

BENJAMIN RUSH'S VIEWS ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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“. . . the cultivation of reason in women.”

IN THE eighteenth century two prevalent points of view regarding the education of women were that women should not be educated formally beyond the most rudimentary fundamentals, and—a more liberal perspective—that their education should be designed to foster the ornamental and gentle aspects of their character and disposition. Benjamin Rush held neither of these views.

It has been said that following the War for Independence, during which Rush was a military surgeon, a member of the Revolutionary Congress, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, he launched a “one-man crusade to remake America.”¹ A physician and professor of chemistry and medicine at the new medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, Rush turned his versatile and creative mind to problems in medicine, psychiatry, social reform, and education, and attacked them in what was to become a substantial body of pamphlets, broadsides, books, and letters. His concern for learning and knowledge was intense and his interests were amazingly varied. He attacked “strong drink, slavery, war, capital punishments, test laws, tobacco, oaths, and even country fairs,” and advocated “beer and cider, free schools, education for women, a college for the Pennsylvania Germans, a national university, the study of science rather than Greek and Latin, free postage for newspapers, churches for Negroes, and the cultivation of the sugar maple tree.”²

In presenting his views on women's education, he anticipated opposition to them and confronted and refuted the arguments which he thought would be used by his opponents. “I know that

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¹ L. H. Butterfield (ed.), *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), I, xviii.

² *Ibid.*

the elevation of the female mind, by means of moral, physical and religious truth," he said, "is considered by some men as unfriendly to the domestic character of a woman. But this is the prejudice of little minds, and springs from the same spirit which opposed the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of our republics."³ Although he did not completely disregard the decorative and embellishing arts in his theoretical curriculum for women, he emphasized these aspects only if they were at the same time eminently practical. He contrasted these points of view by showing

how differently modern writers, and the inspired author of the Proverbs, describe a fine woman. The former confine their praises chiefly to personal charms, and ornamental accomplishments, while the latter celebrates only the virtues of a valuable mistress of a family, and a useful member of society. The one is perfectly acquainted with all the fashionable languages of Europe; the other, "opens her mouth with wisdom" and is perfectly acquainted with all the uses of the needle, the distaff, and the loom. The business of the one, is pleasure; the pleasure of the other, is business. The one is admired abroad; the other is honoured and beloved at home.⁴

But the question Rush asked before he could justify the inclusion of virtually any branch of learning in his proposed curriculum was whether or not the material would be of practical use to the women in this country.

He had a firm belief that education should be a reflection of the society of which it is a part, and a consequent disdain of the snobbishness inherent in the transplanting of European and British culture to a relatively primitive Pennsylvania.

It should not surprize us that British customs, with respect to female education have been transplanted into our American schools and families. We see marks of the same incongruity, of time and place, in many other things. We behold our houses accomodated to the

³ Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon female education, accommodated to the present state of society, manners, and government, in the United States of America," *Essays, Literary, Moral & Philosophical* (Philadelphia, 1798), p. 91.

⁴ Rush, "Thoughts upon female education . . .," p. 86.

climate of Great Britain, by eastern and western directions. We behold our ladies panting in a heat of ninety degrees, under a hat and cushion, which were calculated for the temperature of a British summer. We behold our citizens condemned and punished by a criminal law, which was copied from a country, where maturity in corruption renders public executions a part of the amusements of the nation. It is high time to awake from this servility—to study our own character—to examine the age of our country—and to adopt manners in every thing, that shall be accommodated to our state of society, and to the forms of our government.⁵

Education should “be conducted upon the principles very different from what it is in Great Britain.”⁶ For example, in Great Britain, being a servant was considered a “regular occupation,” but in America, being a servant “is the usual retreat of unexpected indigence.” Consequently, as servants were not always reliable, “our ladies are obliged to attend more to the private affairs of their families, than ladies generally do, of the same rank in Great Britain,” and hence their education should provide for this different and added responsibility.⁷

Whether Rush owed a singular debt to the ideas expressed in François Fénelon's *De L'Education des Filles*, written a century earlier in 1688,⁸ or whether there is merely a similarity of certain ideas⁹ is perhaps a matter of interpretation. That Rush gave a great deal of thought to the problems of women's education and evolved ideas in contrast to those of Fénelon is apparent. Fénelon included the study of Latin in his curriculum for women, whereas Rush was opposed to the study of the classics for all except those who intended to become professional classicists. Unlike Fénelon, Rush included a study of some of the sciences, a consideration of “the principles of liberty and government and the obligations of patriotism,”¹⁰ and thought that singing should be stressed not only for practical and aesthetic reasons but also as a healthful physical

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸ Harry G. Good, *Benjamin Rush and His Services to Education* (Berne, Indiana: Witness Press, 1918), p. 234.

