

Author



The Enduring Images: A Look at the Mythical Southern Belle

Sherry Jung ~
Political Science and Sociology

Abstract

During her research, Sherry learned that law is a complex mixture of both social and legal issues, something she intends to continue studying by attending law school. Sherry's project began with her interest in the Virginia Military Institute's struggle to remain single sex and her desire to place this struggle in a historical context. By participating in research and working closely with her advisor, Sherry augmented her analytical skills and self-confidence in her academic abilities. She encourages all students interested in research to do two things: "Pick a subject that you are interested in, and try to work with someone [with whom] you enjoy working."

A comparison between historical Southern arguments against women's education and the recent arguments by the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) against the admission of women reveals the enduring nature of Southern gender conventions. As will be demonstrated, the arguments made in the VMI case are consistent with, and at some point identical to, arguments made 150 years earlier. Specifically, both arguments portray women as inferior to and less capable than men, thereby justifying limited opportunities for women. Rather than accept the expanding role of women throughout the nation, the South continues to adhere to these historical notions regarding the appropriate types of education for men and women.

Faculty Mentor



In 1990, the United States sued the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), alleging that VMI's 150-year all-male admission policy was unconstitutional. In the case, VMI argued that women's unique educational needs and interests made the VMI program unsuitable for the vast majority of female students. Sherry Jung analyzes these arguments and compares them to antebellum arguments for limiting women's educational opportunities. This analysis reveals strikingly similar views of women's supposedly unique nature, interests, and abilities being used to defend both antebellum and modern policies limiting women's educational programs. This analysis illuminates the cultural persistence of gender-based stereotypes as well as their continued viability in the legal context. I highly recommend that undergraduates seek out research opportunities. Such projects benefit faculty as well through the sharing of knowledge and the enjoyment of coming to know students and watching them grow personally and intellectually.

Key Terms:

- Antebellum
- Gender Conventions
- Inherent
- Public Sphere
- Southern Belle

~ Pam Kelley
School of Social Sciences

Introduction

Since antebellum times (period of time before the Civil War), Southern culture has been founded largely on a myth regarding the true natures of men and women. Women were “belles” waiting to be rescued by their chivalrous knights in shining armor. From this myth emerged an “ideal” Southern man and Southern woman, with an implicit notion that women and men possessed different inherent (biological) qualities. The essence of the Southern belle (the mythical image of the true Southern woman), her fragility, her dependence on men, and her purpose in life as revolving around meeting her knight, was incompatible with an enlarged role in life outside the domestic sphere. This image of the ideal woman has delayed the acceptance of expanded opportunities for Southern women.

A comparison of the arguments in the recent court case to integrate women into the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and historical Southern arguments against the expansion of women’s educational opportunities shows how gender conventions (the pervading definition about the proper role of men and women created by the historical myths) continue to exist in the backdrop of Southern culture and arise when women seek to expand their spheres. In the early nineteenth century, a South Carolina newspaper printed an essay which demonstrates the gender conventions of the times: “Man, by being endowed with more strength of body and solidity of mind than a woman, is better fitted for managing affairs in public and women possessing less strength of body, but more softness of manners, has modestly sought only the care of domestic affairs” (Kierner, 1998). Similar themes regarding men and women’s different natural abilities are constantly repeated to justify limited opportunities for women. Starting in the eighteenth century with arguments against women’s education, these themes reoccur in opposition to coeducation in the nineteenth century and eventually found their way into the modern-day attempt to prevent the integration of women into VMI and The Citadel. In comparing the arguments from earlier attempts to limit women’s opportunities with VMI’s arguments, it will become evident that similar sentiments are echoed—some are exact and others have only slight modifications.

The Virginia Military Institute

VMI was founded in 1839 in Lexington, Virginia, and maintained a 157-year “males-only” tradition. VMI and The Citadel (located in Charleston, South Carolina) were the only all-male, state-supported military colleges remaining in the nation until 1996 (Hurst, 1998). In 1991, the US Department of Justice began litigation against VMI to allow women the opportunity to attend, and, in 1993, the US intervened as the plaintiff in The Citadel court case, which was already under way (US v. Citadel, 1994). These

two institutions strongly resisted the admission of women. VMI’s case proceeded through the court system until June 26, 1996, when the Supreme Court ruled that VMI must admit women. The ruling also applied to The Citadel case, which was still making its way through the lower courts at that time (Hurst, 1998).

The VMI experience consists of an adversative educational method, which is an “experience predicated on the importance of creating doubt about previous beliefs and experiences in order to create a mindset conducive to the values of VMI...Physical rigor, mental stress, absolute equality of treatment, absence of privacy, and minute regulation of behavior...are the salient attributes” of this system (Virginia Brief, 11/95). A central component of the VMI experience is the life in the barracks, in which there is no privacy. In the barracks, the doors are open windows. These are important because “they enable the officer in charge to walk around and check in each room at night and see every cadet without anything being hidden” (US v. Virginia, 1991). Furthermore, the doors do not have locks, and the windows have neither shades nor curtains. This places cadets “under constant scrutiny and permits minute regulation of behavior” from other cadets and upperclassmen (US v. Virginia, 1991).

