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Book Review: Mary Kelley's Learning to Stand and Speak

Melissa Wilkins

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Mary Kelley’s premise for *Learning to Stand and Speak* is the idea that women in post-Revolutionary America through the antebellum era were the makers and shapers of public opinion in what she has termed “civil society” through the process of education. Through education women were able to pursue careers in writing, editing and teaching in ways they never had before. Through those avenues and in their roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and aunts women became the primary shapers of republican citizenship. Kelley defines civil society as,

“. . . any and all publics except those dedicated to the organized politics constituted in political parties and elections . . . with the rights and obligations of citizenship from the rest of the nation’s inhabitants.” (5). She uses the term “gendered republicanism” to give a name to the role women
would play in the young nation (25).

Kelley uses an abundance of both primary and secondary sources. It would be impossible to discuss all her sources; however, she uses the records from the generous number of female academies that sprang up during this time period. She repeatedly mentions Sarah Pierce’s Litchfield Female Academy, Mt Holyoke Seminary, and Rutgers Female Institute to name a few. She also uses periodicals from that era, particularly *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. She accessed records from various literary and benevolent societies as well as papers and books from notable female authors of the time. She mentions in particular Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Josepha Hale, and even Caroline Lee Hentz.

As the nation grew, the elite social classes began educating their daughters as well as their sons. The rise of the female academies during this era gave birth to a new generation of well educated women. Female academies were literally popping up everywhere. Interestingly the curricula for these academies were almost identical to those at universities such as Yale. This was what made them so attractive to the elite of that era. Women were being taught geography, physics, and moral philosophy along with languages like French and Latin. It was a belief at that time that for a woman to be a good partner for the well educated young man, she too should be well educated. The good wife should be a good representative of her family when attending various salons and teas. She should also be able to educate her sons and daughters in the proper ways of good republican citizenship so that they too might take their rightful place in civil society. However began to desire to use their newfound knowledge in more ways than just being a helpmate to a husband. Women began writing, editing, and teaching.

Writing, editing, and teaching were essentially the only lucrative ways in which a woman could really use her education during the post-Revolutionary era. That being said, a woman had to be extremely careful when writing for publication. A woman did not want to be seen as too full of herself or too academic. She did not want to appear to have the desire to actually be an author. She did not want to appear more intelligent than the men around her, as this could lead to social catastrophe. Many women began to form literary societies so they could continue to read, discuss, write, and evaluate various forms of literature. Novels were not included in the list of acceptable forms of literature. Novels were taboo and thought to bring about flights of fancy and cause women to forget their household duties. Novels were dangerous and could make the imagination run wild. They were not discussed seriously in literary societies, and most women would have been embarrassed to admit they enjoyed reading them. Literary societies were one vehicle for shaping public opinion and instilling republicanism. However, a woman did not want to be called *bas bleu* or “bluestocking.” This term implied that she was an intellectual (gasp!) and thought herself just as intelligent as men or heaven forbid even more so. The
term came into use as a reference to the Blue Stockings Society in mid 18th century England. This was a literary society for the most elite intellectuals of that period. Over time, the term came to have more negative connotations, and in post-Revolutionary America, most women tried to avoid the label.

Women were advised to use their knowledge for the service of others, meaning their husbands and families or as missionaries. Even if there were no literary societies available, many women continued to read works and then write letters to each other to discuss them. Kelley quotes Julia Hyde, a student from Mt Holyoke Seminary who when writing a letter to her friend Lucy Goodale states, “Take some book, and read it and form your own opinion as to its character, its influence, its beauties, and its faults” (16). It should be noted that African American women and women from the working classes were not included in these particular literary societies. However, those same groups of women formed their own societies, which usually included some type of benevolence work. Later, women came to join more social activism groups as the desire for true equal rights and suffrage arose.

Most of the literary societies and female academies published small periodicals and papers. With technology making printing easier and cheaper and with the expanding postal service this became easier to accomplish. Kelley points out that through that medium, women were shaping public opinion and discussing the virtues of republican citizenship. The rise of magazines is directly attributed to the reading, writing and education of the women of this era. One notable magazine was Godey’s Lady’s Book. This magazine, like many others, invited women to submit written work, and they did. Through writing some women came to be able to earn an income. Educated women looked to writing, editing, and teaching to earn an income, though they earned about half the salary a man would in the same positions.

As a New Social Historian, Mary Kelley discusses at length the roles women were allowed to pursue in order to participate in the young nation. Her primary assertions are of the newly educated woman and her role in shaping public opinion which she states several times in every chapter, and of the role those same educated women play in “civil society”. She uses the latter term at least fifty-two times, so if, as a reader one is unsure of the author’s premise early in the work, he will surely grasp it by the end. Kelley has a wonderful array of primary and secondary sources, but it seems as though she is trying to use them all, making the work seem “jumpy” for lack of a better term.

Melissa Wilkins