

## The Education of Women in 1852: as discussed in an essay from a women's magazine

This is a short essay titled "Female Education" from the very first number of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, published in May of 1852. If this handout is printed as an 8.5" x 11" letter size paper, the pages will be exactly the size they were for original readers in 1852.

### ESSAY—FEMALE EDUCATION.

In advocating the extension of female education to all classes of society, we must not be understood as recommending that kind of education which prevails almost universally among the higher circles. Showy accomplishments may win a husband, but can do little towards making him a happy one; therefore the whole system of *genteel* education may be regarded as a system of deceit, and its natural consequence must be to bring accomplishments of every kind into discredit. There would obviously be as many young women married—and in all probability more—if these deceptions were never practised; and it must be the aim of a sound system of education to cultivate those sterling qualities which will make a good wife, instead of imparting that superficial polish which only gives the *appearance* of one. The ambition that induces the young women of the present day to show off all their fine qualities, and to put themselves prominently forth, defeats in a great measure its intended object. Young men of sense are most attracted by retiring modesty; and perfections are wonderfully magnified to every eye by its own discovery of them.

Female education—as, indeed, education of every kind—must, of course, begin with spelling—reading, writing and arithmetic. To these should be added an outline of geographical and historical knowledge, so that some general conception may be retained of the relative position of different countries, and the mutual relations of the great events which have agitated the world. Among all these acquisitions, however, we give the first place to good spelling; for we do not know of anything more fatal to sentimental appreciation, or more calculated to

make a woman ridiculous, than glaring defects in orthography. Music and drawing are agreeable additions, if there be time and inclination for them; but, strictly speaking, they are no more parts of education than skipping or playing at ball; and it is as absurd to give up much time to such accomplishments as to spend time over the girlish amusements we have indicated. Modern languages, again, are in many cases eligible acquisitions; but we do not conceive they should generally form a part of female education, but should be a mere recreation, which may be resorted to, and will prove advantageous when circumstances warrant and opportunities occur, if there be the leisure and inclination. In all cases, we think, languages should be learned by rote—by discoursing with another person in the language to be acquired, if that be possible; and if not, by the aid of an interlinear translation.

It is to the subject of domestic duties, however, that the utilitarian part of female education should be chiefly directed; and young women should be instructed in all those things it is necessary for them to know when they come to have houses to direct or to manage. Of cookery, for example, they should have a competent knowledge; not such as is derived from a collection of empirical recipes, but such as flows from the apprehension of a few great principles which are applicable under all circumstances, with a suitable variation. Cookery is more a matter of common-sense than most people imagine; and a slight tincture of chemical knowledge is very useful to those who practise it, so as to enable them to simplify by generalisation, and to deviate successfully from ordinary modes, as new circumstances arise to render such a course expedient. The method of se-

If this is printed 2-sided, the side will line up and readers can cut out the page to read it like a magazine page.

lecting the best and most economical materials to be employed in cookery is another useful branch of knowledge connected with the same subject. In washing and cleansing, again, in the care and preparation of furniture and dress, in the economisation of heat, and in the accomplishment of effectual ventilation, the female should by her education be sufficiently informed and made acquainted with the most approved modes; and a love of order and cleanliness and neatness should be so grafted upon her nature by habit, that her home, however high or however humble, shall never be deficient in these qualities. Finally, she should be instructed in the mode by which, in the simplest and most ordinary cases, health may be preserved or restored, and more particularly how the most prevalent ailments of children may be dissipated or averted. These are things of which she must acquire a knowledge before she can duly perform the duties of a wife and mother; and it is surely better to make them a part of education than to leave them to the chance of being acquired among the distractions of maturer existence, and only after bitter experience and repeated failure have shown that they cannot be done without.

