
Fourth Edition

THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

An American History
WITH DOCUMENTS

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Since in thy pow'r, as in thy will before,
To sooth the griefs, which thou did'st once
deplore.
May heav'nly grace the sacred sanction give
To all thy works, and thou for ever live
Not only on the wings of fleeting *Fame*,

Though praise immortal crowns the patriot's
name,
But to conduct to heav'n's refulgent fane,
May fiery coursers sweep th' ethereal plain,
And bear thee upwards to that blest abode,
Where, like the prophet, thou shalt find thy God.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What do these selections of Wheatley's poems and letters reveal about the importance and role of religion in her life?
2. What are the grounds for her criticism of slavery?
3. How might opponents of slavery have used her poetry to criticize the institution?

PRIMARY SOURCES

Education and Republican Motherhood

FOR MUCH OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD, women's opportunities for education were quite limited. A small number of slave women were instructed by benevolent owners, and some Native American women had access to missionary schools where the emphasis was on assimilation rather than education. White women had little formal schooling, and their training usually emphasized domestic skills with a smattering of reading and sums. By the time of the Revolution in New England, 90 percent of white men could write, while fewer than half of white women could.

The Revolution and its aftermath ushered in significant changes. Outside the South, where public schools were rare, primary public education for white women and men became more common. Women's opportunities for higher education—while not universally endorsed—also expanded. While some of the most famous schools, like Philadelphia's Young Ladies Academy, were in urban areas, educational entrepreneurs also established them in small towns such as Litchfield, Connecticut, where Sarah Pierce's school attracted young women from throughout the region, as well as from other states. The Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Moravian Seminary had special appeal for parents eager to give their daughters a rigorous education; in addition to academic subjects, the school encouraged its students' industry and moral development. While the new schools still offered ornamental skills such as needlework and dancing, they emphasized academic subjects such as history, grammar, geography, logic, and philosophy.

The post-Revolution improvement in white women's education was in part a product of the efforts of reformers, who eagerly promoted the idea that in a republic, all citizens needed education to contribute to the general public good. In keeping with the ideas associated with Republican Motherhood (see pp. 121–22), supporters of women's education argued that mothers needed to be well educated to prepare their children, especially their sons, for their duties as citizens. Advocates also emphasized the importance of women's influence on their husbands. While a number of people participated in the call for expanded opportunities, including Mercy Otis Warren and Sarah Pierce, two of the most significant, whose writings are reproduced here, were Dr. Benjamin Rush and Judith Sargent Murray.

"A PECULIAR MODE OF EDUCATION"

BENJAMIN RUSH SIGNED the Declaration of Independence and was the preeminent physician and medical teacher of the revolutionary era. His essay *Thoughts upon Female Education* reflects both increased expectations as well as the limits to new

ideas about women's education. The curriculum he promoted included geography, bookkeeping, reading, and arithmetic and omitted the traditional female accomplishment of needlework. But he did not recommend that women study advanced mathematics, natural philosophy, or Latin or Greek, subjects that remained hallmarks of educated men. Rush and most other reformers emphasized the utilitarian potential of an academic curriculum for women. Although Rush lectured to both men at the College of Philadelphia and women at the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy on natural philosophy, his presentation for the latter—"Lectures, Containing the Application of the Principles of Natural Philosophy, and Chemistry to Domestic and Culinary Purposes"—was tailored to their perceived future roles. Still, Rush's views were progressive for his time, when many people felt that too much learning might "unsex" a woman and make her unfeminine.

The following selection is from an essay based on a speech Rush gave to the Board of Visitors of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia in 1787. As you read, take note of Rush's major justifications for educating women.

BENJAMIN RUSH

Thoughts upon Female Education (1787)

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 chiefly to the more useful branches of literature.

II. The state of property in America renders it necessary for the greatest part of our citizens to employ themselves in different occupations for the advancement of their fortunes. This cannot be done without the assistance of the female members of the community. They must be the stewards and 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.

SOURCE: Frederick Rudolph, ed., *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 27–40.

