

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 4: The Early National Era – Equality/Gender

Priscilla Mason, **Salutatory Oration** (1793)¹

Prominent Philadelphians opened the Young Ladies Academy (YLA) in 1787. Benjamin Rush, a prominent framer and founder of the school, declared the educational mission was

To correct the mistakes and practice of [the male sex] . . . by demonstrating that the female temper can only be governed by reason and that the cultivation of reason in women is alike friendly to the order of nature and to private as well as public happiness.

Male instructors at YLA insisted that girls take the same subjects taught to boys of the same age. This policy, they believed, worked no radical change in gender roles. Rush and his supporters believed that better educated women better fulfilled their roles as patriotic wives and mothers. Rush expected that “the patriot – the hero – and the legislator, would find the sweetest rewards of their toils, in the approbation and applause of their [well educated] wives.”

Some students had bolder ambitions. Graduates often challenged traditional gender practices during a special year-end ceremony in which two students gave a public oration. As you read the following address, consider the extent to which this is a timeless call for gender equality or a period piece distinctive to the Early National Period. To what extent did Priscilla Mason rely on premises that women at the turn of the twenty-first century use when making arguments for equality? To what extent were her arguments rooted in common late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century assumptions?

...
A female, young and inexperienced, addressing a promiscuous assembly, is a novelty, which requires an apology, as some may suppose. I therefore, with submission, beg leave to offer a few thoughts in vindication of female eloquence.

...
Our right to instruct and persuade cannot be disputed, if it shall appear, that we possess the talents of the orator – and have the opportunities for the exercise of those talents. Is the power of speech, and volubility of expression, one of the talents of the orator? Our sex possess it in an eminent degree.

Do personal attractions give charm to eloquence, and force to the orator’s arguments? There is some truth mixed with flattery we receive on this head. Do tender passions enable the orator to speak in a moving and forcible manner? The talent of the orator is confessedly ours. In all these respects the female orator stands on equal, – nay, on *superior* ground.

If therefore she should fail in the capacity for mathematical studies, or metaphysical profundities, she has, one the whole, equal pretensions to the palm of eloquence. Granted it is, that a perfect knowledge of the subject is essential to the accomplished Orator. But seldom does it happen, that the abstruse sciences, become the subject of eloquence. And, as to that knowledge which is popular and

¹ Excerpted from “The Salutatory Oration, Delivered by Miss Priscilla Mason, May 15, 1793,” in *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: Stewart & Cochran, 1794). The information in this header is taken from, *Women of America: A History*, eds. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 69–87.

practical,—that knowledge which alone is useful to the orator; who will say that the female mind is incapable.

Our high and might Lords (thanks to their arbitrary constitutions) have denied us the means of knowledge, and then reproached us for the want of it. Being the strong party, they early seized the scepter and the sword; with these they gave laws to society; they denied women the advantage of a liberal education; forbid them to exercise their talents on those great occasions, which would serve to improve them. They doomed the sex to servile or frivolous employments, on purpose to degrade their minds, that they themselves might hold unrivalled, the power and pre-eminence they had usurped. Happily, a more liberal way of thinking begins to prevail. The sources of knowledge are gradually opening to our sex. . . .

But supposing now that we possessed all the talents of the orator, in the highest perfection; where shall we find a theater for the display of them? The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us. Who shut them? *Man*; despotic man, first made us incapable of the duty, and then forbid us the exercise. Let us by suitable education, qualify ourselves for those high departments—they will open before us. . . .

With respect to the bar, citizens of either sex have an undoubted right to plead the cause of a friend, a husband, a son; and they have done it with energy and effect. I am assured that there is nothing in our laws or constitution, to prohibit the licensure of female Attorneys; and sure our judges have too much gallantry, to urge *prescription* in bar of their claim. In regard to the senate, prescription is clearly in our favor. We have one or two cases exactly in point.

Heliogabalus, the Roman Emperor . . . made his grandmother a Senator of Rome. He also established a senate of women; appointed his mother President; and committed to them the important business of regulating dress and fashions. And truly methinks the dress of our country, at this day, would admit of some regulation, for it is subject to no rules at all—It would be worthy the wisdom of Congress, to consider whether a similar institution, established at the seat of our Federal Government, would not be a public benefit. We cannot be independent, while we receive our fashions from other countries, nor act properly, while we imitate the manners of governments not congenial to our own. Such a Senate, composed of women most noted for wisdom, learning and taste, delegated from every part of the Union, would give dignity, and independence to our manners; uniformity, and even authority to our fashions.

It would fire the female breast with the most generous ambition, prompting to illustrious actions. It would furnish the most noble Theater for the display, the exercise and improvement of every faculty. It would call forth all that is human—all that is *divine* in the soul of woman; and having proved them equally capable with the other sex, would lead to their equal participation of honor and office.