

The Education of Women in the Victorian Era

Amanda Serpi

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Francis Power Cobbe's "The Education of Women and How it Would be Affected by University Examinations", as well as John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women", and Florence Nightingale's "Cassandra", are all pieces of prose that argue for the education and rights of Victorian women. All three pieces include similar and uniquely different arguments about education and the rights of Victorian women and use powerful rhetoric in order to speak on women's rights and the education of women. Typically, Victorian women were subject to severe boredom and were forced to be "creative" in women's only endeavors, which created great distress for some. Cobbe maintains the unique argument that education brings out the best in individuals and this directly relates to the way in which Mill argues that women are held back by men and how their social standing impedes them from seeking the education that they may desire. Nightingale argues that women are being held back from their true potential and how they should be able to use their intellect, as well as other gifts, and be afforded the same opportunities as men. Together, all three authors use their rhetoric to assess the situation and discuss how the individual is affected by education and how women's social status restrained them from education. In the 1862 text, "The Education of Women and How it Would be Affected by University Examinations", Francis Power Cobbe successfully uses her prose style and rhetorical powers to argue in favor of the increased social role and educational rights of women, and expresses parallel goals and arguments exhibited in John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women", and Florence Nightingale's "Cassandra".

Francis Power Cobbe's rhetorical and prose style reflect her unique pronouncement that education brings out the best in the individual. Cobbe writes that women being educated does not stop them from performing "traditional" Victorian women's duties, but rather strengthens women as a whole and makes them more capable and expresses that, "education is, after all, only what

its etymology implies-the educating, the drawing out, of the powers of the individual” (Cobbe 745). Cobbe emphasizes that in educating the individual, you are drawing out the best in the woman and making her a better woman. Cobbe’s unique argument is that women cannot be made to be like men, but they can be educated into being the best version of themselves which makes them able to compete and exist on the same level with men. She asserts that, “We cannot give her a man’s powers any more than we can give a man a woman’s brilliancy of intuition, or any other gift” (Cobbe 745).

Even though Cobbe believes that men and women are fundamentally different in the aspect of how they learn, she wants women to have the equal opportunity to receive an education and be able to be their best individually. Cobbe argues that a woman acquiring an education will not change how she does traditional “womanly” duties, but will enhance her drive to strive for better as her mind will be fulfilled. Cobbe argues, “We now proceed a step further in our argument. After the examples cited it may perhaps be assumed as proved that a high education does not in itself unfit women from performing either domestic or philanthropic duties; but that, on the contrary, it is a thing to be desired on every account” (Cobbe 745). In bringing out the best in the individual with education, Cobbe means that one is bringing out the best of what a woman has to offer in all of her duties and activities, which makes the playing field between men and women more equal and maintains that women should be able to receive an education that would enhance them as an individual.

Cobbe’s rhetorical power highlights that women should have the same education as men and rewards for their education in order to incentivise them to work for their education and stimulate them. This is another unique argument that Cobbe presents and is one that illustrates how an equal education would benefit women greatly. Cobbe writes, “We would obtain for

women the right to such academic honors as would afford a sufficient motive and stimulus for thorough, accurate, and sustained study by young women past mere girlhood, and able to acquire the higher branches of knowledge. This *general* and great benefit would be the first object—the raising for all women the standard of education” (Cobbe 746). Cobbe believes that by offering women prizes and honors, it would motivate them to be more competitive with men and would affirm their education and what they have learned. Cobbe also wants women to be recognized for their abilities that are grown through their education and wants them to have similar aspects of their education that men have, that have also been successful at women’s schools, and her desire is “to bring woman’s education out of the stage of imperfection in which it stops, it seems evident that some test and standard of perfection is needful. And this test to be sought and applied must be made a goal to which women will strive as ensuring some sort of prize. Scholarships and similar rewards are already used with much benefit at Bedford and other Ladies’ Colleges. But the prize which naturally belongs to perfection of attainment is simply its recognition, —such public and secure recognition of it as shall make it available for all subsequent purposes” (Cobbe 746). Cobbe is making it known that with examinations, scholarships, and rewards, women, despite their differences with men, can get on an even playing field and develop a similar education that will lead them to fight those differences. At the end of Cobbe’s prose piece she additionally states, “Thirdly, that to assimilate the forms of a woman’s education to that of a man by means of examinations and academical honours, and also the substance of it by means of classical and mathematical studies, will in nowise tend to efface the natural differences of their minds, which depend not on any accidental circumstances, to be regulated by education, but on innate benefits, general and particular, to be expected from such Examinations and Honours, such classical and mathematical studies being opened to women”

(Cobbe 747). Driving home her point, Cobbe reasserts that by incentivising women with these rewards it will stimulate them toward receiving a better and more beneficial education. This will allow them to begin to escape the social cycle of being repressed by men. It also allows them to tighten the gap between the sexes and to give women more opportunities than ever before.

