

Circumcision of the Female Intellect: 19th Century Women Who Opposed Scholarly Education

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In 19th century America, some women decry the opportunity for scholarly education as rebellion against religion and predict a grim decline in the quality of life, home, and hearth for American families and for American culture and politics. In particular, women who opposed scholarly education argued that God had not created men and women equally; therefore, women should not desire nor be granted equality in social expectations or roles but remain in the sphere of gender difference. These women preferred the Biblical submission to male-dominant authority, the domestic tranquility of doilies and embroidery, the notion of the morality of motherhood, and the absence of intellectual stimulation and development -objecting to academic education and its consequential outgrowths of political participation, gainful employment, matrimonial choice, and independent living. It is here among these women we find the desire for womanly piety, purity, social graces, and the necessity of the development of Christian character. The intellectual circumcision was deeply rooted in the Protestant faith and was fostered through all branches of religious service. The idea that harmonious development of Christian character was more rewarding and stimulating than scholarly education pulverized the intellectual growth of women. The examination of the pursuit of perfected womanhood and the damning predictions regarding the quality of life for those women who stray from their true purpose is a fascinating reflection of a truly circumcised female intellect and a thoroughly mutilated spirit. Or is it?

Pomp and Piety: Marriage to God and Man

As immigrants flocked to the newly Revolutionized America, Land of the Free, they brought with them in full force: Religion. Though there were many denominations and various forms, in them all was a common theme: the God-given Divinity of gender inequity and difference. From the very Creation of the first social community, the Garden of Eden, the purpose of woman has been clear. She is to be the helpmate and companion of man and submissive to his authority. She also is the instigator of temptation and sin. Ironically, in the biting of the forbidden fruit, it was Eve who first sought knowledge, and Adam who was weak and succumbed to her feminine prowess. However, that was not the message that came to the shores of America. Woman was weak. When left to her own devices, woman was disobedient and sinful, the downfall of man. This was the religious message that resounded from pulpits across the land.

This sentiment is echoed in the writings of M. Carey Thomas—even after she became president of Bryn Mawr, one of the most prestigious women’s colleges in the country at this time. In her essay, “Present Tendencies in Women’s Education,” she recalls the horror she experienced as a child reading the Bible, most particularly the letters of Paul that define clearly the pious role of women as subservient to men. She says she even prayed that God would kill

her if that was all she had to aspire to—a life inferior to men .¹ Although she rose above the examples she detested in Milton, Shakespeare, and the Bible of the non-intellectual woman, even in her own success, she limits the benefits of education for women to making them better wives and “vastly better mothers.”² Although she became quite a trailblazer, in her essay, we see the lessons taught at home and in the pulpit that women’s “brains were too light, their foreheads too small, their reasoning powers too defective, their emotions too easily worked upon” to be anything other than domestic beings.³ This is the identity that prevailed in American thought.

Women are the vessels of God, the nurturers of moral growth and the very givers of life. Biblical teaching instructs women to be submissive to their husbands as they are the Lord, going so far as to specifically state that a husband is the head of his wife. Women are taught to be silent in church, not even daring to question except in the privacy of the home. Older women are to teach what is good and religious and to train the younger generation to love their husbands, to live pure lives above reproach, to take care of the home and the sexual needs of their husbands so as not to bring shame on the Lord God. In the pursuit of Piety, wives even sacrifice their bodies to the sensual whims of husbands. The desire to be a wife of noble character that well pleases both God and Man is the central and initial education for women. Although by law his legal property, a good Christian wife is trustworthy and greatly enhances the life of her husband. She makes clothing and provides food, getting up before dawn to prepare the meal for the household and to plan the work for the day. Her frugality and energy are deeply admired and bring pride to her family.

