

# VINDICATING THE EQUALITY OF FEMALE INTELLECT: WOMEN AND AUTHORITY IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Mary Kelley  
(Dartmouth)

In the wake of the Revolution and establishment of the republic, the essayist Judith Sargent Murray anticipated consequences beyond those typically proclaimed by newly independent Americans. "Expect," she declared, "To see our young women forming a new era in female history"<sup>1</sup> Basing her claim upon already visible changes in the education of women, Murray noted that "female academies are everywhere establishing". Their presence suggested that schooling in the use of the needle, once thought all that was necessary for a female, was now being integrated with "studies of a more elevated and elevating nature". Murray was prescient. Established in both the North and the South during the nineteenth-century's opening decades, private academies and seminaries included in their curriculum subjects such as history, geography, mathematics, and the natural sciences. Nearly four hundred of these schools were founded exclusively for women between 1790 and 1830.<sup>2</sup>

Although historians have not yet determined the exact degree of disparity, it is clear that white female literacy lagged behind that of males at the end of the Revolution.<sup>3</sup> That soon changed. In the last two decades of the eighteenth century and particularly in the North, locally supported public schools began to enroll girls

1. Judith Sargent Murray, [Constantia], *The Gleaner*, I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, Boston, 1798, III, pp. 188-189. An earlier version of this essay was presented as the Third Annual Presidential Lecture, Dartmouth College, 28 February 1990. I am indebted to Norma Basch, Jeanne Boydston, William Freehling, Lee Heller, Judith McGaw, Sharon O'Brien, Nell Irvin Painter, Barbara Sicherman, Brenda Silver, Amy Dru Stanley, and Judith White, all of whom provided counsel in the preparation of this essay. Katherine Monteiro has proved yet again that she is the research assistant par excellence. Robert Eaton Kelley has combined limitless support with invaluable criticism.

2. Lynne Templeton Brickley, 'Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing': *The Beginnings of Secondary Education for Women in the United States, 1790-1830*, Unpublished Qualifying Paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1982, pp. 48-9. The schools are listed in Appendix C. Brickley notes that this list "is just a beginning and only meant to be suggestive".

3. In a study in which literacy was defined in terms of the ability to sign one's name, Kenneth Lockridge estimated that only forty to forty-five percent of women in late eighteenth-century New England were literate in comparison with eighty percent of their male counterparts. More recently, William Gilmore has suggested higher percentages, at least for those residing in Northern New England during the same period. In his analysis of Windsor District, Vermont, Gilmore has documented an increase in women's literacy rate from sixty percent in the early 1780s to nearly eighty percent for the decade from 1787 to 1796. Male rates, which remained stable, indicate nearly universal literacy. E. Jennifer Monaghan has demonstrated that colonial girls and boys were generally instructed in reading before writing. Girl's schooling in the basics of literacy was more likely to conclude with reading, while boys were schooled in both skills. Gloria Main has shown that increasingly in the eighteenth-century girls were taught writing as well as reading. Both Monaghan's and Main's analyses are based upon New England. It should be noted that the evidence employed in these quantitative studies is biased in terms of class and race. Because the sources employed reflected only those with access to property, they exclude poorer people, white and black, who left relatively few such records. See Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England*, Norton, New New, 1974, pp. 38-42, pp.

as well as boys. New England's most prominent historian of the Revolution, Jeremy Belknap, provided the typical justification as early as 1782, telling readers of the *Boston Evening Post* that female minds like those of males should "enjoy some of the benefits of public education, and be dignified with principles of wisdom and virtue".<sup>4</sup> He was joined by physician, political theorist, and educational reformer Benjamin Rush, whose "Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and The Diffusion of Knowledge", called upon Pennsylvania's legislators to support "free schools established in every township".<sup>5</sup> Building upon the basic literacy taught in public schools, an increasing number of private academies and seminaries provided a more extended and diversified education. Local newspapers described the character of these institutions and indicated the rapidity with which they were established in the early republic. Readers of Hartford's *Connecticut Courant* had an increasingly large number of choices - thirty-four academies, all of which admitted women, announced that they were opening their doors in the three decades after 1790. In the second decade of the nineteenth century alone, nine academies, six of which were exclusively female, were established in Hartford and surrounding towns. This was the decade in which a Mrs. Value announced the opening of her "BOARDING SCHOOL for young ladies" and listed

orthography, reading prose and verse, writing, arithmetic, parsing English grammar, the elements of astronomy on the celestial globe, geography on the terrestrial globe with a correct knowledge of the atlas and maps, history, Blair's lectures, [and] composition

among the subjects she offered. Students, she noted, would have the added value of her husband, who would "give them a lesson every day (Sundays excepted) in polite manners, dancing, the French language, and music".<sup>6</sup>

Towns much smaller than Hartford and its environs also had their academies. William Elliott, a resident of early nineteenth-century Beaufort, South Carolina, then a town with less than a thousand inhabitants, told Ann Smith, his future wife, that "Miss Thomson, a Lady from New York, is come to establish a female Academy here".

57-58; William Gilmore, *Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760-1830*, "Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society" 92 (1982), pp. 126; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England", *American Quarterly* (March 1988), pp. 18-44; Gloria Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England", *Journal of Social History*, 24, (Spring 1991), pp. 579-589.

4. Jeremy Belknap, *Boston Evening Post*, 2 February 1782. Quoted in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Brown and Company, Boston, 1980, pp. 290. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot examine public education in *A History of Coeducation in American Schools*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990. See especially chapters 1-4.

5. Benjamin Rush, *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and The Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania*, Dobson, Philadelphia, 1786, p.6. Rush's promotion of female education had its limitations. His elaborate "Plan" included a publicly funded university, four colleges, and academies in every county; only the elementary schools would enroll females.

6. *The Connecticut Courant*, 18 May 1795, 17 April 1797, 6 November 1797, 5 March 1798, 7 May 1798, 17 December 1798, 20 May 1799, 17 June 1799, 6 January 1800, 26 October 1801, 8 February 1802, 24 May 1802, 21 October 1802, 2 November 1803, 16 November 1803, 10 April 1805, 30 October 1805, 6 April 1806, 9 April 1806, 23 July 1806, 23 July 1806, 13 July 1808, 19 April 1809, 30 August 1809, 6 June 1810, 21 December 1813, 15 March 1814, 4 May 1813, 13 May 1813, 21 May 1814, 15 April 1817, 22 April 1817, 29 April 1817. The advertisement for Mrs. Value's academy appeared in the issue dated 21 December 1813.

Thomson, who was "acquainted with most modern languages, an author and professed blue-stocking", had made "quite a sensation in our little town".<sup>7</sup> That was probably an understatement.

During these decades academies were being established just as rapidly in rural settings. William Gilmore's extraordinarily detailed study of the Upper Connecticut River Valley has documented the process in which women entered academies throughout Windsor County, Vermont between 1780 and 1835. During the 1790s, before local institutions emerged, young women had to journey to Hanover, New Hampshire's academy, which began accepting "Young Ladies" in 1791. Founded in 1802, the Windsor Grammar School welcomed girls; twelve years later, a strictly female academy was established. By the early 1830s, the Windsor Female Academy, which by now enrolled more than forty students, had been joined by academies in Chester, Ludlow, and Ryegate.<sup>8</sup> Heightened opportunities for schooling such as those made available in Hartford, in Beaufort, and in the Upper Connecticut River Valley were typical. Their impact was decisive: by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, the disparity between women and men had been erased, and in New England ninety percent of the adult white population had become literate.<sup>9</sup>

Historians and literary critics have only begun to explore the personal and more intangible consequences of literacy. Linda Kerber has noted that literacy broadened an individual's network of communication and exposed her to a wider variety of perspectives.<sup>10</sup> The ability to read, to speculate about an idea in a diary or journal, to exchange an opinion in correspondence all enhanced self-consciousness, choice, and autonomy. Social and cultural consequences were equally significant. The most immediately apparent is related to the increased importance of print as a medium of communication. Unlike women and men who continued to rely upon oral communication, those who were literate had access to print. Able to participate in the discourse that shaped the values of their society, they could determine its character and parameters whatever the subject.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women's reading had been religious in character. In a letter dated 21 September 1819, Maria Campbell reminded

7. William Elliott to Ann Smith, 6 June 1817, Elliott Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.

8. William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1989, pp. 44-47.

9. Using data from the federal census of 1840, Maris Vinovskis and Richard Bernard have found that 91.5% of the nation's white population was literate. This figure does not indicate the considerable regional variation that persisted well into the nineteenth century. Vinovskis and Bernard have estimated that one out of every five white Southerners was illiterate, compared with one out of ten of their counterparts in Western states and one out of thirty-five in Middle Atlantic states. See Vinovskis and Bernard, "Beyond Catharine Beecher: Fiction in the Antebellum Period", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 3 (Summer 1978), pp.856-69; Carl Degler, "The Two Cultures and the Civil War", in Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratoer, eds., *The Development of An American Culture*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1970, p. 99.

10. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1980, pp. 192-193. In an analysis of the diaries of six nineteenth-century women, Richard Brown has also commented on the multifaceted purposes served by reading. Not only did it foster a richer and more diverse interior life, but it also provided readers with subjects for conversation with family and friends. See Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1989, pp. 160-196.

Mary Humes, a younger cousin then attending the acclaimed Salem Academy in Salem, North Carolina, that hers was a world much different from that of earlier generations. "In the days of our forefathers", Campbell said, "it was considered only necessary to learn a female to read the Bible".<sup>11</sup> Hannah Heaton was one such learned female. Taught to read the Bible, she used it as a point of departure for reading that can only be described as prodigious. In a diary that spanned the last forty years of the eighteenth century, she noted that "i [sic] read constantly and find it teaching". That she did in a daily schedule took this New Englander from the Bible to the meditations of John Bunyan to the treatises of Thomas Shepard, Solomon Stoddard, and Michael Wigglesworth.<sup>12</sup> Some of Heaton's contemporaries read more broadly, including Shakespeare, Pope, and Dryden among their choices.<sup>13</sup> South Carolinian Sarah Reeve Gibbes was perhaps most notable in this regard. Telling her son, a student at Princeton in the 1780s, that she was pleased he had decided "to make a collection of books", she proceeded to select the authors for him - Shakespeare's "force of human genius", Pope's "chastity of thought", and Dryden's stimulation of "imagination" made them required reading. Swift was problematic. "Happy sallies of wit" notwithstanding, Gibbes found him wanting in "refinement, in many parts his inelegant expressions hurt the delicate reader". The antidote was Sterne's Yorick who would "correct your feelings". History, Gibbes insisted, would "be most substantially usefull, the Roman history particularly will furnish you many noble examples that deserve imitation".<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, reading of the sort Gibbes had so confidently selected for her son became the likely choice for other women. Although Mary Howell was surely exceptional in the volume of her reading, the history, poetry, biography, and fiction in which she immersed herself were being read by her female contemporaries. In the spring of 1801, this resident of Providence, Rhode Island noted that her recent reading had included Pope, Milton, and Cowper, poets with whom she had "always been familiar, tho' never intimate". In the winter of 1802, she recorded the forty-three volumes that she had read in the previous six months. Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*, Rollin's *Ancient History*, Cook's *Voyages*, Goldsmith's *History of Rome*, and a volume of Shakespeare's plays were included, as were two recently published American novels, Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* and Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting the same predilection for the

11. Maria Campbell to Mary Humes, 21 September 1819, Campbell Collection, Special Collections, Manuscript Department, Duke University, Durham, NC.

12. Hannah Heaton, "Experiences or Spiritual Exercises". A typescript of the diary is deposited at the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT. Quoted in Barbara E. Lacey, "The World of Hannah Heaton: The Autobiography of an Eighteenth-Century Connecticut Farm Woman", *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLV, no. 2, April 1988, pp.1288-289.

13. In her research on colonial women's reading, Alice Mary Baldwin found that women also included Price, *The Spectator*, Congreve, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Addison. See Linda Kerber's commentary on Baldwin's unpublished research, 'Why Should Girls Be Learned and Wise? Two Centuries of Higher Education for Women as Seen Through the Unfinished Work of Alice Mary Baldwin', in John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe (eds.), *Women and Higher Education in American History: Essays from the Mount Holyoke College Sesquicentennial Symposium*, W.W. Norton, N.Y., 1988, p. 24. Baldwin's papers are deposited at Duke University, Durham, NC.

14. Sarah Reeve Gibbes to John Gibbes, 30 September 1783, Gibbes-Gilchrist Collection, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC.

15. Journals of Mary Howell, 21 April 1801, 7 February 1802, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.

secular, Howell's contemporary, Anne Iredell, focused upon history, philosophy, and logic. Having already "entangled, [her]self in a course of modern history", this North Carolinian then acquainted herself with that exemplar of the Scottish Enlightenment, Lord Kames, and he led her to Aristotle's logic.<sup>16</sup>

Fiction, which came to play an increasingly prominent role in women's reading, welcomed them into the world of the imagination and encouraged their self-education. Indeed, as Cathy Davidson has suggested, novels themselves constituted a form of education. Fiction introduced women to a social and intellectual world that had largely excluded them, broadened their knowledge, and increased their literacy. Davidson and other critics have also shown that novels made possible a different relationship between writer and reader in which authority was vested in the latter. Addressing the reading self without the mediation of social authorities, whether ministers or magistrates, fiction engaged a female reader as an equal and encouraged her to claim the role of interpreter. No less important, novels offered characters with whom she might readily identify and narratives that were relevant to her life.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, the novel was severely censured by those social authorities in the pulpit and press that it appeared to be displacing. James Madison, Episcopal bishop and president of William and Mary, warned his daughter Susan that novels tended to vitiate the taste and to produce a disrelish for substantial intellectual food".<sup>18</sup> Princeton theologian Samuel Miller agreed. His judgment in the two volume *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* was damning indeed

[T]here is no species of reading, which promiscuously pursued, has a more direct tendency to discourage the acquisition of solid learning, to fill the mind with vain, unnatural, and delusive ideas, and to deprave the moral taste.<sup>19</sup>

The author of an unsigned essay in the aptly titled *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor* elaborated upon the perils cited by Madison and Miller. Almost without exception, novels were "positively mischievous", offering as they did "false and exaggerated notions which are sure to mislead the understanding, and, possibly, corrupt the heart". They filled

young minds with fancies, wishes, hopes and expectations which can never, in the natural course of things, be gratified.<sup>20</sup>

16. Anne Iredell to James Iredell, Jr., 14 December 1805, 27 August 1806, Charles Johnson Collection, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC. Quoted in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's*, *op. cit.*

17. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1986. In her analysis of the relationship between text and reader, Davidson cites Mikhail Bakhtin's observations about reading as a process that empowers the individual. The reader of a novel, he has said, "acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image". See especially pp. 3-14; 55-79.

18. James Madison to Susan Randolph Madison, [1811], Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia ed. by Thomas J. Buckley. Reprinted in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 91, January 1983, pp. 98-104.

19. Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 volumes, New York, 1803, 2, pp. 177-178.

20. Anonymous, "On Novels and Novel Reading", *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor*, III no. 2 (February 1811), pp. 76-87.

The censures did little if anything to diminish the novel's popularity among readers, however. The author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a telling example in this regard. Three decades before she would publish one of the century's most popular novels, the young Harriet Beecher sought a fictional alternative to the Bibles, sermons, and devotional tracts that filled the household of her father, the prominent evangelical minister Lyman Beecher. The search proved arduous, but a determined Harriet entered her father's study and confronted a "weletering ocean of pamphlets, in which I dug and toiled for hours to be repaid by disintering a delicious morsel of a Don Quixote". The discovery was unexpected, the pleasure graphically described: *Don Quixote*, albeit only as a fragment, had "seemed like the rising of an enchanted island out of an ocean of mud".<sup>21</sup> The same Mary Howell who had read two of America's earliest novelists relished Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. Acknowledging that others thought the plot "simple" and the setting "low", she none the less insisted that "every page was dictated by benevolence and written by sly humor". It was the latter that had made the novel a particular delight: "I have not for a long while had more *solus* laughs".<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Ruffin had a similar reaction to Fielding's second novel. Having taken "a small peep in *Tom Jones*", she parodied the imagined masculine response to her daring act. She had not meant "to shock any one of your senses by such an *unuadylike* and ungenteel confession". The next day's entry in her diary made clear that Ruffin's desired intention was exactly that. In mocking the familiar stereotype that disparaged female intellect, she laughingly presented herself as having "spent the whole day lolling and reading". All about herself had yielded before

the strange infatuation of novel reading so popular with us *silly, weak* women whose mental capacities neither desire nor aspire to a higher grade.

