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A DISSERTATION ON "FEMALE PHYSICIANS."

[Read before the Clay, Lysander and Schreppel (N. Y.) Med. Association, June 6th, 1850, by N. WILLIAMS, M.D., and published by request of the Association.]

GENTLEMEN,—The recent agitation, in this country, of the subject of "female physicians," the extent to which it has been carried, and the effect which it is calculated to produce on the profession and community, are considerations which seem to require more than a passing notice from those who can appreciate the wonderful adaptation of "means to ends," which the Author of the universe has so legibly written upon the face of all things. Happily for us, the subject is one which meets with no obstacle to a fair and impartial investigation, as no one can suppose, that, in our "generation," a set of doctresses are to rise up and order a surrender of the ground we have so long and so quietly occupied. That epoch may ultimately come, and the present dispensation entirely pass away; but "the end is not yet," nor is it probable that such a revolution will be witnessed by any one living at the present time. For one, I had always supposed that the male sex was the legitimate and exclusive heirs of the "healing art"; that its rights and obligations were emphatically and strictly our own, and that we, as a sex, are better adapted to it than our fair competitors. But if I am wrong in all this, if our title is not good, if we are mere squatters, or tenants at will, I shall, on the conviction of my mistake, use my utmost exertions to restore to the opposite sex the things that are hers. And after all, I am not aware that we shall be losers by the operation; for when the *crisis* comes, instead of educating *ourselves* and our *sons* for medical men, we will educate our *wives* and our *daughters* for medical women; and thus, what we may be denied on the one hand, may be restored on the other. And besides all this, when we as *men* have been "thrust out," and our places are occupied by the *fair sex*, may we not hope to fill the very stations which they now occupy? And if they are to turn doctors, lawyers, clergymen, &c., why may not we turn our attention to sewing, knitting, tending babies, and other household employment? Surely when they occupy our places, we must of necessity take possession of theirs; and when they become to all intents and purposes *men*, will we become, to the same extent, *women*. On the whole, then, we have nothing to fear from the agitation of this question, let the result be what it may. But, after all, there seems to be an inherent propriety or im-

propriety in all things, and if the question is to be discussed, I shall, as far as I may be able, determine it by this rule. To me, the proposition seems so evidently *absurd*, that a candid discussion could hardly be required; but inasmuch as our claim has been disputed, we will meet the case as it presents itself, and without any fears as to the result.

To us there is much of novelty in the title of "female physician," and I must confess, in relation to myself, I cannot willingly oppose those who aspire to the honor which such an appellation begets. But if there is an adaptation in nature, of one thing to another; if there is a particular sphere for each particular thing and a general law by which all things are governed and their appropriate office determined, then is it true that the language of nature should be interpreted, and her voice in this, as in all things else, should be obeyed. I assume, then, to proscribe no one, nor to dictate in relation to this matter; but to utter such impressions and such truths as a calm, unbiassed and rational view of the subject seems to warrant.

In saying, therefore, that I am unqualifiedly opposed to educating females for the medical profession, and that they are not constituted for an employment of this character, I utter a sentiment for which nature is responsible, and to whose testimony I shall appeal for the correctness of the position which I have taken. That the anatomy and physiology of the two sexes is mainly the same, that each is governed by the same moral and physical laws, and similarly affected by surrounding circumstances, is true in a general sense; but still, there are exceptions to all this, and peculiarities in every particular which must not and cannot be overlooked. Had the offices of the two sexes been identical, and the sphere of the one the legitimate province of the other, then where would have been the necessity of any difference whatever? Man, having precisely the same duties to perform, the same ends to accomplish, and the same ultimate destiny to fulfil, should have been constituted with the same powers and capabilities as woman. But not so; there is a vast difference, a wide "gulf" in the instinctive faculties, tastes and propensities of the two sexes, and which declare to each, with all the force of philosophic truth, "thus far and no farther shalt thou go." In this light of the subject let us inquire, do *females* possess *equal* talents and facilities, with *males*, for the medical profession? To the solution of this inquiry, I will submit the following propositions, viz. :—