Caroline Gillman epitomizes these pious beliefs in her book, *Recollections of a Southern Matron*, written in 1838. Her observations of the male-dominant South are especially noteworthy. She professes that in order to form a harmonious marriage, women must “sacrifice thought and action.”⁴ Here, we find the Godly wife denies herself and submits to her first priority: the pleasing of her husband, and she did so out of love for both God and duty. She notes that when she became bored, she turned her attentions to the beautification of the home, “careful to consult my husband in those points which interested him, without annoying him with mere trifles.” She admits that she “sacrificed” her own desires and preferences to a feeling of domestic contentment that she calls, “a more sacred feeling.” While noting the absence of much intellectual stimulation of her own, she found delight in being a good wife to her beloved husband. A good wife, she asserts, “must smile amid a thousand perplexities, and clear her voice to tones of cheerfulness when her frame is drooping with disease.”⁵ Wifely duty preceded the caretaking of one’s self even in sickness. And in the interest of submissive harmony, there must be “no scenes of tears and apologies be acted to agitate” the husband. Instead, a Christian wife must be “the star of domestic peace” that “arises in fixedness and beauty . . . and shine down in

¹ Ellen Skinner. *Women and the National Experience – Primary Sources in American History*, (United States: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 2003), 133.

² Skinner, 113.

³ Skinner, 114.

⁴ Skinner, 76.

⁵ Skinner, 78.

gentle light” on the life of the family unit.⁶ Though she clearly has an inquiring mind that desires stimulation, she passively submits to the circumscription that the role of submissive wife fosters.

In addition to being a good wife, the woman is Biblically charged to help the poor and the needy. Motivated out of pious fear of the Lord and damnation, many women embraced these Biblical instructions and began seminaries and academies solely for the purpose of educating women to be worthy Christian wives. Although the antebellum period saw rise to activism and feminism in its early forms, the majority of women were not yet ready to embrace such immoral and irreligious notions as independence and scholarly education. They were, however, forming social organizations to fulfill their inherent benevolent natures and administer the Graces of God. One such organization was the Ladies Society of New York formed under its Constitution in 1800 and in direct cooperation with Protestant clergymen. Another was Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, Massachusetts, founded in 1818. These benevolent groups enabled women to assist widows, the poor and needy, and the sick. Interestingly, the women who applied for assistance from these organizations were required to be women who had fallen on hard times due to widowhood or poverty⁷ and were of strict moral rectitude and demonstrative of excellent moral behavior. Through these social outreach ministries, women of both races networked and offered emotional support and conversation for one another to nourish the piety of their souls. They used this forum to instruct and be instructed more deeply in the ways of Godly service.

Purity of body and mind is also an essential element of the Godly wife. In her essay analyzing the peculiar nature of woman as it was viewed in the 19th century, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Barbara Welter asserts by Divine right, “religion or piety was the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength.”⁸ In fact, religion was so very valuable because it did confine woman to her domestic sphere and served as a “kind of tranquilizer” for those young females who may feel restless in youth and experience what she calls “undefined longings. . . about which it is better to pray than to think.”⁹ In her discussion of the rigors of pious domesticity, she declares it is woman’s “solemn responsibility . . . to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand.”¹⁰ The purity of woman’s physical body was also a condition of the Divine expectation for the Christian woman. She must at all cost “preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness.”¹¹ And even the wardrobe of the 19th century American woman with all its corsets, sheaths, and bustles did just that – protected her chastity. Yet, ironically, marriage for her was an end to her innocence and a Divine charge to accept the husbandly attentions even in the absence of affection or desire.

⁶ Skinner, 78.

⁷ Skinner, 28.

⁸ Barbara Welter. *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*, Summer 1966, <<http://www.pinzler.com/ushistory/culttwo.html>> (8 May 2009), 1.

⁹ Welter, 1.

¹⁰ Welter, 1.

¹¹ Welter, 2.

Gender Spheres and Family Valued

It is also in the 19th century that we see the emergence of the middle-class and the “doctrine of separate spheres became an important ideology” as noted in *Women and the Making of America*.¹² Since the family was the first social organization, the woman’s role in the creation of family was paramount. Suddenly a man’s worth was in part estimated by the social graces and domestic talents of his wife and the production of a well-run household and a religious family unit. Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune, a writer and opponent of women’s rights, asserted that developing a quality family and home was the best profession a woman could have. She “justified female education and training only in relation to domesticity, as preparation for homemaking or in family need.”¹³ In her estimation, marriage was the only profession of women. In the separate sphere of public (male) and private (female) identities, women were cautioned to maintain virtue and propriety.

