

FÉNELON AND THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS. A SHORT NOTE ON SOME ENDURING ANCIENT TOPOI

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Abstract. This paper discusses François Fénelon's treatise on the Education of Girls (*De l'éducation des filles*, 1687) focusing on the presence of common Greco-Roman topoi regarding the education of women. These concern the reasons for which girls should be educated, the curriculum they should follow and the flaws of female nature that should be kept in mind in the process. Some ideas pick up arguments already voiced by Xenophon, Musonius Rufus, and Plutarch. In spite of his moderately progressive educational views, Fénelon uses these topoi to reinforce traditional gender roles. To the *savante* he opposes the modest, self-effaced woman dedicated to household management.

Keywords: education of women, François Fénelon, *De l'éducation des filles*, Xenophon, Musonius Rufus, Plutarch, virtues, household management.

François Fénelon's treatise on the education of girls (*De l'éducation des filles*, 1684/1687)² defies in a sense categorizations like conservative or progressive.³ It is part of a Catholic trend that promoted traditional ideals of educations and gender roles, and it was rather conservative with respect to the education of women, compared to works of contemporaries like François Poulain de la Barre, an outspoken advocate of the equality of the sexes, or Abbé Jean-Baptiste Morvande Bellegarde.⁴ As Carolyn Lougee has summarized it some time ago, Fénelon

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² François DE SALIGNAC DE LA MOTHE FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, Paris, 1800; Engl. François Fenelon's *Treatise on the Education of Daughters. Translated from the French, and Adapted to English Readers* (transl. Thomas F. Dibdin), London, 1805.

³ On the background and reception of the work: Carolyn C. LOUGEE, "Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr", *History of Education Quarterly* 14.1 (1974) 87-113 (88-95); Claire BOULARD JOUSLIN, "Conservative or Reformer? The History and Fortune of Fénelon's *Traité de l'Éducation des filles* in Eighteenth-Century England", *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12.4 (2012) 48-77.

⁴ BOULARD JOUSLIN, "Conservative or Reformer?", 52. See François POULLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'égalité des deux sexes, Discours physique et moral, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés*, Paris: Antoine Dezallier, 1673, ²1679

formulated an educational program designed to produce hard-working, frugal, and simple mothers of noble families. From the fundamental premises that education was a variable of social function and that woman's function was the governance of families, Fénelon deduced a limited curriculum of practical economics, basic religious training, and a safe dose of carefully-selected classical and modern literature.⁵

But the treatise is also remarkably modern in many respects, when it comes to pedagogy. Fénelon appears as a fine observer of the behavior and psychology of children. Many of his principles are clearly progressive.⁶ Educators should pay attention to the inclinations of the children and to the particulars of their age, they should teach and educate through conversation, engaging the insights, the inquisitiveness and the imagination of the child, they should encourage learning through understanding and experiencing, avoid putting pressure on the child, build a relationship based on trust and encourage openness before asserting authority. In a passage addressing the manner women should learn to deal with their servants, he even states that all humans are born equal. This paper does not discuss however Fénelon's pedagogical principles, but focuses on one specific aspect, - the presence of common Greco-Roman topoi regarding the education of women. These concern the reasons for which girls should be educated, the curriculum they should follow and the flaws of female nature that should be kept in mind in the process. Obviously many advices reflect the situation of French elite 17th century women. But other ideas pick up arguments already voiced by Xenophon, Musonius Rufus, and Plutarch.

Although he does not quote ancient authors, Fénelon's acquaintance with many of them is clear. His early biographer remarks that in his years of homeschooling he received a thorough education in Greek and Latin and his style was polished through the example of great models from the schools of

(explaining and criticizing women's exclusion from learning and science, 16–18; women are capable of learning any discipline, just like man, 40–50; they are capable to teach, to enter ministry and to exert authority, 54–55); *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs. Entretiens*, Paris: Jean du Puis, 1674. *De l'égalité des deux sexes* is an exceptionally progressive work, critical of prejudices regarding women, sympathetic of their capacities and achievements. See also Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde, *Modèles de conversations pour les personnes polies*, Amsterdam, 1699, 176–193, on the worth of conversing with intellectually endowed women.

⁵ LOUGEE, "Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform", 87.

⁶ Yet, as shown by BOULARD JOUSLIN, progressive educational principles were advocated already earlier by Erasmus, Montaigne, Comenius, and L'Abbé Fleury, Fénelon's contemporary. "Conservative or Reformer?", 51.