Cobbe, Mill, and Nightingale all desire that women are being socially held back by men and that is the reason why they do not push for education, but deserve to be educated. Mill maintains that because of the preconceived relationship between men and women, women are locked in a cycle of being dominated and subjected to men and expresses that “the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (Mill 91). He speaks about how the suppression of women seems natural to them because it is all they have ever known, and how this is actually quite unnatural and wrong. Nightingale argues something very similar in expressing that, “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity-these three-and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised” (Nightingale 672). In this, she is writing about women’s vast capabilities and how they are in an inferior social position to men and this is why they cannot exercise their gifts. She even questions how men and women get married and have things to talk about because men do not allow women to have sufficient education and proclaims that “husbands and wives never seem to have anything to say to one another. What do they talk about? Not about any great religious, social, political questions or feelings” (Nightingale 675). In this sentiment, Cobbe agrees with both Mill and Nightingale in that women are being held back and oppressed by men and this is why they should receive an education to place them on an even

playing field. Using powerful rhetoric, Cobbe asserts that the “wretchedness of an empty brain is perhaps as hard to bear as that of an empty purse, and a heart without hope as cheerless as a fireless grate” (Cobbe 742). Both Cobbe and Nightingale remark on women losing hope because they go so long with nothing to do but engage in “traditional” Victorian women’s activities and need an education. Women being held back in their social position in relation to men is exactly why they are afraid to speak up and demand an education, but it is also the reason they so desperately require an education.

Cobbe, Mill, and Nightingale argue that women do not push back against men and the oppression they face because it is all they unfortunately know. Victorian women needed a man in most cases to care for their lifestyle and without that they had no protection. Mill communicates that all “causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. They are so far in a position different from all other subject classes, that their masters require something more from them than actual service. Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments” (Mill 93). Mill wants women to have a sufficient education in order to escape from being held down and restricted in their social position by men. He believes it is unlikely for them to rebel given their continued status, which is one that they have only ever known. In educating women, they will begin to realize that they do not have to be subordinate to men and that they too can achieve so much more. Nightingale expresses the same frustration in her piece of prose and uses her rhetorical power to argue that even with intellect, it is hard for a woman to achieve anything given the poor position in society, which is one she hopes education to strengthen natural intellect will help. Nightingale conveys that “then comes intellect. It wishes to satisfy the wants which intellect creates for it. But there is a physical, not moral impossibility of supplying the wants of the

intellect in the state of civilization at which we have arrived. The stimulus, the training, the time are all three not wanting to us; or, in other words, the means and inducements are not there” (Nightingale 673). In this, she means that women may have intellect, but without the social change of women pushing back against men by receiving an education there will be no change in civilization. She also speaks about how there is no time or training for women to receive an education, which keeps them pinned to the same subordination cycle that they have always been a part of. Even Cobbe agrees with this sentiment and urges for a change in society, so that women can be properly educated and have more of an opportunity to compete with men. Cobbe asserts that “few indeed can be unaware that they are passing through a transition period of no small difficulty, and that there is urgent need for revision of many of the old social regulations regarding them” (Cobbe 742). In this, Cobbe is using her rhetorical power to explain that there is a need for a social transition period that would allow women to have an education and, in turn, be able to break free and escape their subordination under men. Education is vital for women to become the best version of themselves and to be equal to men.

Francis Power Cobbe asserts the argument that different class status stands in the way of some women receiving an education, as well. Cobbe’s desire is that people think about how class status could prevent women of both upper and lower classes from receiving a fair and equitable education. Cobbe writes, “Most people prefer to ignore their existence as a class to be contemplated in the education of women, but it is as vain to do so as cruel” (Cobbe 743). In this statement, Cobbe is describing how single women and women without children are often disregarded in Victorian society. This applies to women of upper class status who are ensnared by their status and unable to seek an education because of it, as well as lower class women who cannot afford an education. Cobbe writes that women who are not married and women without

