

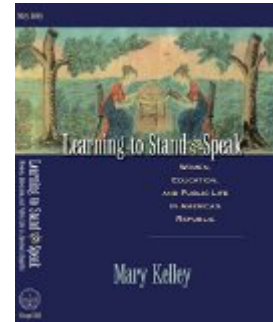
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Kelley. *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. x + 312 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3064-2.

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Eager Students, Expanding Horizons

Mary Kelley's book presents the rising arc of female education in the early republic in a new and provocative framework. Scholars have long known in general about the proliferation of female academies, the advent of district and common schools, and the remarkable rise in literacy that transformed the landscape of women's history between the Revolution and the Civil War. Kelley approaches this material anew, with abundant and satisfying detail in her evidence and with a big-picture approach that makes this an impressive and comprehensive book.

Her study starts with the claim that advancements in female education offered by single-sex academies and seminaries inducted ever-larger numbers of women into civil society and gave them a sense of themselves as citizens imbued with rights and obligations. This is a claim that goes considerably further than the "republican motherhood" synthesis that every survey textbook invokes. Linda Kerber coined that term in her path-breaking 1976 essay in the *American Quarterly*, breaking the gender barrier in the history of education in the early republic and showing us how a far-reaching transformation in women's mental training could be launched by a seemingly conservative argument: that mothers can serve their families best, and especially their republican sons, by gaining an education.[1]

Kelley does not dispute the power of the "republican motherhood" justification, framed as obligation in order to open doors, but she goes beyond it by showing what

was to be gained, concretely, from an education beyond curricular basics. Educated women in the early republic, she argues, gained a sense of themselves as real or potential actors in civil society, wielding influence and contributing to public opinion. She invokes Jurgen Habermas's theoretical work on civil society, but she almost doesn't need to, since (as she shows) "civil society" was a much-used term in the period. Defining the term as "any and all publics except" the political (p. 5), she traces the expanding sphere of women's actions in civil society along with their sense of entitlement to claim such ground. In its earliest and least bold form, elite educated womanhood contributed to civil society when they presided over their tea tables, a ritual that at its most exalted was perhaps the American version of the French salon. Then from the 1810s forward, educated women joined in community associations, moved into the teaching profession, founded and directed major educational institutions, wrote for publication (and good money) in periodicals and newspapers, authored and edited books, and took to the public stage, lecturing, declaiming, and contributing their ideas to the stream of public opinion in the United States. Nearly all the leaders of the 1840s-1850s woman's rights movement were products of female academies; it is the hidden common denominator. As the title of her book suggests, advanced schooling literally taught women to "stand and speak," a quotation from Lucy Stone. (Contrast that to the absence of explicit training in rhetoric in our own schools and colleges today, neglected for both sexes; what does that say about

our expectation of citizens' influence on public opinion?)

Kelley also makes use of "social capital" theory, which has enjoyed a vogue in political science and sociology and is best known, perhaps, in the "bowling alone" thesis of a few years ago. But again, Kelley wears her theory lightly. What we get are stories of ministers' daughters and other less than fully elite women, including some black women as well, using their educational training to open up social space to meet, grow intellectually, and commit to an ongoing life of associational networking. Kelley argues that women's subjectivity was at stake in the move for education, their sense of themselves as participants in public life. Without education, women might define themselves as baby machines, or as worker bees doing the daily restorative tasks of life, or as religious beings focused on the hereafter. Reading moral philosophy and the classics, working algebra problems and learning botany, all this conferred a sense of entitlement to something beyond domesticity and motherhood.

The evidentiary base of the book is strong and satisfying. Kelley recounts the rise of the female academies, over 180 of them founded between 1790 and 1830, and vastly accelerating numbers thereafter, in the North, South, and West, in rural and urban areas. She analyzes the curriculum as presented in the hundreds of annual catalogues the schools issued, where courses, readings, teachers, and students with their hometowns were all listed. A surprising finding here is that Kelley matches the top female schools to famous male colleges and finds the curricula remarkably similar in academic content. No longer can we say that only Oberlin and Antioch offered a collegiate education to antebellum women. School founders strategically declined to call their schools colleges, even as they appropriately a masculine curriculum down to the science and math programs, Latin, and the traditional capstone course in moral philosophy. As long as they could clothe ambition in the cloak of female modesty, school founders could advance their cause seemingly without challenging gender hierarchy. Many female academies did not jettison the ornamental curriculum of traditional upper-class female education, with time devoted to music, dancing, drawing, and needlework. But the solid subjects put students at these academies in a position to claim thinking skills and exposure to a western canon of learned books that was on a par with the education their brothers got.

Of course, only a very small percentage of any age cohort of Americans attended these academies, Kelley acknowledges, a fact equally true for males as for fe-

males. Between and half and one percent of the population availed itself of this opportunity (p. 81), but her key point is that females as well as males were part of that percent. One percent may sound small, but it translates to over 30,000 male and female students in the 1850s—enough to populate state and national legislatures, run courtrooms, fill ministerial and university posts, and—on the female side—provide leadership and membership for all kinds of civic and activist groups dominated by women. Interestingly, tuition costs were fairly similar for male colleges and the best female academies. Families that once invested only in their son's training now were willing to pay goodly sums for their daughter's mental development, a cost augmented by the sacrifice of a daughter's traditional contribution to household labor while attending boarding school. Kelley closes her chapter on curriculum and pedagogy with a nuanced discussion of parental expectations for their daughters, which not surprisingly did not include turning them into outspoken activists. Schools had to negotiate constantly the tension between ambition and modesty to assure parents their daughters would graduate with a safe understanding of the constraints of the female sphere. Clearly not all of them took the message.