There is one part of female cultivation, however, that we have not yet mentioned, though of infinitely greater consequence than all the rest—the cultivation of the heart. It can signify but little what a woman's other perfections may be, if she be destitute of tenderness and sensibility, or if her heart be not pure as the spotless snow "that hangs on Diana's temple." A wife is nothing to her husband whose heart is not bound to his by the sympathies of a kindred spirit—which, like that invisible force that turns the needle to the pole, and

binds creation together, must direct to his happiness every impulse of her being, thereby knitting soul to soul by the affinities of undying love. Where love reigns supreme the cares and distresses of life fade into insignificance, and all creation reflects the roseate tints of the soul's hope and joy; but if love be dissipated or broken, the sun of existence is darkened, and creation relapses into chaos; the gay panorama of life, with its shifting lights and musical echoes, changing to the wailing and desolation of a funeral scene.

**LARGE FAMILIES.**—To the instances of unusually large numbers of children by one mother, may be added that of a Lady Elphinstone, who is said, by tradition, to have had no less than 36 children, of whom 27 were living at one time. There is a story told of this lady and her husband, Lord Elphinstone, which seems to corroborate the tradition; it is, that they once asked a new and somewhat bashful acquaintance to visit them, telling him that he should meet no one but their family circle. Their guest arrived shortly before dinner, and, being shown through the dining-hall on his way to the drawing-room, was much disconcerted at seeing a long table laid for about 20 people. On remonstrating with his host and hostess for having taken him in, as he thought, he was quietly informed that he had been told no more than the truth, for that their family party, when all assembled, only fell short of *thirty by one*. I believe that John, 8th Lord Elphinstone, and his lady, a daughter of the Earl of Lauderdale, who lived in the latter part of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, are the pair to whom this story refers; and though the Scotch peerages make no mention of any such phenomenon in the Elphinstone family, yet I am strongly inclined, from the goodness of the authority from which I derive the tradition, to believe it to be true.—*Notes and Queries*.

Curran being angry in a debate one day, put his hand on his heart, saying, "I am the trusty guardian of my own honour." "Then," replied Sir Boyle Roach, "I congratulate my honourable friend on the snug sinecure which he has appointed himself."

1852 “Female Education” Class Reading Annotation Exercise

Name:

In the column at right is the text of an 1852 essay titled “Female Education” from the very first issue of a new women’s magazine being published in London, The *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*. As you are reading, mark up the text. In the column at right, jot down questions you have, things you noticed, or things that surprised you.

<p>ESSAY – FEMALE EDUCATION.</p> <p>In advocating the extension of female education to all classes of society, we must not be understood as recommending that kind of education which prevails almost universally among the higher circles. Showy accomplishments may win a husband, but can do little towards making him a happy one; therefore the whole system of <i>genteel</i> education may be regarded as a system of deceit, and its natural consequence must be to bring accomplishments of every kind into discredit. There would obviously be as many young women married – and in all probability more – if these deceptions were never practised; and it must be the aim of a sound system of education to cultivate those sterling qualities which will make a good wife, instead of imparting that superficial polish which only give the <i>appearance</i> of one. The ambition that induces the young women of the present day to show off all their fine qualities, and to put themselves prominently forth, defeats in a great measure its intended object. Young men of sense are most attracted by retiring modesty; and perfections are wonderfully magnified to every eye by its own discovery of them.</p>	<p>Paragraph 1 notes:</p>
<p>Female education – as indeed, education of every kind – must, of course, begin with spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic. To these should be added an outline of geographical and historical knowledge, so that some general conception may be retained of the relative position of different countries, and the mutual relations of the great events which have agitated the world. Among all these acquisitions, however, we give the first place to good spelling; for we do not know of anything more fatal to sentimental appreciation, or more calculated to make a woman ridiculous, than glaring defects in orthography. Music and drawing are agreeable additions, if there be time and inclination for them; but strictly speaking, they are no</p>	<p>Paragraph 2 notes:</p>

more parts of education than skipping or playing at ball; and it is as absurd to give up much time to such accomplishments as to spend time over the girlish amusements we have indicated. Modern languages, again, are in many cases eligible acquisitions; but we do not conceive they should generally form a part of female education, but should be a mere recreation, which may be resorted to, and will prove advantageous when circumstances warrant and opportunities occur, if there be the leisure and inclination. In all cases, we think, languages should be learned by rote – by discoursing with another person in the language to be acquired, if that be possible; and if not, by the aid of an interlinear translation.

