

## 21 QUOTATIONS



Charles Brockden Brown

(1771-1810)

Charles Brockden Brown is the first notable literary novelist in American history. His two dark novels *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntley* (1799) established the serious Gothic tradition in American fiction and influenced Poe. They read like silent horror movies, yet are full of themes significant in intellectual history. In them Brown dramatizes the transition from 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rationalism to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism. Of primary interest to many people today is his *Alcuin* (1797), the first tract advocating women's rights in America, over half a century before the first national women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Brown was an idealistic young liberal ahead of his time. The women's rights movement in 1797 was urban, whereas over 90% of women lived on family farms and were Victorian. Most women thought "equal rights" would threaten their family-based economic security, destroy marriage, weaken charities, reduce their moral authority and diminish their power in homes, schools and churches:

Adapted from *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1797)

### GENDER DIALOGUE

"My dear Madam... If the sexes had in reality separate interests, and it were not absurd to set more value on qualifications on account of their belonging to one of our own sex, it is the women who may justly triumph..."

"If I understand you rightly (said the lady) you are of opinion that the sexes are essentially equal."

"It appears to me (answered I) that human beings are moulded by the circumstances in which they are placed. In this they are all alike. The differences that flow from the sexual distinction are as nothing in the balance."

"...Yes (said the lady); of all forms of injustice, that is the most egregious which makes the circumstances of sex a reason for excluding one half of mankind from all those paths which lead to usefulness and honour."

"Without doubt (returned I) there is abundance of injustice in the sentence; yet it is possible to misapprehend and to overrate the injury that flows from the established order of things. If a certain part of

every community must be condemned to servile and mechanical professions, it matters not of what sex they may be.... The evil lies in so much of human capacity being thus fettered and perverted. The allotment is sad. Perhaps it is unnecessary.... Perhaps this inequality is incurable. In either case it is to be lamented, and, as far as possible, mitigated.... Though we must admit the claims of the female sex [to be equal] with the other, we cannot allow them to be superior.”

“...But nature (said the lady) has subjected us to peculiar infirmities and hardships. In consideration of what we suffer as mothers and nurses, I think we ought to be exempted from the same proportion of labour....”

“In every family there are various duties. Certainly the most toilsome and rugged do not fall to the lot of women....”

“But are we not (cried the lady) excluded from the liberal professions?...”

“Why that may admit of question. You have free access, for example, to the accounting-house.... The profession of a merchant may be pursued with success and dignity...”

“But what apology can you make for our exclusion from the class of physicians?”

“To a certain extent the exclusion is imaginary. My grandmother was a tolerable physician....”

“But the law—”

“True, we are not accustomed to see female pleaders at the bar. I never wish to see them there. But the law...may be...practiced as a source of gain, without obliging us to frequent and public exhibitions....”

“Well (said the lady), let us dismiss the lawyer and physician, and turn our eye to the pulpit.”

“Tis only (replied I) in some sects... But there are other sects which admit females into the class of preachers...there is no religious society in which women are debarred from the privileges of superior sanctity. The Christian religion has done much to level the distinctions of property, and rank, and sex.... If some pursuits are monopolized by men, others are appropriated by you.”...

“What think you of female education? Mine has been frivolous....”

“What can render men wise but their own efforts? Does curiosity derive no encouragement from the possession of the power and materials? You are taught to read and to write. Quills, paper, and books are at hand.... If you be insensible to the pleasures and benefits of knowledge, and are therefore ignorant and trifling, truly, it is not for want of assistance and encouragement....”

(said she) “You forget how seldom those who are most fortunately situated, are permitted to cater for themselves. Their conduct in this case, as in all others, is subject to the control of others who are guided by established prejudices, and are careful to remember that we are women. They think a being of this sex to be instructed in a manner different from those of another. Schools, and colleges, and public instructors are provided in all the abstruse sciences and learned languages; but whatever may be their advantages, are not women totally excluded from them?”

“Let us consider (said I) whether a public education be not unfavorable to moral and intellectual improvement, or, at least, whether it be preferable to the domestic method.... [Besides,] places of public education, which are colleges in all respects but the name, are, perhaps, as numerous for females as for males.”

“They differ (said the lady) from colleges in this, that a very different plan of instruction is followed. I know of no female school where Latin is taught, or geometry, or chemistry.”

“Yet, Madam, there are female geometricians, and chemists, and scholars, not a few....”

*Alcuin*  
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