A History of Male Attitudes toward Educating Women

by Gary K. Clabaugh

The very essence of a culture is revealed in its educational attitudes, policies, and practices. Just as blood pressure and body temperature are measures of physical health, such matters are measures of social justice. Want to perform an autopsy on the Hitler regime and see what fueled the murder of innocent millions? One hardly need go further than the memorable newsreels of German university students grinning with mindless malevolence while hurling books onto bonfires. Want an accurate indicator of the social situation in Afghanistan? Look at who is educated, who is not, and what is being taught, and you quickly get to the kernel of things.

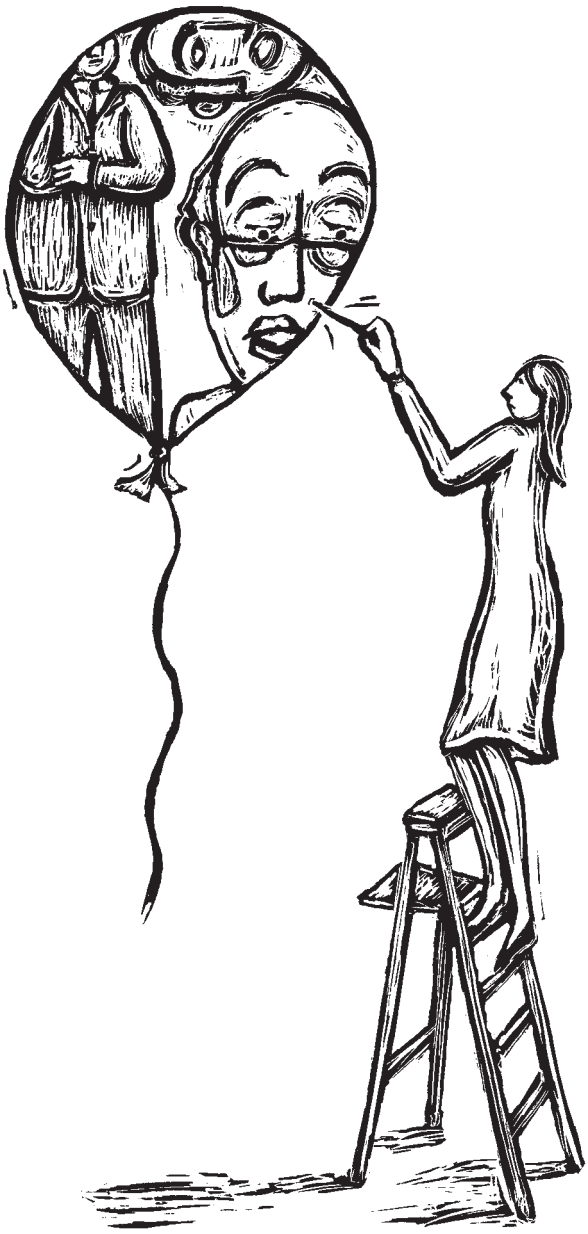
Few subjects are more revealing. What follows, then, is an examination of male attitudes toward the education of women. More specifically, it is a dissection of the attitudes of the most famous and highly accomplished men and, occasionally, the most infamous and destructive men regarding women and their education.

You might wonder why the attitudes of the most accomplished women are not examined. Male opinion is the focus because, for the most part, men have had the power to make the decisions for both men and women alike.

There is another reason for highlighting misogyny. Women, particularly young modern women, often fail to fully appreciate the bitter burden their sex has shouldered over the years. Century after century women have been regarded as inferior and systematically denied opportunities to prove otherwise. And that unfairness is particularly conspicuous when it comes to education.

Classical Antiquity

The accomplishments of the Greeks and the Romans provide the foundations of Western civilization. Moreover, their pedagogy established the foundations of contemporary education. What did



influential Greek and Roman men have to say about women and their educability?

Greek Harmony

Greek women lived highly circumscribed lives of a distinctly subordinate character, and male attitudes toward them vividly reflected that second-class status. As early as 850 B.C., Hesiod, a Greek poet and early scientific farmer, gave vent to opinions that echoed and reechoed throughout the history of Greece. In *Theogony* he observed, "Zeus, who thunders on high, made women to be an evil to mortal men, with the nature to do evil." A hundred years later, the Greek elegiac poet and satirist Semonides of Amorgos also blamed it all on Zeus and women when in his poetic essay *Iambus on Women* he noted "the worst plague Zeus ever made—women."