⁹ Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York: Science Press, 1929), I, 63.

¹⁰ Benjamin Rush, “Of the mode of education proper in a republic,” *Essays, Literary, Moral & Philosophical* (Philadelphia, 1798), p. 19.

exercise. It might be said that Rush was more of a pioneer than was Fénelon, despite the century gap, in his concept of women's ability in certain branches of learning, such as "a general acquaintance with the first principles of astronomy natural philosophy and chemistry,"¹¹ previously assumed to have been men's prerogative.

Rush's recommendations for changes in the general educational pattern for women rested on the "several circumstances in the situation, employments, and duties of women in America, which require a peculiar mode of education."¹²

I. The early marriages of our women, by contracting the time allowed for education, renders it necessary to contract its plan, and to confine it chiefly to the more useful branches of literature.

II. The state of property in America, renders it necessary for the greatest part of our citizens to employ themselves, in different occupations, for the advancement of their fortunes. This cannot be done without the assistance of the female members of the community. They must be the stewards, and the guardians of their husbands' property. That education, therefore, will be most proper for our women, which teaches them to discharge the duties of those offices with the most success and reputation.

III. From the numerous avocations from their families, to which professional life exposes gentlemen in America, a principal share of the instruction of children naturally devolves upon the women. It becomes us therefore to prepare them by a suitable education, for the discharge of this most important duty of mothers.

IV. The equal share that every citizen has in liberty, and the possible share he may have in the government of our country, make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.¹³

The branches of learning for women which Rush thought could be depended upon to meet the requirements of the "peculiar mode of education" were:

I. A knowledge of the English language. She should not only read, but speak and spell it correctly. And to enable

¹¹ Rush, "Thoughts on female education . . .," p. 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

her to do this, she should be taught the English grammar, and be frequently examined in applying its rules in common conversation.

II. Pleasure and interest conspire to make the writing of a fair and legible hand, a necessary branch of a lady's education. For this purpose she should be taught not only to shape every letter properly, but to pay the strictest regard to points and capitals. . . .

III. Some knowledge of figures and book-keeping is absolutely necessary to qualify a young lady for the duties which await her in this country. There are certain occupations in which she may assist her husband with this knowledge; and should she survive him, and agreeably to the custom of our country be the executrix of his will, she cannot fail of deriving immense advantages from it.

IV. An acquaintance with geography and some instruction in chronology will enable a young lady to read history, biography, and travels, with advantage; and thereby qualify her not only for a general intercourse with the world, but to be an agreeable companion for a sensible man. To these branches of knowledge may be added, in some instances, a general acquaintance with the first principles of astronomy natural philosophy and chemistry, particularly, with such parts of them as are calculated to prevent superstition, by explaining the causes, or obviating the effects of of [*sic*] natural evil, and such, as are capable of being applied to domestic, and culinary purposes.

V. Vocal music should never be neglected, in the education of a young lady, in this country. Besides preparing her to join in that part of public worship which consists in psalmody, it will enable her to soothe the cares of domestic life. The distress and vexation of a husband—the noise of a nursey [*sic*], and, even, the the [*sic*] sorrows that will sometimes intrude into her own bosom, may all be relieved by a song, where sound and sentiment unite to act upon the mind. I hope it will not be thought foreign to this part of our subject to introduce a fact here which has been suggested to me by my profession, and that is, that the exercise of the organs of the breast, by singing, contributes very much to defend them from those diseases to which our climate; and other causes, have of late exposed them.

VI. DANCING is by no means an improper branch of education for an American lady. It promotes health, and renders the figure and motions of the body easy and agreeable. I anticipate the time when the resources of con-

versation shall be so far multiplied, that the amusement of dancing shall be wholly confined to children. But in our present state of society and knowledge, I conceive it to be an agreeable substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking, and gaming, in our assemblies of grown people.

