

Book Review

Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early Republic

Lucia McMahon

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In the New Testament, the book of Timothy instructs all readers to “[l]et the woman learn in silence with all subjection” (Chapter 2, verse 11). The early national period in the United States proved to be an era that extended political and education opportunities to populations that was previously denied them. However, if, as Gordon Wood argues (1991), the revolutionary generation and the early national period that followed were seminal eras in American history for the expansion of democratic ideals, why were a majority of the educational opportunities reserved primarily for men? While historians have devoted significant energy to understanding the early national period in American history, far fewer studies have examined the impact this period had on women. Well versed in the field of women’s education in the early national period, Lucia McMahon (2009a, 2009b) describes the effects of women’s education on notions of gender equality. However, she breaks new ground with *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early Republic*. In this carefully researched book, McMahon juxtaposes the awkward position of many educated women and asks, How did women who received an equal education to men balance their knowledge and experiences with the social position they were relegated to?

McMahon begins her examination of women’s educational opportunities in some of the nation’s first female academies. She contends that education became an important tool in the creation of personal identity as women were “[r]eluctant to be cast as the coquette or the pedant,” rather “women approached education with optimism, determined to fashion positive identities as learned women” (p. 19). For women, education rested within the acceptance that although they attained knowledge of the arts, science, history, and philosophy, their social standing still rested on the assumption that they would use that knowledge to raise future generations of Americans steeped in the tradition of republicanism.

Building on the notion of Republican Motherhood (Kerber, 1980), McMahon expands our understanding of the influence education had on women of the period. Kerber contends that the revolutionary generation produced an expansion of democratic ideals but the majority of women retained their pre-Revolution social statuses. To Kerber, Republican Motherhood referred to the notion that women were the avenue to transfer republican values to their children, thus sustaining future generations in the ideas of civic duty, thrift, and social responsibility. Instead of attaining suffrage, greater access to education, and entrance into labor markets, women resumed their duties as caretakers and mothers after the completion of their education. Rather

than the maintenance of intellectual submissiveness, educated women of the early national period used education for small but important gains in their journey toward equality with men. McMahon draws on Kerber's interpretation of Republican Motherhood to frame her study. She builds on it to show that it was only one way in which the revolutionary ideals were maintained. McMahon also suggests that "motherhood was one of the many possible roles for early national women" (p. 140).

Female relationships and friendships occupy an important place in this study. In her second chapter, McMahon examines letters between women of the period and their diaries and challenges the notion that they maintained their bonds of friendship for emotional support and stability. Instead, she posits friendships forged new inroads to intellectual equality with men. McMahon writes that women exchanged "ideas, books, and favorite authors with one another as they created a world in which they could celebrate their intellectual interests" (p. 43). Instead of sharing recipes or different child-rearing techniques, women sought opportunities to expand their knowledge and validate their views. To McMahon, women did not simply acquiesce to the social norms and gendered expectations of submission. Rather, they forged new identities and "approached education with optimism, determined to fashion positive identities as learned women" (p. 19).

The treatment of marriage and courtship illustrates the influence education had for many women. McMahon's analysis of the letters and courtship of Benjamin and Linda Raymond reveals that educated women pursued engagement with greater equality than their pre-Revolutionary predecessors. Throughout their 6-year engagement, Benjamin and Linda exchanged letters indicating a mutual respect for one another as well as a greater equality in courtship practices. She suggests Benjamin and Linda were "determined to craft a union of reason and love" as they defined the "possibilities and boundaries of mere equality" (p. 91). To McMahon, a woman's education offered the availability of greater equality in love and companionship. Built by a common understanding of literature and shared bases of knowledge, educated women pursued romance with greater authority. Rather than mere disseminators of republican ideals, McMahon suggests educated women lived the values that they were taught. Furthermore, McMahon draws attention to the growth of companionate marriages. Women were taught to be submissive to their husbands. However, the ideal of companionate marriages encouraged both spouses to pursue their common interests.

Interestingly, McMahon cogently concludes that family relationships were a point of contention for women. Reuben and Jane Haines' marriage, was, in part, defined by Jane's connection to her parents. Unlike women of the time, Jane was not expected to abandon her family. Reuben encouraged Jane's desire to visit her family, and their personal exchanges and letters highlighted Reuben's acceptance of Jane as an equal in their marriage. McMahon writes that although companionate marriages encouraged the notion of equality in marriage, it was "mere equality" and that whenever "discord and disharmony became an inevitable part of life, the focus shifted to the sacrifices necessary to maintain harmony and accord despite moments of strife" (p. 138). Thus, when the freedoms afforded by education were challenged by the realities of 19th century marriages, a woman was expected to recognize the authority of her husband and be willing to acquiesce to his wishes.

McMahon's final chapter reveals a thorough understanding of the historiography of Republican Motherhood. Was education and intellectual equality simply something that ended with marriage? Or, were women free to pursue their intellectual interests while maintaining a family? As McMahon correctly asserts, motherhood presented a challenge for women seeking to

maintain their intellectual equality to men. As such, some women sought to maintain the social ideals of maternity while other women challenged the status quo.

Framed within the lives of two sisters, Jane Bayard Kirkpatrick and Margaret Bayard Smith, McMahon illustrates the competing visions of the Republican ideal. Kirkpatrick embodied the sullen disposition of many educated women who remained within the socially prescribed boundaries of womanhood. Rather than pursuing a literary career, like her sister, Kirkpatrick focused on raising her children. Through personal letters and diaries, McMahon compares Kirkpatrick to her more famous sister who personified a different form of gender equality. Because their correspondence was consistent and archived, the collection of letters offers a cohesive timeline of their dialogues. As an author, Smith rejected the norms for women of the early national period and pursued her intellectual and social interests while Kirkpatrick embraced motherhood. This comparison underscores the competing notions of equality and the expectations for women of the period.

McMahon's effort to reveal the influence education had for women of the early national period is commendable. The rich use of primary sources allows the reader to hear the individual women. The sources do not just give a broad overview of the period. Because McMahon received her doctorate from a university in the northeast, it is likely that she used her location as the catalyst to choose the individuals who informed her study. The collections she read, while limited in scope, offer keen insights into the lives and thoughts of individuals of the period.

Despite the value this book adds to the growing interest in women's education in the early national period, the regional focus of this book limits our understanding of the role of women's education at this time. For instance, Were there any similarities between the experiences of women in the northeast and that of the agrarian South? This reviewer would have liked to see a broader incorporation of the political debates and how educated women viewed their role in the national discourses of the period. Sadly, the omission of women like Abigail Adams could have shed light on how some women became national figures in the debate over female education. Adams, wife of John Adams, drew on her passion for female education to petition her husband to "not forget the ladies" (Rury, 2005, p. 54). As such, she encouraged her husband to include women in the emerging social order of the period. It would provide greater breadth to the narrative as well as depth in debate on women's education in the early national period if women from other regions of America were considered.

Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early Republic offers a fresh examination into the influence education had on identity formation of the early national period. As historians of the era and historians of education will find, McMahon contributes to our understanding about the quest for equality in education in a country that has had a mixed history in providing it. Should future historians seek to expand on the subject, they will find that McMahon has provided a significant foundation for their efforts. McMahon demonstrates that the gains in education, despite New Testament scripture urging that women must learn in silence with all subjection, resulted in greater equality for women. However, the inroads toward true equality would merely have to wait for nearly a century.

References

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