children are especially ignored and overlooked when it comes to receiving an education, and expresses that “all of us know enough of those hapless households where the wife, having no children and few home duties, undergoes the most deplorable depreciation of character for want of employment of the heart and mind” (Cobbe 743). Without receiving an education, Cobbe is communicating that women with nothing else in their lives will begin to wither away for want of more and of an education. An education would free them of having nothing to do and free them of the same household duties that they must complete everyday. With an education, they would no longer be tied to the chains of boredom and would be able to freely exercise their minds and free their hearts. Cobbe especially wants to drive the point home that when it comes to the class of women who are unmarried or have no children, they will waste away in want of something more to save them from their idle lives, and conveys that “all of us know those other households, none the less hapless, where grown-up daughters, unneeded by their parents, are kept from all usefulness or freedom of action, frittering away the prime of their days in the busy idleness of trivial accomplishments” (Cobbe 743). With this, Cobbe hammers home the point that women should be allowed to be educated to be spared from a class who in turn would have to turn to idleness and wither away from boredom.

John Stuart Mill argues that because we have never witnessed women in a society without men, we can never know how they will act without the influence of men which they have been forced to live under. Mill begins by explaining how women have been dominated by men and this is why they have not gone out of their way to seek an education, because the way their lives are now is the way they have always been. Mill declares, “If men had ever been found in society without women, or women without men, or if there had been a society of men and women in which the women were not under the control of the men, something might have been

positively known about the mental and moral differences which may be inherent in the nature of each. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing- the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others” (Mill 96). With this, Mill is proving that women should receive an education based solely on the fact that women are not in fact different from men, but subjected to their control. Women are inherently the same as men and we cannot know how they would behave without the crushing influence of men and, in turn, we cannot say that they have mental or moral differences. Mill also wrote that women will not defy what is protecting them and, therefore, will not rebel and ask for education that they deserve on the grounds of not being different from men, as he expresses that “accordingly wives, even in the most extreme and protracted cases of bodily ill usage, hardly ever dare avail themselves of the laws made for their protection: and if in a moment of irrepressible indignation, or by the interference of neighbors, they are induced to do so, their whole effort afterward is to disclose as little as they can, and to beg off their tyrant from his merited chastisement” (Mill 93). This confirms that women will not rebel against the status they have always known and, therefore, should receive an education to free them from the “protection” of men. Mill also believes that women’s education should, in fact, be urged for so that they can escape the influence of men and be free thinkers on their own, and declares that “the claim of women to be educated as solidly, and in the same branches of knowledge, as men, is urged with growing intensity, and with a great prospect of success; while the demand for their admission into professions and occupations hitherto closed against them, becomes every year more urgent” (Mill 93). Since Mill wrote that we cannot know how women would act in a world where they are not influenced by men, he asserts that we should educate them to free them from the cycle of being influenced and controlled by what men want.

Florence Nightingale, on the other hand, was more concerned for women's daily lives and boredom in their activities that an education would be able to solve. Nightingale spoke about the activities that women were forced to endure for hours a day and how this prevented them from being able to learn anything of value. Nightingale writes, "If she has a knife and fork in her hands for three hours of the day, she cannot have a pencil or brush. Dinner is the great sacred ceremony of this day, the great sacrament. To be absent from dinner is equivalent to being ill" (Nightingale 673). In this statement, she is proving that women are forced to partake in long societal activities that stand in the way of their learning and cause great boredom and suffering for some women. Women are only allowed to miss these activities for extreme illness and there are no other excuses that will free them from a three hour affair that wastes their learning time. Nightingale emphasizes this lack of time in her prose and even speaks to women trying to learn, but failing because of their lack of time, and conveys that "women often try one branch of intellect after another in their youth, e.g., mathematics. But that, least of all, is compatible with the life of "society". It is impossible to follow up anything systematically. Women often long to enter some man's profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others) and, above all, time" (Nightingale 674). In this, women are forced to conform to society's norms for women, meaning that they must partake in the daily womanly activities, such as sewing, and forsake learning as there is just not enough time. Nightingale also speaks on how women must remain ready to be interrupted and are not allowed to have activities that they want to learn, such as science or mathematics. Nightingale states, "They are taught from their infancy upwards that it is a wrong, ill-tempered, and a misunderstanding of "women's mission" (with a great M) if they do not allow themselves *willingly* to be interrupted at all hours" (Nightingale 674). With a lack of time and constant

interruptions, Nightingale is trying to illustrate with her prose that being allowed an education would permit women to be free of the strains that they face daily in the wake of society norms.

