

9.4 Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female Education*, 1787

Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female Education* (Philadelphia: Prichard & Gall, 1787).

MADAM,

SOME of the opinions contained in the following pages are so contrary to general prejudice and fashion, that I could not presume to offer them to the publick, without soliciting for them the patronage of a respectable and popular female name.

Permit me therefore, MADAM, to commit this little work to your protection, and at the same time to assure you, of the great respect and esteem, with which I have the honor to subscribe myself.

Your most obedient,

Humble servant,

BENJAMIN RUSH

GENTLEMEN,

I have yielded with diffidence to the solicitations of the Principal of the Academy, in undertaking to express my regard for the prosperity of this Seminary of Learning, by submitting to your candor, a few Thoughts upon Female Education.

The first remark that I shall make upon this subject, is, that female education should be accommodated to the state of society, manners, and government of the country, in which it is conducted.

This remark leads me at once to add, that the education of young ladies, in this country, should be conducted upon principles very different from what it is in Great-

Britain, and in some respects different from what it was when we were part of a monarchical empire.

There are several circumstances in the situation, employments, and duties of women in America, which require a peculiar mode of education.

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 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 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 to which a professional life exposes gentlemen in America from their families, 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 the liberty, and the possible share that 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.

V. In Great-Britain the business of servants is a regular occupation; but in America this humble station is the usual retreat of unexpected indigence; hence the servants in this country possess less knowledge and subordination than are required

from them; and hence, 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. "They are good servants (said an American lady of distinguished merit in a letter to a favourite daughter) who will do well with good looking after." This circumstance should have great influence upon the nature and extent of female education in America.

The branches of literature most essential for a young lady in this country, appear to be,

I. A knowledge of the English language. She should not only read, but speak and spell it correctly. And to enable 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 female 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. I once heard of a man who professed to discover the temper and disposition of persons by looking at their hand writing. Without enquiring into the probability of this story, I shall only remark, that there is one thing which all mankind agree upon this subject, and that is, in considering writing that is blotted, crooked, or illegible, as a mark of a vulgar education. I know of few things more rude or illiberal, than to obtrude a letter upon a person of rank or business, which cannot be easily read. Peculiar care should be taken to avoid every kind of ambiguity and affectation in writing *names*. I have now a letter in my possession upon business, from a gentleman of a liberal profession in a neighbouring state, which I am unable to answer, because I cannot discover the name which is subscribed to it. For obvious reasons I would recommend the writing of the first or Christian name at full length, where it does not consist of more than two syllables. Abbreviations of all kinds of letter-writing, which always denote either

haste or carelessness, should likewise be avoided. I have only to add under this head, that the Italian and inverted hands, which are read with difficulty are by no means accommodated to the active state of business in America, or to the simplicity of the citizens of a republic.

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, and natural philosophy, particularly with such parts of them as are calculated to prevent superstition, by explaining the causes, or obviating the effects of natural evil.

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 nursery, and, even, the 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. — Our German fellow-citizens are seldom afflicted with consumptions, nor have I ever known but one instance of a spitting of blood among them. This, I believe, is in part occasioned by the strength which their lungs acquire, by exercising them frequently in vocal music, for this constitutes an essential branch of their education. The music-master of our academy has furnished me with an observation still more in favour of this opinion. He informed me that he had known several instances of persons who were strongly disposed to the consumption, who were restored to health, by the moderate exercise of their lungs in singing.

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 conversation 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 two o'clock from the sight of a beggar, who solicits in feeble accents of 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 in 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. 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. Rousseau has asserted that the great secret of education consists in "wasting the time of children profitably." There is some truth in this observation. I believe that we often impair their health, and weaken their capacities, by imposing studies upon them, which are not proportioned to their years. But this objection does not apply to religious instruction. There are certain simple propositions in the Christian religion, that are suited in a peculiar manner, to the instant state of reason and moral sensibility. A clergyman of long experience in the instruction of youth informed me, that he always found children acquired religious knowledge more easily than

knowledge upon other subjects; and that young girls acquired this kind of knowledge more readily than boys. The female breast is the natural soil of Christianity; and while our women are taught to believe its doctrines, and obey its precepts, the wit of Voltaire, and the stile of Bolingbroke, will never be able to destroy its influence upon our citizens.

