Views on Women's Education in the Early Eighteenth Century

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A desire for equality between the sexes is not new. Even in ancient Greece equal education for women and men was proposed. In his *Republic*, Plato says women have the same nature as men and they therefore should be instructed in the same manner and allowed to share in public duties. He maintains that the only difference between the sexes is physical; the male begets children and the female bears them. Plato comes to the conclusion that "there is no occupation concerned with the management of social affairs which belongs either to woman or to man, as such...every occupation is open to both, so far as their natures are concerned, though woman is for all purposes the weaker."[1] Unfortunately, this Utopian ideal was not soon put into practice. Plato's denial of a feminine character which irrefutably sets women apart from men is still not completely accepted.

One age in British history which dealt with discussion of this feminine character was the eighteenth century. Several of the literary figures of this period concerned themselves, directly or indirectly, with the question of whether or not women differed from men in more than the physical aspects. Many believed that they did. Differences in behavior, accomplishments, and duties were seen as inherent. The superiority of the male sex and the position of men was seen as the natural order and not merely the result of custom. Men were regarded as intellectual, rational creatures. They possessed reason, the faculty which separates mankind from the rest of the animal world. Women, on the other hand, were ruled by feeling, and their possession of reason was questionable. Man was expected to deal in society, in the world of action. Woman's existence was encompassed by the home. Maternity and domestic duties were her proper areas. The

belief in a distinctly feminine character resulted in two different views of woman. Either her differences rendered her obviously inferior, or the sexes were separate but equal. Both of these views resulted in the subjection of women to men.

In general, women were characterized as much less sensible than men and more easily swayed by their passions. They were regarded as naturally vain and childlike. Women were said to be discerning observers, but unable to generalize ideas as well as men. They were thought to have too great a confidence in their own opinions since they could not reason to a proper conclusion as could men. Women were deemed unable to compare, combine and analyse ideas. All of these failings made submission to man beneficial as well as natural. It was sometimes granted that women possessed certain virtues, but these were designed to complement men. Their mercy was made to accompany men's justice, their softness to temper men's rough character.

The female sex sometimes provoked harsher criticism. Two of the major authors of the eighteenth century serve as examples of this fact. Pope's "Epistle to a Lady" paints a far from flattering picture of the sex. He goes so far as saying "Most Women have no Characters at all" (1.2) He attacks the pride which women have in dress and complains that their character is often at variance with their attractive outer appearance. He accuses women of being overly upset by small things and possessing a changeability which makes them extraordinarily hard to please. Pope also says that women have no powers of concentration. Even worse, they are often irreligious and lewd. Their ruling passions are love of pleasure and of power. Pope enumerates many differences between the sexes: women are foolish, men scorn fools; women are reserved, men are frank; women deal in artfulness, men deal in truth; women are swayed by fancy, men are ruled by fixed principles. However, Pope does not attribute these differences entirely to nature. In a note to the poem, he says they are also occasioned by the education which women receive.

Swift was another who sometimes attacked women. In one particularly slanderous passage he says of the sex, "I cannot conceive you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly above a monkey; who has

more diverting tricks than any of you; is an animal less mischievous and expensive, might in time be a tolerable critic in velvet and brocade, and for ought I know would equally become them."[2]

Swift was also critical of the education of women. He believed that it fostered frivolity and did nothing to prepare women for their role in life of wife and mother. Swift felt that education for women was necessary. He reasoned that women needed to have a somewhat cultivated mind if they were to be suitable companions for their husbands. But he does not seem to be optimistic that women will be capable of intellectual acheivement. He said in a letter to a woman, "you can never arrive in point of learning to the perfection of a schoolboy."[3]

Some eighteenth century women seemingly had attained more than a schoolboy's perfection in learning. There were several women authors and women noted for learned acquirements. They were not silent on the subject of women's education. One of these learned women was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. She was almost entirely self educated and felt that women were handicapped by a lack of learning. In the dedication to a Latin translation she says:

> We are permitted no books but such as tend to the weakening and effeminating of the mind. Our natural defects are everyway indulged, and it is looked upon as in a degree criminal to improve our reason, or fancy we have any. We are taught to place all our art in adorning our outward forms...while our minds are entirely nelected.[4]

Montagu goes on to assert that she is not arguing for equality of the sexes. She believes that God and nature put woman in an inferior rank in which they owe obedience to the superior sex. This position is characteristic of many women of the time. They did not see a desire for education as an assertion of equality.