It was not just the early poets and satirists who gave vent to such negativity. Even the sober astronomer and mathematician Pythagoras (c. 585–507 B.C.) observed,

> There is a good principle which created order, light, and man, and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.

Socrates (c. 470–399 B.C.), widely regarded as one of the wisest of men, shared this vision of women. While he allowed that they could make a considerable contribution to society, and even advocated an expansion of feminine responsibilities, he still maintained in the *Republic:*

> All of the pursuits of men are the pursuits of women also, but in all of them a woman is inferior to a man.

Aristotle (c. 384–322 B.C.), who clearly intended no satire, went further. In his proto-scientific treatise *Generation of Animals*, he declared that women were "mutilated males" and argued that the female character was "a sort of natural deficiency."

It is little wonder, then, that even the progressive Athenians, who developed the first educational system stressing the importance of human, or at least male, individuality, spent little effort on the formal education of females. As Plato put it in the *Meno*, a woman's virtue was "to order her house, keep what is indoors, and obey her husband." Given such attitudes, which were nearly universal in Athens, there was little perceived need for any but the most rudimentary education for women.

Moreover, because females were widely regarded as potentially or even inherently vicious, irrational, and untrustworthy, it

was commonly held that their education was not only unnecessary, but imprudent, counterproductive, even dangerous. As Menander (c. 343–291 B.C.) the Greek dramatist observed, "He who teaches a woman letters feeds more poison to the frightful asp" [*fragments*].

The Greeks pioneered the development of knowledge for its own sake. They are famous for adhering to Plato's advice: "Follow the argument wherever it leads." They forsook the almost-universal practice of subordinating individuality to the collective and honored the duty advised by Socrates to "know thyself."[1] Yet they also regarded women as mutilated males, unworthy of formal education.

Roman Utility

It was the Greek genius to investigate the aims of life, and it was the Roman genius to strive for achievement. The Greeks measured things in terms of harmony and proportion; the Romans measured things in terms of utility. Greek education favored the intellectual development of males; Roman education stressed male rights, duties, and obligations, particularly of the father. Legally he ruled the family with complete authority.[2]

Although Roman women were more highly regarded in their role of wives and mothers than their Greek counterparts, Roman male attitudes toward them were similar to those of the Greeks. Titus Livy (c. 59 B.C.–A.D. 17), the eminent Roman historian, exemplified that when he observed in his *History*, "A woman's mind is influenced by little things." Publilius Syrus also expressed characteristic sentiments when in *Sententiae* he stated, "A woman who meditates alone, meditates evil." Lucius Anacus Seneca (c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65), philosopher, dramatist, essayist, and tutor of Nero, expressed a similar though more comprehensive claim in *Hippolytus*: "When a woman thinks . . . she thinks evil."

The Roman male's attitude toward women's education was slightly more charitable than that of the Greeks. The great importance of family life and the enormous authority of the Roman father, which technically even included the supreme power of life and death over every member of the family, made education largely a function of life in the home. The mother personally reared and educated the younger children. As boys grew older, however, they became the father's responsibility.

As Rome developed into an empire, Roman education increasingly resembled that of the Greeks. But until the fall of Rome, it never lost its predisposition for practicality and its reliance on the home. Toward the end of empire, however, the Roman family,

debased by urban idleness and vulgar amusements, was no longer capable of doing that job.[3]

In early Roman history, the woman's only education was for her future role as wife and mother, but as the power and wealth of Rome grew, so did the boredom, leisure, affluence, and formal education of many Roman women. By the second century B.C. it was possible for a woman like Cornelia, a celebrated Roman matron and mother of the great liberal tribunes Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, to have acquired a wide and detailed education that she utilized teaching her twelve children—achieving remarkable results. Her fame, which derived primarily from the accomplishments of her offspring, did much to legitimize the formal education of wealthy Roman women.[4]

Such a pedagogical metamorphosis was not popular with many Roman men. Decimus Junius Juvenal (c. A.D. 60–140), Roman poet and satirist of consummate skill, appealed to this resentment when he reserved some of his sharpest barbs for educated women. For example, in his sixth satire he depicted the learned female thus:

> But of all plagues, the greatest is untold;
> The book-learned wife, in Greek and Latin bold;
> The critic-dame, who at her table sits,
> Homer and Virgil quotes, and weighs their wits,
> And pities Dido's agonizing fits.
>
> —*Satires*

Like many Roman men, however, Plutarch acknowledged in *Moralia* that the formal education of women had some value:

> A woman who is studying geometry will be ashamed to go dancing and one who is charmed by the words of Plato or Xenophon is not going to pay attention to magic incantations.