While white middle-class men worked for material gain and professional advancement, “women accepted as their female duty the obligation of providing husbands with a much needed refuge from the wider world.”¹⁴ In general, women kept to themselves and had little contact with men, and therefore little opportunity to defile their reputations or stimulate their curiosity beyond domesticity. The correlation between a happy family and a successful man became quite apparent during this time. Yet, the wife at home remained the “keeper of the spiritual values of the family” and her competence in housekeeping and entertaining and the development of a good family was her measure of success.¹⁵ However, compliance to the idea of separate spheres earned women a measure of respect even in the pulpit as long as women maintained their subservient obedience to male authority and adherence to their Divine purpose.

Another woman writer and teacher, Mary Lyon suggests that once married the wife’s domestic duties must be done with “courage, patience, and submission. Men are to earn support, and the women are to save.”¹⁶ Zilpah Grant phrased it slightly differently in her teachings to promote submission claiming that in marriage “where there are only two there can be no majority, and the supremacy must rest on one.”¹⁷ Both of these women were teachers who forged the instruction of the religious necessity for maintaining separate spheres in order to fulfill the woman’s destiny as wife. Mary Beth Norton writes that the education of women, especially among the emerging middle class, was “limited to the bare essentials of basic literacy, domestic skills, and perhaps the female ‘accomplishments’ of music and painting. She asserts that too much education – of the scholarly nature- “rendered a woman decidedly unfeminine.”¹⁸ Margaret

¹² Mari Jo Buhle, Teresa Murphy, and Jane Garland, *Women and the Making of America*, (New Jersey, US: Pearson Education, 2009), 145.

¹³ Barbara Miller Solomon. *In the Company of Educated Women*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 36.

¹⁴ Solomon, 37.

¹⁵ Solomon, 37.

¹⁶ Solomon, 26.

¹⁷ Solomon, 26.

¹⁸ Margaret A. Nash. *Women’s Education in the United States*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 26.

Nash, author of *Women's Education in the United States*, attributes the content of the female education as mostly “ornamental” as she says, “confined to music, needlework, or the fine arts.”¹⁹

Even when educated by intellectual women at formal academies, the curriculum circumscribed the female possibilities to the limits and the confines of the home. Interestingly, the educators who were teaching at these female academies and seminaries believed strongly that women should have “proper diction, tone, and pronunciation,” not to become orators but to “please listeners.” In the instruction of these young intellectual American women, reading aloud “with propriety and grace,” as one academy trustee called it, was deemed a “charming accomplishment.”²⁰ Ah, the necessity to provide delightful and soothing entertainment at one’s dinner party.

Perhaps no other writer sounded the trumpet of family and the differing roles therein more than Lyman Abbot in his article, “Why Women Do Not Wish the Suffrage.” He speaks well for the many women who truly did not desire to separate themselves from domesticity. Here, we are reminded of the predisposed separateness of gender in the public and private sectors of life and the religious implications for all of womanhood- even after nearly a century of feminism and activism. His call to home and hearth is a reflection of the conflict of the women who were at war with the culture of independence, and with it a reaffirmation of the value of family and the Divinity of femininity. In keeping with the Biblical identity of the first family as Adam and Eve, he asserts also that the “family was the first church,” citing Abraham’s altar and Sarah and the servants gathering to worship. The family is the first labor union, the first army, and even the first government.²¹ In the evolution of that initial society, it is the act of marriage that unites them—and us today—one to another. The family is “historically,” “organically,” and “biologically” the component of all social organization.²² Then, quite revealing is the assertion that the “most patent fact in the family is the differences in the sexes” and it is here in these separate spheres that the family finds its “sweet and sacred bond.”²³ Abbott did, however, assert that different did not necessitate any one being more essential or superior to the other, which aids in his review as a proponent of feminism of sorts. The claim that women are “different in nature, in temperament, in function...[and] in preserving it lies the joy of the family; the peace, prosperity, and well-being of society”²⁴ is a common theme among women teachers at seminary as well. Catharine Beecher taught that if women ventured beyond the realm of domesticity, they would meet with failure and then become inferior. Understanding and submitting to the “law of Nature, that is the law of God,” as Mr. Abbott describes it is essential not only to the success of

¹⁹ Nash, 36.

²⁰ Nash, 44.

²¹ Lyman Abbott. Why Women Do Not Wish the Suffrage,

²² Abbott, 2.

