

Godey's Lady's Book and Sarah Josepha Hale: Making Female Education Fashionable

By Amy Condra Peters

The heart is perpetually in vigorous motion, and the brain should be as busy as the heart.
Godey's Lady's Book <1>

In nineteenth century America, *Godey's Lady's Book* was the "Victorian Bible of the Parlor," <2> and its editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, preached the sacred gospel of "true womanhood" -- piety, purity, and domesticity. <3> The pages of *Godey's* were dedicated to sweet, wholesome prose and poetry, to recipes for "Refreshing Drinks for Hot Weather" <4> and to the "Latest Fashion for Head-dresses." <5> Mrs. Hale, as editor of *Godey's*, often wrote of the moral superiority with which God had graced women, thus rendering women responsible for the morality of the family and, by extension, of society. <6> However, Mrs. Hale's conventional view of women, as domestic creatures infused with moral goodness, influenced her to assume an unconventional position. According to Mrs. Hale, a woman's ". . . first right is to education in its widest sense, to such education as will give her the full development of all her personal, mental and moral qualities." <7> Therefore, in order to fulfill her moral obligations, a woman must first receive the education necessary to be successful in her noble mission. Sarah Hale and her *Godey's Lady's Book* emphasized that a woman's primary place should be in the home as an example of morality and virtue to her family; however, Mrs. Hale's contributions to the cause of female education ultimately provided the means for women to enter and to compete in the public sphere.

Godey's Lady's Book was founded by Louis Godey in 1830. Under Mr. Godey's direction the book was relatively insignificant, and employed the common practice of the times of reprinting articles from English periodicals. <8> Not until Mr. Godey persuaded Sarah Hale to become the editor of *Godey's* in 1836 <9> did the magazine begin to gain widespread success, culminating in an extensive circulation of 150,000. <10> The popularity of *Godey's* was so great that many women who would not otherwise be able to afford the subscription rate would join together to form clubs which would subscribe to the magazine, thus reducing the cost to each member. <11> The widespread appeal of the magazine, due to its colored fashion plates and its articles on health, architecture, beauty, gardening and cookery, meant that as editor of the magazine Mrs. Hale's potential influence on women would be considerable.

One of Sarah Hale's first decisions upon assuming her position as editor of *Godey's* was to rid the magazine of much of the "watery verse and sugary romances" <12> which had dominated its pages under Mr. Godey's direction. Although many of the poems and stories published in *Godey's* remained sentimental, Mrs. Hale also introduced readers to the works of several major writers -- Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Emerson, Bryant, Whittier -- who contributed to *Godey's Lady's Book*. One writer, Edgar Allan Poe, contributed so frequently to *Godey's* that one of his biographers states that through 1846 "*Godey's Lady's Book* must have been the main source of his livelihood." <13> The

literary quality of *Godey's* was thus raised to the point at which "to appear in *Godey's Lady's Book* was to be made." <14>

As Sarah Hale sought to improve the literary quality of stories submitted by professional writers, she also attempted to advance the writing skills of *Godey's* readers. She published several articles which described proper writing techniques. One article, titled "Rule of Composition," instructed writers to "give yourself as you are -- what *you* see, and how *you* see it. Shakespeare, Goethe, Cervantes, gave the world as *they* saw it, each for himself . . ." <15> Other articles emphasized the need for a strong vocabulary <16> and the dangers of verbosity.<17> Mrs. Hale published the titles of those articles which had been accepted and also those which did not meet the magazine's standards.<18> Her impatience with those submissions which she did not accept often led her to write announcements such as the following -- "We again repeat that we will not accept any stories where runaway horses or upsetting of boats is necessary to the denouement -- certainly some other incidents can be invented." <19>

Mrs. Hale's desire to aid in the literary improvement of *Godey's* readers prompted her to prescribe reading courses, which if followed would have resulted in the equivalent of a college education. <20> Titles suggested resented such diverse subjects as *Elements of Intellectual Philosophy*, <21> *Principles of Zoology* <22> and *Thoughts on the Future Civil Policy of America*. <23> If subscribers could not find these books, *Godey's* would obtain the works for them. <24>

Although exposure to well-written and informative literary works would definitely improve a woman's base of knowledge, such efforts were not enough to provide the education which Sarah Hale thought it crucial for women to possess. *Godey's Lady's Book* published an article which stated that knowledge ". . . is the first and most essential element of power; it is the germ of all prosperity; it is the means of all enjoyment." <25>

Mrs. Hale first presented her ideas on the necessity of women's education in such a way that it would be agreeable to men -- ". . . intelligent companionship, a life in which ideas have a share, is much more attractive to men, and women also, than a life of mere outside events." <26> *Godey's Lady's Book* published articles by Catherine Beecher, Emma Willard, and others who shared Mrs. Hale's views on female education. Also published in *Godey's* were notices by schools for women, thereby keeping readers up to date on the status of female seminaries, and their locations and costs. <27> Any school for women was guaranteed space in the magazine simply by submitting a catalogue.