1st. The practice of medicine is necessarily a *laborious* employment. It does not simply consist in riding about in an easy carriage, from patient to patient, whilst the weather is fair and pleasant, and all nature is rejoicing, to the surrender of its claims when the elements are boisterous and forbidding, or when "tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep, its ready visit pays." With the ease and comforts of life, or the healthful and agreeable occupation of the corporeal and mental faculties, which generally pertain to other pursuits, the medical man is comparatively a stranger. The path which he treads, although strewn with occasional flowers, is nevertheless a rugged and irregular one. The regulation of his habits, of his rest, his meals, and intercourse with others, are often circumstances over which he has little or no control. These repeated

violations of the laws of health, save in the strongest constitution, are followed by ill health and a premature dissolution. Hence it is, that our bills of mortality exhibit so many cases of death from the ranks of the young and middle-aged members of the profession. And hence the necessity of the most robust and enduring physical constitution, as an important *prerequisite* of those who devote themselves to the healing art. To me this is a point of no small moment, and one which should never be overlooked in determining whether this or that individual is endowed with the requisite qualifications for a successful practitioner. If it be the misfortune of our sons to inherit feeble and delicate constitutions, better, by far, that they be educated to agriculture, or the work-shop, than to any profession, and much less the medical. The husbandry of a farm, or the steady application of the tools of a shop, will contribute much to strengthen and fortify the most slender bodily frame; but not so with the practice of medicine. The diligent pursuit of the one is healthy; the other, unhealthy. It is a mistake, therefore, that our puny young men should be trained to a profession; and a still greater one, when they are educated for that of medicine. To what conclusion, then, must we come with reference to an entire sex, who are naturally more *delicate* than ourselves? Most certainly, if corporeal hardship and privation are the necessary consequences of the medical profession, that the *male* sex is better qualified in this respect to discharge its duties than the *female*. And if so, then with what propriety do our fair competitors lay claim to an employment, for which they have not the same requisite qualifications as ourselves? I dare not say that they have been designed for any vocation for which Deity has not furnished them with the most ample qualifications. For this reason, then, the argument appears to me conclusive.

2d. *Marriage* is a natural and divine institution, and its duties by females incompatible with the practice of medicine. Imagine, if you please, a female physician, who is the mother of a large family of children; or suppose she has no more than two or three. I submit, whether even the smaller number does not present cares and responsibilities, which a humane mother would not and should not transfer to another? She may, it is true, thrust them from her even at their birth, and smother all those warm and instinctive emotions which emanate in the bosom of a mother; but she ever does it at the peril of her own happiness and that of her offspring. To others, the superintendence of the nursery may be irksome; but to a mother who is a mother, the task is one which affords the greatest pleasure to her. The same fountain whose waters are "bitter" to all others, is one whose draughts are exquisitely "sweet" to the kind and affectionate mother. But suppose it were otherwise, that the same offices could be performed by the *artificial* as the *natural* parent, and with equal fidelity to the child; do not the circumstances of *gestation* and *childbirth* present difficulties, which could not be surmounted by a female under such embarrassments? But I need not extend the argument, for the bare mention of the thought of married females engaging in the medical profession is too palpably absurd to require any exposition. It carries along with it, a sense of shame, vul-

garity and disgust. But it may be argued, that those who are destined for the profession should avoid the marriage covenant, and hence these objections will be obviated. Such, I believe, is the course of Miss Blackwell, and some others, who have openly declared their own consecration to a life of celibacy, that the world may be benefited by their labors in the department of medicine. Wonderful beings, truly! Such philanthropy, such disinterestedness, and such a sacrifice on the altar of public good, will waft their names down the current of time, *long* after those who opposed them have been forgotten. But the avoidance of the marriage contract does not, after all, take the argument out of our hands; or if it does, it leaves another in its stead. It may be the removal of one of the horns of the dilemma; but let us see whether it is not the exhibition of another? Marriage, it will be acknowledged, is a *natural* state of the two sexes; consequently, the reverse of this is an *unnatural* one. And if it be a divine institution, then must its avoidance, *cæteris paribus*, be morally wrong. The conclusion of the whole argument, then, is, that the marriage condition is not compatible with the duties of a physician so far as regards females, and that its refusal is *naturally, religiously and socially wrong*.

