Chapter One

Gender and Higher Education

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>
> —Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*

In the nineteenth century, American women challenged their assigned role in the social order as never before. Lecturing for antislavery societies, temperance or women's rights; fighting for suffrage and entry to college; entering the professions—all expressed a new activism in a time of rapid socioeconomic and cultural change. The nineteenth-century experience for women provided both opportunities and restrictions, betraying society's ambivalence about women's nature and role. As Gerda Lerner has pointed out, society was confused about "the woman question"; deep tensions and conflicting views were manifestations of a shifting value system.[1] Embedded as education is in the culture it serves, nowhere was this ambivalence more clearly stated than in the erratic development of women's higher education and the century-long debate over its appropriateness.

This complex debate must be understood before the unusual nature of Alfred University's environment can be grasped. Fueled by deep-seated preconceptions of assigned gender roles expressed formulaically in the ideology of separate spheres, this debate demonstrates "the powerful ways that notions of appropriate sex roles and of the organization of the gender system shaped educational discourse." Historians' exploration of the concept of separate spheres, often viewed as a reaction to sudden

urban growth in the previously agrarian nation, has shaped our understanding of every aspect of women's lives in the nineteenth century. Welter's influential article, "The Cult of True Womanhood," drew the ideal—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—from women's magazines, sermons, novels, and diaries of the period. Studying industrialization, Gerda Lerner identified that cult as a predominantly middle-class ideology; "mill girls" were ignored. (As others have pointed out, the ideology held less sway in rural areas as well.) Examining diaries and letters, Cott argued that women's sphere, while restrictive, opened a path to "social power based on their special female qualities."[2]

Separate spheres ideology hardened the characteristics and roles ascribed to men and women into the view that the sexes possessed opposed, if complementary, natures. Men were assumed to be rational, worldly, aggressive, sexual, voters, property owners; they lived in the public world. Women were emotional, spiritual, submissive, asexual, non-voters, non-property owners; they inhabited a private world. These differences were considered divinely ordained and immutable. Though historians discard separate spheres as a single lens, it remains an important concept.

The barriers were real. The first question was not "Should women be taught?"; it was "Could women be taught?" Female intellectual inferiority had long been assumed. Scattered voices in past centuries had protested women's subordination, but the multiple protests heard at the end of the eighteenth century were unprecedented. The advantages, dangers, and utility of education for women were widely discussed. Would education destroy feminine characteristics or enhance them? If women restricted themselves to the home, what type of education was appropriate for those circumscribed duties? If women were the primary influence on youth, what level of education was sufficient for that essential task?

The competitive nature of school life with its long tradition of rhetorical training, debates, public demonstrations, and awards, thought bracing for boys, was considered destructive to desired feminine traits, such as subservience and compliance. "Would the desire of distinction, of surpassing her friends, be the most sure [way] to suggest to a wife the numberless little kindnesses and attentions so essential to the happiness of a husband?" asked one educator. And even granted an intellect, what use was a woman to make of it? For most Americans, access to education did not suggest conferring social, political, or economic equality on women. Florence Nightingale became so frustrated with narrow home life before beginning her nursing crusade that she contemplated suicide. She wrote in her private journal, "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?"[3]

These constraints became increasingly poignant as popular enthusiasm for education grew dramatically. Primary schools spread after the Revolution; by 1840, Cott reports, "almost all women in New England could

read and write, women's literacy having approximately doubled since 1780." In fact, "New England women in the years of the early republic were the most literate women in western society." As industrialization and urban growth transformed society, all concurred: human development, government, commerce, even salvation depended on education.[4]

Soon a new argument was heard: not only could women be taught, they actually made ideal teachers. Still, most early advocates of women's education—Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, Catharine Beecher, and Horace Mann—had conservative views of women's role, justifying the need for education within the domestic sphere. Willard's school "would differ as much from a school for men as women's character and duties differed from men's." Believing that "nature designed our sex for the care of children," she wanted to "place the business of teaching children, in hands now nearly useless to society; and take it from those, whose services the state wants in many other ways." Beecher convinced many that women were best at nurturing the young; she traveled the West, placing female teachers in hundreds of schools. Teacher preparation gave real impetus to women's education; coeducational and single-sex academies sprang up by the hundreds, many specializing in teacher training.[5]