I cannot help remarking in this place, that Christianity exerts the most friendly influence upon science, as well as upon the morals and manners of mankind. Whether this be occasioned by the unity of truth, and the mutual assistance which truths upon different subjects afford each other, or whether the faculties of the mind be sharpened and corrected by embracing the truths of revelation, and thereby prepared to investigate and perceive truths upon other subjects, I will not determine, but it is certain that the greatest discoveries in science have been made by Christian philosophers, and that there is the most knowledge in those countries where there is the most Christianity. By knowledge I mean truth only; and by truth I mean the perception of things as they appear to the divine mind. If this remark be well founded, then those philosophers who reject Christianity, and those Christians, whether parents or school-masters, who neglect the religious instruction of their children and pupils, *reject* and *neglect* the most effectual means of promoting knowledge in our country.

IX. 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. I shall only remark under this head, that *strictness* of discipline will always render *severity* unnecessary, and that there will be the most instruction in that school, where there is the most order.

I have said nothing in favour of instrumental music as a branch of female education, because I conceive it is by no means accommodated to the present state of society and

manners in America. The price of musical instruments, and the extravagant fees demanded by the teachers of instrumental music, form but a small part of my objections to it.

To perform well, upon a musical instrument, requires much time and long practice. From two to four hours in a day, for three or four years, appropriated to music, are an immense deduction from that short period of time which is allowed by the peculiar circumstances of our country for the acquisition of the useful branches of literature that have been mentioned. How many useful ideas might be picked up in these hours from history, philosophy, poetry, and the numerous moral essays with which our language abounds, and how much more would the knowledge acquired upon these subjects add to the consequence of a lady, with her husband and with society, than the best performed pieces of music upon a harpsichord or a guitar! Of the many ladies whom we have known, who have spent the most important years of their lives, in learning to play upon instruments of music, how few of them do we see amuse themselves or their friends with them, after they become mistresses of families! 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.

Let it not be supposed from these observations that I am insensible of the charms of instrumental music, or that I wish to exclude it from the education of a lady where a musical ear irresistibly disposes to it, and affluence at the same time affords a prospect of such an exemption from the usual cares and duties of the mistress of a family, as will enable her to practice it. These circumstances form an exception to the general conduct that should arise upon this subject, from the present state of society and manners in America.

I beg leave further to bear a testimony against the practice of making the French language a part of female education in America. In Britain, where company and pleasure are the principal business of ladies; where the nursery and the kitchen form no part of their care, and where a daily intercourse is maintained with Frenchmen and other foreigners who speak the French language, a knowledge of it is absolutely necessary. But the case is widely different in this country. Of the many ladies who have applied to this language, how great a proportion of them have been hurried into the cares and duties of a family before they had acquired it; of those who have acquired it, how few have retained it after they were married; and of the few who had retained it, how seldom have they had occasion to speak it, in the course of their lives! It certainly comports more with female delicacy, as well as the natural politeness of the French nation, to make it necessary for Frenchmen to learn to speak our language in order to converse with our ladies, than for our ladies to learn their language, in order to converse with them.

Let it not be said in defence of a knowledge of the French language, that many elegant books are written in it. Those of them that are truly valuable, are generally translated; but, if this were not the case, the English language certainly contains many more books of real utility and useful information than can be read, without neglecting other duties, by the daughter, or wife of an American citizen.

It is with reluctance that I object to drawing, as a branch of education for an American lady. To be the mistress of a family is one of the great ends of a woman's being, and while the peculiar state of society in America imposes this station so early, and renders the duties of it so numerous and difficult, I conceive that little time can be spared for the acquisition of this elegant accomplishment.

It is agreeable to observe how differently modern writers, and the inspired author of the proverbs, describe a fine woman. The former confines 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, and 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. “Her children arise up and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praiseth her.” There is no fame in the world equal to this; nor is there a note in music half so delightful, as the respectful language with which a grateful son or daughter perpetuates the memory of a sensible and affectionate mother.

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 accommodated to the climate of Great-Britain, by eastern and western directions. We behold our ladies panting in the 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 publick executions a part of the amusements of the nation. It is high time to awake form 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. In particular it is incumbent upon us to make ornamental accomplishments yield to principles and knowledge, in the education of our women.