Men, of course, were not subject to such temptations. Comprising the "more *noble, exalted, and exemplary* part of society", they supposedly pursued only "*fame, honor, solid benefit and perpetual profit*". The satirical portrayals concluded, Ruffin left her male hostages of mind with a last parry, saying "construe the compliment as you please, exacting not from me an explanation which might be unwelcome to your superior ears".<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the unequivocal pleasure so apparent in the response of Stowe, Howell, and Ruffin was unusual. Despite the satisfactions they derived from fiction, many readers remained vulnerable to the strictures of those that Ruffin had delighted in lampooning. Susan Nye Hutchinson was completely intimidated. In the only reference to reading fiction that she recorded in her diary, she expressed "great regret for having looked into an old novel - Richardson's *Pamela* - I am conscious it was wrong".<sup>24</sup> The dedicated student of Plutarch, Rollin, Hurde, Shakespeare, and Milton, Caroline Brooks Lilly, allowed herself the pleasures of fiction very infrequently. Like

21. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Early Remembrances*, Charles Beecher (ed.), *Autobiography. Correspondence, Etc. of Lyman Beecher*, vol. 3, 1864, pp.1, 26.

22. *Journals of Mary Howell*, 2 April 1802, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.

23. Elizabeth Ruffin Diary, 9 February 1827, 10 February 1827, Harrison Henry Cocke Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

24. Susan Nye Hutchinson Diary, 25 February 1833, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

Hutchinson, she then felt obliged to confess in her diary that she had "for the first time in three or four years (I believe) been guilty of reading a *Novel*".<sup>25</sup>

In a subtle but critical sense, the increase in female literacy, the broadened reading in which women engaged, and the enhanced educational opportunities, changed women's sense of themselves as historical actors. They provided a context for the negotiation of boundaries separating the private and public, the feminine and masculine, the household and body politic. Equally important, they made possible the invention of careers that brought women into public life - and once there - women themselves created female-dominated spaces, whether educational institutions, voluntary associations, or religious organizations.<sup>26</sup> But before those careers and those institutions could become a reality, the idea of an educated woman had to be constructed, and as Sarah Pierce, the founder of one of the nation's earliest female academies, said to her students, "the equality of female intellect" had to be "vindicated".<sup>27</sup>

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, newly independent Americans began to consider the subject of female intellect, a topic that had elicited little concern earlier. The resulting discourse addressed fundamental questions. Were women's minds equal to those of men? Did this equality necessarily imply sameness? Or was it possible for women to be simultaneously equal and different in their mental capacities? However these epistemological issues were addressed, questions about the purpose of female education remained. Were women to be educated simply to enlarge their minds and to encourage them to become enlightened and articulate individuals? Or was it more appropriate to dedicate their education to a larger social purpose? And if the latter was stressed, to what degree should their education be different from that of their male counterparts? These questions were surely basic. Significantly, they were also constructed solely in terms of gender. White and at least middling in social station, the participants in this discourse on female intellect displayed little if any consciousness of race and class as determinants of identity and status. Instead, they made gender the only relevant category. Their focus upon gender resulted in a bipolar construction in which woman was defined in opposition to man, then regarded as the standard against which all humanity was measured.<sup>28</sup>

25. Caroline Brooks Lilly Diary, 14 July 1838, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

26. Anne Firor Scott has shown that voluntary associations provided women a bridge into public life. In her recent survey of American women's history, Sara Evans has also stressed the role of these organizations in redefining gender relationships and remapping the boundaries separating private and public. Lori D. Ginzberg's analysis of nineteenth-century voluntary associations has provided extensive documentation of this phenomenon. I would add that female educational institutions have also been influential in this regard. See Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1984, pp. 9-294; Evans, *Born for Liberty: History of Women in America*, Free Press, N.Y., 1989; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States*, Yale, New Haven, 1990.

27. Sarah Pierce. "Address at the Close of School", October 29, 1818, *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833*, compiled by Emily Noyes Vanderpoel and edited by Elizabeth C. Barney, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1903, p. 177.

28. In their examinations of gender, historians are beginning to consider the signal importance of race and class. See Nancy Hewitt's "Beyond the Search", *Social History*, 10 (October 1985), pp.299-321. Alice Kessler Harris has cast the relationship between gender, race, and class as a circle. In calling upon historians

Pamphlets, sermons, articles in periodicals, speeches before audiences large and small, all sought to discover the character of women's minds and to determine how those minds might best be educated. Invariably, the commentators looked at female intellect through the lens of gender and, having glimpsed the masculine and the feminine, invested these social constructions with explanatory power. Any of their documents might serve to illustrate the strategies they employed in constructing the idea of an educated woman. One of the least visible of these sources is remarkably comprehensive. Carefully bound in marbled paper and tucked away in an obscure collection at the Georgia Historical Society, Penuel Bowen's forty-three pages of commentary elaborate upon virtually every issue that would dominate the discourse on women's education for the next seven decades. The year was 1786, the author a transplanted New Englander. A graduate of Harvard College and a former minister of New South Church in Boston, Bowen, who had come South in search of a parish, had been preaching in Savannah, Georgia for only two months and had founded there the "Young Ladies and Misses Academy" to supplement his income. Delivered before parents and students, Bowen's address marked the opening of the school in which twenty young women had enrolled.<sup>29</sup>

In the speech's opening pages, Bowen's stance accorded women equality with men. "Woman", he declared with a striking inclusiveness

is a human being of one and the same nature and properties as man, endowed with the same spirit; the same powers of understanding and reason, moral agency and accountability; the same passions and affections.

Theoretically, then, female equality was based upon a presumed sameness between the sexes. But if Bowen claimed that the commonalities shared by women and men made them equals, he also insisted upon difference in regard to their roles. Whatever else, a woman "has her proper station, and her part to act". That station, that part were seen as "very nicely proportional and equal to man's". Initially at least, female difference was not to be understood as antithetical to female equality. Instead, Bowen seemed to present women's station, their part, as the equivalent of men's. But quickly, very quickly, he employed difference to serve ends that sanctioned female subordination.<sup>30</sup>

to leave behind an exclusive focus upon gender, she has suggested that "we attempt to understand difference, not as single necessary dichotomy, but as a set of intersecting circles of experience that together structure consciousness." See *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*, University of Kentucky, Lexington, 1990, p. 67.

29. Although the document entitled *Upon Virtue in General and Female Education Manners in Particular* at the Georgia Historical Society is identified only as an "Anonymous Booklet," Mary Beth Norton has compared the address with a collection of Penuel Bowen's papers deposited at the South Carolina Historical Society and shown Bowen to be the author. See *Liberty's Daughters*, *op. cit.*, p. 368; Linda K. Kerber examined the claims made for female education in "Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787-1805" in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (eds), *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, Knopf, N.Y., 1974, pp. 36-59.

30. Penuel Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. 1-2. Recently, feminist scholars have begun to explore the implications of the hegemonic categories of equality and difference. I am particularly indebted to Joan Wallach Scott's analysis. Ann Snitow's subtly nuanced commentary has been very helpful. See Scott, "The Sears Case" in *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 167-177; Snitow, "Pages from a Gender Diary. Basic Divisions in Feminism", *Dissent*, (Spring 1989), pp. 205-224. Legal scholars have



Having posited female equality and female difference as basic categories, Bowen proceeded to situate education within his society's dominant concerns. Nowhere was this more apparent than in his analysis of virtue, a concept that had been central to Revolutionary ideology and remained equally important in the early republic. Initially, this might appear a meaningless digression on the part of a pedagogue eager to display his learning. But, as Bowen and his listeners understood the matter, the inculcation of virtue was education's most important objective. And, if women were to have a claim on education, their relationship to virtue had to be defined. Virtue, as he described it, meant an "entire conformity in moral agents to the dictates of right reason". Employing the premises and the vocabulary of Scottish philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson, Bowen explained that "this sense of virtue, or the difference between right and wrong is impressed on the reasonable soul in its original composition". Commonly designated the "conscience", this trait was always in need of "cultivation and knowledge".<sup>31</sup>

Bowen himself was part of a generation that was beginning to elaborate upon the implications of virtue for women. Looking to the classical world of Greece and Rome for ideas that would empower them in the struggle with England, eighteenth-century Americans originally subscribed to a definition of virtue that was entirely masculine in its connotations. Indeed, the word itself derived from the Latin *vir* signifying man. Patriotic, independent, and courageous in defense of his country, the model republican stood ready to yield his private interests before the needs of his newly established nation. He and he alone appeared essential to the survival of the republic.<sup>32</sup> And yet

addressed the constitutional and statutory implications of this binary opposition. Martha Minow has highlighted the conundrum entailed in the dualism: "If women claim they are the same as men in order to secure rights, any sign of difference can be used to deny those rights; and if women claim they are different from men in order to secure rights, those very differences can be cited to exclude women from the rights that men enjoy." Catharine MacKinnon has also noted either men or masculinity become the referent for both categories. See Minow, "Adjudicating Differences: Conflicts among Feminist Lawyers, in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (eds.), *Conflicts in Feminism*, New York and London, 1990, pp.49-163; MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination", in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp.32-45.