But he hastened to say that they must "develop this education in the company of their husbands."

Perhaps Roman men were moved to accept the formal education of women in the hope that it would reinforce the rapidly weakening pedagogical role of Roman mothers. But the time when most mothers played a key role in their children's education was already past. This task had been passed to slaves, hired hands, and tutors. In his *Dialogue,* Tacitus (c. A.D. 55–118) lamented the disappearance of the age when

> [e]very citizen's son . . . was from the beginning reared not in the chamber of a purchased nurse, but in that mother's

> bosom and embrace, and it was her special glory to study her home and devote herself to her children.

Evidently, the increasing educational sophistication of a Roman woman had more to do with her private amusements than it did with educating her children.

The fact that in later Roman history more and more women became educated must also be balanced against the reality that more and more Roman men were also being schooled. In fact, in terms of literacy, there is reason to believe that the proportion of literate women compared with literate men actually declined as Rome aged.[5] Hence, it could well be that comparably women were little better off educationally at the time of the fall of Rome than they were centuries before.

In any case, we know that ancient Greece and Rome were the crucibles in which Western civilization was forged. The Greeks, though they had their goddesses and heroines and idealized certain aspects of femininity, defined woman's role simply as wife and mother and gave little emphasis to her education. The Romans, probably because of their veneration of the family, had a higher regard for women but still were grudging in their education; they viewed it either as a means of achieving more effective mothering or as a relatively harmless diversion from licentious idleness. That is Western woman's educational heritage.

The Middle Ages

The slow decay and final collapse of the Roman Empire saw Christianity emerge triumphant over its rivals. By A.D. 392 it was the only lawful religion of the empire. This triumph was significant for women. Mithraism, the most vital of Christianity's early rivals, totally excluded women from worship while Christianity did not.[6] This meant that despite Paul's admonition to the Corinthians that women should "keep silent in the churches," early Christianity enjoyed their active participation. So it came to be that with the cautious encouragement of leaders such as Gregory I (590–604), the early medieval church benefited from the accomplishments of educated women such as Hild of Whitby, Leoba, Hildegard of Bingen, and Roswitha of Gandersheim.[7]

As the initial revolutionary fervor of Christianity waned, however, a more reactionary attitude toward women began to assert itself. The church, overwhelmingly masculine in its power structure, became more and more cautious about women in general and their education in particular. As a result, the public activity of women declined, their place in the church receded, and their education became more and more problematic.

The Gregorian "reform" movement of the eleventh century severely discouraged women's religious monastic orders. Phillippe of Navarre (1301–1343) voiced the attitude that likely spawned this "reformation" when he observed in *Les quartre temps de l'homme*, "One should not teach a woman letters or writing unless she is a nun, because a woman's reading and writing leads to great evil." Ironically, the movement to restrict the monastic life had the effect of decimating female religious orders; consequently, the potentially literate nuns, cited as the exception to the rule by Phillippe of Navarre, already were scarce. Moreover, because the negative attitude toward educating laywomen was commonplace, educated women were not.

The Cult of the Virgin

The growing distrust and hostility toward ordinary women paralleled growth in the adoration of the Virgin. Mary's adoration, championed by influential figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), was a profoundly important part of the religious mysticism of those times—a movement on the edge of heresy so far as the church was concerned.

The mystics who embraced Mary claimed that confining women to the home was a way of shielding them from the avarice and corruption of the outside world, preserving their precious purity. Because innocence requires ignorance, the formal education of women threatened to eliminate the very quality that gave them worth.[8]

One wonders about the seriousness of such claims even then. Perhaps it makes more sense to claim that at bottom relegating females, save the mystically virginal, to the periphery of the medieval church had to do with a fundamental distrust of women as women. Perhaps denying literacy to the vast majority of females had to do with it being unwise to empower those whom one distrusts. It most assuredly had to do with the ascendancy of male attitudes and values that might best be labeled "Tertullianism."

Tertullian (c. 150–c. 230), a Roman church father of the time of persecution, regarded all women with hostility and suspicion, largely because of the connection he saw between femininity and sin. In *De habitu muliebri* he advised Christian women "to act the part of mourning and repentant Eve" to partially expiate the "ignominy" derived from being the "cause and fall of the human race." Lest he leave any doubt regarding how he viewed woman's legacy, he went on to say,

> The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times and so it is necessary that the guilt should live on also. You are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree, you

> are the one who deserted the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, Man. Because of your desertion, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.

