

Classics in the Education of Girls and Women

Shirley Nelson Kersey. *Classics in the Education of Girls and Women*. Metuchen, N.J. and London; The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1981, xii, 323 p.

This volume is a collection of thirty-five primary sources, essays and excerpts from longer pieces on the utility and rationale for educating females. The earliest extract is from Plato's famous dialogue in *The Republic* justifying female education in the ideal state. St. Jerome represents the early Christian era; three writers address us from the Renaissance, six from the Reformation. Writers from the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century complete the volume. Its editor optimistically begins her introduction with a quotation from Horace Mann who argued for every person's right to an education and every government's duty to provide it. She points out that the volume should be read chronologically, and that implicit in its organization lies a progression toward equal education for women. Writing that the authors she includes "alter educational circumstances for women of their day or for women of the future," she suggests that the very fact of writing about women's education improved its circumstances, providing something closer to equality over the twenty-four hundred years of history the book spans. (xi)

One person who lived only two hundred years ago did not think that the educational possibilities of her day were worth much. Abigail Adams in eighteenth century America did not see that great progress had taken place; she criticized the "trifling narrow contracted Education" offered women. She found it "mortifying" in 1778 to see "the difference in Education between the male and female sex, even in those families where Education is attended to." It is just as mortifying today to read this collection. Most of the writings included in the volume are by males; one must ask, with Abigail Adams, whether the sort of educations they proposed for their "companions and associates" arose from "an ungenerous jealousy of rivals near the Throne." Mary Astell of England one hundred years before Adams had thought that to be the case. "... the men will resent it, to have their enclosure broke down, and Women invited to taste of that Tree of Knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized." (114) The many years spanned by this book did not loosen men's hold on educational thought and educational systems; their ideas did not become more generous with the passing centuries.

For all the narrowness of educations proposed in the essays, the editor suggests that one must note that their authors at least took pains to write of the subject. Does that fact render them by definition more advanced or radical than their contemporaries, as the editor suggests when she sees progress in women's education resulting from these authors' solicitous attention? I do not think so. One ought definitely not just be grateful for their having written about educating women; one must in each instance question closely why they wrote about that subject.

Their motivations were complex. On the face of it, obviously each author here argued for educating women. What education meant is another story; and why educate women at all is yet another. Very few of them in fact called for women's curricula to be like those offered boys or men. Most of them assumed that males and females were inherently different, with different modes of thinking (some overtly said that women do not think but feel), who must therefore have different educations. One of the questions these writers had to address was each era's urge to socialize girls for a unique reason. For over twenty centuries the perceived need was to socialize girls to obedience, not to creativity or independence. The obedience might be owed mothers, as St. Jerome suggested. "She should love her as her parent, obey her as her mistress, fear her as her teacher." (17) Or the obedience could be owed future husbands as Richard Mulcaster, in the sixteenth century headmaster of St. Paul's Cathedral School, suggested. "Are they not . . . our naturall, next and most necessarie freindes? The very selfe same creatures, which were made for our comfort, the onely good to garnish our aloneness . . . borne for us to life, bund to us till death?" (54) Rousseau was perfectly candid about the difference between boys and girls. (5) . . . Dependence being a state natural to women, girls will soon perceive they were formed to obey." (139) Erasmus Darwin also argued that whatever educating girls received should be consonant with their natures. "The female character should possess the mild and retiring virtues rather than the bold and dazzling ones; great eminence is almost any thing is sometimes injurious to a young lady; whose temper and disposition should appear to be pliant rather than robust . . . as great apparent strength of character, however excellent, is liable to alarm both her own and the other sex . . ." (193) Sarah Fielding advocated in 1749 that the gentlewoman who taught young ladies should "render them obedient to their superiors," also teaching them neatness in their dress and gentility in their carriage. (125)

Few of the authors discussed whether the obedience that must belong in the girls' curriculum was innate or learned. Many of them assumed its presence nonetheless; indeed dependence and passivity as female characteristics are assumed almost throughout the book. A Woman, wrote Fenelon, should learn only enough religion "to believe it and to carry it out properly in practice, without ever arguing about it . . . She must avoid conversing with women who meddle with rash arguments concerning doctrine, and she must realise how unbecoming and dangerous this freedom is." (83) Fenelon more than most authors was quite candid about the purpose of all this docility. ". . . Never let her argue about theology to the great danger of her faith. Everything is lost if she obstinately tries to be clever and gets a distaste for domestic duties." (83)

That seems to be the point, then: women, if they are to be educated, should be offered a curriculum that will cause them to be better at what they are supposed to do — provide for convenient and comfortable households. Leonardo Bruni in 1405 wrote that the study of rhetoric — public and private discussion and forensic argument — was not for women. (23) Instead, their devotional instinct should be strengthened by the study of religion and morals. Let educators consider that women's bodies are not strong; keep them quietly occupied in their homes, wrote Fenelon. (76) In short, women were and must remain private creatures, and obedient to their fathers and husbands. Education could strengthen women's commitment to the private realm by helping eliminate women's natural inclinations to frivolity, vanity, and dissipation. Fenelon again: "Women are eloquent in conversation and active in carrying on an intrigue." (82) Or Sydney Smith, who wrote in 1808 that if one could teach women that acquisition of knowledge is as good as the gratification of vanity one could "raise up a much more formidable barrier against dissipation than . . . exhortations can supply." (230) Women then were dangerous; "the dearest comfort than men can have, if they encline to good: the nearest corrosive if they tread awry." (61) They must therefore be carefully controlled through education.

Since women bore and raised children, all the more reason to educate them to do their job well. Almost every author included in this book, male or female, argues that the best reason for educating women is that they raise the young. ". . . She cannot lay the foundation of a great character if she is absorbed in frivolous amusements . . .," wrote Sydney Smith in 1840. (228) Instead, wrote Catharine Beecher at about the same time, she must learn discretion, industry, neatness, punctuality, in order to pass on those qualities to her children. (288) Women must be taught for the sake of teaching their children: the theme recurs from the fifth century B.C. to the nineteenth A.D. Erasmus, Froebel, and others agreed with Rousseau that women should be taught "to the end that their male offspring may be strong and vigorous." (134)

In fact, this book is rather a grim compendium of views on the education of women. The motivations of the authors seem an ambivalent mixture of a desire to educate women, a desire normally transcended by an urge to educate them for men's comfort. In collecting these writings in one volume the editor is to be thanked. For blithely accepting the dictum that progress inevitably ensues because people encouraged women's education she must be criticized. In fact, few of the writers sought improvement of women or scholarship. Instead, they sought to benefit themselves. One can end a bit more cheerfully only by quoting Benjamin Rush, who in eighteenth century America urged women to grasp control of their own educations so that true equality could be achieved. "It will be in your power, Ladies, to correct the mistakes and practice of our sex upon these subjects, by demonstrating, that the female temper can only be governed by reason, and that the cultivation of reason in women, is alike friendly to the order of nature, and to private as well as public happiness."

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