



THE FEMALE ADVOCATE

Written by a Lady

1801

Excerpts

To all the Patrons of Female Merit, the following Tract, the production of many leisure Moments, is Dedicated, with reliance on their Candor, and with an humble Appeal to their Judgment, by a sincere Advocate for the Merits of her Sex.

THE AUTHORESS.

County of Middlesex [Connecticut], A. D. 1801.

. . . I would ask the impartial and candid, when treating of female merit, not only where wisdom dwells, or whether it be limited to the males; but that which is far more important, where morals, the first mark of wisdom, and that to which all intellectual endowments must be subservient, if truly valuable, are found to reside?—Which is the most given to all manner of gross immorality? Which is the most devoted to the vile practices of intemperance, prophaneness, lust, and unnatural affections; the man or the woman? Which is the most enslaved to other criminal practices, such as theft, perjury, or even the first of sins, the shedding of man's blood?—If it must be answered, the man!—it requires not the pen of the learned to demonstrate which, in the sight of the all seeing God, constitutes the better half of mankind; better in the best sense;—better not in wisdom only, which men arrogate to themselves; but better in that quality, which constitutes the highest wisdom, the discriminating wisdom which elevates the human above the animal, the intellectual above the brutal nature.

But probably you will ask which is the greatest hero or politician, the greatest historian or philosopher, or, in a word, which is the most skilled in the arts and sciences?—But in answer;—let it be

asked; which of the sexes has the most haughtiness to arrogate, and engross, all to themselves? Do not the men impiously assume that all, to their own imagined superiority? Do they not say,—it becomes the women to be meek, humble, and submissive. Humility is indeed a virtue which becomes them; but does it not also become the men? or would they be pleased with humility, appropriate to the female sex, that they might more securely gain a triumph? Humility, however, is a virtue, which I would wish to possess, as the first of graces, the first of blessings, and the first sure argument of real wisdom. Its opposite vice, I view
40 as totally repugnant, alike to real wisdom, and true christianity. While I hear my Savior say, “Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly,”—my soul would reply, this Lord is my desire. May my little bark glide gently, and steal softly, through the vale of humble life, till it mount the ascending summit of ever rising day.

Were I now to pass from the open scenes of life, to domestic relations, the usual and useful sphere of woman, where the world would wish solely to limit them, shall we not find traits of excellence, which fairly entitle them, at least, to approximate the modern self-sufficient man?

In the domestic circle, do we not often behold the faithful and affectionate, the pious and tender-hearted wife, or mother, in sympathetic kindness, fulfilling her part of the marriage covenant, while the cruel, hard-hearted husband, is lavishly spending his time, and property, which ought to be devoted to the support of his wife and offspring, at the gaming table, “*that standard of the devil,*” or in wicked, lewd,
50 and abandoned company. . . .

Much and often has the world exclaimed against masculine women. Before I offer any sentiment on this exclamation, I would wish to hear the word properly and fairly defined. If by the epithet “Masculine,” be meant a bold, assuming, haughty, arrogant, all sufficient, dogmatical, temper and spirit, I would wish totally and entirely to discard it from the society of the fair sex. I would wish the term to be applied, where I think it is appropriate, by long established custom. I am quite willing that the other sex should share it altogether to themselves. But if by the word “Masculine,” be meant a person of reading and letters, a person of science and information, one who can properly answer a question, without fear and trembling, or one who is capable of doing business, with a suitable command over self; this I believe to be a glory to the one sex, equally with the other.—The sole reason why the epithet is disgraceful, in the
60 estimation of many, is because custom, which is not infallible, has gradually introduced the habits of seeing an imaginary propriety, that all science, all public utility, all superiority, all that is intellectually great and astonishing, should be engrossed exclusively by the male half of mankind.—But may I not

* Portrait of Rhoda Smith Bardwell, Northfield, Mass., ca. 1794, attributed to Charles Lyman. Image for illustration only;

securely say, that it is a point of great consequence, that we should have an equal share in science, or that degree of education, at least, which enables us, in some measure, to have command over ourselves, and become superior to those base artifices of the many, by which numerous females, through the want of suitable privileges in education, have been the dupes of men inferior to themselves, in every other respect but this single advantage, of education.