As Sarah Hale's ideas concerning the education of women gained acceptance, she proceeded to assert that women must not only be educated, but must be educated in the same manner accorded to men. "No sex in education!" Such was the motto of Mrs. Hale, who published an article in *Godey's* declaring:

And, indeed, if there were to be any difference between a girl's education and a boy's, I should say that of the two the girl should be earlier led . . . and that her range of literature should be, not more, but less frivolous . . . <28>

Sarah Hale's desire that women be educated as liberally as men were educated prompted her to welcome the opening of Vassar College, a school designed to "accomplish for young women what our colleges are accomplishing for young men." <29> In fact, Mrs. Hale's determination to see Vassar succeed inspired her to write to Matthew Vassar, the founder of the college, and offer his school free publicity in *Godey's Lady's Book*. "I shall rejoice to aid in your good plan, by making the readers of the *Lady's Book* your earnest friends..." <30> In this vein Mrs. Hale repeatedly printed articles describing the status of Vassar, and declaring to Godey's readers that "Vassar College we consider as one of the most important interests of our age and nation, therefore we make it a subject of particular attention." <31>

The concern for Vassar's ultimate success led Mrs. Hale to display particular concern when the college's original outline of organization provided for no women executives. <32> In an article titled "Vassar College -- the New Plan of Organization Explained -- Only One Defect and This May Be Easily Amended," Mrs. Hale stated the following:

It would seem that not only the President but all the teachers are to be men . . . all instructors should be ladies except when properly qualified teachers of that sex cannot be found . . . surely the President and Trustees of this college, which is designed . . . for the elevation of woman, will not commence by degrading her. <33>

Mrs. Hale's plea proved effective, and when Vassar opened on September 20, 1865, the faculty was comprised of 22 women (as opposed to 8 men).

Sarah Hale's interest in education extended to the education of children, and she felt that women were the best suited to this enterprise. Mrs. Hale felt that women's "native feminine patience and understanding of children" provided a more positive influence for children than did the more aggressive temperament of men. <34> Sarah Hale praised Catherine Beecher's efforts to train women to teach in the West, <35> and *Godey's Lady's Book* publicized the work of the organization founded by Ms. Beecher, The Board of National Popular Education. <36> In June, 1846, Godey's announced that it was authorized and prepared to handle requests from communities desiring teachers and applications from young women wishing to teach. <37> Such notices appealed to women from various backgrounds and locales, and who shared the desire to teach. <38> To such women, Godey's provided the means to fulfill their aspirations.

As the number of women in the teaching profession increased, Mrs. Hale continued to address the concerns of teachers. In an article titled, "Appeal to the Fortieth Congress of the United States," published in *Godey's* in 1868, Sarah Hale stated that:

The profession of teacher requires . . . as thorough and special training as that of any of the other intellectual professions. The great majority of teachers are deficient in this training . . . the complaint on this head is indeed universal. And it is coupled with another complaint of the inadequate salaries almost everywhere paid to teachers . . . <39>

Mrs. Hale's advocacy of women teachers was extremely effective, and in 1839, when the first normal school in the country was opened, it was for women. In October, 1839, Mrs. Hale wrote in *Godey's* that, "There is soon to be another Normal School for males -- but the recedence has, for once, been given in the walks of science to women!" <40> Mrs. Hale's efforts on behalf of teachers did not go unrecognized. In 1860, the Baltimore Female College, one of the largest seminaries in the country, presented a medal "to Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, editress of *Godey's Lady's Book*, for her distinguished services in the cause of female education.."