The new nation's educational aspirations, opportunities, and enrollments grew rapidly. Common schools, uniformly coeducational, appeared in every new settlement. Academies and seminaries, offering secondary education, spread across the growing country; by 1850, there were more than 6,000. Republican values, community needs, denominational pride, and westward expansion produced a surge of college building after 1800. While only twenty-five colleges were chartered in the 160 years after Harvard's 1636 founding, by 1870, 582 colleges existed; by 1900, nearly 1,000.

Writing from the later perspective of the research university, influential historians denigrated this impressive surge of antebellum college building. Donald Tewksbury termed this the "denominational era," when sect after sect "will [each] have its college, generally one at least in each State." Richard Hofstadter and Frederick Rudolph criticized church affiliation as incompatible with intellectual freedom, apparently viewing these institutions as irrelevant sectarian outposts, "narrow, rigid, anti-intellectual backwaters." In his classic study, Laurence Veysey saw the college as a "somewhat quaint ministerial survival," its leaders opposed to change.[6]

Recent historians have corrected this view, finding instead vibrant and diverse institutions that were a popular expression of faith in education, responding to local needs of the new middle class. Even Tewksbury observed, "America had already become the land of neighborhood colleges." The distinctive character of American higher education was established by 1850 when Henry P. Tappan (later, University of Michigan president) said, "we have multiplied colleges so as to place them at every man's door."[7]

Tappan failed to note that colleges had also been placed at every woman's door. Unprecedented growth in female schooling occurred as

women benefited from the general support for basic education, then entered the burgeoning academies. Thousands of unrecorded coeducational academies brought advanced education to young women. In New York, of two hundred incorporated academies in mid-century, 85 percent were coeducational. Of 20,000 students, half were women.[8]

Historians had long ignored academies and seminaries (barring a few leading female seminaries) for a variety of reasons: some vanished leaving no trace; others were absorbed into public school districts; still others developed into colleges and their historians rush over the somewhat embarrassing academy prelude to reach college history. Academies have been dismissed as mercifully temporary, because their standards varied greatly; as elitist, though most were not; as unfortunate preludes, erratic and undersupervised, to the modern, bureaucratized high school; or as unimportant forerunners to colleges (in fact their lack of regulation, unorthodox approaches, and responsiveness to local conditions were important factors for women's entry into higher education). Tewksbury wrote in 1932, "The general relation of the academy movement in this country to the college movement remains to be adequately studied." Theodore Sizer echoed in 1964: "a detailed study of the academies has yet to be written." Recent work is filling this gap and bringing fresh insights. Beadie and Tolley's collection of essays, Nash's analysis of academy development, and Tolley's work on girls' science education represent the first major studies in the last forty years.[9]

Academies were quasi-public institutions, funded through a combination of tuition, state payments, and local payments that provided nearly all the secondary education in antebellum America. Diverse, fluid, mostly unregulated, frequently ephemeral, they were "founded and supported, often at great sacrifice," by local families and civic leaders in almost every town.[10] Their curricula and student body overlapped with common schools at one end of the spectrum and colleges at the other. Academies took erratically prepared students of a wide age range and educated them as far as they could. Strong academies sent their graduates into the sophomore or even junior year of college. Academies were, in spirit and achievement, America's first engine for mass secondary education.

Fundamentally rural, admirably adapted to thinly scattered populations (because room and board were available), the academy was slowly replaced by the new publicly funded high school as Americans became urban dwellers in the second half of the century (students could then walk to school). However, many colleges maintained their academies or preparatory departments until the late nineteenth century, either as regional service or because student preparation was deficient. In 1850, only 69 of Oberlin's 500 students were in its college courses; in 1860, 199 of 1,311 were. In Antioch's first year, more than 200 students were enrolled in its preparatory department; only six (four men, two women) were ready for the college course, and a discouraged Mary Mann wrote a Massachu-

setts friend, "Our college is in fact a school." Of 300 women who enrolled at Wellesley when it opened in 1875, only 30 passed the entrance examination; a preparatory class was immediately established. As late as 1889, Bucknell's preparatory students outnumbered its college-level students three to one. Swarthmore, founded 1869, did not eliminate its preparatory program until 1894.[11]