During the Victorian Era, women's rights were limited in terms of education and the resentment that was felt by women in the Victorian era due to the poor quality and lack of educational opportunities was widespread. The Victorian mindset in regards to the education of women centered around holding women back from embracing their true potential and it was viewed that "women's intellects were seen as insightful and sensitive without the ability to make rational evidence-based judgements; physiologically, they were not equipped to deal with the rigours of university education which would threaten their capacity to bear children" and furthermore, because "women's vocation in life was supposedly different from that of men, it was believed to be pointless and cruel to educate her beyond her sphere as wife and mother" (Schwartz 674). Women mainly occupied the domestic sphere in the Victorian era. They were expected to focus on household duties, rather than focus on obtaining a university degree, and learned what they needed to know at home or from their governess. Cobbe's concern for the class of women who are unmarried or have no children is reasonable, as well, because "in 1861 at least two-fifths of women were unmarried, and perhaps one-quarter of unmarried women were compelled to perform some labour to support themselves and their families" (Schwartz 673). Without a proper education, women were unable to enter professions that were typically reserved for men. Additionally, in terms of historical context, a common opinion during the Victorian era was that by educating women, it would diminish their female characteristics. Cobbe, though, disagreed and asserted that "education was about drawing out one's powers and therefore, if we 'draw out a woman's powers to the very uttermost, we shall only educe her womanliness...and so make her a perfect woman'" (Schwartz 675). This reaffirms her belief that education brings

out the best of the individual. Women's desire for an education and a declaration of their right to an education grew rapidly during this time and "feminist thinking on education, like the Victorian women's movement at large, reflected and responded to many wider concerns and contemporary political questions. It was imbued with a horror of idleness, and a belief in the value of work, the dignity of economic independence and individual self-improvement" (Schwartz 678). Frances Power Cobbe supported this sentiment because she valued the education of women in that it brings out the best in the individual, as well as that it would serve as the basis for the transformation of society. Social status also continued to restrict women from gaining a proper education and a "cultural resistance to the idea of educating women remained strong throughout the 19th century"(Schwartz 674). By the end of the Victorian era, opportunities for women to become educated began to emerge.

Cobbe, Mill, and Nightingale provide a picture about the education of women of this era in that women should be able to escape the confines of class and society, which communicates that the problem with Victorian women's education is a lack of freedom to do so. Cobbe highlights how upper class women especially find it difficult to escape from the confines of society life and find work or an education, and expresses that "the employment of women of the upper class is one of the most difficult of achievements. At nearly every door they knock in vain; and, what is worse, they are sometimes told they are unfit for work (even for philanthropic work), *because* they are not soundly educated, or possessed of steady business habits. Yet when they seek to obtain such education, here again they meet the bolted door!" (Cobbe 744). With this, Cobbe is exhibiting with her prose that the confines of class and society have blocked women from both an education and other options that would offer them freedom from their daily lives. Mill argues something very similar in that with women being controlled by men and

society, they cannot receive an education that would grant them the freedom they desire, and communicates that “when we put together three things—first, the natural attraction between opposite sexes; secondly, the wife’s entire dependence on the husband, every privilege or pleasure she has being either his gift, or depending entirely on his will; and lastly, that the principal object of human pursuit, consideration, and all objects of social ambition, can in general be sought or obtained by her only through him, it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character” (Mill 94). With this quote, Mill is describing how women are dependent on men and it is the way of society which in turn prohibits them from receiving a proper education and makes them dependent on men. Without this proper education, they are held back from the freedom they could achieve with an education. Nightingale writes about how women are conditioned by society to be completely unselfish and view any education they could want as a selfish desire, when indicating that “they have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement, which it is their “duty” to give up for every trifle more selfish than themselves” (Nightingale 674). Nightingale is describing women having to forfeit their desires to society's expectations of them and she wants them to be able to escape this by pushing for an education. With an education, they will have the freedom to do as they please and to not view what they want as “selfish”, as society does.

All three authors Cobbe, Mill and Nightingale focus on arguing for the education and rights of Victorian women. They all argue similar and, at the same time, very different points about education for Victorian women, but they use powerful rhetoric to craft their arguments and shape what they desire for women. Cobbe has the unique argument of bringing out the individual in education, while Mill focuses on how men influence women, and Nightingale’s main

argument is that women do not have time to be educated. All three authors, though, focus on how society constrains and confines women to class and social status which impedes on their being educated. With their powerful rhetoric, all three authors provide a strong argument for why women should be provided equal education with men and why they should be permitted to accomplish other goals in life, other than what society dictates for them.

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