

**Graduation/Presentation Day Lecture:
The Intellect of Women**
(April 1893)
By Agatha Tiegel

The apparent inferiority of women's intellect is to be attributed to many restrictive circumstances. We are so accustomed to behold her in a stage of development so far below her powers that we do not apprehend the full evil of these circumstances.

The error begins before she leaves the cradle. Her sex is ever a chain and restraint. Many liberties, healthy and helpful in themselves, are denied her by the decree of a false sentiment. In childhood she is tutored in the idea that her role on the great stage of life is secondary to that of the brother who plays by her side; and all meek and docile graces are carefully cultivated in her. She is not expected to reflect for herself. As she waxes in years and height, marriage is held before her as the goal of her existence, and she sinks into a state of passive waiting. She loses her soul, in popular estimation, if she violates the conventionalities; her inherent talents are not exercised and grow rusty, as it were, for want of use; her real self lies dormant. She is content with superficiality in thought, attainments, and conduct, and forgets that she is in the world to help it by action.

Popular opinion exerts a powerful influence to hold her in this condition; a rut has been made on the highway, and the wheel slips into it easily and glides along smoothly. The centuries during which university education has been the exclusive privilege of men have done much to retard her intellectual progress, as a long yielding to one tendency makes it more pronounced. The indolence natural to all contributes its share to keeping her back. It is always more agreeable to imitate than to originate, and no woman likes to incur the often unfavourable notice which a resolute step forward on her own account is certain to draw down upon her.

But in all this there is no inferiority in intellectual capacity, but only neglect of use and tardiness of development. That such repression and restraint upon mental action are artificial has been demonstrated in all ages by women whose independence has bust every fetter and won them recognition in the fields of sciences, theology, literature, politics, and art. It is impossible to estimate the immensity of the influence that woman's mind has exerted on the history of the world, an influence silently wielded and never obtruded, but of a potency inferior to no other. If, during these ages of wrong custom, of false sentiment, she has often retained much of her greatness of intellect and soul, she will better do justice to her inborn powers when she has room and light in which to grow.

The idea is absurd that a special source of study should be selected different from the one pursued in the average college under the impression that such a selection would be better adapted to woman's needs and sphere in life. The agitation of this topic is merely the old current of prejudice against learned women turning itself

into a new channel when its old one has been dammed up. No one has a right to say to a woman: "In this path of knowledge shalt thou walk, and in no other." Knowledge, like religion, admits of no trammels and no narrowing boundaries; if some peculiar form of it is not in harmony with the higher tastes and inclinations, it will be rejected.

To argue also, that a woman is not fit to be trusted with her liberty on the score of her emotional nature, her poor powers of logic and judgment, and other characteristics open to criticism, is to copy the fallacies of the opponents of emancipation, who used as arguments those very faults in slaves that slavery had produced. Woman should be free as the air to learn what she will and to devote her life to whatever vocation seems good to her. To cry out that she would be unsexed is to imply that she has not that divine element in her which is the prerogative of the highest form of creation and which craves instruction from all sources. Over and above the peculiarities which pertain to a woman as a woman are her needs as a human being. She has her own way to make in the world, and she will succeed or fail in whatever sphere she moves, according as her judgment is rendered accurate, her moral nature cultivated, her thinking faculties strengthened. It is true that we have made a start in the right direction. But that start has been made very recently, and it is still too early to pass sentence on the results. There yet remains a large fund of prejudice to overcome, of false sentiment to combat, of narrow-minded opposition to triumph over. But there is no uncertainty as to the final outcome. Civilization is too far advanced not to acknowledge the justice of woman's cause. She herself is too strongly impelled by a noble hunger for something better than she has known, too highly inspired by the vista of the glorious future, not to rise with determination and might and move on till all barriers crumble and fall.