Sarah Hale believed that as women were ideal for the teaching profession, due to their native patience and understanding, likewise were they perfect candidates for the field of medicine. An article in *Godey's* explains, "The property of her nature which renders her the best of nurses, with proper instruction, equally qualifies her to be the best of physicians. Above all is this the case with her own sex and her children." <41> By this emphasis on the need for female physicians to treat their own sex as well as children, Mrs. Hale defended her relatively nonconformist position on this issue by employing traditional arguments -- it was "unnatural" for male physicians to treat the intimate complaints of women, and this could cause women to ignore troubling conditions rather than consult with a male practitioner. <42> As with her public statements regarding education for women, once her rather conservative view was accepted, Sarah Hale began to pursue the idea further. After women became accepted in the medical profession, Mrs. Hale pushed for women's medical schools. *Godey's* published an article profiling Elizabeth Blackwell, the first American female physician, and ended the article by noting that the "The people of the Great West are in earnest to place woman in her rifht sphere of Doctress for her own sex and for children. They are right." <43>

During the years Sarah Hale spent as editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* her views concerning careers for women underwent a notable transformation. <44> Beginning in 1852, *Godey's* began publishing notices that gave specific information regarding the various occupations in which women were employed. <45> As demonstrated by her efforts pertaining to the inclusion of women in the teaching and medical professions, Mrs. Hale also continued to fight for women's entrance into professions previously closed to them. One article published in *Godey's* applauded the increasing numbers of women becoming postmistresses, and observed that, "Probably one-half of all the post-offices in the land would be safer and better managed by women than by men." <46> As her support for women entering professional life grew, Mrs. Hale wrote, "Every young woman in our land should be qualified by some accomplishment which she may teach, or some art or profession she can follow, to support herself creditably, should the necessity occur." <47>

As Sarah Josepha Hale announced in *Godey's* in 1850:

The *Lady's Book* . . . was the first avowed advocate of the holy cause of woman's intellectual progress; it has been the pioneer in the wonderful change of public sentiment respecting female education and the employment of female talent in educating the young. We intend to go on . . . till female education shall receive the same careful attention and

liberal support from public legislation as are bestowed on that of the other sex. Such is the mission of the Lady's Book. <48>

Sarah Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* firmly believed that woman's natural mission was to serve as a model of virtue, thus providing an impeccable moral example for her family, and by extension, for the Republic. However, while a traditional interpretation of the cult of domesticity would place the woman strictly in the home, Mrs. Hale and her *Godey's Lady's Book* encouraged, if not impelled, women to properly educate themselves and to enter the professional world.

Notes

1 *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, vol. 71, p. 343.

2 Charlotte Eldridge, *The Godey Lady Doll: The Story of Her Creation with Patterns for Dresses and Doll Furniture* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1953), p. 2.

3 Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 190.

4 *Godey's*, vol.39, p. 80.

5 *Godey's*, vol.71, p. 364.

6 Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women 1607-1950* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1971), p. 111 .

7 Finley, p. 237.

8 Finley, p. 43.

9 James, p. 112.

10 Eldridge, p. 20.

11 *Godey's*, vol. 72, p. 543.

12 Norma R. Fryatt, *Sarah Joseph Hale: The Life and Times of a Nineteenth Century Career Woman* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1975), p.69.

13 Finley, p. 241.

14 Finley, p.252.

15 *Godey's*, vol. 71, p. 220.

16 *Godey's*, vol. 72, p. 376.

17 Finley, p. 259.

18 *Godey's*, vol. 72, p.462.

19 Finley, p. 259.

20 James, p. 112.

21 *Godey's*, vol.72, p. 372.

22 *Godey's*, vol.72, p. 368.

23 *Godey's*, vol.71 , p. 448.

24 Fryatt, p. 109.

25 *Godey's*, vol. 71, p.146.

26 *Godey's*, vol. 72, p.551.

27 Fryatt, p.80.

28 *Godey's*, vol. 72, p.460.

29 *Godey's*, vol.71, p.173.

30 Finley, p. 209.

31 *Godey's*, vol. 71, p. 360.

32 Finley p. 211.

33 Finley, p. 212.

34 Finley, p. 230.

35 James, p. 112.

36 Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 25.

37 Finley, p. 235.

38 Fryatt, p. 78.

39 Finley, p. 234.

40 Finley, p. 234.

41 Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women In America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. 105.

42 James, p.113.

43 *Godey's*, vol.72, p. 426.

44 James, p. 113.

45 Finley, p. 239.

46 *Godey's*, vol. 71, p. 447.

47 James, p. 113.

48 Finley, p. 237.

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Sarah Josepha Hale, American writer who, as the first female editor of a magazine, shaped many of the attitudes and thoughts of women of her period. Sarah Josepha Buell married David Hale in 1813, and with him she had five children. Left in financial straits by her husband's death in 1822, she. Get exclusive access to content from our 1768 First Edition with your subscription. Subscribe today. In later years Hale liberalized her outlook so far as to approve women doctors, if only to treat those ailments of women that she felt were otherwise better endured than examined by male physicians. She was also active in promoting child welfare, and she published a number of books, including cookbooks, poetry, and prose.