

## Transcript of “Eliza S. Bowne’s Notes on Feminism”

**Emily** Hello everyone and welcome back to the Bowne House Historical Society’s series: “Eliza Southgate Bowne: In Her Own Words”. My name is Emily and I am again joined by David. We will be chatting about the letters of Eliza Bowne for all of March, in honor of Women’s History month. Today we will be exploring her thoughts about feminism. David, would you start us off?

**David** Certainly! To begin, I would like to point out that we only have access to Eliza’s letters and while they are plentiful I do not want to assume that we have a comprehensive understanding of her thoughts on such a complex topic. With that said, she did write about her thoughts several times, especially to her cousin Moses. In her early letters to Moses, Eliza is often fostering a trust between them. In April 1801 she writes to him, saying:

*“But I declare to you, Cousin, I am much gratified that you told me what you thought — had you have locked it in your bosom, I should never have had an opportunity to vindicate myself. I beg of you always to write with freedom, always write with the same openness you did in your last — ’tis one of the greatest advantages I expect to derive from our correspondence — I enjoin it upon you as you value my happiness.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne, April 9, 1801 (p. 53)

Eliza and Moses clearly had a special relationship. In my opinion, Eliza’s letters to him are some of the most lively and expressive of her writings. We do not have his letters to her, but Eliza’s responses suggest his writing was equally as expressive and playful. Unfortunately, Moses died from Yellow Fever in 1802, which cut off a valuable connection for Eliza.

**Emily** Oh that is sad and unfortunate. As we will see, her writing to Moses is very passionate so even 200 years later we can feel the loss of that relationship. Let’s get into the details, what did they discuss?

**David** In their letters they are most concerned with the differences in the way men and women think. Eliza often attempts to endear him to her by showing humility. In this letter she describes how much she has grown:

*"I wished for admiration, and took the means which would be most likely to obtain it. I found the mind of a female, if such a thing existed, was thought not worth cultivating. I disliked the trouble of thinking for myself and therefore adopted the sentiments of others — fully convinced to adorn my person and acquire a few little accomplishments was sufficient to secure me the admiration of the society I frequented. I cared but little about the mind. I learned to flutter about with a thoughtless gaiety — a mere feather which every breath had power to move. I left school with a head full of something, tumbled in without order or connection."*

But in the same letter she declares her confidence in her natural ability: *"Yet I believe I possess decent talents and should have been quite another being had they been properly cultivated."*

-Eliza S. Bowne, May 1801 (p. 55)

**Emily** She was acutely aware of how society produced "appropriate" women by encouraging and admiring when they adorn themselves well, and earn just a few accomplishments. But she now seems to want more.

**David** Absolutely. She saw education as the key. She certainly thought her boarding school education was very important and even encouraged her younger sister to take education more seriously.

*"I think, my dear sister, you ought to improve every moment of your time, which is short, very short to complete your education. In November terminates the period of your instruction."*

-Eliza S. Bowne, September 14, 1800 (p. 29)

But in a later letter to Moses Eliza also describes the failings of education available to women during this period and she compares the education of women with that of men.

*"As to the qualities of mind peculiar to each sex, I agree with you that sprightliness is in favor of females and profundity of males. Their education, their pursuits would create such a quality even tho' nature had not implanted it. The business and pursuits of men require deep thinking, judgment, and moderation, while on the other hand, females are under no necessity of dipping deep"*

And she goes on to explain this further: *“Women who have no such incentives to action suffer all the strong energetic qualities of the mind to sleep in obscurity; sometimes a ray of genius gleams through the thick clouds with which it is enveloped, and irradiated for a moment the darkness of mental night; yet, like a comet that shoots wildly from its sphere, it excites our wonder, and we place it among the phenomenons of nature, without searching for a natural cause. Thus it is the qualities with which nature has endowed us, as a support amid the misfortunes of life and a shield from the allurements of vice, are left to moulder in ruin. In this dormant state they become enervated and impaired, and at last die for want of exercise.”*

She also asks her cousin, *“Do you suppose the mind of woman the only work of God that was “made in vain?” The cultivation of the powers we possess, I have ever thought a privilege (or I may say duty) that belonged to the human species, and not man's exclusive prerogative.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne, June 1, 1801 (pp. 58-60)

**Emily** So, in Eliza’s view, society did not require, let alone encourage, women to think in the way that men were encouraged to do so.

**David** Yes, but she also believed that a difference was acceptable, but just not to the extent that it existed at the time. This will sound a bit odd to contemporary listeners but she believed that women should be encouraged to develop their minds as deeply as possible and still occupy a subservient role. She explains,

*“Far from destroying the harmony that ought to subsist, it would fix it on a foundation that would not totter at every jar. Women would be under the same degree of subordination that they now are; enlighten and expand their minds, and they would perceive the necessity of such a regulation to preserve the order and happiness of society. Yet you require that their conduct should be always guided by that reason which you refuse them the power of exercising. I know it is generally thought that in such a case women would assume the right of commanding. But I see no foundation for such a supposition.”*

-Eliza S. Bowne (p. 61)

As we can see, gender roles were very firmly entrenched and Eliza refuses to concede them. But she does believe that women deserve to have an informed

perspective on their role rather than being forced to blindly accept it which is some progress for 1801.

**Emily** So she was still trying to appeal to her cousin's sensibilities, while at the same time advocating for educating women.

**David** Yes, in a very telling passage she references a famous contemporary feminist and while Eliza is careful to distance herself from the woman, she also agrees with some of her thoughts. It is important to note that although the term feminist did not yet exist, Mary Wollstonecraft's work *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is a foundational text of feminism and Eliza's thoughts here directly stem from it.

*"I am aware of the censure that will ever await the female that attempts the vindication of her sex, yet I dare to brave that censure that I know to be undeserved. It does not follow that every female who vindicates the capacity of the sex is a disciple of Mary Wolstoncraft. Though I allow her to have said many things which I cannot but approve, yet the very foundation on which she builds her work will be apt to prejudice us so against her that we will not allow her the merit she really deserves, — yet, prejudice set aside, I confess I admire many of her sentiments."*

-Eliza S. Bowne (pp. 61-62)

**Emily** Hmm, yes, Eliza seems to be walking a very thin line here. She recognizes that if she were to align with Mary Wollstonecraft, she would be dismissed as being too radical. But Eliza admits to agreeing with some of Mary's ideas.

**David** Yes, it shows how she was juggling many conflicting opinions simultaneously.

**Emily** We have much more to talk about on this topic, but we'll save that for next week when we continue by discussing Eliza's thoughts on how women approached marriage. Join us next week!

## Cited Text

Eliza Southgate Bowne (1783-1809). *A girl's life eighty years ago; selections from the letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1887).

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