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# Horace Mann's Vision in Action: Bridgewater Normal School's Female Teachers

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Casey graduated summa cum laude from Bridgewater State College in May of 2007, earning a Bachelor of Arts in History and a minor in Secondary Education. Casey conducted this research, which was partially funded by an ATP summer grant, under the mentorship of Dr. Margaret Lowe of the History Department. This excerpt represents a small portion of her Honors Thesis which was accepted by, and presented at, the National Conference of Undergraduate Research in 2007. Casey is currently teaching Social Studies at Silver Lake Regional High School. She plans to pursue her masters and doctoral degrees.

## Abstract

**T**hrough a close reading of Horace Mann's archival material including official documents and speeches, this paper argues that Horace Mann expanded women's social roles in the nineteenth century. Whether he intended such an outcome or not, Horace Mann's agenda to improve common schools increased American women's educational and professional opportunities. Drawing upon the popular ideology of the day, Mann articulated a detailed rationale for placing women, as "natural teachers" at the center of public education in Massachusetts when he became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837. This can best be seen through his annual reports to the Board of Education as well as how his ideas took shape at one of his original three normal schools, Bridgewater State Normal School. The normal school gave women academic experience above the high school level—which was usually reserved for men, and trained them for the noble profession of teaching. Mann's philosophy of women, which was widely disseminated, was limited by contemporary ideas about gender, his political position, and the constraints of establishing a school specifically to train a corps of common school teachers. Despite this, Mann does show a progressive awareness of women's issues for his time period that should not be overlooked. Since this aspect of Horace Mann and his normal schools has not been widely studied, this honors thesis, completed in the Fall of 2006, contributes new knowledge about gender and educational policy during a pivotal moment in American history.

In 1837, Horace Mann accepted the position as the first secretary to the Board of Education in Massachusetts; his mission was to improve the public school system in the state. One of his most revolutionary changes to the system included establishing normal schools for the express purpose of training a core of well-trained teachers who could then, he believed, transform the public schools. His ideal normal school student would be female, as Mann believed they were "naturally" suited by God to instruct young common school children.

Teaching and education had traditionally been considered men's responsibilities however, Mann circumvented this tradition by promoting a particular form of education for women— that of normal schools, and a particular type of teaching-working with young children in common schools. Thus, Mann's plan for improved common schools brought women outside the home without interfering with the traditional notions of women's proper domain. Using the popular ideology of his

time, Mann carved out a more public space for women without directly challenging the separate spheres ideology. He believed that women were perfectly capable of mastering the art of teaching which he considered to be “the most difficult of all arts, and the profoundest of all sciences.”<sup>1</sup> Not only could they master the role of teacher, they were naturally inclined to succeed in this role because of their God-given roles as mothers and designated roles as moral guardians. Female teachers would benefit the state as well; they cost much less than male teachers did. Mann was not considered a women’s rights advocate or a feminist; however, he was willing to offer women an expanded role in society as long as he could embed it within the widely accepted separate spheres ideology.<sup>2</sup>

Mann, like many of his contemporaries, subscribed to the theory of the true woman and the separate spheres. Over and over again, in his writings, Mann celebrated wife, mother, and womanhood in general. In his annual reports and lectures, Mann emphasized women’s virtuous character and their positive social influence. He also noted the more limiting aspects of the ideology, “As a general law,” he wrote, “the man surpasses the woman in stature, [and] in physical strength.”<sup>3</sup> He also observed that

Young men, it may be said, have a larger circle of action; they can mingle in more promiscuous society, -at least they have a far wider range of business occupations... But the sphere of females is domestic. Their life is comparatively secluded. The proper delicacy of the sex forbids them from appearing in the promiscuous marts of business.<sup>4</sup>

Mann believed that these differences were acceptable, and even a product of God’s work and intention. It was “the Creator Himself...[which]... created the race, Male and Female, ON THE PRINCIPLE OF A DIVISION OF LABOR.”<sup>5</sup> The natural differences and characteristics, in Mann’s mind, were “everlasting distinctions which God has established between man and woman.”<sup>6</sup>

