

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

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 marriage and love. David, what did Eliza write on this topic?

David Thanks, Emily. Well from her writing, I get the sense Eliza was not very eager to marry. She makes that pretty clear in one of her letters to her dear cousin Moses, who we mentioned in our last chat. In this letter, a 17 year old Eliza writes in great detail her thoughts about the connection between love and marriage.

“As I look around me I am surprised at the happiness which is so generally enjoyed in families , and that marriages which have not love for a foundation on more than one side at most, should produce so much apparent harmony. I may be censured for declaring it as my opinion that not one woman in a hundred marries for love . A woman of taste and sentiment will surely see but a very few whom she could love, and it is altogether uncertain whether either of them will particularly distinguish her. If they should, surely she is very fortunate, but it would be one of fortune's random favors and such as we have no right to expect.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, October? 1800 (pg. 37)

Emily It is quite a declaration that less than 1% of women marry for love. So how does she think women approach marriage if not for love?

David She goes on to explain the predicament women are placed in by society,

“Admitting as a known truth that few women marry those whom they would prefer to all the world if they could be viewed by them with equal affection, or rather that there are often others whom they could have preferred if they had felt that affection for them which would have induced them to offer themselves, — admitting this as a truth not to be disputed, — is it not a subject of astonishment that happiness is not almost banished from this connexion? Gratitude is undoubtedly the foundation of the esteem we

commonly feel for a husband. One that has preferred us to all the world, one that has thought us possessed of every quality to render him happy, surely merits our gratitude. If his character is good — if he is not displeasing in his person or manners — what objection can we make that will not be thought frivolous by the greater part of the world?”

-Eliza S. Bowne, October? 1800 (p. 37)

Emily Ah, society would treat women choosing to marry for love as frivolous. So whenever women receive attention from a gentleman, they are expected to show gratitude and not consider their own happiness. How does Eliza feel about this situation?

David Again she does an excellent job at describing what the world expects from her and other women. She is not looking forward to marriage because she does not think it will bring her happiness. She goes on to make a strong statement, saying,

“the world should never compel me to marry a man because I could not give satisfactory reasons for not liking him. I do not esteem marriage absolutely essential to happiness, and that it does not always bring happiness we must every day witness in our acquaintance. A single life is considered too generally as a reproach; but let me ask you, which is the most despicable — she who marries a man she scarcely thinks well of — to avoid the reputation of an old maid — or she, who with more delicacy, than marry one she could not highly esteem, preferred to live single all her life, and had wisdom enough to despise so mean a sacrifice, to the opinion of the rabble, as the woman who marries a man she has not much love for — must make.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, October? 1800 (p. 38)

But like we saw last week, she then attempts to temper her opinion by asserting that she believes the world shouldn't change, even if she thinks the status quo puts women in a difficult position.

“I wish not to alter the laws of nature — neither will I quarrel with the rules which custom has established and rendered indispensably necessary to the harmony of society. But every being who has contemplated human nature on a large scale will certainly justify me when I declare that the inequality of privilege between the sexes is very sensibly felt by us females, and in no

instance is it greater than in the liberty of choosing a partner in marriage; true, we have the liberty of refusing those we don't like, but not of selecting those we do. This is undoubtedly as it should be. But let me ask you, what must be that love which is altogether voluntary, which we can withhold or give, which sleeps in dulness and apathy till it is requested to brighten into life? Is it not a cold, lifeless dictate of the head, — do we not weigh all the conveniences and inconveniences which will attend it? And after a long calculation, in which the heart never was consulted, we determine whether it is most prudent to love or not. How I should despise a soul so sordid, so mean!"

And she goes on to justify this by theorizing the differences between men and women: *"There is a happy conformity or pliability in the female mind which seems to have been a gift of nature to enable them to be happy with so few privileges, — and another thing, they have more gratitude in their dispositions than men, and there is a something particularly gratifying to the heart in being beloved, if the object is worthy."*

Eliza ends this incredible letter by making the concept of marriage personal again, *"For my part I should never ask the question of myself - do I love such a one, if I had reason to think he loved me — and I believe there are many who love that never confessed it to themselves. My Pride, my delicacy, would all be hurt if I discovered such unasked for love, even in my own bosom. I would strain every nerve and rouse every faculty to quell the first appearance of it. There is no danger, however. I could never love without being beloved, and I am confident in my own mind that no person whom I could love would ever think me sufficiently worthy to love me. But I congratulate myself that I am at liberty to refuse those I don't like, and that I have firmness enough to brave the sneers of the world and live an old maid, if I never find one I can love ."*

-Eliza S. Bowne, October? 1800 (pp. 38-41)

Emily And we know she does not become an "old maid," because eventually she does marry. Does she speak about her own courtship and marriage?

David Before she met her future husband Walter Bowne, she addressed rumors that she was getting close to an engagement.

"I despise coquetry, - every lady says the same, you will say, — but if I know myself at all — my heart readily assents to its truth — I think no lady has a right

to encourage hopes that she means never to gratify, but I think she is much to blame if she considers these little attentions as a proof of love; they often mean nothing, and should be treated as such...William has been left alone; — true, he has this winter been more attentive to me than usual; he lent me books, drawings, and music; he used often to be my gallant home from parties if I walked, and if I rode help me to the sleigh, yet every gentleman does the same, — all have a favorite, some for a month, some a little longer.”

-Eliza S. Bowne, March 18, 1801 (p. 45-48)

Emily That’s interesting - she seems very careful not to misinterpret gallant gestures as romantic intentions. What about when she finally meets Walter Bowne?

David Unfortunately, Moses has passed by the time Eliza met Walter, so her following letter to her mother is written in a much more cautious and respectful tone.

“At Albany, on our way to Ballston, we put up at the same house with a Mr. Bowne from New York; he went on to the Springs the same day we did, and from that time was particularly attentive to me; he was always of our parties to ride, went to Lake George in company with us, and came on to Lebanon when we did, — for 4 weeks I saw him every day and probably had a better opportunity of knowing him than if I had seen him as a common acquaintance in town for years.”

She continues by convincing her parents that Walter is a fit match for her.

"I left myself in a situation truly embarrassing. At such a distance from all my friends, — my Father and Mother a perfect stranger to the person, — and pre possessed in his favor as much as so short an acquaintance would sanction, - his conduct was such as I shall ever reflect on with the greatest pleasure, — open, candid, generous, and delicate. He is a man in whom I could place the most unbounded confidence, nothing rash or impetuous in his disposition, but weighs maturely every circumstance; he knew I was not at liberty to encourage his addresses without the approbation of my Parents, and appeared as solicitous that I should act with strict propriety as one of my most disinterested friends. He advised me like a friend and would not have suffered me to do anything improper. He only required I would not discourage his addresses till he had an opportunity of making known to my Parents his character and wishes - this I promised and went so far as to tell him I

approved him as far as I knew him, but the decision must rest with my Parents, their wishes were my law.”

-Eliza S. Bowne September 9, 1802 (pp. 139-141)

Emily Very interesting! Even though this is not as colorful as her letters to Moses, it is wonderful to get a glimpse into the relationship with her parents.

David I agree. It is a beautiful letter showing the importance of their opinions to her and as we know, they agreed with Eliza about Walter!

Emily Yes! They were married in 1803 and had children together before Eliza passed in 1809. It seems to have been a good match with a tragic ending. Thank you for joining me again, David. Next week we continue by discussing Eliza's experience during a Yellow Fever epidemic. Join us next week!

Cited Text

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