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Co-education, a barrier.

J. H. Bennett

The theme of "Woman's Sphere" has been the subject of much discussion during the past decade; not only by the Senior at college, who disposes of the subject in a few sentences, and thinks he has forever set at rest the whole question, but also by the eminent men of the day, who have given the subject much thought and whose views have been published. Woman however has not been satisfied with mere discussion in her behalf, but has endeavored to put the theory of the subject into practice; and to enlarge the sphere her sister of the past has occupied. And so successful has

she been that she occupies a place in the world of to-day, which would astound, and possibly shock, our accustomed only to the usages of the past

Desiring to occupy these higher spheres, she demanded, and rightfully too, that she be allowed the advantages of a higher training in order that she might be properly fitted for her new position in the world of action. On account of this desire she has inflicted upon the college world of to-day the system of co-education. Inflicted is the word I have used, and purposely, and at the risk of

being considered prejudiced, I would present a few arguments against the system under consideration

The feminine portion of mankind is not generally considered in the same way, nor in the same light as the male. As we compare the two, there seems to be about the former an odor of sanctity which places them on a different plane from the latter. They are among men and yet not of them. They are of a different stamp and mould. Differing thus from men, the treatment accorded to them must not be the same, for, as we perceive the differences so must we

also suit to each that which will do them the most good in the world.

And yet co-education places men and women in the college and endeavors by the self same method to bring them both to the highest plane.

Needing different treatment, owing to fundamental differences in their natures, can this self-same method bring them both to an equally high plane? I claim not.

There must be a compromise made somewhere, whereby both are partially deterred from reaching the ultimate object, or one is receiving the attention which will not to the greatest extent benefit

the other. For neither the man nor the woman do I think co-education to be a beneficial institution.

The colleges, in which co-education is carried out in a small degree, will remain the same as ever; leaning to that which will most benefit the man. And where co-education has attracted numbers of women to the college, the reverse will be true; for, try as faculties will to be arbitrary, it is the expressed needs of the student that governs the formation of courses leading to degrees. The women in the college first mentioned will graduate, but not have

attained the highest possible good from the course any more than the man in the second case.

Do you say that women are to day leading their classes and outstripping men in colleges in which the latter largely predominate? Granted, in part; but can you say that a college education consists merely of filling one's head with declensions and conjugations, rules and exceptions? Such would be a narrow view of a liberal education. The fitness of a person trained in such a narrow sense of the term, education to meet the demands of the world might

well be doubled. And yet the women, who lead classes in so-called men's colleges, can but lead in the sense which is allowed by the narrow construction. If they then harp upon such instances, which, as far as ultimate good is concerned, are worthless

Harmony of thought and purpose must be present also if male and female are to reach together the highest plane. The halo of liberalism, which is thrown about co-education by the press of the day, must not so blind our eyes that we think the world is of our mind and our accord on

the subject. Let us consult the interested parties, and see their position on the question.

Male students are chivalrous to a degree King Arthur himself would be glad to honor, and have the greatest honor for the fair sex; but when the subject of co-education is broached, there is heard the growl of dissent at its intrusion. His chivalry yields to the feelings which arise and he records a negative vote on the question. And now let us consult the charming "co-ed" on the subject and she will favor the proposition because nothing better offers itself.

Harmony of feeling is here entirely absent; one accepting the situation because they are obliged to, the other because it can obtain nothing better under existing circumstances. Harmony can not nor will it ever exist in such a case.

The abolishment of the system of co-education in colleges would be a step in advance; and result in beneficial results to male and female. The Yale and Harvard of to-day are the glory of her men of the past, and the glory of Wellesly and Smith, of Bryn Mawr and Vassar is likewise resting upon her women. Abolish

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Commencement Oration of Joseph Alexander Bennett, Class of 1894
Transcribed by Nick Bloom, June 2009
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

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