

Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections

<http://archives.dickinson.edu/>

Documents Online

Title: "Formation of Female Character," by John O. Proctor

Format: Commencement Oration

Date: July 11, 1839

Location: Orations-1839-P964f

Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

The Formation
of
Female Character

Formation of Female Character.

By John C. Procter. June. 1839.

It has become an established truth, that nations advance in civilization, and refinement, in proportion to the improvement of the female sex. In every enlightened nation the power of women has become so great, and the influence of their actions so lasting, that they may be seen and felt in every station in life: the Merchant, Mechanic and Statesman, all stand in the same relation to them and feel the same effects of their authority.

It was with such considerations as these, that the wise men and true philanthropists of every age paid such strict attention to the improvement of their condition, knowing that by so doing, they actually elevated their national character and rendered their country men, more useful and happy. Philosophy, philanthropy, wisdom and wealth, were all employed for this grand enterprise: improvements were constantly made and fixed rules were permanently established, till now they appear to have arrived at such perfection, as to extend to woman all the advantages for improvement which could be desired. Books of instruction and wisdom - schools and seminaries, and even colleges, are all at command solely for the perfecting their condition and rendering them competent to fulfill the duties incumbent upon them.

But during all this time, while these devoted friends were laying this foundation of usefulness and esteem; and that upon the rock of ages, as they supposed, the stealthy enemy was preparing an opponent. Fashion that dangerous director which has arrogated to itself the prerogative of fixing the criterion of pleasure, appeared: its siren voice and its enticing charms turned many from their duties, and led them into vain amusements; - the studies became too dry; - time was wasted with the follies which had been adopted, and the ornamental accomplishments became the subject of consideration. Yes, and it did not even stop here, but succeeded in introducing its innovations

vations into the very seat of learning. Instead of the rudiments of education, and the higher branches of Philosophy Astronomy and Optics, the more improved subjects, such as Latin, Italian and French languages, drawing, painting and dancing with a host of others have been adopted and cultivated.

It is true that most of these are noble employments in their proper places, and well worthy the attention of every one; but when they encroach upon that time which should be appropriated to better purposes, — when they eat up not only the time of their devotees, but also that of others, — and when they implant too great a desire of pleasure in the youthful breast, then it is that all classes feel their pernicious effects; and that women appear to be in no better state than they were in by-gone days.

What can be the use of the Latin, Italian and French languages to this class of community? What advantage can they derive from this source which will render them more competent to fulfill the duties incumbent upon them? It is true that man by continued exertions may derive great advantage from them: his powers of thought, of conception, of reason, and of judgment; — a command of words, and a power of arranging his expressions; — powers which he must possess — may all be improved by them: but such advantages cannot be derived from them by the other sex. These things are not in their line of duty: Woman's powers are not called forth to such lively action, — her voice is not heard in literary societies and in the halls of legislation — her actions are of a more retired nature: the milder virtues which are adapted to cultivate the heart are her peculiar accomplishments. Her employments are rather to soften the passions and polish the manners of man; — to heal the broken-hearted, and to diffuse joy and rejoicing through the mansions of sorrow and misfortune. Besides, this studying of the languages is not accompanied with a desire of attaining an accurate knowledge of them — it is only a knowledge

4

of the first principles, and an acquaintance with those fashionable phrases which are so common at the present day: this is the key to the whole secret; it is only to be up to the fashion that they desire this knowledge.

"But," it may be said, "it is not the vast majority who attend to such studies, it is only a few of the more fashionable and accomplished." True, but when this is wanting there is always something else in its stead. That faithful servant of all classes will not leave any of its suitors to suffer from want of attention; the beauties of the outward form, or dress, or some one of the ornamental accomplishments may take its place. This kind of education will never prepare woman for the duties in life. Now in some countries this sex act consistently by studying nothing but exterior graces and cultivating personal attractions, because they live under the tyranny of despots whose will they must obey and whose favour they must propitiate; but in this land of christian light and liberty, where perfect freedom is given and no binding hand of tyranny compels, they lie under an increased obligation to be more attentive to the cultivation of the mind and the good order of society. The rising generations are entirely under their control, and from them, they must receive those impressions which will cling to them through life. The youthful mind when in their care, is in its natural state; unprejudiced by external influences, and subject to receive any impressions made by woman's hand. Like as the majestic ship wafted along by prosperous breezes, soon arrives at the destined port in perfect order and safety; or tossed to and fro by boisterous surges till dashed against the rock, she lies a wreck upon the beach a signal of distress: so also the mind, nurtured by the tender hand of love and led in virtue's paths; or exposed to the boisterous surges of passion and rocks of hatred and revenge, arrives at manhood, strengthened and improved, or impaired and degraded, an honor

to society or a tottering wreck of perverted powers!