31. Penuel Bowen, op. cit., pp. 5-6, 7. In studies that have shaped the perspective of a generation of historians, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood made virtue central to analysis of the Revolution and establishment of the Republic. See Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Harvard, Cambridge, 1967, and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1969. Robert Shalhope's historiographical essays have highlighted the importance of this approach. His most recent is "Republicanism and Early American Historiography", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (April 1982), pp. 334-56. Linda K. Kerber's essay indicates the current tendencies in the scholarship. See "The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation", *American Quarterly*, (Fall 1985), pp. 475-95.

32. Ruth Bloch's insightful article is helpful in this regard. In bringing the importance of gender to the fore, she has suggested that ideas about sexual difference "underlay some of the most basic premises of the Revolution, and shaped important ideological changes in the early Republic". She locates the origins of these masculine connotations in classical literature and notes as well that they were also encoded in the Renaissance republicanism of Machiavelli. As Bloch notes, the idea itself can be found in the Homeric concept of arete, a concept that emphasized strength and prowess in athletic competition and armed conflict. Virtue derived from the Latin *virtus*, and thus originally from *vir*. Hannah Fenichel Pitkin has addressed the inscription of gender in Machiavelli's political theory. See Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America", *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13 (Fall 1987), pp. 37-58; Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*, University of California, Berkeley, 1984.

Americans in the years immediately after the Revolution began constructing a female counterpart in the model of the republican mother, a woman who fostered the requisite elements of virtue in her sons and encouraged the same in her husband. If she was to be effective, this mother had to be educated. Women, then, were also seen as sustaining the republic and, as a result, the traditional boundaries between private and public were beginning to be modified. Indeed, Bowen's commentary exemplified the transition - in designating the gender of virtue, he located it simultaneously in "man's human's mind".<sup>33</sup>

Gender and its concomitant, difference, remained at the forefront in Bowen's elaboration of virtue's particular behavioral attributes. Dividing its elements into a series of binary oppositions, Bowen claimed for the feminine "moral virtues [which] are surely all your own" - moderation, prudence, modesty, delicacy, and tranquillity. Bowen then engaged in definition by negation, a rhetorically powerful approach that located the feminine in opposition to the masculine. "Not Valour or Fortitude, - this belongs alone to man", - he pointedly told his listeners,

A woman had a thousand times better be a coward than a Virago. You were not made for fists or war-like action, therefore the virtues proposed to it become you not but rather deform.<sup>34</sup>

In his analysis of the social and cultural meaning encoded in these dualisms, Bowen employed the same binary oppositions to construct a system of gender relations in which an individual female's equality was joined with her social subordination. The theoretical and linguistic negotiations required in this endeavor were almost as notable as the character of the system itself. Bowen began with the basic and then hegemonic premise that "degrees of superiority and subordination would seem needful in all society". What this entailed for women became immediately apparent: "a degree of submission or place giving", as Bowen succinctly (and graphically) described the hierarchy. He acknowledged that this hierarchy implied "some superiority on the man's part", but he hastened to add that this was offset by the woman's "superiority of delicacy and a prevalence of the finer sensibilities". This hierarchical system also served to legitimate the spatial dimensions that Bowen ascribed to this system. Women's space, as Bowen told his listeners in establishing yet another series of oppositions, was "domestic". Here, he said, is "your field, your scene to shine in".<sup>35</sup>

33. Bowen, p. 5. The use of a double possessive adjective suggests that Bowen, a late eighteenth-century clergyman, understood the distinction between "man" and "human," a distinction that still escapes some today. Linda K. Kerber identified this concept in her pathbreaking article on the construction of republican motherhood. See "The Republican Mother. Women and the Enlightenment: An American Perspective", *American Quarterly*, 38 (Summer 1976), pp. 187-205. She elaborated on the concept's implications in *Women of the Republic*, *op. cit.*

34. Bowen, pp. 19-20, 20-21. Historically, engagement in armed conflict has served as a signal means by which to designate appropriate gender behavior. In highlighting the masculine connotations of virtue, Ruth Bloch has noted that "exemplary citizens were above all daring soldiers and inspired orators those who risked danger and won glory in valiant defense of liberty." See "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13 (Fall 1987), 43. That gender remains an issue today has become obvious in the controversy about women's appropriate role in the military.

35. Bowen, pp. 24, 28. One of the early participants in this revaluation of the emotions, Bowen's construction of human psychology became a typical nineteenth-century challenge to the privileged position accorded rationality by the Enlightenment.

Bowen's claims for female education were deeply informed by gendered ideas about human psychology and social relations. Ironically, the same ideas simultaneously led him into a series of qualifications about that education. "Most generally", he declared, men agreed that "to be very bookishly inclined or to become *much* learned is not an essential requisite in a female". And why was that? Initially, Bowen simply observed that women would not be engaged in "teaching [in] the arts and sciences, [in] politicks, or [in] law". Obviously, then, their education need not include any preparation for the professions. However, much more than potential careers was at stake. Femininity was the fundamental issue, as Bowen made clear. "Characters too learned in your sex, or rather affectedly sensible of it", he pointedly told his female listeners, appeared "disgusting and disagreeable". Despite Bowen's insistence upon the importance of female education, the intellectual woman had become an oxymoron.<sup>36</sup>

In the juxtaposition of equality and difference, the concern with virtue, and the lingering apprehensions about the development of female intellect, Penuel Bowen's address was representative. Almost without exception, commentators made the same double-edged declarations about women's mental capabilities and their appropriate education. On the one hand, they insisted women's minds were equal to men's. Writing in the *American Museum* six years after Bowen's speech, one J.P. Martin emphasized that no one should "limit merit, nor knowledge, to either sex"; instead, both should be considered "the natural growth of the human mind". Alden Bradford clearly agreed. Speaking at the opening of the local academy in Wiscassett, Maine in 1808, he told the town's residents that women

possess equally with the other sex quickness of apprehension and accuracy of discernment; and that with equal advantages, they make as great proficiency in any branches of literature.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, James Milnor felt sufficiently confident to declare in the pages of the *Port Folio* that any lingering ideas about female inferiority had "been nearly exploded".<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, this particular equality did not mean that education should prepare women for equal roles with men. The same J. P. Martin who had rejected intellectual distinctions between the sexes insisted upon very different intellectual objectives for educated women and men. "Our young men", he declared,

will be emulous to excel the geniuses of the east; our daughters will shine as bright constellations, in the sphere where nature has placed them.

Alden Bradford pointedly appended to a defense of female equality grounded in sameness the caveat that "women's employments and pursuits are not the same". In contrast to male counterparts who were developing skills to act upon the world, females should dedicate themselves to becoming "more agreeable and judicious

36. Bowen, pp. 28-30.

37. J. P. Martin, "Extract from an Address on Female Education", *American Museum*, XI, No. 5 (May 1792), pp. 219-220; Alden Bradford, "An Address Delivered at the Opening of the Academy, Wiscassett, Maine", Cheever, Hallowell, 1808, p. 13; James Milnor, "On Female Education," *Port Folio* 3rd Series, I (1809), p. 387.

companions and more capable of directing the dispositions and manners of children". James Milnor hardly needed to add that such an education could only help women in "the faithful discharge of every female duty".<sup>38</sup>

Lingering apprehension about the development of women's intellect, an apprehension that skewed defenses of female education offered by Bowen and the other commentators, had its own history. One need only turn to the previous century for warnings about the ominous consequences of educating women. John Winthrop, one of the founders of Massachusetts's Bay and its first governor, recorded the plight of one Anne Hopkins, a "godly young woman" who nonetheless had "fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason". The cause was easily discernible, at least to Winthrop - she had given "herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books". Hopkins' fate would have been entirely different, Winthrop concluded,

if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger.<sup>39</sup>

Winthrop could not have been more emblematic in articulating premises about women and their minds that were common to his time and place.