While identifying with all the contents of the separate spheres ideology, particularly those which identified women as care takers of the nation’s children and the moral guardians of the nation, Mann qualified his idea of the spheres a little differently. Instead of speaking of two completely separate entities, each belonging to one of the two sexes, Mann called what was traditionally referred to as the “Women’s Sphere,” a “Hemisphere” in of the orb of human interactions.<sup>7</sup> He emphasized one sphere divided in half, instead of two wholly, independent spheres. He wrote that in these hemispheres, “each [of the sexes] is necessary as the complement of the other.”<sup>8</sup> This is a powerful visual that carries a significant psychological impact. Rather than assuming that individuals

would understand the two spheres to be complimentary, Mann made it clear, by discussing gender relations as two halves of one sphere, that the division of labor represented the essential balance and interdependence of the two sexes. While the more traditional approach divided the world into two seemingly unconnected, completely opposite domains- public and private- (which further implied that one was not required for the full functionality of the other), Mann used one sphere divided in half to stress that while the hemispheres are not alike, “there is a mutuality of superiority” between them.<sup>9</sup> Even in his hemispherical view of gender relations, Mann called the women’s half of the sphere, the “upper and nobler half of the orb of human duty;”<sup>10</sup> this is similar to his contemporaries who believed that women, even as members of the private sphere of society, were important contributing members of society. Unlike those who believed that women were upholding their responsibilities in their sphere, Mann believed that women, because they were deprived of education and even from teaching in the classroom, had “not been allowed to fill [their] semi-circle.”<sup>11</sup> He wanted women to have a larger, more active role within the hemisphere that they were assuming; this larger role included education and teaching. Mann argued that a woman’s education and her innate domesticity complimented each other. As an example he wrote:

See Mrs. Somerville mastering science by science, and comprehending world after world, until her own mind becomes, as it were, a transcript of the universe; and then writing out, with a lucidity which can be borrowed only from nature’s light, the glorious harmonies and adaptations of the Creators works, until, in perusing her pages, we seem to hear, even with the natural ear, those hallelujahs of praise to His name with which all nature is vocal; while, at the same time she attends to all her domestic concerns, and makes her own house, for order, simplicity and neatness, like the grand machinery of nature she so loves to contemplate.<sup>12</sup>

This demonstrated and supported Mann’s argument that women could balance education, morality, and domestic concerns. Education would not jeopardize these aspects of women’s proper hemisphere.

Even though women’s traditional role involved caring for children, Mann had to demonstrate how these innate abilities transferred to the classroom setting; this was not an easy task. In his *Ninth Annual Report*, Mann recounted how the concept of female teachers was not immediately accepted:

Six or eight years ago, when the employment of female teachers was recommended to school committees, not a little was said against adopting the suggestion. But one committee after another was induced to try the experiment, and the success has been so great that the voice of opposition is now silenced. So far as can be learned from the committees' reports, I believe there is now an unbroken unanimity among them, on this subject.<sup>13</sup>

This shows that Mann successfully convinced the school committees of the benefits of hiring female teachers for the common schools; he obviously made compelling arguments. Like others arguing for a more expanded role for women, Mann used the ideology in his day to expand American women's roles in the society he lived. By emphasizing that female common school teachers used the same maternal instincts that they would use in their own home with their own children, Mann demonstrated that "teaching, especially of small children, was outside the public, male sphere because the school [was] an extension of the family."<sup>13</sup> Mann, as a politician, recognized that using this approach "affirmed [society's] belief in the uniqueness of women and [it] offered a reassurance that proposed changes in women's activities would benefit society."<sup>14</sup> He claimed that "Education... is women's work;- the domain of her empire, the scepter of her power, the crown of her glory."<sup>15</sup> He used traditional ideals of womanhood, namely women's innate ability to care for and guide children, as well as her virtuous nature and moral superiority. These justifications permitted Mann to expand the women's sphere to fit his needs without grossly clashing with society's norms and expectations for women. Mann's proposal for a more expanded role for women allowed him to accommodate his goals for an improved common school system in Massachusetts.

The traditional gender roles for women bolstered Mann's argument for female teachers. Since femininity and true womanhood were associated with motherhood and caring for the children in the home, Mann felt that females could easily apply their skills in the classroom. According to Mann, "the Author of nature pre-adapted [women], by constitution, and faculty, and temperament for this noble work [of teaching]."<sup>16</sup> Mann adamantly believed that women were naturally endowed to be common school teachers, and he frequently argued this point in his annual reports and lectures. He believed that

