and class?

Is There Common Ground?

In both studies, Kelley and McMahon recognize the forms of subtle or compliant resistance utilized by women while acknowledging that progress was predicated on and restricted by entrenched views of gender. For while education of all citizens was recognized in the early 19th century as critical component of an effective democracy and republic, the ways in which men and women were allowed to act upon their knowledge was strictly prescribed. Both authors cite references to women couching their desires for greater educational and intellectual opportunities in non-competitive and service-oriented language. In doing so, these educated women helped usher in the Second Great Awakening and the subsequent period of social reform and change. They applied themselves to a variety of fields such as abolition, temperance, sufferance, and to expanding educational and employment opportunities for women.

Angelica Grimke, for example used her position within Southern genteel society and later her authority as a wife of prominent abolitionist Theodore Weld as a platform for her work to end slavery. Catherine Beecher, daughter of minister Lyman Beecher and sister to author Harriet Beecher Stowe, championed women being educated for teaching by utilizing interest intersection and working within frameworks of feminine gender norms

even while tacitly acknowledging that many used teaching to escape the prescribed and normed path of marriage and motherhood. Teachers and other educated women may have had less status or power than their male counterparts, but their professions and work were a source of satisfaction and public identity. Founder of the American women's suffrage movement Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very careful of, and made much use of, her image as a happy and contented mother and wife to pursue of her goals. By pushing from within the accepted feminine sphere, she was able to maneuver around her critic's claims of the unnaturalness of her demands for emancipation, suffrage and self-sovereignty.

Kelley and McMahon's works also bring us pause for reflection of our own time and society. Women continue to work mainly in areas of service to others and these feminized professions are still less respected and valued. While the 19th Amendment approaches its centennial anniversary, women still have yet to achieve political parity in representation. Indeed, in what ways are women still pressured to appear non-confrontational, non-competitive and to put others at ease? Is compliant resistance a source of unrecognized strength that simply does not fit with masculinized views of power and agency, or is it a symptom of the continuing patriarchal gender bifurcation hierarchy and oppression?

Additional Resources

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National Women's History Museum

<https://www.womenshistory.org/womens-history>

The United States House of Representatives: The Women's Rights Movement, 1848-1920

<http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/No-Lady/Womens-Rights/>

Women and Reform

<https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/time-capsule/history5.html>

Education in Early America

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/education-in-early-america-birth-of-public-schools-and-universities.html>