Tertullian had great difficulty reconciling such views with the proper role of women in Christian life. Indeed, his concern with the place of females in the church, and in a man's life, bordered on an obsession.[9]

Tertullian's fear of and loathing for women was atypical for his time. By the late eleventh century, however, such negativity had become common.[10] The Roman heritage of grudging respect for woman as mother and wife had been partially supplanted by the notion that all the evil in the world had started with Eve.

Because the system of chivalry was to secular life what monasticism was to the religious, it represented the only other social alternative for upper-class women during the Middle Ages. Here females fared somewhat better as far as male attitudes were concerned. The knight's duties were to his God, his lord, and his lady. In fact, the tradition of courtly love, in which the knight served an unattainable, highborn mistress, mirrored the growing religious adoration of the Virgin.[11] In this context, women of the nobility enjoyed an unprecedented degree of both courtesy and deference. But the noble female's role was still essentially passive and decorative, while women of lesser social status could wait a very long time indeed for their champion. As a consequence, chivalry offered women no significant opportunities—educational or otherwise.

The Renaissance and Reformation

Throughout the waning centuries of the Middle Ages there was more and more tolerance in schooling for secular knowledge—particularly logic. By the advent of the Renaissance, it was clear that intellectual life was to be less restricted, less formal, and much more abundant. Schooling took on new vitality, and great mendicant schoolmen like Duns Scotus, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus enjoyed both notoriety and success.

Women, however, remained largely outside the scope of these changes. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467–1536), the most famous of all the leaders of the new learning, evidenced the still-prevailing attitude perpetuating this exclusion when he noted in *Colloquia*, "I do not know the reason, but just as a saddle is not suitable for an ox, so learning is unsuitable for a woman."

Ultimately, the Renaissance did little to alter educational opportunities for women. That remained for the Protestant Reformation to accomplish.

Luther the Reluctant Revolutionary

Martin Luther (1463–1546) was no champion of women's rights. Many of his attitudes simply echoed earlier prejudices. For example, in *Table Talk* he maintained that women "are chiefly created to bear children and be the pleasure, joy, and solace of their husbands." Citing anatomy, he even argued that women had broad hips "to the end that they should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children."

Despite his acceptance of these popular opinions, however, Luther articulated the revolutionary idea that the salvation of every human soul depended upon informed reading of the Holy Scriptures. That required the universal education of both sexes, and Luther's advocacy of such a radical measure was ultimately communicated to the whole of the Reformation.

Because religion permeated the Protestant schools that evolved from Luther's teaching, it is widely believed that his reforms were strictly sacerdotal in intent and that he would not have advocated literacy for women had it not been for the need to help them save their souls. The evidence, however, does not support such a view. Luther himself observed,

> Were there neither soul, heaven, nor hell, it would still be necessary to have schools here below. The world has need of educated men *and women* [emphasis mine], to the end that they may govern the country properly, and that the women may properly bring up their children, care for their domestics, and direct the affairs of their households.[12]

Luther's remarks reflected the new social order that trade, commerce, and urbanization were bringing to European life. He still relegated women to the kitchen and the nursery, but his remarkable call for universal literacy, accomplished by state compulsion if necessary, was direct and unapologetic.

The educational genie was finally out of the bottle so far as women, and the common man, were concerned. And although change would be halting and fitful, there would be no putting that genie back.

The Modern Period

The early modern period saw little apparent change in the general status of women or in male attitudes toward them. This surface

calm, however, concealed a quiet but profound social revolution set in motion by fundamental socio-economic changes. This transformation would ultimately affect the opportunities of not only women but the great mass of humanity as well.

The chief practical result of the Reformation, so far as schooling is concerned, was the establishment of state-sponsored schools motivated by the belief that it was the duty of the family, church, and state to educate every child, male and female. Admittedly, boys were the first to enter such schools, but girls ultimately followed. For example, the Elector of Saxony established compulsory elementary schools for boys in 1580. Fully 144 years later, girls were permitted to attend.[13]

By the mid-eighteenth century the basic education of females was becoming well established in more-progressive countries. For example, Frederick II of Prussia (1712–1786), often called "the Great," implemented school reforms that included compulsory education for boys and girls age six to fourteen.[14] Similarly, Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–1780), a formidable female in her own right, inaugurated a system of popular public schools "to make both sexes good Christians, and industrious, intelligent, and obedient subjects in the different orders of society."[15] Similar developments were also found in America.