Athens and Rome.⁷ His knowledge of Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* was noted already in the 19th century with respect to both the *Education of Girls* and the *Adventures of Telemachus*.⁸ His knowledge of Plutarch has also been confirmed, at least with respect to his *Lives*.⁹ I did not find studies on Fénelon's knowledge of Musonius, but some of his arguments evoke the views of the Stoic philosopher on the matter, and Stobaeus, whose *Anthologion* includes Musonius' fragments on the education of girls and women's study of philosophy was published already in the 16th century and could have been available to him.¹⁰

(Why) should girls be educated?

There is no question for Fénelon that women need to be educated. He introduces his treatise with a plea on the matter, refuting common counterarguments. Supposedly girls should be given little education, and the task is commonly neglected and often left to custom. Women, according to common opinion, are not expected to be learned ("savantes"), as curiosity renders them vain and pretentious ("vaines et précieuses"). They are therefore supposed to learn just enough to be able to manage their household and obey their husband without disputing ("sans raisonner"). Fénelon does not reject the critique against learned women, whom knowledge has turned ridiculous. Women's mind is weaker and they are more curious than men. Girls' education should not however be given up, abandoned to the whim of ignorant and indiscreet mothers, even when girls should not be engaged in studies in which they would stubbornly persist ("s'entêter").¹¹

⁷ Louis-François DE BAUSSET, *Histoire de Fénelon I*, Paris: Gauthier, 41830, 4.

⁸ Louis BOULVÉ, *De l'hellénisme chez Fénelon*, Paris, 1897, reprint Genève: Slatkine, 1970, 108–109, 278–287. Boulvé's approach is apologetic; he argues that given his long-time experience Fénelon had in fact nothing to learn from pagan antiquity and the disciple of St Paul knew more on the education of women than the disciple of Socrates.

⁹ Sandra GREMY-DEPREZ, "Une source privilégiée du Télémaque: Les Vies des hommes illustres de Plutarque", *Littératures Classiques* 70 (2010) 225–242.

¹⁰ Books 3-4 of the *Anthologion*: Joannes STOBÆUS, *Eklogai Apophthegmaton. Sententiae ex thesauris Graecorum delectae (Graece et Latine) ..., nunc primum ... in Latinu(m) sermonem traductae*, ed., trans. Conrad GESNER, Zürich, 1543 (followed by two more editions: Basel, 1549 and Zürich; 1559). The *Sententiae* was also published in France (Paris, 1552 and 1557, Lyons, 1555). The entire *Anthologion* (Books 1-4) was first published in Geneva, in 1609. See Apophthegmata Bibliography, The Library of Renaissance Symbolism <<http://www.camrax.com/symbol/apophthegmbooks.php4>>.

¹¹ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 1-3. See also *Avis de monsieur de Fénelon, archevêque de Cambrai, à une dame de qualité, sur l'éducation de mademoiselle sa*

The point however is that girls should receive appropriate education: the weaker the female nature is, the more women need to be strengthened by instruction. Further, women have essential tasks and duties to fulfil, which pertain to the fundament of human existence. The fair or wrong management of the household depends on women; moreover they are responsible for the good or evil morals of the entire world. A wise, diligent and religious woman puts order in earthly matters as well as those leading to salvation. Even men's public performance depends on the support they receive from their wife.¹² Fénelon envisages the social dimension of household management. The world is made up of the totality of families, which no one else can keep in order ("policer") with greater concern than women, with their natural authority, their diligence and innate qualities. They have an essential role in supporting their husband and educating their children.¹³ A further argument for the education of women comes from the recognition that they, who make up the half of humankind, have the same virtue as men, and have been saved by the blood of Christ.¹⁴ Later on Fénelon turns to one specific virtue, - courage, commonly assigned to

filles, in the same volume, 217–240 (229): the mother should denunciate before her daughter the vain and ridiculous character of women who pretend to be learned ("blâmer le caractère vain et ridicule des femmes qui affectent d'être savantes").

¹² "Ne sont-ce pas les femmes qui ruinent ou qui soutiennent les maisons, qui règlent tout le détail des choses domestiques, et qui, par conséquent, décident de ce qui touche de plus près à tout le genre humain? Par là, elles ont la principale part aux bonnes ou aux mauvaises mœurs de presque tout le monde. Une femme judicieuse, appliquée, et pleine de religion est l'âme de toute une grande maison; elle y met l'ordre pour les biens temporels et pour le salut. Les hommes mêmes, qui ont toute l'autorité en public, ne peuvent par leurs délibérations établir aucun bien effectif, si les femmes ne leur aident à l'exécuter." FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 4–5.