In rejecting the idea that women's minds were lesser and their education useless, if not damaging, commentators such as Bowen reflected a change in perspective that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, female education was now being represented as necessary for the fulfillment of a woman's newly politicized role as wife and mother. In an address that he delivered before the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, Benjamin Rush justified female education on exactly those grounds. Beginning with what he considered obvious, Rush declared that a woman's "education should be accommodated to the state of society, manners, and government of the country". In a republic, her role was just as obviously "the instruction of children" and particularly the instruction of "sons in the principles of liberty and government". (In Rush's statement we can also locate the origins for one of the oldest clichés in American political life. "It has been remarked", he himself remarked, "that there have been few great or good men who have not been blessed with wise and prudent mothers".) Nonetheless, Rush's confidence in women's salutary influence was checkmated by his conviction that they would also be the harbingers of the republic's decline. Aligning himself with the widely accepted cyclical theory of history, Rush predicted that America would "probably too soon follow the footsteps of the nations of Europe in manners and vices". The signs would be apparent everywhere language would be corrupted, churches neglected, novels read, and Sundays appropriated for amusement. But the signal tendency would already have been displayed in women's "idleness, ignorance and profligacy". Like so much else in early America, predictions of the nation's degeneration were gender based.<sup>40</sup>

38. Martin, p. 220; Bradford, p. 13; Milnor, p. 387.

39. John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649*, 2 Volumes, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1853, II, p. 266.

40. Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education*, Samuel Hall, Boston, 1787, pp.5-6, 20, 21. Shortly after founding the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia early in 1787, John Poor began to invite speakers

Not surprisingly, the justification for female education articulated by Rush and other male advocates simultaneously defined the woman who was expected to emerge from academies and seminaries and circumscribed what she was to do with her education. Deeply marked by gender, these definitions and circumscriptions privileged a particular model of womanhood that not only disregarded differences among women, but also cast an educated woman as decidedly different from her male counterpart. In contrast to men who increasingly subscribed to the ideology of individualism, a woman was still expected to define herself in relation to others. Serving husband and children, her education was directed to benefit them, not to fulfill her individual potential.<sup>41</sup> Nowhere was this distinction made more clearly than in the pages of the *Port Folio*. Lauding the more progressive perspective on women's education, James Milnor nonetheless issued a highly charged admonition: "let it be forever recollected, 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". A cherished "modesty and amiableness", both of which were marked as feminine, were juxtaposed against "affectation and conceit of scholastic attainments". The achievements and more importantly the "ostentatious display of the decorations of her mind" made a woman decidedly unwomanly.<sup>42</sup>

Just as important, this woman, who indeed was not a woman at all, appeared to threaten the conventional system of gender relations. It was almost as if she symbolized the system gone awry. An artfully constructed "Dialogue on Female Education", published in Baltimore's *Portico*, described an alternative system marked by stark reversals in gender attributes and the relations they sustained. Throughout the "Dialogue" the author identifies with the advocate Theodosius until the skeptic Eugenius poses the last and most telling question. In wondering whether education would erase a woman's "delicacy and modesty", that is, her femininity, Eugenius

to address the students at their quarerly examinations. Rush's speech was the first in the series, all of which were later published separately and also included as part of a pamphlet describing the Academy. Joseph Pilmore, who stood at the podium at the next quarterly examination, was much more optimistic about the republic's possibilities for survival. The students were indeed fortunate "to live in an age of light and refinement," an age that he was confident would continue if they remembered the lessons of "an education properly calculated for opening the understanding, eoriching the mind, and the promotion of vinue." Lest they forget the latter, he stressed that their "delight in learning[their] diligence in acquiring mental improvements" should always be coupled with their "love of virtue." The next year John Spreoat made exactly the same point, telling the students that their education had been designed to "mollify the temper, refine the manners, amuse the fancy, improve the understanding, and strengthen virtue. See *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia*, Stewan & Cochran, Philadelphia, 1794), pp. 6, 11-12, 26. Ann D. Gordon has examined the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia in Carol Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (eds.), *Women of America*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1979, pp. 69-91. An excerpt from Rush's essay was included in *The American Lady's Preceptor*. Published in 1810 and issued in nine subsequent editions, this collection of essays, historical sketches, and poetry was, as the subtitle suggests, "designed to direct the female mind in a course of pleasing and instructive reading". Rush would have been pleased by the appearance of such a volume.

41. There are at least two possible reasons why these male theorists constructed this model of behavior. Perhaps they simply could not envision women engaged in any role other than wifehood and motherhood. However, the highly charged character of the rhetoric belies that interpretation, suggesting instead a fear that female education might have unanticipated consequences. Inadvertently, the intensity also highlights the concern, indeed the fear, that one of those consequences could be a challenge to the model itself.

42. James Milnor, "On Female Education", *Port Folio*, 3rd series, 1(1809), 388.

asks rhetorically: "And that instead of endeavoring to gain the hearts of the men by engaging manners, they would become their rivals, and be more anxious to vanquish them by strong arguments, than by fascinating manners?". Absolutely not, responds Theodosius, telling Eugenius that they could "safely trust to the dispositions implanted in the female breast, to prevent this".<sup>43</sup> Theodosius' confidence notwithstanding, his response is not entirely reassuring, at least for those wedded to conventional gender relations. What if "dispositions" were part of a gender system that was socially constructed rather than natural? What if an education led female students to challenge those "dispositions" labelled feminine and to develop those considered masculine?

By the last decade of the eighteenth century, women were already beginning to participate in the discourse on female intellect. Although they were less visible and their contributions fewer in number, their articles, speeches, and pamphlets demonstrate that women had begun to regard themselves as subjects and were no longer simply objects in a male discourse. These female commentators also help us to determine the degree to which gender itself shaped the perspective of the participants. The novelist, teacher, playwright and actress Susanna Rowson established one of the nation's earliest academies dedicated to the education of women. In the addresses she prepared for her students, Rowson made already familiar claims on behalf of female intellect. Insisting that "the mind of a female is certainly as capable of acquiring knowledge as that of the other sex", she placed that knowledge at the service of others. The study of history filled "the mind with entertaining topics of conversation and render[ed] us fit companions for persons of sense and knowledge". Command of literature did much the same, enlivening a woman's ideas and preparing her "to interest and charm those with whom we associate". But Rowson also reminded her students that a woman who pursued knowledge for other ends risked the damning judgment "conceited". Indeed, she was subject to such opprobrium that, sadly, Rowson wrote, "it were better to remain in ignorance, since pedantry and presumption in a woman is more disgusting than an entire want of literary information".<sup>44</sup>

The stereotyping to which Rowson referred was deplored in the aptly titled *Female Advocate*, a pamphlet that consistently defended a woman's pursuit of learning, whatever the objective. Identifying herself only as "an aged matron," the author condemned those who labelled a learned woman "masculine". If they meant the woman "was a person of reading and letters, a person of science and information, one who can properly answer a question, without fear and trembling", then any woman (or man) should try to become as "masculine" as possible. But, of course, what they meant was that she was "bold, assuming, haughty, arrogant". Poking fun at those who would include women in this category of the "masculine", the author declared her willingness that the other sex "should share it altogether to themselves". Actually, however, "masculine" became a negative not because a learned woman displayed these conventionally male attributes, but because gender relations had reserved for her male counterparts "all science, all public utility, all superiority, all

43. Anonymous, "Dialogue on Female Education", *Portico: A Repository of Science and Literature*, II, 3 (September 1816), 215.

44. Susanna Rowson, "Concluding Address for 1810", *A Present for Young Ladies; Containing Poems. Dialogues, Addresses, As Recited by the Pupils of Mrs. Rowson's Academy*, John West, Boston, 1811, pp. 151-2.

that is intellectually great".<sup>45</sup> Whether saddened or defiant, both Rowson and the "Female Advocate" distinguished themselves from their male counterparts. Sensitive to the gender markings attached to learning, they nevertheless rejected the idea that female learning was deviant. Simultaneously, their responses registered an understanding that women were extremely vulnerable to precisely that equation.