70 Are we not sensible, my female friends, and have we not often heard it observed, by the other sex, as an objection to our possessing peculiar advantages for scientific improvements, that they cannot so easily command the ascendancy over us; but why should we wish them to have this dominion, if we are sensible that that is often, and may I not say, almost always, the reason and foundation of our ruin. A young lady of the greatest purity of mind, yet uneducated, is frequently a victim to the arts of seduction: differently advantaged by knowledge, the seducer would have respected her virtues, and conducted with becoming deference. Thus, a second advantage would be the consequence of female education. It would reform the men, or at least prevent, or restrain, many of those artifices, which are now too successfully used, with innocent, uneducated, and unsuspecting females.

If a well informed mind will be the mean of enabling us to possess some command over ourselves, of what infinite consequence and importance is it to us, that we read both men and books, and study to acquire all that theoretic and practical information, which enlarges the soul.

80 Now I observe, that if the above description of useful and scientific information, which has hitherto been arbitrarily appropriated to the males, is intended by the epithet “Masculine education,” instead of being terrified from such pursuits, by fear of the term, I would wish to be one of that accomplished number. . . .

Why then may not all the seeming difference between the sexes, be imputed solely to the difference of their education and subsequent advantages?—Here let us draw a just and plain parallel between the education of a sister and her brother. Perhaps they are sent to the same school, till the age of ten, or twelve years. Here the advantages of their improvement are the same, and their actual augmentation of mind is equal, unless there be a real superiority of genius, in the female youth, which is a case not unusual.—Behold the arbitrary distinctions where are, next, made between them. The brother is taken from a
90 common school, and transmitted to an academy, or a collegiate life; next becomes a divine, a lawyer or physician; the whole term of time including usually from seven to nine years. But how is the time of his

sister occupied, after she is taken from her early school? Immediately she is removed from every mean of literary improvement, and almost as effectually immured in a house, as a roman catholic Nun. She is admitted to walk in no road of preferment, and has before her, no incentives to aspire to public utility, by superior enlargement of mind. No! that is not the path for her to walk. Science and public utility are exclusively appropriated to the males.—See the invariable sister’s fate! If she be not sent to a nunnery, she is at least confined to domestic labor, and utterly secluded from all public concerns.

100 If not thus limited, she must have what the world calls a polite education: such as dancing, music, embroidering, altering and adjusting the fashion of her apparel. I have heard it, and I think very justly, observed, as an apology for females when frequently conversing, and being more disposed than the men, to talk of fashion, dress, amusements and the polite customs of the fair world, that the former were precisely following the natural, and almost necessary effect of their appropriate education. A young Miss is taught to esteem it of the utmost consequence to her success in life, that she be dressed fashionably, and observe the external graces. It requires but a small share of sagacity for her to discern, that unless she pay more attention to outward ornaments, than intellectual endowments, she will not be noticed by the other sex, on whom is her dependence for a partner, or, shall I say, “master;” for life. For high intellectual endowments, she would rather be avoided, in the view of a connexion for life, as these would be qualities incompatible with that arbitrary sovereignty, which the man would wish to have fully established in his domestic empire. To such a man, when she is united by the dearest ties, how are the best of her days, and
110 the prime of her life to be devoted?—In a way truly, which I acknowledge to be highly beneficial; in the employments of the house and the nursing of children, and imbruing their tender minds with the early precepts of true wisdom. But beneficial as it may be, does not this confined mode of living, and devoting our rolling years, afford sufficient arguments, why females do not advance in literary acquisitions, and the knowledge of men and manners, and the concerns of more public utility so far as the other sex.