VII. The attention of our young ladies should be directed, as soon as they are prepared for it, to the reading of history—travels—poetry—and moral essays. These studies are accommodated, in a peculiar manner, to the present state of society in America, and when a relish is excited for them, in early life, they subdue that passion for reading novels, which so generally prevails among the fair sex. I cannot dismiss this species of writing and reading without observing, that the subjects of novels are by no means accommodated to our present manners. They hold up *life*, it is true, but it is not as yet *life* in America. Our passions have not as yet “overstepped the modesty of nature,” nor are they “torn to tatters,” to use the expressions of the poet, by extravagant love, jealousy, ambition, or revenge. As yet the intrigues of a British novel, are as foreign to our manners, as the refinements of Asiatic vice. Let it not be said, that the tales of distress, which fill modern novels, have a tendency to soften the female heart into acts of humanity. The fact is the reverse of this. The abortive sympathy which is excited by the recital of imaginary distress blunts the heart to that which is real; and, hence, we sometimes see instances of young ladies, who weep away a whole forenoon over the criminal sorrows of a fictitious Charlotte or Werter, turning with disdain at three o’clock from the sight of a beggar, who solicits in feeble accents or signs, a small portion only of the crumbs which fall from their fathers’ tables.

VIII. It will be necessary to connect all these branches of education with regular instruction for the christian religion. For this purpose the principles of the different sects of christians should be taught and explained, and our pupils should early be furnished with some of the most simple arguments in favour of the truth of christianity.* [*Baron Haller’s letters to his daughter on the truths of the christian religion, and Dr. Beatie’s “evidences of the christian religion briefly and plainly stated” are excellent little tracts, and well adapted for this purpose.] A portion of the bible (of late improperly banished from our schools) should be read by them every day, and such questions should be asked, after reading it as

are calculated to imprint upon their minds the interesting stories contained in it.¹⁴

As for the method which should be used to accomplish women's learning in "the branches," Rush remarked that "if the measures that have been recommended for inspiring our pupils with a sense of religious and moral obligation be adopted, the government of them will be easy and agreeable." He added that "strictness of discipline" will make "severity unnecessary," and the best instruction will occur in the school that has the most order.¹⁵

Omitted from Rush's curriculum for women were such subjects as metaphysics, logic, mathematics (as opposed to arithmetic and bookkeeping), and the higher reaches of chemistry, which had become, "in most of the universities of Europe, a necessary branch of a gentleman's education. In a young country, where improvements in agriculture and manufactures are so much to be desired, the cultivation of this science, which explains the principles of both of them, should be considered as an object of the utmost importance."¹⁶ Omitted, too, was the study of instrumental music, "because I conceive it is by no means accommodated to the present state of society and manners in America." The high cost of instruments and the "extravagant fees" charged by the teachers were minor reasons for his opposition. Rush's main objection was to the large amount of time which had to be devoted to practice—"from two to four hours in a day, for three or four years." How much valuable time, which could have been devoted to the gathering of "useful ideas," was wasted in such practice, and how few of the women continued to play upon their instruments after they became the "mistresses of families." With irony, Rush pointed out that "their harpsichords serve only as sideboards for their parlours, and prove by their silence, that necessity and circumstances, will always prevail over fashion, and false maxims of education."¹⁷

Rush pointed to differences in predilections among boys and girls as justification for certain emphases in their respective educations. The "passion for reading novels, which so generally pre-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁶ Rush, "Of the mode of education proper in a republic," p. 17.

¹⁷ Rush, "Thoughts upon female education . . .," p. 85.

vails among the fair sex,"¹⁸ can be diverted by the study of history, travels, poetry, and moral essays, while special advantage should be taken of the proclivity of young girls to acquire religious knowledge more readily than boys. Rush believed that the appropriate education of women would contribute to the general uplifting of the morals and manners of the country. If women were educated properly, "they will not only make and administer its laws, but form its manners and character. It would require a lively imagination to describe, or even to comprehend, the happiness of a country, where knowledge and virtue, were generally diffused among the female sex."¹⁹ Not only are the opinions and conduct of men in the higher purposes of life often regulated by women, said Rush,²⁰ but also rude manners, "the loud laugh, and the malignant smile, at the expence of innocence, or of personal infirmities—the feats of successful mimicry—and the low priced wit, . . . would no more be considered as recommendations to the society of ladies," and would preclude their approval.²¹

In the final analysis, the influence of women's education would be most keenly felt in domestic life. It would be to the advantage of the republic if women were educated to "think justly upon the great subjects of liberty and government," and have "the obligations of patriotism . . . inculcated upon them."²² Not the least of the important reasons for this emphasis was that women would be "instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government."²³ Rush did not add that, with this reasoning, an even greater advantage might have been gained by including such instruction for their daughters.

In commending the "number of gentlemen associated for the purpose of directing the education of young ladies," in the city of Philadelphia, Rush made it clear that for the children of the upper classes he favored separate education for men and women as he praised the educational plan of "separation of the sexes in the unformed state of their manners." Through such separation, "female delicacy is cherished and preserved. Here the young ladies may enjoy all the literary advantages of a boarding-school,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

²⁰ Rush, "Of the mode of education proper in a republic," p. 19.