Writing under the pseudonym "Constantia", Judith Sargent Murray was not as sharply critical as the "Female Advocate". But she was also more decisive and confident than Rowson. The suggestion that women might be less capable was "in this *enlightened* age, totally *inadmissible*". Instead, women's minds were "*naturally* as susceptible of every improvement, as those of men".<sup>46</sup> Murray's peremptory dismissal and her unequivocal statement that women and men had the same intellectual potential might have led her readers to wonder whether she would insist that their education be the same. But in this regard at least, she followed the same trajectory as the male participants in the discourse on female intellect. Having made equality the lynchpin for her defense of education, Murray employed difference to inscribe that education with purpose. Mothers, she declared, "imprint on the opening mind, characters, ideas, and conclusions, which time, in all its variety of vicissitudes, will never be able to erase".<sup>47</sup>

But if Murray aligned herself with male commentators in stressing the primacy of motherhood, she distinguished herself with the suggestion that female education had a secondary purpose preparing women for "independence". Of course it was this very independence that could lead to the rivalry that the skeptical Eugenius so feared. Situated as it was in a commentary on the exigencies of widowhood, the statement's radical potential nonetheless appeared to be deflected, at least initially. Should women be educated for independence, "the term, *helpless* widow, might be rendered as unfrequent and inapplicable as that of *helpless widower*". That widow who was also a mother "could [then] *assist* as well as *weep* over her offspring". The death of the husband and father seemed to require that a woman do more, not that she do anything to define herself differently. Properly educated and thereby able to be independent, the wife and mother could continue to serve her family, albeit under altered circumstances. But Murray did not stop here. Boldly declaring that "the Sex should be taught to depend on their own efforts, for the procurement of an establishment in life", she introduced an education that would serve different ends. If women were provided the tools for economic and social independence, they could look calmly upon the fact that marriage was "no more than a probable contingency". Still more important,

If they were early accustomed to regard this *uncertain* event with suitable *indifference*, they would make elections with that deliberation, which would be calculated to give a more rational prospect of tranquillity.<sup>48</sup>

45. Anonymous, "The Female Advocate", Thomas Green and Son, New Haven, 1801, pp. 3, 21.

46. Judith Sargent Murray [Constantia], *The Gleaner*, Three Volumes, I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, Boston, 1798, III, pp. 191, 197.

47. Murray [Constantia], II, 6. Lest her readers then wonder what she would consider an adequate education, she immediately told them that mothers would need at least a command of English, French, geography, and astronomy. She added that it should not be considered "unsexual, if they were capacitated to render the rudiments of the Latin tongue familiar".

48. Murray, [Constantia], III: 219.

Murray did not choose to follow her reasoning to equally logical *and* decidedly radical conclusions. Women who were educated for independence had more options than marriage. They *might* decide, as Louisa May Alcott aptly phrased it, that "liberty is a better husband".<sup>49</sup>

That Murray chose to address the subject of independence in the context of women's conventional role should not be surprising. Like the other men and women who formulated the idea of an educated woman, she sought to advance female education during a century in which many remained skeptical about its merits on any grounds. Similarly, she reasoned that the success of her proposals depended upon integrating that education into the dominant system of gender relations. But in contrast to her male counterparts, she glimpsed another purpose for a woman's education and enthusiastically defended a woman's potential independence.

It was left to Priscilla Mason, a student not more than sixteen years old, to suggest all that might be entailed in the decision to educate women. The setting was Philadelphia's Young Ladies Academy, the speaker the class' salutatorian, and the date 1793. Mason's remarkable address seemed decidedly unremarkable at the outset. Beginning with the formulaic expression of gratitude to teachers and trustees, Mason proceeded with an equally formulaic declaration of self-effacement, if not self-deprecation. She was "female", she was "young", she was "inexperienced", and more - on that day in May of 1793 she was "addressing a promiscuous assembly", listeners who were both female and male. What could she do but commence with an apology, as indeed she did before her radical departure from the typical address on female education for any late eighteenth-century American, much less one who was female, young, and inexperienced.

Claiming for herself and all women the exercise of authority in public as well as private, "our right to instruct and persuade", she insisted that this most basic of human entitlements had been denied them. "Our high and mighty Lords", as Mason described the party she held responsible, had

early seized the sceptre and the sword; with these they gave laws to society; they denied women the advantage of a liberal education; [and] forb[ade] them to exercise their talents on those great occasions, which might serve to improve them.

Denunciations of the past were joined with declarations about a more auspicious present:

Happily, - she told her listeners, - a more liberal way of thinking begins to prevail. The sources of knowledge are gradually opening to our sex.

These altered circumstances had not yet changed the boundaries separating the private and the public, and as Mason said pointedly, "the Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut up against us". Men were still the obstacle. It was they who "first made us incapable of the duty, and then forbid us the exercise". But if Mason remained pointed in her criticism of men, she believed that their recalcitrance could be overcome

49. Journal of Louisa May Alcott, 14 February 1868, in Ednah D. Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life: Letters and Journals*, Roberts Brothers, Boston, 1889, p. 197.



by women. Speaking directly to her classmates, she offered them a challenge enveloped with a promise: "Let us by suitable education, qualify ourselves for those high departments - they will open before us".<sup>50</sup>

Susanna Rowson, the pseudonymous "Female Advocate", Judith Sargent Murray, and Priscilla Mason were all able participants in their society's discourse on female intellect. The degree to which gender shaped their perspective was evident in the references to the toll taken by intellectual deprivation. No less, gender informed the readiness with which they embraced calls for the development of women's intellectual potential. The same can be said for a parallel discourse that emerged simultaneously in a setting that has received less consideration from historians. Private rather than public and located in letters, diaries, and journals, it illustrated the almost startling rapidity with which ideas regarding female education spread through a newly independent America. There was a signal difference between these public and private discourses, however. The latter was the domain of women. Certainly, educated men acknowledged the issue in their letters, diaries, and journals. But women who themselves were literate made it a central subject for consideration.

The significance that women attached to education is perhaps most graphically illustrated by those who registered the deprivation condemned by the "Female Advocate" and by Mason. In introducing herself to her sister-in-law Elizabeth Wainwright, Hepsy Howard of Dorchester, Massachusetts reluctantly acknowledged that Wainwright should "not expect to find in me the well informed companion". The problem was Howard's education which had "consisted more in the ornamental than the useful". Hers was a too typical circumstance, "a too general fault in regard to females." It was also a circumstance that Howard proposed to remedy with a female education exactly like that offered males. Should Wainwright object on the grounds that "women thus educated would not be attentive to their domestic concerns", Howard said she had only to look to herself. Declaring that "you are the person I am speaking of", Howard insisted that female intellect need not detract from female obligation: "With all the advantages you profess I do not understand that you neglect a duty belonging to domestic life".<sup>51</sup> Despite the fact that Elizabeth Wainwright and Mary Howell had been equally fortunate in their educations, the latter also considered herself deprived, albeit relative to men. A telling entry in her diary described a conversation between herself and a male friend who had insisted upon "the superior pleasures and advantages enjoyed by his sex". Initially, Howell had denied any such pleasures. Yes, she had responded, males could vote and defend their country in armed conflict, neither of which Howell considered particular pleasures. Supposedly, the same could be said for advantages. But, her male friend pressed still further, "don't you wish you was a man?" Here Howell had faltered before the interrogation:

I was almost tempted to deny it, convinced that if I did not, he would give me no credit for anything I had just advanced, but *truth* brought forward my answer. I was unwilling to send her back, and replied, "yes", but merely from a wish to enjoy their advantages of education.<sup>52</sup>

50. Priscilla Mason, "Salutatory Oration", *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia*, Stewart & Cochran, Philadelphia, 1794, pp. 90, 91, 92, 93. Following this address, Mason apparently disappeared from the historical record.

51. Hepsy Howard to Elizabeth Wainwright, 29 June 1801, Peter Wainwright Papers, Special Collections, Manuscripts Department, Duke University, Durham, NC.