²³ Abbott, 2.

²⁴ Abbott, 3.

the family unit, but also to the success of society and ultimately humanity,²⁵ which is the very lesson of Biblical and academic instruction.

Housework and the domestic building of a family are demonstrative of Divine character. Abbott notes that the “continuous toil of the household requires exhaustless patience.”²⁶ He argues the “very instinct of humanity revolts against the employment of women” in any field that is not domestic, noting that even Lady Macbeth had to be “unsexed,” in essence void of all of her feminine nature, in order to become an ambitious killer. The Christian traits of tenderness, nobility, charity, creation, nurture, and genteelness are clearly the nature of woman. It is the perpetuation of such staunch value of the family unit and the woman’s role in it that infuses the education of women to refine its influence on the elements of domesticity. It is also this fervor for the appreciation of the family unity perpetuated in literature and the political culture that enables the voice of anarchy itself through Emma Goldman. She asserts that when women stepped beyond that innate disposition, they become isolated and devoid of that which “springs forth that happiness that is so essential to her.” She supports Lyman’s claim that in essence women who travel beyond the sphere of domesticity into the world of emancipation become “artificial beings.”²⁷

This is a sentiment echoed in the journals of Beatrice Webb as well. Although an acclaimed published writer, Beatrice discusses the “double-visioned quality” of what she terms her “duplex personality” that draws her back to her innate desire to be a homemaker²⁸ and her fundamental belief that there can not be “companionship without common faith.”²⁹ She identifies marriage as a “beautiful pact” filled with “personal love and tenderness, community of faith, fellowship in work, a divine relationship.”³⁰ In spite of her success as a writer, she valued the spiritual purpose of woman. She writes that spirituality is “the great want” in her life, “to cultivate my own soul to keep it perforce and holy, tender.”³¹ In her endeavors to teach other women about Christian duties as wives, she questions her own abilities and distractions to her own personal relationship with God. A distinct gender difference Beatrice Webb observes is in the practice of spiritual routines. To man she says, “The spiritual life seems unneedful” but to woman “her delicacy and her incapacity leaves her consciousness more the prey of irresponsible undirected ideas.” Without Divine guidance, she asserts woman is more likely to stray from her intended purpose, more easily manipulated and deceived. In deference to the very separate nature of women, she claims, “Spiritual life alone fills her being with the inspiration needful to keep her thought on a high plane.”³² She recommends that for woman to be successful in securing a valued family life, she needs to “kneel down and pray each morning for noble effort,

²⁵ Abbott, 4.

²⁶ Abbott, 4.

²⁷ Emma Goldman. *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 214.

²⁸ Beatrice Webb. *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (Great Britain: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1983), xii.

²⁹ Webb, 29.

³⁰ Webb, 29.

³¹ Webb, 32.

³² Webb, 33.

every evening for pure peaceful rest.”³³ Though Beatrice Webb and her husband Sidney had quite a successful marriage and partnership, she still concerned herself with the doubt of whether or not she had “narrowed” his life by not being as perfect a wife as divinely possible because she pursued intellectual endeavors. In spite of her professional success writing about housewifery and instructing other women, she doubts whether she has fulfilled her own responsibilities in that area to the degree that is required, demonstrating both the difficulty in mastering the Biblical instruction and the insecurity of the competency in imparting it.

There are other women writers that greatly influenced the culture of 19th century America who agree that domesticity is the essence of womanhood and the training (education) of women should be limited to that which enables them to better serve their Godly positions as wives and mothers reaffirming what came to be called the Cult of Domesticity.

Domestic Tranquility and Training

Nineteenth century America gave rise to women’s literature, the woman’s magazine and fiction, both an acknowledgement of the literacy that women had obtained as commonplace as well as the opportunity to further instruct women on the throes of domestic bliss through the feminine fine arts, The Cult of Domesticity as it was known. Within this scope of pious entertainment for women were magazines, advice books, religious journals, newspapers tailored to the female readership, all the while “cataloging the cardinal virtues of true womanhood for a new age.”³⁴ There was debate among women that formal education may lead women “astray from their true purpose and task in life,” to which the seminaries argued the contrary that the education provided by academies was specifically to “make of young women handmaidens of God.”³⁵ This outgrowth of a new woman was recognized as a new Eve of sorts with religion her “salve for a potentially restless mind.”³⁶ And as such, we find the emergence of the middle-class domestic goddess whose pleasure in life became the demonstration of her abilities to embroider and sew lovely doilies, bake a superb cake, and provide delightfully well-versed conversation and background music while entertaining.