Academies played a critical role by opening advanced education to women and establishing their ability to study equally with men. Oberlin's founders did not see coeducation as an innovation when they opened their academy in 1833 with 29 men, none yet ready for college, and 15 women. Nevertheless, it did not cross their minds that women would seek admittance to the Collegiate Department. But in 1837, four women did just that, presenting enough Greek and Latin to enter the college course. After initial confusion, hesitation, and debate, the faculty allowed them to enter.[12] Although several schools have since claimed the honor of first offering women college-level instruction, it is generally agreed that the passage of these four women from Oberlin's academy to its college-level courses marked women's first access to full collegiate education. Building on the academy movement, other coeducational colleges, including Alfred, opened in the antebellum period. By 1865, when Vassar (generally considered the first women's college) opened, more than twenty coeducational schools already provided collegiate instruction to women. Yet most histories focus on women's colleges rather than the earlier and more numerous coeducational schools.

While college education may appear to have been an inevitable step, it proved contentious. Women's separate sphere could be used to justify basic education; its utility for the important role of raising the next generation was relatively easy to accept. Academy-level education spread rapidly. But higher education was a very different matter. It traditionally led to public life and occupations closed to women. Giving women an identity outside the family created anxiety over their possible abandonment of traditional roles. As work left the home for urban shops, factories, and mills in the early nineteenth century, the home, which had been a production center, became instead a retreat. In this time of rapid change, the cult of True Womanhood prescribed religious, social, familial, and sexual stability—impossible demands on woman, "the hostage in the home." Morality, fertility, the family, societal power, Western civilization itself—some observers believed all were threatened by women's higher education.[13]

The normative curriculum when women entered higher education was "the classical course," a liberal arts curriculum based on scholastic and humanistic thinkers—"the education of a gentleman"—and the public purpose of its rhetorical tradition excluded women. In preparing the citizen and statesman for public life and public speaking, oration and debate were integral to advanced education. Since women were without the vote or public power of any sort, denied public forums, and directed to

the home, such education appeared ludicrously inappropriate to some, including Harvard's powerful President Charles W. Eliot.

At the end of the century, M. Carey Thomas, President of Bryn Mawr College (founded in 1884), still struggled to legitimize equal education for women. Possessed of a ferocious intellect herself, she was determined to prove women the intellectual equals of men. Eliot infuriated Thomas with his pronouncement—incredibly, made at Wellesley College—that women were unfit to study the liberal arts. In her 1899 opening address at Bryn Mawr, Thomas attacked this "dark spot of mediaevalism," protesting Eliot's attempt to shove women's higher education "out of its path":

> President Eliot said that the president and faculty of a women's college had no guide from the past, that the great tradition of learning existing from the time of the Egyptians to the present existed only for men and that this vast body of inherited tradition was of no service in women's education, that women's colleges simply imitated men when they used the same educational methods instead of inventing new ones of their own and that furthermore it would indeed be strange if women's intellects were not at least as unlike men's as their bodies.
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> . . . He might as well have told the president of Wellesley to invent a new Christian religion for Wellesley or new symphonies and operas, a new Beethoven and Wagner . . . new Chemistry, new philosophies, in short, a new intellectual heavens and earth.[14]

The argument frequently shifted ground: if it was conceded that women's brains might be equal to the task, their bodies were not. One physician thundered, "Women beware. You are on the brink of destruction. . . . Beware!! Science pronounces that the woman who studies is lost." Another asserted that a woman is "a moral, a sexual, a germiferous, gestative and parturient creature." These warnings culminated in the book that created the "most notorious controversy" of the century, *Sex in Education*, "the great uterine manifesto" published in 1873 by Harvard's Dr. Edward Clarke. This infamous book expressed the most profound fear: education would "unsex" women, rendering them sterile. Asserting that women were dominated by the uterus, which would be atrophied by use of the brain, Clarke declared that women's reproductive system could not tolerate extended study and that "identical education" of women was "a crime before God and humanity, that physiology protests against, and that experience weeps over."[15]