Let us farther, in the pursuit of the general arguments of the subject before us, descant for a moment on a class of our fellow-men, who have for ages been holden in the vilest bondage:—I mean the African race. Divested of almost every advantage for intellectual improvement, we may perhaps derive a good additional argument for the elucidation of the equality of intelligence naturally between the sexes. In this class of human beings, we may fairly see the force of nature, unaided by art or cultivation, as it respects
120 the male and the female. Do we find in these human souls, that distinction of intelligence, which is contested among the whites? If there be a difference in point of natural talents, between the sexes in the African race, is not that difference evidently in favor of the females? What African has displayed a greater

share of genius, and stronger mental powers, than the justly celebrated Phillis Wheatley, whose poetical writings are so much read and applauded. How long had the world been accustomed to believe this despised race to be really inferior? How unjust in making no allowance between their children, and those of the whites, in early education, early ideas of liberty in the one, and of slavery, which never fails to depress the mind, in the other. But in returning from the regions of slavery which are at this day irradiating, by the all cheering sun of liberty, will not the last observations enable us to discern, that the only cause of the discrimination between the sexes, in the Christian world, arises from the early difference
130 in education, and total distinction of future temporal prospects as to public utility.

Let us for a moment advance the supposition, that this distinction were reversed in favor of the females. What would be the consequence, if the doors of our seminaries were as effectually shut against the gentlemen, as they now are against the other sex;—and colleges and superior schools of scientific improvement, were appropriately thrown open to the benefit of the female world. I ask what would then be the consequence? Would it not be a *complete reverse* of superiority in the sexes. Methinks I see some of my sex smilingly say, surely the result is indisputably true. The scale of literature would soon preponderate in our favor, and the gentlemen become of course, the same ignorant, weak and pitiable beings, as they now view the females. May I not add? “And *a little more awkward too.*”—But hush, I will say no more, lest I should give offence. It is not my design, if in my power to enter the lists as a candidate
140 for a paper battle; I wish only to be indulged in a little railery on the other sex, in return for far more bitter things, and much severer satire, which they have long uttered against female talents. Thus much I will add for their consolation, they need not ever fear the most distant probability of our soaring above them, so long as domestic confines, and the nursery of children are our destiny and employment all the prime of our lives, and the best of our days. But what I desire of them is that they lay no more on us, than GOD in his providence has designed.

As we are co-heirs of immortality, let us walk hand in hand, as equals in nature, and not as the master and servant. Women were figuratively, if not literally taken from man’s side, a station where I have reason to suppose and believe the good and pious are willing, and do choose, to see us placed. For once be candid, and throw off all arrogant pretensions to natural superiority, and the strength of native genius
150 above the females. . . .

On the ground of equality alone, is there a prospect of true, permanent, and endearing friendship:—friendship not like that between the master and his faithful slave, but like fellow rationals, engaged in the same cause, ennobled by the same prospects, and travellers to the same eternity of intellectual and moral

delights. Without this equality, there can be no esteem, and consequently no true rational felicity in the connubial state; nor reciprocity of sentiments, interchanging and inspiring intellectual life, and glows of moral and sentimental joy, in that union, which, on earth, when justly formed presents us, the most lively portrait of heavenly bliss, which can be exhibited in living colours. . . .

160 But to return from this digression to the importance and justness of admitting the idea of an equality between the sexes; how greatly doth a man of science misjudge in choosing a companion for life, if he selects one from the class of the ignorant and untaught, that he may, by this mean, the more securely retain his favorite supremacy. Is it not a total blindness to the ideas of refined happiness, arising from a reciprocity of sentiments, and the exchange of rational felicity, as well as an illiberal prejudice, thus to conduct?—Shall the women be kept ignorant, to render her more docile in the management of domestic concerns? How illy capable is such a person of being a companion for a man of refinement? How miserably capable of augmenting his social joys, or managing prudently the concerns of a family, or educating his children? Is it not of the utmost consequence, that the tender mind of the youth receive an early direction for future usefulness? and is it not equally true, that the first direction of a child necessarily becomes the immediate and peculiar province of the woman? And may I not ask, is not a woman of a capacious and well stored mind, a better wife, a better widow, a better mother, and a better neighbor; and
170 shall I add, a better friend in every respect?