Here within this domain many women writers became professionals with careers in the training of housewifery. In her book, *Just a Housewife*, Glenna Matthews thoroughly examines the multiplicity of this forum and its influence as an educator of women. She observes, “By the 1830s the home had begun to be sentimentalized to an unprecedented degree,”³⁷ and this trend continued to develop through the writings of women. Matthews notes that Mary Ryan, author of “Cradle to the Middle Class”, esteems the “universal function of cooking...had become something more than simply preparing food”³⁸ It now was not only an art form, to be critiqued

³³ Webb, 33.

³⁴ Catharine Lavender. *The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood*, <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/truewoman.html>> (8 May 2009), 1.

³⁵ Lavender, 1.

³⁶ Lavender, 1.

³⁷ Glenna Matthews. *Just A Housewife*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

³⁸ Matthews, 14.

and judged, but it also had become a badge of honor, and recipes, passed down from mother to daughter, an “inherited craft tradition.”³⁹ Cooking and the preparing of a fine meal and a lovely table had become the way in which women expressed their individuality and judged themselves – and each other.

Perhaps the most successful female author on the value of housewifery was Susan Warner, whose book, *The Wide, Wide World*, “may have been the first novel to sell one million copies,”⁴⁰ owing, in part, its success to the literacy of women as much as the respect upon domestic talents the book instilled. One reason for the book’s success is that at its heart is the story of the struggle of Ellen, a young woman who has been left without a mother to teach her, who is trying to master the arts of domesticity. Warner’s attention to the glorification of the gravy-making process (which remains an un-mastered art today for many women), whereby the aunt mixes in the pan the cream and flour, and it is “transformed as if by magic to a thick white froth”⁴¹ or Ellen’s “being awakened by the smells and sounds of someone frying at the hearth.”⁴² The arts of cooking and domesticity are so well celebrated and the young Ellen’s journey to perfect them so filled with hilarious misadventure that women readers simply could not get enough. As a result, in *The Wide, Wide World*, Susan Warner had written in romantic formula an “unprecedented success” that which we would call today a “best seller.”⁴³

In the Doctoral Dissertation of Karen Manners Smith, “Marion Harland: The Making of a Household Word,” we learn that Mary Virginia Hawes Terhune, using her pen name Marion Harland, wrote over 75 books of fiction though she was best known for *Common Sense in the Household*, a delightful cookbook “enlivened with pungent commentary” selling over a million copies and remaining in print for over half a century.⁴⁴ She was “one of the best known American women in the nineteenth century,” Smith writes. And before there was Abigail van Buren’s Dear Abby, there was Marion Harland, who also penned a syndicated newspaper advice column offering “domestic advice” based on her own experiences as a minister’s wife and a mother.⁴⁵

In this arena too we find Catharine Beecher as a prominent voice for women and her vision for the betterment of the lives of Christian women through knowledge- even in the traits of domesticity, or better yet mostly in the finer areas of domesticity. In her book, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, which was published in 1841, Catharine Beecher “spelled out the significance of domesticity” quite clearly. Beecher recognized the difficulty many young wives were having with the art of homemaking, having left the “communal and familial ties that might have fortified her skills.” The intent of her book, and she has been widely credited for it, was to “fill the gap she perceived between society’s expectations of women and the resources at their

³⁹ Matthews, 14.

⁴⁰ Matthews, 15.

⁴¹ Matthews, 16.

⁴² Matthews, 15.

⁴³ Matthews, 16.

⁴⁴ Karen Manners Smith, *Marion Harland: The making of a household word*, 1 January 1990, <<http://scholarworks.umass.edu/Dissertations/AA19022746>> (15 June 2009).