He argued that "schools and colleges . . . require girls to work their brains with full force and sustained power, at the time when their organization periodically requires a portion of their force for the performance of a periodical function, and a portion of their power for the building up of a peculiar, complicated, and important mechanism,—the engine within an engine." Energy required for hours of study was diverted from this uterine construction project. The resulting sterility in this "sexless class of termites" would destroy the family and Anglo-Saxon civilization: "It requires no

prophet to foretell that the wives who are to be mothers in our republic must be drawn from trans-atlantic homes." His science left no room for argument: both the woman who studies, and her civilization, is lost.[16]

Clarke's book, which quickly went through multiple editions, stirred immediate controversy and put women's educators on the defensive; they scrambled to prove their graduates were healthy, married, and fertile. M. Carey Thomas remembered, "We were haunted in those early days by the clanging chains of that gloomy little specter.[17] In the midst of these persistent and profound disagreements, the pioneering coeducational and women's colleges had to make decisions about the appropriate education for women.

Advocates struggled to eradicate persistent views of women's intellectual disability and occupational purposelessness. Yet educational institutions expressed the ambivalence towards women's intellect manifest in society as a whole. In 1889, when Alice Freeman Palmer (past president of Wellesley College) reviewed women's higher education, she found, "After fifty years of argument and twenty-five of varied and costly experiment, it might be easy to suppose that we were still in chaos, almost as far from knowing the best way to train a woman as we were at the beginning." Palmer described the advent of coeducation, "established in some colleges at their beginning, in others after debate, and by a radical change in policy," opening of women's colleges after the Civil War, and development of the coordinate college (for instance, the Harvard "Annex," dating from 1879 and which became Radcliffe). Each system represented a variant belief in women's role, and Palmer found this variety valuable, given society's continuing uncertainty about the proper education for women: "While the public mind is so uncertain, so liable to panic, and so doubtful whether, after all, it is not better for a girl to be a goose, the many methods of education assist one another mightily in their united warfare against ignorance, selfish privileges, and antiquated ideals."[18]

The diverse, unregularized nature of nineteenth-century higher education and the blurred line between academy and college contributed much to women's opportunities. Oberlin (opened in 1833), Alfred (1836), and Antioch (1853), each with large academies, were "western" schools, and it was in the West that coeducation was more readily accepted. In the East, where established men's colleges had prior possession of the educational territory, women were barred and coeducation resisted. Women's colleges and coordinate colleges were founded there after the Civil War to provide for women. As Palmer observed, "The older, more generously endowed, more conservative seats of learning, inheriting the complications of the dormitory system, have remained closed to women."[19]

Western colleges claimed to be more egalitarian than eastern schools and in many cases they were. Frontier values and a democratic spirit "breaking the bond of custom" were friendly to coeducation. Western colleges, naturally opening later than eastern, arose from coeducational

academies, which were more economical than separate institutions. The West's rural nature was also conducive: Kathryn Kerns's research on five Western New York colleges (two women's colleges and three coeducational) demonstrates that the women's colleges drew many more students from cities than did coeducational ones, suggesting that urban families (clustered in the Northeast) were influenced by separate spheres doctrine and preferred separate schooling.[20]

Even so, coeducation was often difficult to implement in the West; state universities exhibited great ambivalence. There were numerous confrontations and idiosyncratic resolutions as the new universities dealt with women's demands and powerful resistance to those demands. Many institutions battled over enrolling women, initially resisting coeducation as Michigan and Cornell did, or alternately admitting women, then separating them, as Wisconsin did. As the University of Wisconsin's President Van Hise declared, "it is necessary to remember that in the older state universities of the middle west, coeducation began, not in consequence of the theoretical belief in it upon the part of the officials of those institutions, but in spite of such belief."[21] Michigan's state university opened in 1841 with six male students. In 1855, the State Teachers Association asked that women be allowed to attend. The request was tabled, but in 1858, when informed that twelve young women would indeed seek admission, the Regents asked a committee to review the issue.