Kelley enlarges her canvas to include self-culture institutions that multiplied rapidly in the early republic. She has found records of membership and meetings of the many female reading circles and literary societies, whose goals included sharpening members' minds via analysis of books and improving verbal delivery via formal presentations. Seen against this background, the justly famed "conversations" of Margaret Fuller in Boston appear to be an especially high-level form of the literary society rather than a unique invention.

There is a wealth of detail in this book that will make many of us ask new questions of our own research projects. I was moved to consider anew the case of Helen Jewett, featured in my 1998 book, a servant girl in Maine from an impoverished shoemaker's family who took up prostitution, moved to New York City, and passed herself off entirely credibly as a graduate of an elite female academy.[2] I now have an enhanced appreciation for Jewett's capacity to pull off this impersonation and to see how her bogus educational credentials empowered her to deal with her middle-class clients as her mental equals (or less). Kelley's opening sections on civil society and social capital caused me to stud her book with many Post-it notes to myself about my current person of interest, Mary Gove Nichols, an extraordinary health and marriage reformer who lectured on female physiology and

even masturbation from public stages in the 1830s and argued for free love in the 1850s. Where did she get the ego requisite to those activities? Of what did her education consist, what books did she read as a child, and what did a dismissal from a female academy mean for her?

As rich as the book is, there is one area where I would wish for more. At a SHEAR session in Montreal in 2006 devoted to showcasing Kelley's book, prepublication, Carolyn Eastman of the University of Texas, Austin, asked Kelley if she found links between advanced education and that other significant trend of women's history in this period, the increasing strictures on female sexual propriety that Clare A. Lyons describes so well in her new book, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (2006). Kelley reasonably replied that sexual propriety was not taught in academies. My suspicion is that it was, but just not in the official curriculum; a school's disciplinary regulations are the place to look. Lowell mill girls lived with announced curfews and required church attendance, and I suspect academy girls encountered the same. The co-ed Derby Academy in northern Vermont had a rule circa 1840 that unmarried men could not converse with young ladies without the permission of the teacher, at a forfeit of 37 1/2 cents per infraction. An earlier educational endeavor in that same village, Derby's Female Reading Society of 1818, enrolled 37 members specifically noted to be of "untarnished reputation" and "good moral character," terms that certainly pertained to chastity.[3] The coeducational Antioch College, founded in the 1850s in Yellow Springs, Ohio, only admitted students who could produce a certificate of good moral character. The school prohibited walks or rides shared by opposite sex students and restricted rambles in the nearby scenic glen to alternate days for males (odd on the calendar) and females (even).[4] Probably many schools required the certificate of good character, usually issued by a church. Still, young women of suspect character evidently gained admission. Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary—the "Harvard" of the women's schools—admitted Louisa Missouri Miller in 1832 and trained her for three years. Miller's suspicious death in 1838 made headlines in New York and exposed her as the daughter of the richest brothel madam of the city. Mrs. Willard had to do some fast damage control, issuing a public statement disclaiming all knowledge of the girl's family. She was represented to be an orphan when she arrived, a girl "somewhat wild and thoughtless," Mrs. Willard recalled, who developed into "not only an accomplished lady, but a good woman" in her three years at Troy.[5] Education

was indeed a powerful force for good, but schools had to be vigilant to preserve the morality of their students. It does not seem surprising to me that associational life for women, either in local literary societies or in boarding schools, would provide an arena for linking the overt self-improvement goals of these institutions with an insistence on reputation for chastity. Consider too, that this linkage might encompass more than the policing of premarital sex. Historical demographers have long noted a correlation in many societies, western and non-western, between women's educational attainments and a pattern of declining fertility. There is much to ponder in that correlation.

Even a medium-length review cannot exhibit all the nuggets of great interest that this book includes. There are wonderful sections I have not mentioned on individual women, on the self-imagining involved in reading, on the enterprise of women's history as mapped out then, and on role models of learned women. Overall, Mary Kelley's book is an impressive, career-crowning work by a senior scholar drawing deeply on her own extensive learning about women's mental lives in the early republic. It will be influential in that it identifies the particular dynamic propelling educated women to claim the public sphere of civil society; it forces all of us to probe the educational attainments of the people we study more closely. This is a book with staying power, sure to be on course reading lists at the upper-division and graduate level for years to come.

Notes

[1]. Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment, An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 187-205.

[2]. Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

[3]. Cecile B. Hay and Mildred B. Hay, *A History of Derby, Vermont* (Littleton, N.H.: Courier Printing Co, 1967), 135-136, 143.

[4]. "Catalogue of Antioch College for the Year 1853-54," found at <http://www.ohiomemory.org/index.html> (accessed June 8, 2007).

[5]. Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2008).

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