²¹ Rush, "Thoughts upon female education . . .," p. 88.

²² Rush, "Of the mode of education proper in a republic," p. 19.

²³ Rush, "Thoughts upon female education . . .," p. 76.

and at the same time live under the protection of their parents. Here emulation may be excited without jealousy,—ambition without envy,—and competition without strife.”²⁴

For the education of “the poor and labouring part of the community,” he recommended segregation by religious denomination “in order that they may be instructed with the more ease in the principles and forms of their respective churches.” The plan included education for both sexes in the essential rudiments of reading and writing the English language, “and (when required by their parents) the German language.” In addition to these branches, the girls were to “be instructed in needle-work, knitting and spinning, as well as in the branches of literature that have been mentioned.” The most important part of education for both sexes, however, was instruction “in the principles, and obligations of the christian religion. This is the most essential part of education—this will make them dutiful children—teachable scholars—and, afterwards, good apprentices—good husbands—good wives—honest mechanics—industrious farmers—peaceable sailors—and, in every thing that relates to this country, good citizens.”²⁵

Indeed, his faith in the efficacy of education was so strong that he believed the ignorance and vices of the children of poor people, which would “contaminate the children of persons in the higher ranks of society,” could be eliminated by providing for the education of such poor children.²⁶

Rush had many reasons for his opposition to the study of Latin and Greek for most boys. In support of his case, he pointed to women as well as men, who despite their lack of knowledge of the classics, had competence in the English language. “A knowledge of the Latin or Greek grammar, it has been said, is necessary for our becoming acquainted with English grammar. . . . I have known many bachelors and masters of arts, who were incorrect English scholars, and many persons of both sexes, ignorant of the dead languages, who both wrote and spoke English, agreeable

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁵ Benjamin Rush, “To the Citizens of Philadelphia, and of the Districts of Southwark and the Northern Liberties,” *The Independent Gazetteer* (Philadelphia), VI (March 28, 1787), n.p.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, n.p.

to the strictest rules of modern grammar."²⁷ In writing to a correspondent in Virginia about this matter, he mentioned the "several English schools in our city, in which boys and girls of twelve and fourteen years old have been taught to speak and write our native language with great grammatical propriety. Some of these children would disgrace our bachelors and masters of arts, who have spent five or six years in the study of the Latin and Greek languages in our American colleges."²⁸

Then, too, he added, the removal of the classics from boys' studies would further improve the status of women by

removing the present immense disparity which subsists between the sexes, in the degrees of their education and knowledge. Perhaps one cause of the misery of many families, as well as communities, may be sought for in the *mediocrity* of knowledge of the women. They should know *more or less*, in order to be happy themselves, and to communicate happiness to others. By ceasing to make Latin and Greek a necessary part of a liberal education, we open the doors for every species of improvement to the female part of society:—hence will arise new pleasures in their company,—and hence, too, we may expect a general reformation and refinement, in the generations which are to follow us; for principles and manners in all societies are formed chiefly by the women.²⁹

Rush believed that eventually the education of women as well as men would lift the abilities of both sexes to the point "where the resources of conversation shall be so far multiplied, that the amusement of dancing shall be wholly confined to children."³⁰ He also ridiculed a belief he ascribed to some men that "ignorance is favourable to the government of the female sex, . . . for the weak and ignorant woman will always be governed with the greatest difficulty," and stressed that education will help women to become aware that improving their minds will redound in innumerable advantages. He said: "I have sometimes been led to

²⁷ Benjamin Rush, "An enquiry into the utility of a knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages, as a branch of liberal education . . .," *The American Museum* (Philadelphia, June, 1789), p. 326.

²⁸ Benjamin Rush to James Muir, *The American Museum* (Philadelphia, August, 1791), p. 62.

²⁹ Benjamin Rush, "An enquiry into the utility of a knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages . . .," p. 333.

³⁰ Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts on female education . . .," p. 81.

ascribe the invention of ridiculous and expensive fashions in female dress, entirely to the gentlemen, in order to divert the ladies from improving their minds, and thereby to secure a more arbitrary and unlimited authority over them." He added that "the very expensive prints of female dresses which are published annually in France, are invented and executed wholly by GENTLEMEN."²¹ He charged those who were becoming educated women to prove that their education was advantageous from many perspectives. "It will be in your power, LADIES," he said, "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 [*sic*]."²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²² *Ibid.*