Winter 1979

College Board Exam Places "Imprimatur" on Women's History

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The Advanced Placement examination is divided into three parts: a multiple-choice section testing knowledge of the narrative history of Europe from 1450 to the present (75 minutes); one essay chosen from six topics dealing with major themes (45 minutes); and a required essay based on carefully selected and edited documents which students must read and synthesize (60 minutes). Neither students nor teachers have any advance knowledge of the examination. Essay questions and the required document-based question are a surprise.

Last year (1977-78) I had worked hard to integrate women's history into my AP curriculum. In every unit—from the Renaissance to Nazi Germany—students read, analyzed, and argued about documents dealing with the female experience; they heard lectures on women's status and struggles; and they examined images of women in European art. And even when materials on women for high school use were scanty in some areas, students were taught that a history existed.

Six females and thirteen males made up the class. The males, while seriously interested in studying women's history, often tried to rile us. "Now we're studying nothing," one would quip when documents on or by women were assigned. Or "Rousseau is right. Woman's purpose is to please man and serve him," another pronounced.

In the beginning of the course, the women students deferred to their male counterparts. As the course progressed, however, they became outspoken critics of historical materials which neglected women, and eager students reporting on historical figures they were encountering for the first time: Mary Wollstonecraft, Flora Tristan, Alexandra Kollontai, to name a few.

On the day of the exam, one student expressed doubts others must have felt. "As I was reviewing my notes," he confessed, "I couldn't help wondering if we'd wasted a lot of time with this women's stuff."

This story has a happy ending. My students were understandably elated over with writing. All they need is enough to keep their accounts and memoranda; you don't need to teach them fine handwriting or talk to them of style; a little spelling will do. Arithmetic is different. They need it.... Educate your middle-class girls in the middle-class way.... Don't even contemplate embellishing their minds. Teach them their domestic duties, obedience to their husbands, and how to look out after their children and train their small superior education. However, I have nearly always found that such preparation turned out to be useless for women of middling rank like yourselves. ... There is the fact, moreover, that a disproportionate elevation of the mind is very apt to breed pride. I have seen two bad effects issue from this: (1) contempt for housekeeping, for poverty, and for a husband less clever than oneself, and (2) discord. And so I conclude that I would be most reluctant to encourage girls to pursue book learning unless they were princesses, obliged by their rank to assume the responsibilities, knowledge, competence, administration, and authority of men."—Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, to his daughters, circa 1590.

Editors' Note: The document-based question was: "Discuss the extent to which early modern European society encouraged education for women. What criteria were used to evaluate women's education or its role, and women's potential for learning? What evolution, if any, can be seen in attitudes toward education for women from the Renaissance through the early eighteenth century?"

Students were required to analyze, as part of their examination, excerpts from 13 historical documents, including comments by Castiglione, Erasmus, Roger Ascham (describing his student, the future Queen Elizabeth I), Martin Luther, Milton, and Molière. Among the documents were quotations from three women: Louise Labé, Marie Dentière, and Mme. de Maintenon.

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"There is little point in girls of common extraction learning to read as well as young ladies or being taught as fine a pronunciation or knowledge of what a period is, etc. It is the same with writing. All they need is enough to keep their accounts and memoranda; you don't need to teach them fine handwriting or talk to them of style; a little spelling will do. Arithmetic is different. The need it. ... Educate your middle-class girls in the middle-class way. ... Don't even contemplate embellishing their minds. Teach them their domestic duties, obedience to their husbands, and how to look after their children and train their small staff, to go regularly to church on Sundays and holidays, to be modest with customers, honest in business.... Tell them that nothing is more displeasing to God and men than stepping out of one's social station—all are ordained by Providence, and God resists our endeavors to be other than He intended us to be. Teach them to be moderate and that the peasant must not try to ape the bourgeois nor the bourgeois the gentleman."—Mme. de Maintenon, letter to two women teachers, 1713.