" Brutes find out where their talents lie,
A bear will not attempt to fly;
A dog by instinct turns aside,
Who sees the ditch too deep and wide.
But man we find the only creature,
Who led by folly combats nature;
Who, when she loudly cries *forbear*,
With obstinacy fixes there;
And where his genius least inclines
Absurdly bends his whole designs."

3d. Females cannot practise medicine with so much convenience to themselves and others, as males. This arises not only from their constitutional peculiarities, rendering hardship and exposure hazardous at particular times; but also from their habits and education. Imagine a call for one of these *model physicians* at the dead hour of night, and perchance some miles out of town. Does she repair to the stable, harness her horse, and hasten with all possible despatch to the residence of her patient? By no means. Her groom must at least deliver her carriage at the door under all circumstances, and must frequently attend her doctorship to the place of destination, lest some insult or injury befall her upon the road. But suppose her groom is absent at the very moment when his services are most required; or suppose, when he has fulfilled his office and has started the fair one on her journey, that she meets with a mishap and fractures her carriage or lacerates her harness. Can it be supposed that her surgical attainments would be as adequate to the emergency as those of the opposite sex? True, she may not go off in a hysterical paroxysm; but in my opinion, her surgical reputation would meet with a rebuff, which would blast it forever. If, however, she is amply provided for in all these respects, and has only to seat herself in a carriage and be driven from place to place, and from patient to patient, at whose expense is her coachman employed? Here is an *extra* charge, which some one must defray; and upon whom does it devolve, except

those who employ the physician? If the patient were a widower or a melancholy old bachelor, I know not as this would be an objection; but with most persons it is material what such expenses are. Which, then, is most competent to act the physician, so far as this qualification is concerned—the *gentleman*, who is independent and competent to perform the task in and of himself; or the *lady*, who must have an assistant to aid and attend her in her operations?

I do not deny that *females* can, under many circumstances, act the physician as advantageously, in all respects, as our own sex. Nor, on the other hand, will any one deny that they can perform much of the labor of the farm and shop, with as much or even more despatch than ourselves. But this does not prove that they should turn farmers and mechanics. And if a false and fastidious delicacy is any objection on the one hand, the same objection is equally good on the other. If the time has come for each sex to have its own physicians, we certainly have as much grounds for it as *females* themselves. But I hold to no such theory, nor will I admit that both sexes may with the same propriety be educated for any profession, much less that of medicine. The title can never be divided, and the treasure is the exclusive inheritance of one party or the other. To determine, then, in whose favor the verdict shall be given, we must examine the question as a *whole*, in a *comprehensive* manner, and with reference to the natural qualifications of the two sexes, as related to it.

4th. The *temperament* of females is less favorable for the medical profession than that of males. I shall not urge, that a special temperament pertains to each of the sexes; but rather, that, as a whole, there is a material difference in this respect. To the female sex, then, may be ascribed the *nervous* or *excitable* temperament. To the male sex, the lymphatic, bilious and sanguine are more common. The designation, therefore, of *excitable* and *non-excitable*, is something more than an imaginary line distinguishing the two sexes. I scarcely, then, need to add, that in a profession where the *utmost nerve* and *self-possession* are often required, the male sex is the most favorably constituted. Habit and education may do much to improve the temperament for this or any other department; but it cannot wholly supply the deficiency, or render the *artificial* arrangement of things equal to the *natural*.