There is nothing a girl can learn, that a woman is incapable of teaching, when properly trained; and in many cases- as everyone knows from frequenting Sunday schools,- women make better instructors than those of the other sex. Women have often more talent for conversational teaching (the best of all forms of instruction,) more

quickness of perception in seizing difficulties by which the mind of a child is embarrassed, and more mildness of manner than a master commonly possesses; and when these important qualities are combined with the proper degree of firmness, (and that, too, may be acquired,) they cannot be excelled.<sup>17</sup>

The female teacher, Mann wrote, "holds her commission from nature,... [as] all the differences of organization and temperament which individualize the sexes point to females as the guide and guardian of young children."<sup>18</sup> Her "natural sympathy, sagacity, [and] maternal instincts preeminently qualify her for this sphere of noble usefulness."<sup>19</sup>

Teaching in common schools, Mann believed, required the same types of skills that were inherent in all females; teachers used the same disposition, gentleness, and nurturing ability as mothers did. He thought that "[women] should be the educator of children;...[and that this was] as much a requirement of nature as that she should be the mother of children."<sup>20</sup> He argued that woman's "stronger parental impulses [endowed upon them by nature]" and "more mild and gentle manners," made them "more in consonance with the tenderness of children," and thus "better teachers" than their male counterparts.<sup>v</sup> He also contended that,

females will teach young children better than males, will govern them with less resort to physical appliances, and will exert a more genial, kindly, a more humanizing and refining influence on their dispositions and manners.<sup>21</sup>

Mann praised women for their grace, faith, and purity, along with their natural spirit of love and affection for good; he believed that these were all important qualities for individuals working with children to possess. Based on women's natural, God-given abilities and characteristics- specifically their natural affinity of children- Mann argued that women were better suited as common school teachers than men. "Female teachers," Mann believed, "are nine cases out of ten better adapted to promote the improvement of our children in learning than teachers of the other sex...three-fourths of the pupils could be better taught by them than by our most able male teachers"<sup>22</sup>

In addition to promoting women as common school teachers because of their inborn maternal instincts, Mann further advocated for more female common school teachers because he believed that women were morally superior to men. This superiority, according to Mann would permit females to instill their morals in the common school students they taught. "[Female teachers]," Mann wrote "are ...of purer morals," and "more fit than males to be the guides and exemplars of young children."<sup>23</sup> She naturally "revolts from vice."<sup>24</sup> Women's prerogative is "to lift our world

from its degradation... and adorn it with all moral adornments.”<sup>25</sup> They had, in Mann’s mind, the unique, “reflex power of elevating others.”<sup>26</sup> Females, unlike their male counterparts, “utilized their more “forbearing nature and a nicer delicacy of touch, to remove the evil” within students and replace it with virtue of conduct and character.”<sup>27</sup> This moral superiority was important to Mann, because he believed that common schools “were the only agency capable of moral education in an age of endemic sectarianism.”<sup>28</sup> He believed that schools should instill morals and virtue within the students who attended in order to form citizens filled with republican ideals and character. In order to do this, the teachers themselves had to be the moral examples for the children who attended. Since high moral ideals came naturally to women, he believed female teachers would help him achieve his moral ideals for the common schools.

Women’s moral superiority made females better common school teachers for another reason: their purer motives for teaching in the common schools. Unlike their male counterparts, who taught school between college breaks to support themselves financially, female teachers were less likely to use teaching as a temporary employment or a stepping stone to another career. Mann thought it “preposterous” that many males “[kept] school for a few years in order to obtain the means of entering the medical or legal profession.”<sup>29</sup> Teaching for such impure reasons set a bad example for the students left in their charge. Mann appreciated the fact that, women’s minds were

less withdrawn from their employment [as] they are less intent and scheming for future honors or emoluments.... as a class they never look forward, as young men almost invariably do to a period [when they may] go abroad into the world, to build up a fortune for themselves; and hence, the sphere of hope and of effort is narrower, and the whole force of the mind are more readily concentrated upon present duties.<sup>30</sup>

Because of the fact that women’s opportunities were so limited, they did not have many options outside of teaching to aim for, let alone leave their teaching positions for. If females sought some sort of professional status, teaching was really their best and only option.