⁴⁵ Smith, 1.

disposal for meeting those expectations.”⁴⁶ Without an education, many of these young women simply were “unprepared for their domestic burdens.”⁴⁷ Beecher is critically acclaimed for having integrated practical instruction with religious temperance and social theory in this book in particular. In *Treaties*, she “exaggerated and heightened gender differences and thereby altered and romanticized the emphasis given to women’s domestic role.”⁴⁸ Beecher’s accolades are also duly noted in Glenna Matthews’ book, *Just a Housewife*, as she refers to Beecher as “an important female progenitor as teacher, as home economist, as architect, and as theologian.”⁴⁹ That is quite a commentary on the influence Catharine Esther Beecher had on reforming and refining the 19th century middle-class American wife. Of course, this also corresponded with the rise of the Evangelical Romanticism movement of the mid-19th century, making the book accepted and endorsed even by many of the Evangelical churches, increasing its acceptance and its readership.

It was also during the 1850s that the woman’s magazine industry thrived. There was “The Ladies Companion” wherein young wives were warned not to deviate from the sphere lest they “tamper with the order of the Universe.”⁵⁰ “The Ladies Repository” suggests that wives should be submissive “for the sake of good order’.”⁵¹ “A Young Woman’s Guide to the Harmonious Development of Christian Character” unabashedly commands females to “become as little children” pliant and obedient in marriage,⁵² and on and on. One female contributor noted wives were “the highest adornment of civilization” and yet another noted that “making beds was good exercise, the repetitiveness of routine tasks inculcated patience and perseverance,”⁵³ further enflaming the circumscribed intellect by suggesting the mindless domestic work of woman was the utility to develop her religious piety and Divine nature. The training of young girls to be wives rather than educating them to be scientist, doctors, mathematicians, scholars was an economic boon (sadly, the same can be said of women’s magazines still today over a hundred years later).

However, the mass appeal of these resources began much earlier with Sarah Josepha Hale. Her first book, *Northwood*, so impressed the Episcopal minister and headmaster of the Cornhill School for Young Ladies that he extended an invitation to her to serve as the editor of a new magazine, endorsed by the denomination, but devoted to the instruction of women.⁵⁴ The magazine, eventually entitled “American Ladies Magazine,” became the first such publication. Hale used her editorship as a “platform’ to further the education of women in a way that had at its roots the fundamentals of piety. However, the magazine also became a forum for which other women could share their own stories, giving women the opportunity, in the realm of religious

⁴⁶ Catharine Beecher, *A Study in American Domesticity* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 152.

⁴⁷ Beecher, 152.

⁴⁸ Beecher, 153.

⁴⁹ Matthews, 45.

⁵⁰ Welter, 3.

⁵¹ Welter, 3.

⁵² Welter, 3.

⁵³ Welter, 3.

⁵⁴ “Godey’s Lady’s Book,” March 1995 <mhtml:file://E:\Godey’sLady’sBook SarahJosephaHaleBiography.mht> (15 June 2009), 1.

sanction, a voice, an opportunity for creative expression beyond embroidery- and, of course, lessons in domesticity. Eventually, Hale became the editor of Godey's "Lady's Book" from 1836 until 1877⁵⁵ and one of the most influential women to leave her mark on the American wife.

The Morality of Motherhood and Instruction of Children

There perhaps is no other more fulfilling event in the life of a woman than to become a mother. It is the pinnacle of her Divine purpose in life. Here again, we hear the message of Lyman Abbott and the morality, the very essence of womanhood, that giving birth affords. He observes, "woman does not wish to turn aside from this higher work, which is itself the end of life, . . . the Direct Ministry to Life."⁵⁶ He affirms that mothers provide the "nurture and training of children in this primary school, which we call life."⁵⁷ In his passionate proclamation of the morality of the Divine usage of the womb, the inherent Christian responsibility to bear children that feeds the nurturing nature of the soul of woman, he identifies "the impartation of life which is her highest joy." Acutely observant, Mr. Abbott goes even further to assert that women "instinctively" sought the schoolroom, "substituting for the mother" and that woman by Divine nature is the "minister to life."⁵⁸ Apparently he is quite correct.

However, even in the presence of maternal instinct and Divine purpose, mothers must be instructed in the ways of religious rearing of children. As noted in Margaret Nash's *Women's Education in the United States 1780-1840*, most women writers agreed that motherhood was the moral opportunity to rear fine citizens and brave Patriots who were also stewards of "virtue, piety, and dignity."⁵⁹ She explains that "virtuous women helped create virtuous men, and thereby a healthy republic."⁶⁰ Although the majority of the education of women was in the wifely and housewifery roles, there was some measure of maternal instruction as well—more often though from mother to daughter as the first birth neared.