That committee gathered opinions from a number of college presidents. Women's prescribed sphere was uppermost to Harvard's James Walker, who responded that enlightened public opinion was against this experiment and that "its decision must turn in no small measure, on the question whether we propose to educate females for public or private life." The character differences between men and women seemed an insuperable barrier to Dr. Eliphalet Nott of Union College: "Delicacy of sentiment, a feeling of dependence and shrinking from the public view, are attributes sought for in the one sex, in the other decision of character, self-reliance, a feeling of personal independence, and a willingness to meet opposition and encounter difficulties." Educating men and women together would endanger "alike their virtue and their happiness."[22]

Even the presidents of Oberlin and Antioch were cautious. Horace Mann wrote from Antioch that while the advantages of joint education were "*very great.* The dangers of it are *terrible.* . . . I must say that I should rather forego the advantages than incur the dangers." The dangers, of course, included unsupervised "clandestine" meetings of men and women. These responses reinforced the beliefs of the University of Michigan's President Tappan, who did not relax his opposition, writing nearly ten years later: "I sometimes fear we shall have no more women in America. If the Women's Rights sect triumphs, women will try to do the work of men—they will cease to be women while they will fail to become men—they will be something mongrel, hermaphroditic. The men will

lose as the women advance, we shall have a community of *defeminated* women and *demasculated* men. When we attempt to disturb God's order we produce monstrosities." The Michigan Regents denied admission to the twelve petitioners and did not open the university to coeducation until 1870, when they reluctantly bowed to the most economical solution to taxpayers' demands for educated daughters.[23]

While coeducation's proponents justifiably viewed women's entry as a victory, admission per se certainly did not guarantee equitable or even respectful treatment. Women were admitted to Wisconsin's Normal Department in 1860 and permitted to take some "college classes" with men. One student remembered, "The feeling of hostility was exceedingly intense and bitter. As I now recollect the entire body of students were without exception opposed to the admission of the young ladies." (Christine Ogren has shown that, ironically, the nearby Wisconsin state normal schools fostered a far more egalitarian environment than did the university.) When women were admitted to Missouri in 1870, they were marched to class in a group. Missouri's President Reed recalled, "Finding that the young women at 'the Normal' did no matter of harm, we very cautiously admitted them to some of the recitations and lectures in the University building itself, providing always that they were to be marched in good order, with at least two teachers, one in front and the other in the rear of the column as guards." At Cornell, fraternity members were not allowed to date Cornell women, invite them to parties, or even speak to them. Charlotte Williams Conable concluded, "The cultural message which the Cornell experience reinforced for both men and women, was that woman's proper role is as a social appendage to a man."[24]

Women and men alike were concerned about the radical implications of coeducation. Even teachers accustomed to educating young men and women together often opposed equal education at the college level. In 1857 Susan B. Anthony presented a resolution favoring coeducation to the New York State Teachers' Convention. Vehement opposition erupted on the floor: coeducation would produce "a vast social evil," "abolish marriage," and lead to "horrible quagmires" like racial mixing, Mormonism, and sexual impurity. The resolution lost by a large majority; many women present must have voted against it. Anthony's good friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was infuriated: "What an infernal set of fools those schoolmarms must be! Well, if in order to please men they wish to live on air, let them. The sooner the present generation of women dies out, the better. We have idiots enough in the world now without such women propagating any more."[25]

Opposition did slowly give way, and by the end of the century, much had changed. America's twenty-five colleges entered the nineteenth century as a small homogeneous band, confident in their liberal arts curriculum, educating just a few students; no women were permitted to enroll. By century's end there were nearly a thousand colleges and universities. Development was erratic, seemingly noncontroversial in some schools,

dogged by dispute in others, but by the end of the century women's higher education was firmly established and coeducation was the dominant mode. Total college enrollment reached about 238,000 (a dramatic rise from 5,000 in 1800), almost three-quarters of colleges were coeducational, and nearly 85,000 women were enrolled. The curriculum was irrevocably changed, by science and the expansion of knowledge certainly, but also by women's reach for equal rights, equal education, and a public role. As industrialization and urbanization transformed the nation, colleges "stumbled toward clarifying how they were going to fit into the world of new technology, vast material gains, and broadened opportunities."[26]