¹³ "Le monde [...] c'est l'assemblage de toutes les familles: et qui est-ce qui peut les policer avec un soin plus exact que les femmes, qui, outre leur autorité naturelle et leur assiduité dans leur maison, ont encore l'avantage d'être nées soigneuses, attentives au détail, industrieuses, insinuantes et persuasives? Mais les hommes peuvent-ils espérer pour eux-mêmes quelque douceur dans la vie, si leur plus étroite société, qui est celle du mariage, se tourne en amertume? Mais les enfants, qui feront dans la suite tout le genre humain, que deviendront-ils, si les mères les gâtent dès leurs premières années? Voilà donc les occupations des femmes, qui ne sont guère moins importantes au public que celles des hommes, puisqu'elles ont une maison à régler, un mari à rendre heureux, des enfants à bien élever." FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 5.

¹⁴ "Ajoutez que la vertu n'est pas moins pour les femmes que pour les hommes: sans parler du bien ou du mal qu'elles peuvent faire au public, elles sont la moitié du genre humain, racheté du sang de Jésus-Christ et destiné à la vie éternelle." FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 5–6.

men, yet equally important in women. Courage enables women to withstand all difficult conditions. It makes Christians of both sexes despise this life and love the one to come.¹⁵

Education should develop in girls respect for work, attention to useful occupations, and should aim at avoiding idleness.¹⁶

Several points emerge from this discussion. a) Women are thought to have lesser mental capacities; therefore they are less suited for education. b) The education of women is subject to derision and contempt. Learned women are commonly considered vain, conceited and ridiculous, a reason for which girls should not receive (too much) instruction. c) Women need to be taught in order to fulfil their fundamental role: to be able to manage their household, support their husband and raise their children. d) Appropriate household management is fundamental for a well-ordered human existence, for society as a whole; therefore the role of women is essential. e) Women should be educated because their virtue is equal to that of men, courage, a typically male virtue, included.

All these points are recurring themes in Greek and Roman authors.

Mental capacities and education

Women's ability to reason, to deliberate and to preserve their self-control is commonly questioned in antiquity.¹⁷ Certain women's outstanding intellectual

¹⁵ “Quoique les femmes n’aient pas les mêmes occasions que les hommes de montrer leur courage, elles doivent pourtant en avoir. La lâcheté est méprisable partout; partout elle a de méchants effets. Il faut qu’une femme sache résister à de vaines alarmes, qu’elle soit ferme contre certains périls imprévus; qu’elle ne pleure, ni ne s’effraye que pour de grands sujets, encore faut-il s’y soutenir par vertu. Quand on est Chrétien, de quelque sexe qu’on soit, il n’est pas permis d’être lâche. L’âme du christianisme, si on peut parler ainsi, est le mépris de cette vie et l’amour de l’autre.” FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 124–125,

¹⁶ FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 196.

¹⁷ The deliberative faculty of the woman (τὸ βουλευτικόν) lacks full authority (ἄκυρον) Arist., *Pol.* 1.5.6, 1260A. The man is by nature ruler over the woman, as he is superior (κρείττον) to her. Arist., *Pol.* 1.2.12, 1254B; 1.5.2, 1259B; 1.5.6, 1260A. Of all virtues, prudence or practical wisdom (φρόνησις) is possessed only by the ruler, while the ruled may have only correct opinion (δόξα ἀληθής). Arist., *Pol.* 3.2.11, 1277B. Cic., *Mur.* 27 (infirmitas consilii), Sen., *Cons. Marc.* 1.1 (infirmitas muliebris animi); Val. Max. 9.1.3 (imbecillitas mentis), Liv. 3.48.8 (imbecillus animus); cf. Emily HEMELRIJK, *Matrona Docta Educated Women in the Roman Elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (Routledge Classical Monographs), London, New York: Routledge, 1999, 284. See also Philo, *QG* 1.25.

abilities are said to mirror those of the father¹⁸ or such women are associated with licentiousness.¹⁹

Only a few ancient authors defend the education of women, because of practical or ethical considerations. Plato argues that women should be educated in order to prevent an indulgent and wasteful lifestyle.²⁰ Xenophon, in his *Oikonomikos* makes a strong case for husbands teaching their wives.²¹ His main character, Isomachus is the best example to the point. He has married his wife when she was hardly fifteen, and turns out to be her successful teacher. As a result, she will develop excellent skills in household management.