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Paragraph 3 notes:

<p>before she can duly perform the duties of a wife and mother; and it is surely better to make them a part of education than to leave them to the chance of being acquired among the distractions of mature existence, and only after bitter experience and repeated failure have shown that they cannot be done without.</p>	
<p>There is one part of female cultivation, however, that we have not yet mentioned, though of infinitely greater consequence than all the rest – the cultivation of the heart. It can signify but little what a woman’s other perfections may be, if she be destitute of tenderness and sensibility, or if her heart be not pure as the spotless snow “that hangs on Diana’s temple.”<sup>1</sup> A wife is nothing to her husband whose heart is not bound to his by the sympathies of a kindred spirit – which, like that invisible force that turns the needle to the pole, and binds creation together, must direct to his happiness every impulse of her being, thereby knitting soul to soul by the affinities of undying love. Where love reigns supreme the cares and distresses of life fade into insignificance, and all creation reflects the roseate tints of the soul’s hope and joy; but if love be dissipated or broken, the sun of existence is darkened, and creation relapses into chaos; the gay panorama of life, with its shifting lights and musical echoes, changing to the wailing and desolation of a funeral scene.</p>	<p>Paragraph 4 notes:</p>

Overall notes, questions, or thoughts:

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<sup>1</sup> This is a quotation from Shakespeare’s tragedy *Coriolanus*, Act 5, Scene 3, lines 75-77 where Coriolanus describes Valeria as being “chaste as the icicle / That’s curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian’s temple!”

## Questions for discussion and analysis:

What was it like reading this essay on its original page, compared with the plain text transcription? Printed material was still quite expensive in 1852, both to produce and to distribute. Do you see evidence of that here?

Since this is the first issue of the magazine, in many ways this essay is a subtle advertisement for the magazine's brand -- a particular type of female identity this magazine will support and encourage. Consider the following.

What concerns does the writer of this piece have? What can you tell or infer about the writer?

At the start of the essay, what type of female education does this writer clearly not support?

What do you think of the author's assessment about what "young men of sense" are attracted to?

What is assumed about women's desires and ambitions in the essay? Be specific and come up with several examples.

The middle of the essay has a rather extensive list of things a well-educated woman should know about, and skills she should have. What do you notice about this list? What does it emphasize? Can you think of things that are left out?

What about the "domestic duties" section? What do you notice about the ideal woman being described?

In the last paragraph, there is a large shift and a description of priorities. What surprises you here? What is the tone like? Why end the essay this way?

What else stood out to you or surprised you here?

Does it surprise you or change anything in your reading to know this essay was written by the magazine's male editor, a 22-year-old unmarried publisher named Samuel Beeton?

## For further reading on the role of women at the time and separate spheres ideology:

Ruskin, John. "On Queen's Gardens." from *Sesames and Lilies*, Smith, Elder & Co., 1865. Internet Archive link: <https://archive.org/details/sesameliliestwo100ruskrich/page/118/mode/2up>

Ellis, Sarah Stickney. *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. Fisher, Son, & Company, 1839. Internet Archive link: <https://archive.org/details/womenofenglandth00ellirich/page/6/mode/2up>

Page through an entire issue of the magazine. What do you notice that supports and/or undermines the goals of this early essay?

## For further reading on women's magazines and print culture at the time:

Beetham, Margaret. *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914*. Routledge, 1996.

Ytre-Arne, Brita. "I Want to Hold It in My Hands': Readers' Experiences of the Phenomenological Differences between Women's Magazines Online and in Print." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 33, no. 3, Apr. 2011, p. 467.