The "education of a gentleman" shifted, accommodating women. In doing so, however, the liberal arts curriculum diminished in purpose and prestige, until finally there were doubts as to whether it retained any utility for men. "Our women really have some use for the education of a gentleman, but our men have none," observed William Dean Howells.[27] The rhetorical tradition fundamental to higher education had also accommodated women. By the end of the century, women had won a public voice and through it a public role, albeit in underpaid professions not attractive to men, professions deemed compatible with women's nurturant nature—teaching, nursing, social work—and rhetoric had somehow lost its dominant place in the curriculum. Still, ambivalence over women's activities continued: a reaction against coeducation set in during the 1890s and early 1900s as women attended in greater numbers, leading to fears of "feminization."

Women's inclusion in higher education came slowly, amid controversy and fear, and often through the side door—parallel courses of study, parallel colleges, courses in an "Annex," the extracurriculum. Yet an interpretation of history that emphasizes resistance to coeducation, or resistance to higher education for women in general, masks the remarkable diversity of attitudes and experiences among pioneering colleges. Furthermore, exclusive focus on separate spheres limits interpretation, by ignoring the diversity of experiences—among social classes, single and married women, various ethnic groups, and geographic areas, each shaped by regional culture and varying stages of economic development. Alfred University's experience underlines Nancy Hewitt's assertion that "the notion of a single women's community rooted in common oppression denies the social and material realities." Linda Kerber reviewed twenty years of historians' approaches, concluding it is time to move on to more complex analyses. As exceptions multiply, evidence accumulates that separate spheres may indeed be an "exhausted" concept, as Kerber proclaimed.[28]

Yet "these challenges to the ideology of separate spheres have barely begun to have an impact on the history of women's education." In fact, rigidity of the prescriptions was far from uniform. Ogren has found that "'modern' feminist notions of female autonomy existed as an unexamined undercurrent" and gender segregation was minimal in normal schools, which drew predominantly rural students. Hewitt, Joan Jensen, and

Nancy Grey Osterud have shown that rural areas presented important variations; in these communities, cross-gender mutuality, the *denial* of separate spheres, led directly to a feminist vision. Early reformers came out of rural areas where men and women shared work and therefore the cult of domesticity had less currency. Just such a model of mutuality and reform dominated in Alfred University's rural educational community.[29]

Exclusive focus on gender polarity also ignores an important intellectual ideology that stubbornly reappeared among liberal thinkers of the time: Enlightenment values. These principles of human equality, natural rights, and self-government were in direct conflict with the ideology of domesticity. America's founders did not reconceptualize gender relationships; they "did not choose to explore with much rigor the socially radical implications of their republican ideology." Nevertheless the promise of the Enlightenment hung before women as an unresolved dilemma. Most sought to reconcile domesticity to this intellectual challenge. A few men and women embraced radical egalitarianism. In their view, the principles of the Declaration of Independence were universal and women's appropriate sphere unknown since they had been given neither education nor free rein to test their limits. This small band included Jonathan and Abigail Allen.[30]

Within these powerful and complex crosscurrents, at Alfred Academy and Alfred University there was created an institution premising equality of intellect, the value of public action for both sexes, and a "natural" model of gender relations that did not threaten, but rather strengthened, the family. While coeducation was viewed as unnatural and dangerous by many, it does not appear that it was ever viewed as other than natural at Alfred. Alfred's liberalism was unprecedented: its young women came with family support, they were encouraged to speak publicly, and women's rights leaders were welcomed to campus.

The practice of gender integration in rural areas and the belief in sexual equality of natural rights philosophy—these two threads, underemphasized by most historians, came together to create a durable vision of cooperative gender relations and women's equality at Alfred University. Founded in a period of tremendous national growth and populist optimism, this school typified the explosion of educational opportunities in the first half of the nineteenth century; at the same time, it developed a distinctive character. Two arguments were prominent in creating the unusually egalitarian environment: the belief that coeducation was in accord with nature and divine teaching, and the belief, drawn from Enlightenment values, that women had a right to equal opportunities.