52. Journals of Mary Howell, 21 May 1799, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.

The disparities that Howell hesitated to concede served as the basis for Eliza Southgate's call for increased educational opportunities. Writing to her cousin Moses Porter, this resident of Scarborough, Maine declared that the cultivation of intellect was "a privilege (or I may say duty) that belonged to the human species, and not man's exclusive prerogative".<sup>53</sup>

In claiming for themselves the advantages enjoyed by Howell's friend and Southgate's cousin, women employed the rhetorical and ideological strategies of republican motherhood. Writing to the man she would soon marry, New Englander Elizabeth Palmer sounded exactly like Rowson and Murray. Although she granted that women's role and place were different from men's, Palmer insisted that "the duties they have to fulfill are not less important". The most important were those performed by the mother who "ought to be capable, to teach the lisping infant to speak with propriety, and as the tender mind expands to fill it with virtuous principles". These duties made female education key to the survival of the republic. "In this view", she told Nathaniel Peabody, "the fate of our Country, is in some degree dependent, on the education of its females".<sup>54</sup> Southgate made exactly the same point in her journal. During a visit to Lucy Brown Derby, the mother of several children, the as yet unmarried Southgate was impressed with the

great necessity that Mothers, or all ladies should have cultivated minds, as the first rudiments of education are always received from them, and at that early period of life when the mind is open to every new impression and ready to receive the seeds which must form the future principles of the character.<sup>55</sup>

The claims made by participants in the discourse on female intellect, the perceived need for an educated citizenry, and the ideology of republican motherhood provided the context for the emergence of female academies and seminaries in the early republic. Institutions such as Sarah Pierce's academy, the Moravian academy in Salem, North Carolina, Susanna Rowson's academy, and the Philadelphia's Young Ladies Academy - all of which were founded in the eighteenth century - achieved national prominence. Scattered throughout the country and located in settings urban and rural, hundreds more were established in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. These were the institutions that educated the generation of women who founded the nineteenth century's most famous female seminaries. Emma Willard attended the local academy in the hamlet of Berlin, Connecticut and then traveled to the relatively urban Hartford, Connecticut for more advanced schooling at another academy. Fifteen years later, after teaching in Berlin, Connecticut, Westfield, Massachusetts, and Middlebury, Vermont, she opened Troy Female Seminary in 1821. Catharine Beecher, a student of Sarah Pierce's, used Pierce's Academy in Litchfield, Massachusetts as a model for the

53. Eliza Southgate to Moses Porter, 1 June 1801, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1903, p. 60.

54. Elizabeth Palmer to Nathaniel Peabody, 17 February 1800, Peabody Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody was the mother of Elizabeth Peabody, Mary Peabody Mann, and Sophia Peabody Hawthorne. I am indebted to Megan Marshall for sharing this letter with me.

55. Journal of Eliza Southgate, 6 July 1802, *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1903, pp. 109-10.

Hartford Female Seminary established two years after its counterpart in Troy, New York. Mary Lyon's education was the most peripatetic of the three. Having attended local academies in both Ashfield, Massachusetts and Amherst, Massachusetts, she concluded her education at Joseph Emerson's Byfield Female Seminary. Emerson, Lyon recalled, "talked to ladies as if they had brains". That, of course, was the basic premise that Lyon brought to the founding of Mount Holyoke Seminary.<sup>56</sup>

Validated by proclamations of female equality, academies and seminaries were nevertheless expected to inscribe female difference in their classrooms. And yet their very existence provided a setting in which founders, teachers, and students could employ the ideas of equality and difference to invent careers for themselves and create spaces in which women's abilities were developed and displayed. Catharine Beecher did exactly that. Beginning with her decision to establish Hartford Female Seminary, she invented five more careers for herself - moral philosopher, reformer, teacher, leader of a religious revival, and author of textbooks on subjects as disparate as arithmetic and physical education. Beecher's Seminary also served as a model for the other schools that she founded in Cincinnati and Milwaukee.

Located in a room above a harness shop, Hartford Female Seminary had only two teachers and seven students when its doors were opened in the spring of 1823. All of that changed under Beecher's leadership. Within five years she had persuaded Hartford's elite to construct a building that housed a large study hall, a library, and six recitation rooms; had increased the number of teachers four-fold; and had begun to enroll nearly a hundred students a year.<sup>57</sup> It was at this juncture that Beecher proudly wrote Mary Lyon that their

present arrangements [were] *charming*. The society and cooperation of the teachers among themselves - our opportunities to read and improve ourselves - the facilities we find in teaching and many other things I could tell you of.<sup>58</sup>

56. Kathryn Kish Sklar's exemplary biography explores Beecher's multifaceted pursuits. In two articles that focus upon Emma Willard's career, Anne Firor Scott has explored the larger implications entailed in the education of women. See Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1973; Scott, "What, Then, is the American: This New Woman?", *Journal of American History*, LXV, 3 (December 1978), pp. 679-703; "The Ever-Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822-72", *History of Education Quarterly*, XIX, (Spring 1979), pp. 3-25. Both of these articles have been reprinted in *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1984. Although her career has received little consideration, Susanna Rowson established a precedent earlier than Beecher. In addition to founding an academy and serving as one of its teachers, she was a novelist, actress, playwright, and author of textbooks.

57. Initially, the Hartford Female Seminary was publicized as a joint enterprise undertaken by Beecher and her sister Mary, although the latter left early in 1827. Long before that Beecher had taken sole leadership of the school. The advertisement signaled Catharine's ambitions. The school, she declared, was "intended exclusively for those who wish to pursue the higher branches of female education". Beecher described the institutional changes in *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, I. B. Ford and Company, New York, 1874, pp. 30-33. She also recorded them in the *Catalogue of the Officers, Teachers and Pupils of the Hartford Female Seminary for the Summer Term 1828*. The advertisement and catalogue are deposited at the Stowe-Day Foundation, Hartford, CT.

58. Catharine Beecher to Mary Lyon, 10 July [1828], Archives, Williston Memorial Library, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts. Beecher had hoped that Lyon would join her and the other teachers, but she chose to remain at Ipswich Seminary.

Beecher had also introduced a demanding course of study that included history, geometry, rhetoric and logic, geography, chemistry, and composition. On a daily basis, she and the other teachers led their charges through four hours of classes followed by two hours of study. A series of examinations that lasted two weeks measured students' progress at the end of each term. The rigors of this education were not lost on Sophia Peck, a young woman from Greensboro, Alabama. After describing her daily recitations to her brother William, Sophia complained that as this schooling was not sufficient she then had to

study two hours without speaking which is worse than all for I can scarcely bridle my tongue for an hour as you will judge from the way I used to let it run at home.

She also reminded him that the two weeks set aside for examinations were "much longer than they have them at the South". Nonetheless, she concluded that "I am very much pleased with [the Seminary]"<sup>59</sup>

The demanding series of recitations, the mandated hours of study, the thorough examinations all challenged a Sophia Peck and made her education a potentially transformative experience. The same can be said for Beecher's pedagogy, an approach that emphasized initiative, choice, and participation in learning. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the nineteenth-century student's nemesis, recitations. Setting aside the typical method that relied upon memorization and entirely rehearsed responses, Beecher required that her students "give the ideas *in their own language* and not in the words of the book." She acknowledged that pupils initially preferred simply to recite rather than to conceptualize, to offer "words rather than ideas". But Beecher's persistence resulted in classes that students agreed were decidedly more interesting, at least in part because their teacher also encouraged them "to ask questions - express opinions - and discuss principles".<sup>60</sup> Encouraged to engage in reflection, to evaluate the validity of a proposition, and to develop independent perspectives, these young women could begin to consider themselves in a different light - as thinking beings with ideas that had substance and validity.

Expecting that those enrolled in her seminary "should study, not to shine, but to act", Beecher offered them models of women doing exactly that - teachers acting upon pupils, shaping their learning, determining the course of their institution.<sup>61</sup> Beecher instituted a system in which the instructors, each of whom specialized in

59. Sophia Peck to William Peck, Henry Watson Papers, 2 August [1834]; 4 October 1834, Sophia's enthusiasm for Hartford Female Seminary was tempered by the prospect of spending at least three years separated from her family. When she told her father shortly after her arrival that three years was the most she could envision, he responded that everyone wanted her "home the moment your education is completed, but since you have set out for an education, we are anxious you should have a thorough one not superficial as is very common with young ladies at the present time, particularly at the South". Frederic Peck to Sophia Peck, 30 May 1834. This correspondence is deposited in the Henry Watson Papers, Special Collections, Manuscripts Department, Duke University, Durham, NC.