Musonius strongly promotes the education of girls and emphasizes that women need to study philosophy. Women have the same ability to reason (λόγος) as men, the same senses and body parts, and the same moral sense.²² Man and woman alike must have understanding (φρονεῖν). Therefore girls should receive the same education as boys, since education is the precondition of a virtuous life.²³ As the study of philosophy is the path to a good and virtuous life, this cannot be regarded appropriate for men but inappropriate for women.²⁴ “[A]s without philosophy no man would be properly educated, so no woman would be.” Studying philosophy has its limits: women are not expected to develop “technical skill and acuteness in argument”, deemed to be superfluous, as women “use philosophy for the ends of their life as women.” No doubt, Musonius is not a feminist in the contemporary sense of the word. But it has to be noted that he has the same view on men’s approach to philosophy, which is ultimately a science of life and not a goal in itself. “Even in men I do not prize this accomplishment too highly. I only urge that they

¹⁸ Cic., *Brut.* 211 (Laelia), *Q Fr.* 1.3.3 (Tullia; Quint., *Inst.* 1.1.6 (Laelia); Val. Max. 8.3.3 (Hortensia).

¹⁹ Plut., *Per.* 24.4, of Aspasia.

²⁰ Pl., *Leg.* 7, 805D: “the female sex must share with the male, to the greatest extent possible, both in education and in all else. [...] The lawgiver ought to be whole-hearted, not half-hearted, – letting the female sex indulge in luxury and expense and disorderly ways of life, while supervising the male sex” (LCL, transl. Bury).

²¹ Men are largely responsible for their wives’ success or failure in managing the estate (Xen., *Oec.* 3.11–15; 7.4, 24–25. (*Oeconomicus. A Social and Historical Commentary*, transl. Sarah B. Pomeroy, Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). Also Xen., *Symp.* 2.9.

²² Fr. 3 (“That women too should study philosophy”), Cora E. LUTZ, *Musonius Rufus, “the Roman Socrates”*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947, 38/39–42/43 (38,26–27).

²³ Fr. 4 (“Should daughters receive the same education as sons?”), LUTZ, 42/43–48/49 (44,11).

²⁴ Fr. 3, LUTZ, 38,28–40,7.

should acquire from philosophy goodness in conduct and nobility of character. Now in very truth philosophy is training in nobility of character and nothing else.”²⁵

Virtues and education

Virtues were commonly regarded as gender-specific, and were linked to the particular social role of men and women.²⁶ Notably courage or fortitude (ἀνδρεία) was deemed to be a male virtues. Only some authors sustain that the virtues of men and women are essentially the same (without questioning however their gender-specific roles). Plato’s Socrates argues against Meno that men and women need temperance and justice alike to perform their tasks well.²⁷ Xenophon thinks that certain virtues are granted in a greater share to one of the sexes, but others equally to both (such are temperance and self-control).²⁸ The Neo-Pythagorean treatise on a woman’s temperance assigned to Phintys also argues that some virtues are common to both sexes, whereas others are gender-specific, corresponding to certain occupations. Thus although fortitude / courage, prudence and justice belong to both, the two first are more typical for men.²⁹ Musonius comes closer to (Plato’s) Socrates. He strongly argues that both

²⁵ Fr. 4, LUTZ, 48,15-26.

²⁶ Pl., *Meno*, 71E (Gorgias argues that man’s virtue is political and distributive justice is typical to men; women’s virtue is private and enables her to fulfill her traditional roles in the household). Aristotle rejects the essential identity of virtues; the virtue of ruler and ruled, of men and women is different. *Pol.* 1.5.7–8, 1260A; 3.2.10–11, 1277B. Man is by nature more suitable to lead, and women are excluded from the exercise of (political) rule, even within the household (*Pol.* 1.5.2; 1259B; cf. 1.5.6, 1260A). Neopythagorean authors revive the Aristotelian view on gender-specific virtues (Callicr., *De dom. felic.*, in Holger THESLEFF (ed.), *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1965, 105,10–106,13; Engl. Kenneth S. GUTHRIE, David FIDELER, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library. An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*, Grand Rapids: Phanes, 1987, 236).