In addition to their natural affinity for teaching and their positive moral influence on future generations, Mann viewed female teachers as economically advantageous to his plan to improve common schools. Acknowledging the great disparity in wages between male and female teachers, Mann, wrote, “is in not an unpardonable waste of means, where it can possibly avoided, to employ a man at \$25-\$30 a month, to teach the alphabet, when it can be done much better, at half price, by a female teacher?”<sup>31</sup>

At the time, the average monthly wages of males in the state was \$33.08 while the average monthly wages of females for the same school was \$12.75.<sup>32</sup> Obviously, saving money by hiring women as teachers in the common schools would allow school districts to do a number of other things to improve the quality of the schools- from purchasing textbooks or lab equipment, to improving the school building, extending the school term, or even hiring more teachers. It would even provide the state with excess funds to support more normal schools. In Mann’s opinion, advocating for women to teach in the common schools was quite a bargain. “A female will keep quite as good a school as a man, at two thirds of the expense,” Mann wrote.<sup>33</sup> To show the extent of the savings accrued by hiring female teachers, he discussed in his *Eleventh Annual Report* that the money saved though the increased proportion of female teachers saved the state \$11,580.04 that year, almost equivalent to “double the expense, of the three state normal schools.”<sup>34</sup>

Although Mann’s primary motivation for even discussing female teachers and their education at normal schools was due to his intense desire to improve the common schools in Massachusetts, Mann certainly held an awareness of women’s issues that should not be ignored. Mann used his understanding of the confines of the separate spheres to empower and support new roles for women in nineteenth century society, particularly in the field of education- both as teachers in the common school classrooms, and as students in the normal schools. Mann wrote that women should be educated “not because it is her right, but because it is essential to the world’s progress”<sup>35</sup> Normal schools promoted the idea that women were capable of being educated, and that women could participate in a wider social venue for the greater good of society.

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## Endnotes

1. Horace Mann, *First Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the First Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1837), 58.
2. The sources most influential to my research were: Jeanne Boydston, "The Pastoralization of Housework," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ellen DuBois, and Lynn Dumenil. "Chapter 3: Pedestal, Loom, and Auction Block. 1800-1860." In *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents*. (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2005); Linda Eisenmann. "Assessing the History of Women's Education a Dozen Years after Barbara Solomon." *Harvard Educational Review*. 67 (Winter 1997) 689-717. Christine A. Ogren, *The American State Normal School: An Instrument of Great Good* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Rosalind Rosenberg. "The Limits of Access: The History of Coeducation in America" In *Women and Higher Education in American History: Essays from the Mount Holyoke Sesequential Symposia*. Edited by John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America." In *Woman and Power in American History* Vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Edited by Kathryn Kish Skylar and Thomas Dublin. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002); Barbara Miller Solomon. *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Nancy Woloach, *Women and the American Experience*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996).
3. Horace Mann, "Lecture 1," in *A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Women: Two Lectures*. (Syracuse: Hall, Mills, and Company, 1853), 23.
4. Horace Mann, *Third Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board*. (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1839), 87.
5. Mann, "Lecture 1," 17, emphasis in original.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. Mann, "Lecture 1," 11.
8. Ibid., 17.
9. Ibid., 23.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Horace Mann, "Lecture 2," in *A Few Thoughts on the Powers and Duties of Women: Two Lectures*, (Syracuse: Hall, Mills, and Company, 1853), 73.
12. Mann, "Lecture 1," 60.
13. Horace Mann, *Ninth Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Ninth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1846), 34.



14. Ogren, *The American State Normal School*, 11.
15. Louise Michele Newman, "Chapter 1: The Problem of Biological Determinism (1870-1890)," *Men's Ideas/ Women's Realities: Popular Science, 1870-1915*. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 2.
16. Horace Mann, "Lecture 2," 85.
17. Horace Mann, *Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Eighth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1844), 60.
18. Horace Mann, *Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Fourth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1840), 97.
19. Horace Mann, *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Sixth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1842), 28.
20. *Ibid.*, 31.
21. Mann, "Lecture 2," 82.
22. Mann, *Fourth Annual Report*, 45.
23. Mann, *Ninth Annual Report*, 34.
24. Thomas Woody, "Chapter 10," in *A History of Women's Education in the United States*. (New York: Science Press, 1929), 501.
25. Mann, *Fourth Annual Report*, 45-46.
26. Mann, "Lecture 1," 29.
27. *Ibid.*, 10.
28. *Ibid.*, 12.
29. Mann, *Sixth Annual Report*, 29.
30. Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 263.
31. Mann, *Ninth Annual Report*, 34.
32. Mann, *Fourth Annual Report*, 45.
33. *Ibid.*, 28.
34. *Ibid.*, 33.
35. *Ibid.*, 46.
36. Horace Mann, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Education Together with the Eleventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1847), 26.
37. Mann, "Lecture 2," 86.