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 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 favorite 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.

[Rush proceeds to discuss the most important "branches of literature most essential for a young lady in this country," in which he emphasizes "a knowledge of the English language," "the writing of a fair and legible hand," "some knowledge of figures and bookkeeping," so that she "may assist her husband with this knowledge," "an acquaintance with geography and some instruction in chronology [history]," vocal music and dancing, "the reading of history, travels, poetry, and moral essays," and the "regular instruction in the Christian religion."]

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. . . .

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 wife and prudent mothers.

"ALL THAT INDEPENDENCE WHICH IS PROPER TO HUMANITY"

ALTHOUGH JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY (1751–1820), the daughter of a distinguished and wealthy Gloucester, Massachusetts, family, also believed in the tenets of Republican Motherhood, she was far more radical than Rush in her approach to women's capabilities and needs. Murray's parents denied her the opportunity for the extensive education that they provided for her brother, but she was a voracious reader of both American and European writers. A contemporary of the English historian Catharine Macaulay and the English women's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft, Murray was an early American proponent of women's rights and an accomplished writer. Intensely religious, she had left the Puritan fold for Universalism, a far more egalitarian faith that encouraged her to challenge traditional authority. Already influenced by her religion, as well as her frustration over her limited schooling, Murray was further energized by the ideas swirling around the American Revolution that led her to articulate her belief in men's and women's mental and spiritual equality. As she contemplated the themes of liberty, equality, and independence, she struggled with her own dependence.

After she was widowed in 1787, her second marriage in 1788, like her first, provided little financial security, and she was highly conscious of the legal and financial constraints on women. It is not surprising, then, that many of her essays

call for an education that would help women to be self-reliant and even self-supporting. She pointed out that she would want her daughters to be taught “industry and order.” They “should be enabled to procure for themselves the necessities of life; independence should be placed within their grasp.”⁵⁵ Unlike reformers such as Rush, who saw women’s education primarily as a tool for promoting the family and the public good, Murray understood it as something contributing to women’s independence, to a reverence of self. But she shared with more conventional reformers the assumption that most women would marry and have children and that women’s improved education would make them better wives and virtuous Republican Mothers.

The essay excerpted here contains Murray’s most radical statements concerning women’s capabilities. It is the final installment of a four-part series, “Observations on Female Abilities,” and highlights the accomplishments of two women. Why do you think Murray chose those women? How do you account for the seeming shift in tone and argument in the last two paragraphs?

JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY *Observations of Female Abilities* (1798)

We take leave to repeat, that we are not desirous to array THE SEX in martial habiliments;^o we do not wish to enlist our women as soldiers; and we request it may be remembered, that we only contend for the *capabilities* of the female mind to become possessed of any attainment within the reach of *masculine exertion*. We have produced our witnesses; their depositions have been heard: the cause is before the public; we await their verdict; and, as we entertain all possible veneration for the respectable jury, we shall not dare to appeal from their decision.

But while we do homage to the women of other times, we feel happy that nature is no less bountiful to the females of the present day. We cannot, indeed, obtain a list of the names that have done honour to their Sex, and to humanity during the period now under observation: The lustre of

those minds, still enveloped in a veil of mortality, is necessarily muffled and obscure: but the curtain will be thrown back, and posterity will contemplate, with admiration, their manifold perfections. . . . Nor is America destitute of females, whose abilities and improvements give them an indisputable claim to immortality. It is a fact, established beyond all controversy, that we are indebted for the discovery of our country, to female enterprise, decision and generosity. The great Columbus, after having in vain solicited the aid of Genoa, France, England, Portugal, and Spain—after having combated, for a period of eight years, with every objection that a want of knowledge could propose, found, at last, his only resource in the penetration and magnanimity of Isabella of Spain, who furnished the equipment, and raised the sums necessary to defray the expenses on the sale of her own jewels; and while we conceive an action, so honourable to THE SEX, hath not been sufficiently applauded, we trust, that the equality of the female intellect to that of their brethren, who have so long usurped an unmanly and unfounded superiority, will

^o Characteristic garments or furnishings.