²⁷ Pl., *Meno*, 73AB (to manage *well* the polis or the household). Socrates shifts the meaning of ἀρέτη, from a natural ability enabling someone to perform a function (as Meno has it), toward the moral qualities that provide for an adequate fulfillment of a social role.

²⁸ Xen., *Oec.*, 7. 15,25–27. Even authority is given by God to whichever is the better, to win a larger share of the good(s); 7.27.

²⁹ “Some perhaps may not think that it becomes a woman to philosophize, any more than it is suitable for her to ride on horseback, or to harangue in public. But I think that while there are certain employments specialized to each sex, there are some common to both man and woman, while some belong to a sex only preferentially. Male avocations are to lead an army, to govern and to speak in public. Female avocations are to guard the

boys and girls should be trained in virtue, as “there is not one set of virtues for a man and another for a woman”. Understanding and justice are required in both: “the man who is not just would not be a good citizen and the woman would not manage her household well”.³⁰ Both sexes need to be chaste and show self-control. Philosophy makes a woman excel in all virtues. Not even courage is particular to men, but is equally required in women. Courage enables women to endure hardship and resist any pressure or intimidation that would lead to shameful deeds.³¹ As both sexes have the same virtues, they should receive the same education. This does not mean that they should perform the same tasks, but in fact in Musonius’ view the division of labor is not absolute.³²

house, to stay at home, to receive and minister to her husband. *Common virtues are fortitude, justice and prudence.* Both husband and wife should achieve the virtues of the body and the soul [...] With respect to the virtues, also some are peculiarly suitable to men, and others to women. *Fortitude and prudence regard the man* more than they do the women; both on account of the bodily habits, and the soul-power; but temperance peculiarly belongs to the woman.” Phintys, *De mul. mod.*, THESLEFF, 152,5–18; GUTHRIE, 263–264, modified, emphases added.

³⁰ Fr. 4, LUTZ, 44,7–15/45.

³¹ “Perhaps someone may say that courage is a virtue appropriate to men only. That is not so. For a woman too of the right sort must have courage and be wholly free of cowardice, so that she will neither be swayed by hardships nor by fear; otherwise, how will she be said to have self-control, if by threat or force she can be constrained to yield to shame? Nay more, it is necessary for women to be able to repel attack [...] women have some prowess in arms [...]” Fr. 4, LUTZ, 44,20/45. Also Fr. 3, LUTZ, 40,33/41: “the educated woman will be more courageous than the uneducated, and one who has studied philosophy than one who has not; and she will not therefore submit to anything shameful because of fear of death or unwillingness to face hardship, and she will not be intimidated by anyone. [...] she has schooled herself to be high-minded and to think of death not as an evil and life not as a good, and likewise not to shun hardship and never for a moment to seek ease and indolence. [...] such a woman is likely to be energetic, strong to endure pain, prepared to nourish her children at her own breast, and to serve her husband with her own hands, and willing to do things which some would consider no better than slaves’ work.

³² “[S]ince in the human race man’s constitution is stronger and woman’s weaker, tasks should be assigned which are suited to the nature of each [...]. Thus spinning and indoor work would be more fitting for women [...], while gymnastics and outdoor work would be more suitable for men. Occasionally, however, some men might more fittingly handle [...] what is generally considered women’s work, and again, women might do heavier tasks which seem more appropriate for men [...]. For all human tasks [...] are a common obligation and are common for men and women, and none is necessarily appointed for either one exclusively, but some pursuits are more suited to the nature of one, some to the other [...]” (Fr. 4, LUTZ, 46,13–31 / 47). Compare Hierocl., *On household management*,

What should girls learn?

Most advises of the treatise are not gender-specific; they could have equally addressed the education of boys.³³ Most of the times Fénelon speaks of children (“enfants”) and only in a few cases of girls (notably in the chapters on the duties of women and the defects of girls). As seen earlier, however, Fénelon shares the view that women are weaker and their mind more inquisitive (inquisitiveness is a flaw in women). They should not insist therefore on studying. As women are not expected to rule a country, to wage war, or to take up a religious office, they do not need considerable knowledge regarding politics, military strategies, law, philosophy and theology. They are not made for most of the mechanical skills (“arts mécaniques”) either, given their limited strength. However they do have some innate capacities like industry, tidiness and thrift, suited for quiet indoor tasks.³⁴ Chapters XI–XII address the duties of women and the knowledge they require to fulfil them.