Although Montagu saw education of women as necessary, she did not see it as serving the same function as that of men. In a letter to her daughter she explains that "the use of knowledge in our sex, besides the

amusement of solitude, is to moderate the passions..."[5] In this same letter and elsewhere in her writings, Montagu advises women to conceal whatever learning they attain. She believes that a woman of learning is liable to ridicule and is seen as impertinent, tattling, and conceited.

The conditions of women's education in the eighteenth century seem to warrant criticism. Learning for women had never been a high priority in the society of England. There had been some education of women.[6] Particularly in the time of Elizabeth, women had been afforded some opportunities for intellectual attainment. However, these opportunities were only for the very rich and the results had little effect on society. During the reigns of the earlier Stuarts there were practically no theories proposed for the education of women, and during the civil war, other matters took precedence.The Commonwealth did not advocate women's education. This was not unnatural since the Puritan view of woman was that she had caused the downfall of man. The Restoration provided more individual freedom, but the dubious morals of the court were not conducive to the growth of intellect in women.

In the eighteenth century, young ladies from wealthy families were generally tutored at home. They were taught accomplishments designed to render them attractive to men in order that they might reach the one goal expected of them, a profitable marriage. There were also dozens of boarding schools available. Their curriculum was largely the same; English, French, dancing, music, and needlework. Girls at boarding schools learned the fine points of manners and decorum, such as how to sit and rise and get into and out of a coach gracefully. They also studied the arts of greeting aquaintances in the street, paying and receiving visits, and writing letters of compliment and thanks.[7]

It is small wonder that there were several proposals to amend or replace this form of education. This movement for reform actually began in the late seventeenth century. Two of the earliest proposals looked to the past. In 1673 Mrs. Makin's "Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen" was published. She stated that the current form of education neglected both learning and virtue and she advocated giving up study of the social graces for a return to the classics. Makin differed from

many who proposed schemes for women's education; she actually ran Tottenham High Cross School. Apparently, however, the public was not interested in her ideal. Even at her own school, she was unable to do away with study of the accomplishments. But her students had at least been exposed to a greater learning and some individuals took to the excellencies of higher learning.[8)]

Another proposal was Mary Astell's "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest" (1694.) She assumes, as had Makin, that girls have minds worth training and therefore a right to an education which will benefit them. She maintains that the inferiority of the female sex is due to an inferior education. Her plan is interesting because it makes provisions for women who remained unmarried. Astell was not radical enough to suggest that there might be a profession besides marriage open to them. But if her students did not marry, they would be allowed to remain at the school to continue studying or to teach. Astell assures the reader that she is not proposing a convent; vows of celibacy would not be required. The school would merely provide a safe place for unmarried women without forcing them to rely on the charity of relatives in securing a place to live.[9)]

Astell's proposal was criticized as impractical; women did not want to be isolated. Defoe makes a point of this in his "An Academy for Women" in *An Essay upon Projects* published in 1697. Defoe does not propose a radical change in women's education, but he does look upon the sex more favourably than many. He certainly believes that women are capable of benefiting from education. His proposal opens with these strong statements:

> I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civiliz'd and a Christian Countrey, that we deny the advantages of Learning to Women. We reproach the Sex every day with Folly and Impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of Education equal to us, they wou'd be guilty of less than ourselves.[10)]

Defoe says it is a wonder that women have any intellectual acheivement at all in view of their nearly non-existent education. He sees education as the right of women since God has given them knowledge and understanding.

Defoe regards women as having greater capacities and quicker senses than those of men. He also says they are generally very sensible and retentive. Defoe's criticism of women is the opinion that a levity peculiar to them cannot bear restraint.

Defoe's academy would not discard the teaching of music and dancing which he believes women are fond of. The academy would teach languages, particularly French and Italian. Defoe also suggests studying "Graces of Speech" and the "Air of Conversation." He would have the students read books, especially history, to aid in understanding the world and making judgements. Defoe would deny no sort of learning to those with ability. His purpose would be to cultivate understanding, but there would be a larger aim.

Defoe compares the soul to a rough diamond which must be polished. Education is the form which this polishing takes. Defoe is concerned for the souls of women. They must be allowed to strengthen their virtue through education. Defoe believes that a woman can become the "Glory of her Maker" as well as a delight to man.