A philosopher once said, “let me make all the ballads of a country and I care not who makes its laws.” He might with more propriety have said, let the ladies of a country be educated properly, and 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. Our young men would then be restrained from vice by the terror of being banished from their company. 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, which is borrowed from a misapplication of scripture phrases, would no more be considered as recommendations to the society of the ladies, a double entendre, in their presence, would then exclude a gentleman from the company of both sexes, and probably oblige him to seek an asylum from contempt in a foreign country. The influence of female education would be still more extensive and useful in domestic life. The obligations of gentlemen to qualify themselves by knowledge and industry to discharge the duties of benevolence, would be increased by marriage: and the patriot — the hero — and the legislator, would find the sweetest reward of their toils, in the approbation and applause of their wives. Children would discover the marks of maternal prudence and wisdom in every station of life; for it has been remarked that there have been few great or good men who have not been blessed with wise and prudent mothers. Cyrus was taught to revere the gods by his mother Mandane — Samuel was devoted to his prophetick office before he was born, by his mother Hannah — Constantine was rescued from paganism by his mother Constantina — and Edward the sixth inherited those great and excellent qualities which made him the delight of the age in which he lived, from his mother, lady Jane

Seymour. Many other instances might be mentioned, if necessary, from ancient and modern history, to establish the truth of this proposition.

I am not enthusiastical upon the subject of education. In the ordinary course of human affairs, we shall probably too soon follow the footsteps of the nations of Europe in manners and vices. The first marks we shall perceive of our declension, will appear among our women. Their idleness, ignorance and profligacy will be the harbringers of our ruin. Then will the character and performance of a buffoon on the theatre, be the subject of more conversation and praise, than the patriot or the ministers of the gospel; — then will our language and pronunciation be enfeebled and corrupted by a flood of French and Italian words; — then will the history of romantick amours, be preferred to the immortal writings of Addison, Hawkesworth and Johnson; — then will our churches be neglected, and the name of the Supreme Being never be called upon, but in profane exclamations; — then will our Sundays be appropriated, only to feasts and concerts; — and then will begin all that train of domestick and political calamities — But, I forbear. The prospect is so painful, that I cannot help, silently, imploring the great Arbiter of human affairs, to interpose his almighty goodness, and to deliver us from these evils, that, at least, one spot of the earth may be reserved as a monument of the effects of good education, in order to shew in some degree, what our species was, before the fall, and what it shall be, after its restoration.

Thus, gentlemen, have I briefly finished what I proposed. If I am wrong in those opinions in which I have taken the liberty of departing from general and fashionable habits of thinking, I am sure you will discover, and pardon my mistakes. But, if I am right, I am equally sure you will adopt my opinions; for so enlightened minds truth is alike acceptable, whether it comes from the lips of the age, or the hand of antiquity, or

whether it be obtruded by a person, who has no other claim to attention, than a desire of adding to the stock of human happiness.

I cannot dismiss the subject of female education without remarking, that the city of Philadelphia first saw a number of gentlemen associated for the purpose of directing the education of young ladies. By means of this plan, the power of teachers is regulated and restrained, and the objects of education are extended. By the separation of the sexes in the unformed state of their manners, female delicacy is cherished and preserved. Here the young ladies may enjoy all the literary advantages of a boarding school, 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. The attempt to establish this new mode of education for young ladies, was an experiment, and the success of it hath answered our expectations. Too much praise cannot be given to our principal and his assistants, for the abilities and fidelity with which they have carried the plan into execution. The proficiency which the young ladies have discovered in reading — writing — spelling — arithmetic — grammar — geography — music — and their different catechisms, since the last examination, is a less equivocal mark of the merit of our teachers, than any thing I am able to express in their favour.

But the reputation of the academy must be suspended, till the publick are convinced, by the future conduct and character of our pupils, of the advantages of the institution.

To you, therefore,

YOUNG LADIES,

an important problem is committed for solution; and that is, whether our present plan of education be a wise one, and whether it be calculated to prepare you for the duties of social and domestic life. I know that the elevation of the female mind, by means of

moral, physical and religious truth, 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 opposes the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of our republics. If men believe that ignorance is favourable to the government of the female sex, they are certainly deceived; for a weak and ignorant woman will always be governed with the greatest difficulty. I have sometimes been led to 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. It will be in your power, LADIES, to correct the mistakes and practices 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 publick happiness.