The acknowledgement of fundamental innate differences in males and females—spheres—became a driving force to tailor the education of women to domestic academia. Seminaries and Girls' colleges were formed with the primary purpose to provide young women the skills needed to be good wives, to secure good families, and to become good teachers of the moral strength of children. Catharine Beecher was among those who argued the validity of this separateness. She focused her efforts at reform on the need to educate women to be elementary school teachers and mothers, not scientists and politicians. She asserts that "whenever education is most prosperous, there woman is employed more than man."⁶¹ She clearly affirms that educating children is "the true and noble profession of a woman- that is what is worthy of the

⁵⁵ Godey's, 2
⁵⁶ Abbott, 8.
⁵⁷ Abbott, 10.
⁵⁸ Abbott, 10.
⁵⁹ Nash, 27.
⁶⁰ Nash, 27.
⁶¹ Skinner, 43.

noblest powers and affections of the noblest minds.”⁶² Catharine argued that working class women should leave employment and become “missionary teachers” and upper-class women should do “whatever they could to contribute to the ‘proper education’ of American children.”⁶³ She believed and professed vigorously that education as a profession must be left to women as it was their Christian vocation and duty to educate children. Her theory met with opposition as it was a fear that women would become “overeducated for the traditional roles they were expected to serve,”⁶⁴ but lobby she would, raising money for schools and overseeing the instruction of would-be teachers. Yet, in spite of her advocacy for women as educators, she held firm to her religious upbringing. “With the salvation of her soul hanging in the balance,”⁶⁵ she found a way to reconcile her faith in God and in the need to educate women beyond what was afforded them at home.

Although by some standards Catharine Beecher was a considered a feminist, she was more appropriately an advocate for the religious service of the intellectual Godly woman, finding avenues for women to pursue their true nature while developing their intellect in Godly ways, a circumcision of sorts, an intellectual compliance to the religious order.

In addition, there are many personal journals of 19th century women that reflect the very attitude that Christian mothers instill “love of truth and purity, the subtle sense of honor, the strong spirit of courage and high purpose” that Abbott claims as well.⁶⁶ In *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, Beatrice describes a visit with her friend Mary and marvels at her transition as an ever increasingly interesting person. She has grown from a “curiously unconventional little puritan” to a “worldly-wise woman living in great style” who has been “spending her whole day teaching her little ones and reading books.” She notes in the May 28 entry that Mary’s main “preoccupation for the last year has been to get her eldest son into the smartest possible regiment.”⁶⁷ Thus, in the motherly duty of instructing her children, Mary has also grown wiser, a positive outgrowth of fulfilling one’s moral duty of motherhood. She went on to observe with some degree of pride that in motherhood, Mary was evolving as a woman. In addition, on January 5 she enters that another friend, Margaret, is a “wholly devoted mother,” her son “unspoilt” and her daughters “correct, well-mannered, bright, happy, very pleasant to look at, and quite sufficiently intelligent.” Mrs. Webb also notes that the three children do not “show any curiosity about religion” as “they all conform and never ask questions.”⁶⁸ Margaret has performed her moral duties well as a Christian mother. The very fact that Webb makes these observations of her female friends exemplifies that sound maternal practices are valued and judged even among educated women. Women were the assessors of domestic quality for each other and of each other; in essence we were (and oftentimes still are) our own worst critics.

⁶² Skinner, 44.

⁶³ Beecher, 173.

⁶⁴ Beecher, 94.

⁶⁵ Beecher, 38.

⁶⁶ Abbott, 10.

⁶⁷ Webb, 74.

⁶⁸ Webb, 88.

In *Journal: A Civil War Diary*, by no one famous but an astute writer nonetheless, Anna Long Thomas Fuller names motherhood a “blessed privilege” as she comments on the “thin and delicate” nature of her son⁶⁹ while he is sick and she ministers her mercies upon him. She epitomizes the innate nurturer who administers tenderness, comfort, and solace to her family as is her Religious duty. She prays with great passion, “Oh Lord, help me to live better, to bear the trials and perplexities incident to every day with more patience and meekness.” This she prays after a trying day with testy and sick children. It was her most sincere prayer to parent her young children in “the spirit of Christianity” that God so ordained.⁷⁰ Here in the restricted world of rural farm life in the middle of the Civil War is a wife asking earnestly and quite eloquently for the Lord to provide her with the Christian character to be a moral mother the likes of which her children and all children so richly deserve.