It is here then that woman's greatest influence is felt: here, where the foundation stone is laid—here, where the key stone of the arch is placed. Well may she be termed the main spring of society, the palladium of a republic.

If then, women's duties are so great, and they lie under such weighty obligations to live up to them, it would be natural to suppose that they would be educated in such a manner, as would render them competent to fulfill them. But such things cannot come to pass until greater attention is paid to the more weighty concerns of life. Many of them seem to forget, that the attractions of the fairest forms are but short and feeble, when there is nothing within to correspond to the external appearances. And yet such is the foundation which many a fond parent wishes to be laid, and on which the firm fabric of usefulness and esteem is expected to be reared!

This desire of beautifying the external form, is truly lovely, and of great advantage; but when it becomes the whole engrossing subject—when no expense of time or money are considered too much for that which may afford addition or support to these charms; then it is that injurious effects are felt,—that Reason is expelled from the throne, and the passions, those tyrants of the mind—attain the entire ascendancy.

Would woman consider as she ought, the mighty privileges of her nature and not be engrossed by sensual objects; and would she but rightly apply those faculties with which she is gifted,—how nobly would she appear—how disdainfully would she despise those gaudy trifles which only allure by their fictitious prospects and betray their followers often into the very depths of woe? And what better employment could she be engaged in, than exercising her faculties in attaining a knowledge of

of the Sciences and useful arts? Studies which not only entertain but charm the most expanded mind - which bring to view the power and dignity of human nature and which would ever produce a theme of the noblest speculations!

Astronomy, Botany, Natural History, Natural and moral Philosophy, and many other subjects within their reach, would all have a tendency to produce good results - subjects, than which nothing can be more entertaining or more prolific of pleasure to the mind. From ^{such} sources, she would be led to higher and more exalted notions of the Supreme Being, - his wonderful works - his inconceivable power over all the subjects of his goodness, and the wisdom which can be constantly traced in the works of creation. Her very nature would be changed: every thing would appear in a new light; and Fashion that domineering spirit of the present age, would not hold the strongest control over her actions: Virtue and wisdom would be her handmaids, and she would appear clothed in that garb of beauty which would cling to her through life and adorn her in the hour of Death.

Commencement Oration of John O. Proctor, Class of 1839
Transcribed by Sarah-Hazel Jennings May 2008
Edited by Tristan Deveney June 2008

Formation of Female Character

It has become an established truth, that nations advance in civilization and refinement in proportion to the improvement of the female sex. In every enlightened nation the power of women has become so great and the influence of their actions so lasting, that they may be seen and felt in every station in life: The Merchant, Mechanic, and Statesmen all stand in the same relation to them and feel the same effects of their authority.

It was with such considerations as these, that the wise men and true philanthropists of every age paid such strict attention to the improvement of their condition, knowing that by so doing they actually elevated their national character and rendered their country men more useful and happy. Philosophy, philanthropy, wisdom and wealth were all employed for this grand enterprise: improvements were constantly made, and fixed rules were permanently established, till now they appear to have arrived at such perfections, as to extend to women all the advantages for improvement which could be desired. Books of instructions and wisdom- schools and seminaries and even colleges are all at command solely for the perfecting their condition and rendering them competent to fulfill the duties incumbent upon them.

But during all this time, while these devoted friends were laying this foundation of usefulness and esteem; and that upon the rock of ages as they supposed, the stealthy enemy was preparing an opponent. Fashion that dangerous director which has arrogated to itself the prerogative of fixing the criterion of pleasure, appeared: its syren voice and its enticing charms turned many from their duties, and led them into vain amusements;-- the studies become too dry;-- time was wasted with the follies which had been adopted, and the ornamental accomplishments became the subject of considerations. Yes, and it did not even stop here, but succeeded in introducing its innovations

-vations into the very seat of learning. Instead of the rudiments of education, and the higher branches of Philosophy Astronomy and Optics, the more improved subjects such as the Latin, Italian, and French languages, drawing, painting and dancing with a host of others have been adopted and cultivated.

It is true that most of these are noble employments in their proper places, and well worthy the attention of everyone; but when they encroach upon that time which should be appropriated to better purposes,-- when they eat up not only the time of their devotees, but also that of others,-- and when they implant too great a desire of pleasure in the youthful breast, then it is that all classes feel their pernicious effects; and that women appear to be in no better state than they were in by-gone days.