Women are responsible for the education of their children (notably of girls), but also of the behaviour of their servants, their morals and service. They are in charge with the financial management of the household. Women need particular discernment and prudence in the education of their children. These are the tasks for which education should prepare girls. They also require a good instruction in religion and a mature spirit.³⁵ The instruction of women, just like that of men, should be thus limited to knowledge required for their occupation; this makes in fact the difference in terms of their studies.³⁶

The main task of women is that of household management. Although disregarded by many women as a menial task [clearly Fénelon addresses elite women], economy is a science, as shown by the instruction and books of ancient Greek and Roman authors.³⁷ Fénelon does not name them, but he must have had in mind classics like Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos*, the *Oeconomica*

Stob. 4.28,21 (ed. HENSE 5, 696–699); RAMELLI, *Hierocles*, 92/93–94/95; GUTHRIE, 285–286.

³³ Rightly, Sarah FATHERLY, *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Studies in Eighteenth-Century America and the Atlantic World), Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008, 80; BOULARD JOUSLIN, “Conservative or Reformer?”, 63.

³⁴ FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 3–4.

³⁵ FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 169.

³⁶ FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 167–168 (“La science des femmes, comme celle des hommes, doit se borner à s’instruire par rapport à leurs fonctions; la différence de leurs emplois doit faire celle de leurs études.”).

³⁷ FÉNELON, *De l’éducation des filles*, 170–171.

ascribed to Aristotle, and the *Res rustica* of Columella.³⁸ Knowledge of all the arts associated with the science of economics, which allow the good management of a family, requires genius.³⁹ (Fénelon refers here to the family as a small republic. This reminds of the ancient view according to which the household (*oikos*) is a small polis.⁴⁰) Girls should acquire from an early age practical knowledge that would allow them to manage the household.⁴¹

The education of girls also has an intellectual dimension. They should learn essential skills like reading, writing, grammar, arithmetics and fundamental economic knowledge. They should acquire the ability to express themselves clearly and correctly, as they will have to teach their children. Fénelon evokes here the example of Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, who has brought her contribution to the eloquence of her sons.⁴² Although in the introduction Fénelon has argued that women do not need extensive knowledge of legal matters, he details here the essential legal notions a woman should learn due to their practical applicability.⁴³ Instruction should cover narratives about ancient Greek and Rome, the history of France and other countries, as well as Latin (a language to be preferred to foreign languages like Italian or Spanish).⁴⁴ She may also read carefully selected works on rhetoric (“éloquence”) and poetry.⁴⁵ His rather restrictive approach to books that may be read by girls stands in contrast with that of Poullain de la Barre, who encourages readers to consult a variety of works and even proposes a select bibliography. Readers should observe, examine and judge everything.⁴⁶

³⁸ Xen., *Oec.* 1.2–4 describes *οικονομία* as an *ἐπιστήμη*, a “science” or branch of knowledge, similar to medicine, smithing and carpentry.

³⁹ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 172–173.

⁴⁰ Philo, *Ios.* 8.38–39 (transl. Colson); Arius Didymus, in Stob. 2.26, p. 148.5–7; see Brendan D. NAGLE, “Aristotle and Arius Didymus on Household and Πολις”, *RhM* 145 (2002) 198–223 (201).

⁴¹ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 173–174, 187.

⁴² FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 185–186.

⁴³ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 188–189. POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE on the other hand recommends even Justinian's *Institutes* (*De l'éducation des dames*, 320).

⁴⁴ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 192–193. Latin should be taught only to girls with a solid judgment and modest behavior. It is the language of the offices, which may provide her great comfort.

⁴⁵ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 194.

⁴⁶ POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'éducation des dames*, 306–311, 320–322. In philosophy Descartes has a prominent place.

In short, girls should be instructed first and foremost in matters needed for a successful household management, but some degree of intellectual and literary training should also be considered. Both themes appear in ancient sources which address the education of women.