Despite these developments, male attitudes remained an unusually sturdy obstruction to women's education. Even profound thinkers remained unaffected. For instance, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Germany's greatest philosopher and one of the most-admired thinkers of all time, was a lover of freedom and the dignity of the individual. Nevertheless, his attitudes toward women differed little from those of classical antiquity. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* Kant revealed his understanding of woman as an incomplete person when he declared, "[M]an should become more perfect as a man, and the woman as a wife."

He also wrote:

> [Women] need to know nothing more of the cosmos than is necessary to make the appearance of the heavens on a beautiful evening a stimulating sight to them.

He also commented,

> Even if a woman excels in arduous learning and painstaking thinking, they will exterminate the merits of her sex.

Silver Dishes, Golden Apples

Even the poet Goethe (1749–1832), a man of nearly universal genius and exquisite sensitivity, was unable to transcend the limited view of women. Eckerman, in *Conversations with Goethe*, reveals this when he quotes the great man as saying,

> We love things other than the intellect in a young woman. We love what is beautiful, confiding, teasing, youthful in her; her character, her faults, her whims, and God knows what other undefinable things, but we do not love her intellect. . . .

This view had its origin in the fact that Goethe, and the vast majority of other men of this age, regarded women as essentially passive. They were, as Goethe put it to Eckerman, "silver dishes into which we put our golden apples."

Goethe's curious metaphor reflected a fundamental male attitude toward women that was most succinctly expressed by the dialectical philosopher Johan Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) in *The Science of Rights*. Fichte observed,

> [A woman's] dignity requires that she should give herself entirely as she is [to her husband] and . . . utterly lose herself in him. The least consequence is that she should renounce to him all her property and her rights. Henceforth, she has life and activity only under his eyes and in his business. She has ceased to live the life of an individual; her life has become a part of the life of her lover.

In the same work, Fichte asserted, "Woman . . . is especially practical, and not at all speculative in her womanly nature. She can not and shall not go beyond the limits of her feeling." The "shall not" phrase in that quote is particularly instructive, for by then some women were beginning to demand a life of their own and even daring to create ideas as well as children. The development provoked a reaction from many men that has lasted to the present. As women asserted themselves and sought broader horizons, it was education beyond their place or capacity that many men perceived to be the problem. In their view, more poison was being fed to the frightful asp.

A New Wind Blows

But there was a new wind blowing. To be sure, Fichte's views were repeated in a thousand variations by some of the most famous men of modern history. Schopenhauer, Napoleon, Hegel, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Wagner, Proudhon, Spengler, Tolstoy,

D. H. Lawrence, Freud, Jung, Kierkegaard, Hemingway, Marx, and Heine, to name a few influential men, publicly argued or privately expressed the view that women had limited capacity, suffered from incompleteness and general defects, or were either uneducable or at least incapable of genius.

Every now and then, however, a new masculine point of view was beginning to assert itself. For example, the great poet, novelist, and scholar Friedrich von Schlegel (1771–1829) sympathetically observed in his *Athenaeum Fragments*, "Women are treated as unjustly in poetry as in life. If they are feminine, they are not ideal, and if ideal, not feminine."

By the mid-nineteenth century these once-scarce masculine sentiments were becoming more widespread. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), American clergyman, essayist, and philosopher, mirrored the transformation in his own life. As a young man he confided in his *Journal*,

> Women should not be expected to write or fight or build or compose scores; she does all by inspiring men to do all. . . . She is the requiring genius.

But years later Emerson came to appreciate a very different reality. In fact, he was so moved by what he regarded as the unfairness of man's limitations on women that he angrily declared in that same *Journal*, "If women feel wronged, they are wronged."

A more-measured denunciation of traditional male attitudes toward women appeared in the work of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Mill, an English philosopher of great accomplishment, anticipated much of what was to come with his measured denunciations of male excesses. In his famous work *The Subjection of Women* he argued,

> The social subordination of women . . . stands out an isolated fact in modern social institutions; a solitary breach of what has become fundamental law; a relic of an old world of thought and practice exploded everywhere else.