What can be the use of the Latin, Italian and French languages to this class of community? What advantage can they derive from this source which will render them more competent to fulfill the duties incumbent upon them? It is true that man by continued exertions may derive great advantage from them: his powers of thought, of conception, of reason, and of judgment;-- a command of words and a power of arranging his expressions;-- powers which he must possess may all be improved by them: but such advantages cannot be derived from them by

the other sex. These things are not in their line of duty: women's powers are not called forth to such lively action,—her voice is not heard in literary societies and in the halls of legislation—her actions are of a more retired nature: the milder virtues which are adapted to cultivate the heart are her peculiar accomplishments. Her employments are rather to soften the passions and polish the manners of man; -- to heal the broken-hearted, and to diffuse joy and rejoicing through the mansions of sorrow and misfortune. Besides, this studying of the languages is not accompanied with a desire of attaining an accurate knowledge of them—it is only a knowledge of

of the first principles, and an acquaintance with those fashionable phrases which are so common at the present day: this is the key to the whole secret; it is only to be up to the fashion that they desire this knowledge.

“But,” it may be said, “it is not the vast majority who attend to such studies, it is only a few of the more fashionable and accomplished.” True, but when this is wanting there is always something else in its stead. That faithful servant of all classes will not leave any of its suitors to suffer from want of attention: the beauties of the outward form, or dress, or some one of the ornamental accomplishment, may take its place. This kind of education will never prepare women for the duties in life. Now in some countries this sex act consistently by studying nothing but exterior graces and cultivating personal attractions, because they live under the tyranny of despots whose will they must obey and whose favour they must propitiate; but in this land of Christian light and liberty, where perfect freedom is given and no binding hand of tyranny compels, they lie under an increased obligation to be more attentive to the cultivation of the mind and the good order of society. The rising generations are entirely under their control, and from them, they must receive those impressions which will cling to them through life. The youthful mind when in their care, is in its natural state; unprejudiced by external influences, and subject to receive any impressions made by woman's hand. Like as the majestic ship wafted along by prosperous breezes, soon arrives at the destined port in perfect order and safty or tossed to and fro by boisterous surges till dashed against the rock, she lies a wreck upon the beach a signal of distress; so also the mind, nurtured by the tender hand of love and led in virtue's paths; or exposed to the boisterous surges of passion and rocks of hatred and revenge, arrives at manhood, strengthened and improved, or impaired and degraded, an honor to

to society or a tottering wreck of perverted powers!

It is here then that woman's greatest influence is felt: here, where the foundation stone is laid—here where the key stone of the arch is placed. Well may she be termed the mainspring of society, the palladium of a republic.

If then, women's duties are so great, and they lie under such weighty obligations to live up to them, it would be natural to suppose that they would be educated in such a manner, as would render them competent to fulfill them. But such things cannot come to pass until greater attention is paid to the more weighty concerns of life. Many of them seem to forget, that the attractions of the fairest forms are but short and feeble, when there is nothing within to correspond to the external appearance. And yet, such is the foundation which many a fond parent wishes to be laid, and on which the firm fabric of usefulness and esteem is expected to be reared!

This desire of beautifying the external form, is truly lovely, and of great advantage; but when it becomes the whole engrossing subject- when no expense of time or money are considered too much for that which may afford addition or support to these charms; then it is that injurious effects are felt,-- that Reason is expelled from the throne, and the passions, those tyrants of the mind—attain the entire ascendancy.

Would woman consider as she ought, the mighty privileges of her nature and not be engrossed by sensual objects; and would she but rightly apply those faculties with which she is gifted,-- how nobly would she appear—how disdainfully would she despise those gaudy trifles which only allure by their fictitious prospects and betray their followers often into the very depths of woe? And what better employment could she be engaged in than exercising her faculties in attaining a knowledg of

of the sciences and useful arts? Studies which not only entertain but charm the most expanded mind—which bring to view the power and dignity of human nature and which would ever produce a theme of the noblest speculations!

Astronomy, Botany, Natural History, Natural and Moral Philosophy, and many other subjects within their reach, would all have a tendency to produce good results—subjects than which nothing can be more entertaining or more prolific of pleasure to the mind. From such sources, she would be led to higher and more exalted notions of the Supreme Beings,-- his wonderful works—his inconceivable power over all the subjects of his goodness, and the wisdom which can be constantly traced in the works of creation. Her very nature would be changed: everything would appear in a new light; and Fashion that domineering spirit of the present age, would not hold the strongest control over her actions: Virtue and wisdom would be her handmaids, and she would appear clothed in that garb of beauty which would cling to her through life and adorn her in the hour of Death.