Household management and intellectual training

The “curriculum” included above all a wife’s duties in the household. An extensive part of Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* deals with the matter. Husbands have to teach their wife in matters pertaining to household management. His main character, Isomachus is the best example to the point.⁴⁷ He has married her when she was hardly fifteen, and has turned out to be the excellent teacher of his wife. As a result, she became able to perform her duties even in the absence of the husband, who will dedicate himself to public affairs. Men are largely responsible for their wives’ success or failure in managing the estate. A wife that manages the *oikos* wrongly can be blamed if she has been taught by her husband.⁴⁸ The pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica* adds that the husband should also prepare his wife to be a good mother of his children.⁴⁹

Musonius argues that women should study philosophy because among others it enables them to manage the household well, watching to the welfare of the house and able to direct the slaves.⁵⁰ A woman acquainted with philosophy would be just, an irreproachable companion of her husband, an appropriate helpmate, solicitous towards her husband and her children, lacking greed and selfishness.⁵¹ To be sure, for Musonius philosophy is primarily a science of life that enables men *and* women to perform their specific tasks in the best possible way.

Yet, household management is not the only matter women should learn. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica* notes that the husband should train his wife in virtues,⁵² and should even introduce her to moral-philosophical principles and some sort of intellectual knowledge. Plutarch notes that the man is the teacher of his wife in virtue through his personal example, his guidance and by means of intellectual training.⁵³ Plutarch also evokes of the intellectual dimension of learning. A woman should study geometry, philosophy and

⁴⁷ Xen., *Oec.* 7.4-8. Compare *Oec.* 3,13 (Critoboulos’ wife).

⁴⁸ *Oec.* 3.11-15; transl. Pomeroy).

⁴⁹ [Arist.], *Oec.* 3.2.12-15.

⁵⁰ Fr. 3, LUTZ, 40/41.

⁵¹ Fr. 3, LUTZ, 38/40-39/41.

⁵² [Arist.], *Oec.* 3.3.

⁵³ *Conj. praec.* 47, *Mor.* 144F.

astronomy, as learning deepens virtuous life and it counters superstition and credulity, common in uneducated women.⁵⁴

Problems with the education of women

Fénelon shares the view that learned women (*savantes*) may be ridiculous. As a consequence teaching should take into account girls' degree of maturity. Educators should guard their spirit and caution them that even in science they should preserve a modesty almost as delicate as that inspired by the repulsion from vice.⁵⁵ Education should pay attention to some faults specific to women. Such is their susceptibility to novelty, superstition, religious innovation and excessive religiosity. Girls should be therefore preserved from such extremes; solid education is the most effective instrument.⁵⁶

Vanity is among the worst defaults that have to be prevented in girls, and countered by noble simplicity.⁵⁷ Girls should particularly be deterred from the *bel esprit*. Dibdin translates "children with high and animated spirit",⁵⁸ but *bel esprit* designates persons distinguished by intellectual preoccupations and wit, knowledgeable in literature and arts, engaging in intelligent conversation.⁵⁹ The term is used with derogatory connotations for women, just as the *savante* or *prétieuse*, and here it censures learned women who display their knowledge and refinement in society.⁶⁰ A girl should therefore not talk except when really necessary, as learned she should be and even when the topic excels the common preoccupations of girls. She should be taught an orderly conduct and she should learn to keep silent.⁶¹

⁵⁴ *Conj. praec.* 48, *Mor.* 145B.

⁵⁵ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 107.

⁵⁶ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 115, 117–118; *Avis*, 229.

⁵⁷ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 155–167.

⁵⁸ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 185.

⁵⁹ Christine M. MANTEGHI (GOULDING), *Witz in Enlightenment Thought and in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Critical Theory and Literary Practice* (Doctoral Thesis), California State University, Chico, 1998, 34–37, <www.csuchico.edu/~cgoulding/witz/new-ch1.doc>.

⁶⁰ On Fénelon's critique of Louis XIV's culture of politeness and of what he regarded as women's frivolous involvement in literature and politics at the cost of fulfilling their domestic duties: BOULARD JOUSLIN, "Conservative or Reformer", 51, 59–60, 62–63.

⁶¹ FÉNELON, *De l'éducation des filles*, 165–166.

The erudite, precious woman who engages in learned conversation instead of keeping silent and modest is a topos in ancient literature. A woman should in fact not learn, certainly not more than she needs for the purpose of household management. Women's desire to learn only expresses their vanity. Moreover, educated women become idle, they neglect their domestic duties and become conceited and meddling, intervening in matters that should not concern them.