SOURCE: Sheila L. Skemp, ed., *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 1998), 145–49.

never, in this younger world, be left without a witness. We cannot ascertain the number of ingenious women, who at present adorn our country. In the shade of solitude they perhaps cultivate their own minds, and superintend the education of their children. Our day, we know, is only dawning—But when we contemplate a Warren [Mercy Otis Warren—see Figure 3.1, p. 128], a Philenia [Sarah Wentworth Morton, poet and novelist], &c. &c. we gratefully acknowledge, that genius and application, even in the female line, already gild, with effulgent radiance, our blest Aurora.

But women are calculated to shine in other characters than those adverted to, in the preceding Essays; and with proper attention to their education and subsequent habits, they might easily attain that independence, for which a [Mary] Wollstonecraft hath so energetically contended; the term, *helpless widow*, might be rendered as unfrequent and inapplicable as that of *helpless widower*; and although we should undoubtedly continue to mourn the dissolution of wedded amity, yet we should derive consolation from the knowledge, that the infant train had still a remaining prop, and that a mother could assist as well as weep over her offspring.

That women have a talent—a talent which, duly cultivated, would confer that independence, which is demonstrably of incalculable utility, every attentive observer will confess. THE SEX should be taught to depend on their own efforts, for the procurement of an establishment in life. The chance of a matrimonial coadjutor, is no more than a probable contingency; and 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 tranquility. All this we have repeatedly asserted, and all this we do invariably believe. To neglect polishing a gem, or obstinately to refuse bringing into action a treasure in our possession, when we might thus accumulate a handsome interest, is surely egregiously absurd, and the height of folly.

The united efforts of male and female might rescue many a family from destruction, which, notwithstanding the efforts of its *individual* head, is now involved in all the calamities attendant on a dissipated fortune and augmenting debts. It is not possible to educate children in a manner which will render them *too beneficial* to society; and the more we multiply aids to a family, the greater will be the security, that its individuals will not be thrown a burden on the public.

An instance of *female capability* this moment occurs to memory. In the State of Massachusetts, in a small town, some miles from the metropolis, resides a woman, who hath made astonishing improvements in agriculture. Her mind, in the early part of her life, was but penuriously cultivated, and she grew up almost wholly uneducated: But being suffered, during her childhood, to rove at large among her native fields, her limbs expanded, and she acquired a height of stature above the common size; her mind also became invigorated; and her understanding snatched sufficient information to produce a consciousness of the injury she sustained in the want of those aids, which should have been furnished in the beginning of her years. She however applied herself diligently to remedy the evil, and soon made great proficiency in writing, and in arithmetic. She reads every thing she could procure; but the impressions adventitiously made on her infant mind still obtained the ascendancy. A few rough acres constituted her patrimonial inheritance; these she has brought into a state of high cultivation; their productions are every year both useful and ornamental; she is mistress of agriculture, and is at once a botanist and a florist. The most approved authors in the English language, on these subjects, are in her hands, and she studies them with industry and success. . . .

In the constant use of exercise, she is not corpulent, and she is extremely active, and wonderfully athletic. Instances almost incredible, are produced of her strength. Indeed, it is not surprising that she is the idol and standing theme of the village, since, with all her uncommon

qualifications, she combines a tenderness of disposition not to be exceeded. Her extensive acquaintance with herbs, contributes to render her a skilful and truly valuable nurse; and the world never produced a more affectionate attentive or faithful woman: Yet, while she feelingly sympathizes with every invalid, she is not herself subject to imaginary complaints; nor does she easily yield to real illness. . . .

Although far advanced in years, without a matrimonial connexion, yet, constantly engaged in useful and interesting pursuits, she manifests not that peevishness and discontent, so frequently attendant on *old maids*; she realizes all that independence which is proper to humanity; and she knows how to set a just value on the blessings she enjoys.