A delight to man is the function assigned to women by Rousseau, His philosophies attracted much attention in England and he did not neglect to deal with education. His *Emile* was published in 1762 and a section of the book was devoted to the proper education for women. He felt that education for men and women should be different. Rousseau did not believe women and men were equal. He says women are naturally more docile and that cunning and duplicity are their natural gifts. According to Rousseau, women are extreme in everything and incapable of judgement. Abstract and speculative truths are beyond their grasp and works of genius are beyond their reach. They understand readily but soon forget. Because of these differences in capability, an education like that of men would be impossible. Instead, Rousseau says, "a woman's education must be planned in relation to man."[12] All of women's education should

aim toward the goal of pleasing men. Women should learn never to say anything disagreeable to their listeners and to be submissive in every way. Rousseau regards men as superior, though not better. He says:

> ...the first and most important qualification in a woman is good nature or sweetness of temper: formed to obey a being so imperfect as man, often full of vice and always full of faults, she ought to learn betimes even to suffer injustice.[12)]

Rousseau does not see any mental or moral possibilities in women. He thinks they should be trained to learn but not given a large amount of knowledge. Regarding religion, women should be told what to believe by their parents and there is no necessity for explaining religious principles which women will not be able to understand.

Rousseau's opinions were not received without criticism. Some thought that he emphasized artful acquirements so strongly that he advocated women more suitable for mistresses than for wives. One critic was Mary Wollstonecraft. She was considered revolutionary and even radical in her time. Her life, as well as her writings, was looked upon with alarm. Wollstonecraft's criticism of Rousseau's opinion of women's education is found in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This work was somewhat of a departure from other proposals for women's education. Certainly Wollstonecraft was aware of the sad position of the majority of women. She came from a poor family headed by a drunken father who beat his wife. Mary had to earn a living by being a companion and a governess. She had lived with good tempered obedience, suffering the injustice of which Rousseau speaks. She believed that training anyone in this sort of patience would result in the inability to distinguish right from wrong. Wollstonecraft believed that the insincere submission Rousseau wanted to foster was degrading to women. She asserts that truth and greatness of mind can never dwell alongside cunning.

Wollstonecraft complains that women are kept in a state of childhood. She says that from women "negative virtues only are expected...patience, docility, good humour, and flexibility-virtues incompatible with any

vigorous exertion of intellect"[13] Wollstonecraft saw clearly that the education of accomplishments designed to procure a good husband failed to consider a large number of women, those who never married and those who were widowed. Even those who did marry found their accomplishments were not lastingly useful. Like most others who were critical of education, Wollstonecraft wanted to see reforms which would produce better wives and mothers. She is afraid that women are not trained to develop sufficient judgement for either the physical or mental upbring of their children.

Though she sees domestic functions as important, Wollstonecraft does not regard these as the entire world of woman. She believes that women's minds must take a wider range. Wollstonecraft asserts the very advanced notion of giving women a larger place in society. She believes that they should study politics and have representation in government. Since it is granted that women make excellent nurses, Wollstonecraft proposes that they be allowed to become doctors. She says that women should be allowed to participate in businesses of various kinds. In this way, they would not be forced to marry for support. She regards the few positions open to women as entirely menial. Even when a job is essentially equal to that of a man, for example governesses and tutors, the woman is not treated with equal respect.

Wollstonecraft also believes that women need education to perfect their virtue. An association of ideas and growth of the mind has an effect on the moral character. The subjects women study tend to make them more involved with themselves than with others. Their rote method of learning does not leave them with any deep impression to aid in forming their character.

Wollstonecraft maintains that the segregation of the sexes in education is bad for both. She suggests the establishment of co-educational government day schools. Wollstonecraft proposes that these be open to all classes. The students would wear uniforms to prevent vanity. The curriculum would include botany, mechanics, astronomy, reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history and natural philosophy. Elements of history, religion, and politics could be taught through Socratic conversations.

Wollstonecraft also emphasizes the need for plenty of exercise by both of the sexes. All of this was for children between the ages of five and nine!

After the age of nine there would be some separation. Those intended for employment would attend another school where the sexes would be instructed together in the morning, but study tasks relative to their different future work in the afternoon. Those of more wealth or superior ability would still be instructed together. They would continue to study history and politics,, but more extensively, and they would also study languages, sciences, and polite literature.[14]

The great ambition and detail of Wollstonecraft's plan is admirable. However, at the time it was seen as dangerously revolutionary and impractical. Criticism of Wollstonecraft is implicit in Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education.* A remark regarding the imaginary rights some women think they possess seems to be directed at Wollstonecraft. More's ideas are less concrete and more conservative than those of Wollstonecraft. She constantly stresses the importance of submission in women, but does not advocate the flattery in Rousseau. She says that "to allure and shine" sums up the education of woman. More believes that an entire devotedness to fine arts is the main source of corruption of women. More strongly emphasizes the role education should play in guiding a woman to religion. Unlike Rousseau again, she believes that women should be taught the principles behind religion. She regards education as a necessity in correcting the naturally corrupt nature of mankind. With a defective education, women can never hope to attain purity of conduct.