5th. The bearing of phrenology upon the question under consideration, is adverse to the proposition of creating physicians out of the female sex. This conclusion follows, not so much from the direct teaching of the science, as what may be inferred negatively, or indirectly. Thus, Inhabitiveness and Philoprogenitiveness are much larger, comparatively, in *females* than in *males*. The love of home, and of offspring, are consequently more fully exhibited in the one, than the other. Indeed, they seem to bear sway in the mental constitution of females, and bring almost every other organ into uniform and harmonious subserviency. And, say what we will, or think as we may, it is in the domestic circle that woman's talents and virtues display themselves with the greatest brilliancy. In this sphere we love, cherish and admire her. And the day is not distant when her worth in her own peculiar province will

be more fully appreciated, and a brighter halo will illumine the brow of woman in woman's sphere. Her's is no menial office, nor the station she fills second to that of our own sex. The earliest impressions of life are her's, and the plants of deepest root, and most luxuriant growth, are those which her own soft hand has planted, ere the soil had deteriorated or been occupied with briars and thorns. The *first, deepest, brightest* and most *lasting* impressions of life, are emphatically her's. Surely, then, the fashion, character and moral complexion of society are determined by her own, and must continue to be till she abandons her own sphere and ceases to "teach the young idea how to shoot." And can she ask more than this? Is it not sufficient that she lays the *foundation* of all our moral, social and political institutions? Must she abandon the circle of her own virtues, the centre of her own being, and all that is graceful and lovely in her sex, to minister in those things and in a province to which she is a stranger? No. Rather let her be encouraged, aided and sustained in the department for which she is so well and happily qualified; and let her utmost faculties be exercised for the development of the various resources of her own sex. Science, literature and many of the arts are at her disposal; and with these may she exert an influence, when rightly directed, adequate to her most lofty ambition. But she must be content to labor in her sphere, rather than assume responsibilities for which she has no natural taste or affinity. When she does this, when she aspires to be the *competitor* of man, she must abandon all claim to the love, sympathy and affection which are so freely bestowed upon her. Let me caution her, then, against the least departure from the only circle in which she can move with honor to herself and the good of mankind.

The revolution which is contended for may be accomplished; but when *woman* has been once introduced within the theatre of man's prerogatives, to what point may she not be conducted? If she must enter the medical department, then may she go yet another step, and take her rank in the professions of law and theology. And when she has gone thus far, when she has abandoned all that is fascinating in her sex, and when modesty, gentility and virtue have fallen from her brow, then may she go still further and commence the indiscriminate discharge of any and every duty of life. In this sense, I am no advocate of "woman's rights"; but so long as the distinctive faculties of the two sexes are observed, and the original features of each maintained, so long will I labor for the fullest and most ample liberty for either sex. The truth is, nature has spoken in reference to this matter, and, for one, I believe in no compromises, conservatism or amalgamation, which she does not and will not approve. And notwithstanding there may be a few ambitious spirits among the fair sex, who disregard the natural order of things, and deny that "all things are best as the will of God ordained them," still it will be but a ripple upon the face of the deep, which will soon disappear.

Let us, then, in conclusion, cherish the "rights of woman," as reason, philosophy and science have pointed them out, having an ear to hear and a heart to feel, whenever her claims for our aid and sympathy

are presented. And, on the other hand, let *woman* not assume the prerogatives of *man*, by entering the arena and noisy business of life, for which she has not faculties in common with *man*; but rather let her, in her own sphere, seek to co-operate with him in every effort to improve, happily and elevate the race. Then, and only then, can we extend to her a word of encouragement for virtue, sympathy for suffering, and a wreath for the brow of genius.

“ What if the foot ordained the dust to tread,
 Or hand to toil, aspired to be the head ?
 What if the head, the eye or ear repin'd,
 To serve mere engines of the ruling mind ?
 Just as absurd for any part to claim,
 To be another in this gen'ral frame ;
 Just as absurd to mourn the tasks or pains,
 The Great directing mind of all ordains.”