Mill said that male attitudes toward the education of women were dishonest. He believed they were simply disingenuous apologies for keeping women in virtual slavery. In fact, in *The Subjection of Women* he stated:

> All men . . . desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected to them, not a forced slave, but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favorite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. The masters of all other slaves rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear; either

> fear of themselves or religious fears. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to effect their purposes.

By the late nineteenth century the flood of social change was beginning to run in a direction congenial to women's liberation, and this produced educational reforms. Already male radicals, such as the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), had abandoned measured criticism such as Mill's for vitriolic denunciations of those who opposed a broader understanding of woman's role. As Gauguin put it in *The Writing of a Savage*,

> Woman, who *is* after all our mother, our daughter, our sister, has the right to earn her living. Has the right to love whomever she chooses. Has the right to dispose of her body, of her beauty. Has the right to give birth to a child and to bring him up without having to go through a priest or notary public. Has the right to be respected just as much as the woman who sells herself in wedlock (as commanded by the church) and consequently has the right to spit in the face of anyone who oppresses her.

The Twentieth Century

By the onset of the twentieth century women were, in the more industrialized parts of the Western world at least, universally enrolled in basic education and even making inroads into those last bastions of male elitism—higher education. The first coeds had come upon the scene in the 1840s with dire predictions of disaster. But despite feelings that the higher education of ladies was a creature of "wild fanaticism," in 1841 Oberlin College graduated Mary Kellogg. She was the first American woman to earn a bachelor's degree by completing requirements identical to those of men.[16] Since then, millions of women have followed Kellogg and the Republic has survived.

By the 1920s not only reform-minded males supported woman's cause: even curmudgeonly critics such as H. L. Mencken had joined them. Although Mencken said "Woman is at once the serpent, the apple and the bellyache," he was equally certain that the men who would limit them were insufferable boobs. As Mencken put it in *Defense of Women,*

> That it should be necessary, at this late stage in the senility of the human race[,] to argue that women have a fine and fluent intelligence is surely eloquent proof of the defective

> observation, incurable prejudice, and general imbecility of their lords and masters.

The strident cries of male reformers were one thing, but the derisive sneers of men like Mencken were quite another. They reflected a growing masculine consensus that women were intellectually capable and quite able to master even the highest of higher education.

Reluctantly, the more-virulent reactionaries began to retreat. Meanwhile, spurred by the explosive growth of the public schools and the need for inexpensive and relatively docile teachers, the trickle of women into higher education turned into a flood. As it had for their ancient Roman forebears, opportunity came by extending the role of mother, but it came nonetheless.

Of course, some men would cling to the bitter end to arguments based on gender. But the dire predictions of males like Professor Charles Davis of the U.S. Military Academy that the higher education of women would "introduce a vast social evil . . . a monster of social deformity" had been proved dead wrong.[17]

Women have yet to achieve complete educational parity with men. In social backwaters such as Afghanistan they still are virtual slaves. However, change is dawning even for them. In village after village more and more fathers want their daughters schooled. So although the Taliban burn girls' schools and throw acid in the faces of those who dare attend, the dawn is still breaking.

The Last Word

The views of men have dominated this commentary just as male attitudes have dominated history. But the last word on this matter must come from a woman. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the battle-hardened campaigner for women's suffrage, observed,

> Man has quite enough in this life to find out his one individual calling, without being forced to decide where every woman belongs.

If the history of the education of women tells us anything, it tells us that Stanton was dead right.

Notes

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3. William Kane, *History of Education* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1954), 38–50.

4. Zinserling, *Women*, 56.
5. Sarah Pomeroy, "Women in Roman Egypt," in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity,* ed. Helene Foley (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1981), 309–318.
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7. Susan M. Stuard, "Introduction," in *Women and Medieval Society*, ed. Susan M. Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 8.
8. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 186–189.
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11. Sibylle Harksen, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Abner Schram, 1975), 49–51.
12. Quoted in Monroe, *A Textbook*, 411–412.
13. lbid., 434–443.
14. Henry Barnard, ed., "Frederick II and School Reforms in Prussia," in *German Teachers and Educators* (Hartford, Conn.: Brown and Gross, 1878) 593.
15. Henry Barnard, ed., "Maria Theresa and School Reforms in Austria," in *German Teachers*, 616.
16. Robert Fletcher, "The First Coeds," *American Scholar* 7 (1938): 78–93.
17. Quoted in Julius Bixler, "Shall We Let the Ladies Join Us?" *American Scholar* 4 (1935): 474–483.

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