From these books and the personal reflective journals written from women with and without an education or any formal training in the ways of domestic arts and discovery comes prolific articulation of the heartfelt burden to fulfill with integrity the morality of motherhood. In these earnest works is also the knowledge that the young sons of these pious mothers would one day become men who would engage in warfare- be it politics, economics, or combat. Their only desire was that they as mothers impart unto them the Christian virtues that would behoove their male authority as citizens and their dominance in work and in future marriages to foster in their sons the Christian traits of kind husbands and fathers, which in itself manifests happiness for the family unit and for the members who populate it.

Still, the pulpit decries the call to motherhood ever as loudly as one’s own biology and gender. Glenna Matthews also credits Horace Bushnell, a leading theologian, who perpetuated the importance of women to nurture Christian values in the home, echoing Catharine Beecher’s authoritarian instruction. In Bushnell’s religious message, the child becomes the “center of hope.” His belief was that the home “having a domestic spirit of grace dwelling in it, should become the church of the childhood, the table and hearth a holy rite.”⁷¹ Matthews documents Bushnell’s call: “Home and religion are kindred words: names both of love and reverence; home because it is the seat of religion; religion because it is the sacred element of the home.”⁷² At every turn, from the tender ministering of the mothers and teachers to the rigorous roars from the pulpit, young women, wives especially, were taught the morality of motherhood and the Christian responsibility of pious women to become spiritual mothers, giving birth to children, another generation of Christ followers, perpetuating not only growth of the citizenry but of the Church as well. For the Christian woman, there could be no greater service than motherhood to her country and her God.

⁶⁹ Anna Long Thomas Fuller, *Journal: A Civil War Diary*, ed. Myrtle King, (Alpharetta, Georgia: Priority Publishing, 1999), 61.

⁷⁰ Fuller, 54.

⁷¹ Matthews, 19.

⁷² Matthews, 19.

The Dangers of Defiance

It would be remiss not to mention the dire predictions that many 19th Century women made of the future of family, women, and society should women choose not to comply with the Divinity of their purpose and dare instead to pursue independence through career and spinsterhood -if we dare use such terminology. The leading supporters of domesticity were adamant in their ardor that defiance of God would result in ruin. In fact, it is in the most feminist of literature celebrated near the turn of the century where these reflections are most notable. Repeatedly in American literature we see that women who abandon domesticity and polite societal expectations of embroidery and civility and crave stimulation beyond that realm – or are forced to by disappointment and widowhood-go insane or worse. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” Charlotte Gilman Perkins’ heroine is unable to conform to the mundane expectations of the roles of wife and mother because of her scholarly intellect and her education, and that which once drew her attention to a worthy husband in the end drives her mad. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* submersion into an ocean of death is preferable to submission to man or God or the exhaustive demands of motherhood and the surrendering of one’s own thoughts and desires to the fulfillment of some religious tenant. This theme is repeated in “The Story of an Hour” as well. Upon the surprise resurrection of her husband from the erroneous report of his untimely demise, again death is preferable to the would-be widow rather than suffer the loss of independence that shone so brightly albeit so briefly.

The struggle for female autonomy that began amid 19th century American women, probably in part because of the ardent celebration of domesticity that antebellum America fostered, continues to be a source of great conflict for women today in the 21st century. Perhaps, truly, the only way for woman to find happiness and fulfillment is to subjugate her Selfhood to the Holy demands of God and become not simply all, but *only*, that which is Divinely ordained. Ironically, submission to matrimony and the morality of motherhood, woman’s compliance to Biblical instruction not to withdraw from but joyfully submit to her husband’s passion, gave rise to her own imminent authority—there, in the separate sphere of her domesticity. Within the circumcision of her intellect, it is the morality of Woman’s womb coupled with her Godly submission to male-dominant authority that becomes her education and, ultimately, her salvation.

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