60. *Catalogue of the Officers, Teachers and Pupils of the Hartford Female Seminary. for the Summer Term of 1828.* Stowe-Day Foundation, Hartford, CT.

61. Catharine Beecher, "Female Education", *American Journal of Education*, No. XVI and XVII. Beecher included this commentary in her prospectus for the Seminary that she issued shortly before the school's permanent building was constructed in 1827. The prospectus is deposited at the Connecticut Historical Society, Hanford, CT.

one or two disciplines, taught their subjects in tandem with the most promising students. Despite the relative equality implied by this curricular and pedagogical division of labor, Beecher preserved an unmistakable hierarchy that ranked students, assistant pupils (as the apprentices were called), teachers, and principal in ascending order. Almost certainly, Beecher's students were already familiar with vertical forms of organization, but the hierarchy they encountered at Hartford Female Seminary was exceptional it was exclusively female. Daily, indeed hourly, women stood before their students as models of authority. Most visibly, they had the model of Beecher herself. Every morning she assembled the students, read the Bible, and conducted religious worship. Here, then, was a figure with whom to reckon and with whom to identify - teacher, moral and religious guide, principal, and advocate for women's education.

In the last of these careors that she invented for herself, Beecher participated in the discourse on female intellect that had been begun by commentators such as Bowen, Rush, and Murray. Like them, she laid claim to an equality of female intellect that was deeply inscribed with difference. In *Educational Reminiscences* she told her readers that childhood observation had persuaded her that "there is in mind no distinction of sex". Nothing in her later experience led her to alter this conviction. The telling example had been her parents, Roxana and Lyman Beecher. In contrast to her father who was "imaginative, impulsive, and averse to hard study", Catharine's mother had been "calm and self-possessed, and solved mathematical problems, not only for practical purposes, but because she enjoyed that kind of mental effort". The implications were obvious

my father seemed, by natural organization, to have what one usually deemed the natural traits of a woman, while my mother had some of those which often are claimed to be the distinctive attributes of man.<sup>62</sup>

But if her parents had reversed the feminine and the masculine, if they had demonstrated that gender was socially constructed, they had readily and consistently conformed to the adult roles upon which these constructions were based. A woman whose existence was bounded by the household, Roxana deferred to husband and dedicated herself to family. Deeply engaged in the world beyond the home, Lyman, Catharine recalled, also had all the authority, "all the discipline of government" in his household.<sup>63</sup> Mind might have no sex, might be the same in woman and man, but the expectations for wife and husband were decidedly different, as were the boundaries that circumscribed them and the authority that they claimed.

Surely, the woman who thought that her students should be trained to "act", not simply to "shine", understood the constraints upon the exercise of female power that these signal differences entailed. Beecher did not challenge distinctions in this regard, however. Her claims for female intellect, claims that had always been based upon equality, were employed to defend female education in terms of woman's conventional

62. Catharine E. Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions*, J. B. Ford and Company, New York, 1874), pp. 14-16. In reference to her parents, Beecher also recalled that Lyman, a minister carefully schooled in rhetoric and logic, had found Roxana who obviously had none of his training "the only person he had met that he felt was fully his equal in an argument", pp. 15-16.

63. Catharine Beecher, "Household Recollections", Charles Beecher (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. I, 148.

role, not in terms of her right to develop individual potential. Indeed, in her effort to counter the spectre of the bluestocking, she joined the objective of a woman's learning with her presumed destiny, motherhood. Blaming those who delighted in education regardless of its social consequences for the "not unreasonable prejudice which has existed against *learned ladies*", she cast them as unfeminine, as deficient in "all a woman's true duties and honours".<sup>64</sup>

Initially, it appeared that she had simply identified herself with those who divided the world into the public and private, the masculine and feminine, the marketplace and household. Nonetheless, Beecher simultaneously displayed a remarkable ability to negotiate the boundaries inherent in those binary oppositions, to manipulate their meanings, and to join their supposed antitheses. All of this had but one purpose - empowering women and claiming for them a signal social and cultural authority. Having invested women's education with the social purpose of motherhood, Beecher committed a woman to a role that required the deference practiced by her mother, Roxana. Significantly, however, she invested this woman with an authority that resembled her father's. Beecher's strategy governs subject and presentation in *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, a volume she published six years after the establishment of Hartford Female Seminary.

Like Bowen before her, Beecher situated her claims in the context of the highly influential Scottish common sense philosophy. Human beings, she declared, were so constituted that

*doing right, on the whole, does tend to promote the happiness of every individual in all cases, even in this world, and doing wrong, does eventually lead to a diminution of enjoyment.*

But, she quickly added, these tendencies governed only if "reason and conscience" had been properly stimulated. The catalyst was none other than the "affections". If they dominated, "reason and conscience, that point out the path of rectitude as the path of true happiness, even for this world, will be heard and obeyed". Unfortunately, this world, or at least the part of this world inhabited by men, did not encourage the exercise of "reason and conscience", much less the "affections"; instead, it was dominated by "motives that men are ashamed to own." Insisting that "pride, prejudice, or passion", held sway, Beecher nonetheless depicted men as unwilling actors in a corrupt world. Ideally, she said, men themselves wanted to identify with higher motives dictated by "reason and conscience". And women, having cultivated those attributes and having "already recolved from the hand of her Maker those warm affections" could see that men did so. Lest her readers wonder about the implications for gender relations, Beecher hastened to inform them that the conventional hierarchy remained intact, that "woman in all her relations is bound to 'honour and obey' those on whom she depends for protection and support".<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, that same woman was now invested with "reason and conscience" (and with the "affections" that stimulated these principles), the very characteristics that constituted the basis for moral authority. The boundaries of women's influence had also been extended beyond

64. Catharine E. Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, Packard and Butler, Hanford, 1829, p. 42.

65. Beecher, *ibid.*, pp. 45, 46, 52, 53.

children to include all manner of persons. Most particularly, the very men who had held exclusive authority in this regard were now subject to this influence. No longer the inculcators, they were now the recipients.

The claims that Beecher made on behalf of female intellect had been conceived as a means by which to validate female power. The same can be said concerning her claims for female moral influence. And yet the second of these claims was enmeshed in paradox. Beecher, a woman who did not hesitate to participate in her society's discourse, restricted women's influence to the household, to husbands and children. No less important, the female agency claimed by Beecher was influence, a less formal and surely less secure form of power than the institutionalized forms still wielded solely by men. But it was Beecher's adherence to the binary oppositions of public and private, masculine and feminine, marketplace and household that made both of her claims most problematical. As much as she sought an equality that empowered women, at least those of her race and class, that pursuit was frustrated by her observance of binary oppositions that were grounded in difference. Writing within a contemporary framework of post-structuralism, obviously a framework that was not available to Beecher, Joan Wallach Scott has highlighted the dilemma in which Beecher placed herself more than a century ago:

When equality and difference are paired dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable.<sup>66</sup>

The tensions and contradictions that had been encoded in the idea of an educated woman persisted well into the nineteenth century. Employing the strategies that had been developed by Bowen and his colleagues, later generations situated female equality in the context of female difference. Education continued to be defended in terms of woman's conventional role, not in terms of her generic right to develop individual potential. Gender was still privileged as the critical variable, and differences rooted in race and class received little consideration. But these later generations also went beyond Bowen and the other males who had participated in the earlier discourse to insist as Murray had that women be educated for independence, that they be provided with the means by which to support themselves. It was this demand that highlighted their recognition of what women did hold in common - a shared vulnerability in a structurally inequitable society. Here too certain tensions and contradictions remained, perhaps the most prominent being that education for self-support was defended only for unmarried women. In their use of binary oppositions, these nineteenth-century participants highlighted still another continuity that made all the others possible. They employed these oppositions because they were readily available, were just as readily recognizable, and, most important, were hegemonic modes of explanation. Ultimately, however, the framework itself made it difficult if not impossible to reconcile equality with difference. That claims made on this basis continue to be powerful today is telling, suggesting how deeply binary oppositions are inscribed in contemporary discourse. So long as dualities constitute

66. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 172.

the basis upon which social and political relations are constructed, hierarchies based on a presumptive difference between women and men are likely to remain. But if this oppositional mode can be set aside, then perhaps the differences among women can be more fully addressed and the search for more expansive understandings of equality undertaken.