From my treasury of facts, I produce a second instance, equally in point. I have seen letters, written by a lady, an inhabitant of St. Sebastian (a Spanish emporium), that breathed the true spirit of commerce, and evinced the writer to possess all the integrity, punctuality and dispatch, which are such capital requisites in the mercantile career. This lady is at the head of a firm, of which herself and daughters make up the individuals—Her name is *Birmingham*. She is, I imagine, well known to the commercial part of the United States. She was left a widow in the infancy of her children, who were numerous; and she immediately adopted the most vigorous measures for their emolument. Being a woman of a magnanimous mind, she devoted her sons to the profession of arms; and they were expeditiously disposed of, in a way the best calculated to bring them acquainted with the art of war. Her daughters were educated for business; and, arriving at womanhood, they have long since established themselves into a capital trading-house, of which, as has been observed, their respectable mother is the head. She is, in the hours of business, invariably to be found in her counting-house; there she takes her morning repast; her daughters act as clerks (and they are adepts in their office), regularly preparing the papers and letters, which pass

in order under her inspection. She signs herself, in all accounts and letters, *Widow Birmingham*; and this is the address by which she is designated. I have conversed with one of our captains, who has often negotiated with her the disposal of large and valuable cargoes. Her consignments, I am told, are to a great amount; and one of the principal merchants in the town of Boston asserts, that he receives from no house in Europe more satisfactory returns. Upright in their dealings, and unwearied in their application, these ladies possess a right to prosperity; and we trust that their circumstances are as easy, as their conduct is meritorious.

"Would you, good Mr. Gleaner, station us in the counting-house?" No, my fair countrywomen, except circumstances unavoidably pointed the way. Again I say, I do but hold up to your view, the *capability* of your Sex; thus stimulating you to cultivate your talents, to endeavour to acquire general knowledge, and to aim at making yourselves so far acquainted with some particular branch of business, as that it may, if occasion requires, assist in establishing you above that kind of dependence, against which the freeborn mind so naturally revolts. Far be it from me, to wish to unsex you—I am desirous of preserving, by all means, those amiable traits that are considered as characteristic—I reverence the modesty and gentleness of your dispositions—I would not annihilate a single virtue; but I would assiduously augment the faithfulness and affection of your bosoms. An elegant panegyrist of your Sex, hath assigned you the superiority in the feelings of the heart; and I cannot more emphatically conclude my subject, than in his beautifully pathetic language:

"The pleasures of women must arise from their virtues. It is by the cradle of their children, and in viewing the smiles of their daughters, or the sports of their sons, that mothers find their happiness. Where are the powerful emotions of nature? Where is the sentiment, at once sublime and pathetic, that carries every feeling to excess? Is it to be found in the frosty indifference, and the sour severity of some fathers? No—but in the warm and affectionate bosom of a *mother*. It is

she, who, by an impulse as quick as involuntary, rushes into the flood to preserve a boy, whose imprudence had betrayed him into the waves—It is she, who, in the middle of a conflagration, throws herself across the flames to save a sleeping infant—It is she, who, with dishevelled locks, pale and distracted, embraces with transport, the body of a dead child, pressing its cold lips to her's, as if she would reanimate, by her tears and her

caresses, the insensible clay. These great expressions of nature—these heart-rending emotions, which fill us at once with wonder, compassion and terror, always have belonged, and always will belong, only to Women. They possess, in those moments, an inexpressible something, which carries them beyond themselves; and they seem to discover to us new souls, above the standard of humanity."

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What do Rush and Murray see as the benefits of female education? How does the proper education of females differ from that of males?
2. What do Rush and Murray assume about the abilities of females?
3. How do Rush's and Murray's ideas accord with the ideas associated with Republican Motherhood?

NOTES

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3. Cynthia Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700–1835* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 75.
4. Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 164.
5. *Ibid.*, 168.
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37. *Ibid.*, 211.
38. Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 287.
39. Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.
40. *Ibid.*, 49.
41. *Ibid.*, 63–64.
42. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African-American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.
43. *Ibid.*, 110–11.
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45. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 83–84.
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