Theophrast argues that education that goes beyond the needs of household management made women idle, talkative and busybodies.⁶² Musonius quotes similar concerns with learned women, trained in philosophy, but only to dismiss them:

Some will say that women who associate with philosophers are bound to be arrogant for the most part and presumptuous, in that abandoning their own households and turning to the company of men they practice speeches, talk like sophists, and analyze syllogisms, when they ought to be sitting at home spinning.⁶³

Musonius counters these allegations by arguing that philosophy would in fact make women more modest and dedicated to their traditional roles:

I should not expect the women who study philosophy to shirk their appointed tasks for mere talk any more than men, but I maintain that their discussions should be conducted for the sake of their practical application. [...] Above all, we ought to examine the doctrine which we think women who study philosophy ought to follow; we ought to see if the study which presents modesty as the greatest good can make them presumptuous, if the study which is a guide to the greatest self-restraint accustoms them to live heedlessly, if what sets forth intemperance as the greatest evil does not teach self-control, if what represents the management of a household as a virtue does not impel them to manage well their homes. Finally, the teachings of philosophy exhort the woman to be content with her lot and to work with her own hands.⁶⁴

Seneca notes that his mother, Helvia had studied some philosophy, yet, her interest in liberal arts was restrained by “the old-fashioned strictness” of her husband,⁶⁵ because of those women “who do not employ learning as a means to

⁶² Stob. 2.31.10–14, ed. Wachsmuth, 207.

⁶³ Fr. 3, LUTZ, 43 (emphases added).

⁶⁴ Fr. 3, LUTZ, 42/43).

⁶⁵ Sen., *Helv.* 17.3.

wisdom, but equip themselves with it for the purpose of display”.⁶⁶ Conversely, a traditionally minded education had to promote female chastity, modesty and compliance with gender roles (motherhood) and check unnecessary instruction.⁶⁷ Lucian deplored the fate of scholars employed by wealthy women, not least because these were vain, lacked intellectual aptitudes and used learning for display.⁶⁸ Juvenal is particularly incisive in his derision of learned women who converse on scholarly matters in the presence of men; their intellectual interests are vain and ostentatious.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The topoi regarding women, their nature, abilities and defects, their role and their education are particularly enduring, even when social circumstances change. Some may have been just commonplace, out “in the air”. Yet, Fénelon was an erudite author, with a thorough knowledge of classical authors. The *Education of Girls* suggests that some themes were taken over from literature. The view that women have the same virtues as men, courage included, evokes Musonius’ perspective. Women’s fundamental role in managing the household understood as a small-scale state, the detailed discussion of this role, the authority of the woman in governing the household, her role in supervising the servants evoke the points made in ancient economic literature, notably by Xenophon. The association of women with superstition and excessive religiosity is a widespread topos in antiquity. That learning counters superstition may be a commonplace, but it is discussed in Plutarch.

⁶⁶ *Helv.* 17.4.

⁶⁷ *Helv.* 17.3–4.

⁶⁸ *Merc. cond.* 36 (LCL). See the discussion in HEMELRIJK, *Matrona docta*, 37.

⁶⁹ *Juv., Sat.* 6, 434–447. “But she’s much worse, the woman who as soon as she’s taken her place at dinner is praising Virgil and forgiving Elissa on her deathbed, who pits the poets against one another assesses them, weighing in her scales Maro on this side and Homer on the other. The schoolteachers give way; the teachers of rhetoric are beaten, the whole party falls silent, there’ll not be a word from any lawyer or auctioneer – and not even from another woman. [...] Don’t let the lady reclining next to you have her own rhetorical style or brandish phrases before hurling her rounded syllogism at you. Don’t let her know the whole of history. Let there be a few things in books that she doesn’t even understand. I loathe the woman who is forever referring to Palaemon’s *Grammar* and thumbing through it, observing all the rules of speech, or who quotes lines I’ve never heard, a female scholar. [...] the woman who longs to appear excessively clever and eloquent should hitch up a tunic knee-high, on morals, like a philosopher; thirsting to be deemed both wise and eloquent [...]” (LCL, transl. Morton Braund).

The theme of women's education is obviously Christianized. Women require education not only because they make up half of humankind (as in Plato), but also because they were saved by the blood of Christ. They need not simply philosophy, but a solid religious formation.

In itself or when compared to ancient writings on the matter, the discussion of women's education may seem progressive in some respects. Yet, if the treatise is placed in its historical context and compared with other contemporary works, notably those of Poulain de la Barre, it actually reinforces ancient topoi on women's inferiority, liability to superstition, and it puts forward the ideal of female modesty and self-effacement, encouraging their relegation to the household and domestic duties. The *savante* is vain and ridiculous; therefore girls do not require too much education.

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