More, like others, wants women to be educated in order to better fulfill their roles of wife and mother. She puts a high premium on one of women's duties, the instruction of children. She says this will determine the future happiness or ruin of the country. More states that the profession of women is motherhood and that they should be trained for it as men are trained for their modes of making a living.

More is not an advocate of learning for learning's sake. In her opinion, the uses of study are to regulate the mind of the student and enable her (or him) to be instrumental to the good of others. She does not fear that a

larger amount of learning will cause women to be discontent with their roles, but says "the enlargement of the female understanding is the most likely means to put an end to those petty and absurd contentions for equality."[15]

Along with this comes her attack on the term "rights of woman." She says this terms was coined to:

> rekindle in the minds of women a presumptuous vanity dishonourable to their sex, produced with a view to incite in their hearts an impious discontent with the post which God has assigned them in this world...they little understand the true interests of woman who would lift her from the important duties of her alloted station to fill a loftier but less appropriate niche... Whence but by carefully preserving the original marks of difference stamped by the hand of the Creator would be derived the superior advantage of mixed society?[16]

Though it would be comforting to end on a more promising note, these were the prevalent ones among eighteenth century society.

At least there was widespread recognition of the need for improvement in women's education. All of the proposers agreed that women needed enough education to be suitable companions for men. Some also conceded that learning would give a woman something to do if she was not lucky enough to make a marriage, or if she was, to occupy her when she was no longer young and pretty enough to be involved in balls, flirtations and other such pasttimes. Education for women was also seen as a benefit to society. Since women would be the mothers of the future generation, it would be unwise to allow them to remain in total ignorance. After all, supervision of the children's education was in their hands. Therefore, an education which prepared a woman to be a better wife and mother would lead to the improvement of society.

Another widely accepted basis for women's education was religious in nature. If women possessed souls, their Christian duties were the same as those of men. They were supposed to strive for virtue and prepare

themselves for a future life. In ignorance they might fall into vices and thus spread them; an education would help them avoid temptations. Well educated women could become agents for a higher moral tone in the general society.

In almost all cases, advocates of education for women did not see women in any roles but those of wife, mother and moral guide. Though educated, woman was still to submit to man. Her place was not less important than that of man, just different. Her roles were just as valuable in the creation of a satisfactory society. The one exception to this view point was Mary Wollstonecraft. But even she did not advocate a complete overthrow of the traditional roles. She only suggested that women might have talent in other areas which could be tapped for the benefit of all.

Except for Mary Wollstonecraft's, proposals for reform in women's education were only tentative steps forward. But although small, they were nonetheless in the right direction. Those who proposed such changes may have had different motives, but their opinions all pointed to the fact that a society in which women were not granted a valuable education was far from being ideal.

Notes

(1) Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), p.153.

(2) Johnathon Swift, "A Letter to a Very Young Lady on her Marriage," in *Literary Essays*, Vol XI of *The Prose Works of Johnathon Swift*, ed. Temple Scott (London: George Bell andSons, 1907), p.120.

(3) Swift, p. 122.

(4) Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Lord Wharncliffe, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908). II, 435.

(5) Montagu, p. 237.

(6) Full accounts of women's education through the ages are given in Mary Cathcart Borer, *Willingly to School*, (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1976), Phyllis Stock, *Better Than Rubies*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), and Barry Turner, *Equality for some*, (Glasgow: Robert MacLehose and Co., 1974).

(7) Borer, p. 188.

(8) For views on Makin see Stock, pp. 84–98 and Myra Reynold, *The Learned Lady*, (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1964), p.426, pp. 446.

(9) Reynolds, pp. 297–311.

(10) Daniel Defoe, "An Academy for Women," in *Daniel Defoe*, ed. J.T. Boulton, (New York: Schoken Books, 1965), p.32.

(11) Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley, Everyman's Library, No 515, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1911), p.328.

(12) Rousseau, p. 333.

(13) Mary Wollstonecraft, *AVindication of the Rights of Woman*, Everyman's Library, No 825, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1929), p.64.

(14) Hannah More, "Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education," in *The Complete Works of Hannah More*, Vol II, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), p. 365.

(15) More, p.366.

(16) More, p. 342.

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