The VMI administration, attempting to create an alternative option to accepting women into VMI, formed a task force consisting of experts in women’s education at the college level in order to develop a program for women; this would parallel VMI’s male-oriented education. The task force developed the Virginia Women’s Institute for Leadership (VWIL), a state-supported military program for women at the Mary Baldwin College, a historically all-female private college. The task force argued that VWIL was more effective in developing female leaders because VWIL employed a “method that reinforces self-esteem rather than the leveling process used by VMI” (Virginia Brief, 12/95).

The educational experience at VMIL was quite different from that offered at VMI (Department of Justice, 1995). Unlike VMI, students at VWIL were neither required to live and eat meals together nor wear uniforms throughout the four-year program. In addition, VWIL expected to teach their students leadership skills from seminars, internships, and speaker series, not by physical rigor, mental stress, and minute regulation of behavior. VWIL’s student body, faculty, course offerings, and facilities did not match that of VMI’s, nor could graduates anticipate the benefits associated with VMI’s history, prestige, and alumni.

VMI’s Arguments against Coeducation

In the litigation, VMI argued that the school’s adversative method was inappropriate for the vast majority of female college students and stressed the benefits of single-sex edu-

cation for both men and women. According to Dr. Reisman, a noted sociologist and expert witness for VMI, “if VMI were to admit women, it would eventually find it necessary to drop the adversative system altogether and adopt a system that provides more nurturing and support for their students” because women need “an experience that is supportive and emphasizes positive motivation in order for it to be growth producing” (US v. Virginia, 1991). The task force argued that “young women will be for the foreseeable future products of a culture which encourages them to find their sense of self in relationships” and “that women responded more naturally to an ethic of care premised on the notion that no one should be hurt” (Department of Justice, 1995). One task force member, the Dean of Students at Mary Baldwin College, “relied on her experience as a sorority advisor to conclude that women would not benefit from a VMI training. She observed that, while young men will paddle their pledges, make them consume alcohol, and eat disgusting things, young women will give flowers and write poems” (Department of Justice, 1995). Thus, VMI concluded that “a military model, and especially VMI’s adversative method, would be wholly inappropriate for educating and training most women” (Department of Justice, 1995).

VMI also relied on claims about developmental differences between the sexes to support its argument that the adversative method was inappropriate for women. VMI’s expert witness, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, expanded on this notion with her testimony that males and females need different kinds of discipline because of these developmental differences. She explained that women are more likely to look within themselves for control, which can result in cases of anorexia (which she defines as a pathological type of internal self-discipline, because of the control over the amount of food intake) and depression. Males, on other hand, are more likely to turn their energies outward to physical violence, drinking, and other forms of delinquency. Therefore, in order for men to become disciplined, they need to have the “uppityness and aggression beat out of them” with an “atmosphere of adversativeness or ritual combat with a disciplinarian and worthy competitor for a teacher;” this is the adversative method. In contrast, the “adversative method of teaching in an all-female school would not only be inappropriate for most women, but counter-productive, because it would be destructive of women’s self-confidence” (Virginia Brief, 12/95).

VMI also claimed that the adversative method was inappropriate for women because women could not be protected in the adversative environment, and to try to protect them would actually destroy the egalitarian atmosphere of VMI. According to VMI, its adversative method could not “accommodate the effects of the cross-gender harassment that would result from an attempt to employ that method in a coeducational setting” (Virginia Brief, 12/95). The lack of privacy, the reliance on and constant interaction with male

peers, and the control of upperclassmen over freshman cadets would place the male and female cadets in a relationship that could be easily exploited. VMI argued that the changes needed to give women their necessary protection would destroy the adversative system by introducing privacy issues that would alter or even eliminate the egalitarian environment of the school. VMI argued that “the reality of cross gender interactions and relationships between college students would inevitably lead to substantial changes in the ethic of absolute egalitarianism and the intentional harassment and intimidation that characterize the adversative method” (Virginia Brief, 11/95). In their case brief, attorneys for VMI stressed that the adversative method would “have to be altered so as to avoid the harassment deemed inappropriate for women” and that the “petitioner [had] yet to explain how the extreme harassment and intimidation inherent in the adversative method could be implemented in a coeducational setting without creating a ‘hostile environment’ constituting impermissible sexual harassment” (Virginia Brief, 12/95).

VMI also argued against coeducation, glorifying the benefits of single-sex education for men and women. For example, an all-male VMI environment freed cadets from gender related distractions and allowed adherence to egalitarian physical standards. VMI argued that women would attach themselves to men in order to survive the rigors of school. This would introduce male cadets to a “new set of stress, of a very different kind than the cadets now face” because they would now have to worry about how to treat women in this environment, about being humiliated in front of women, and also how relationships with women would be perceived by fellow peers (i.e., whether it was platonic or romantic) (US v. Virginia, 1991). VMI also claimed that “the presence of women would tend to distract male students from their studies. Furthermore, it would increase pressures relating to dating, which would impair the *esprit de corps* and the egalitarian atmosphere, which are critical elements of the VMI experience” (US v. Virginia, 1991). Thus, VMI concluded that, for many men, “single-sex college is optimal. At an all-male college, adolescent males would be able to focus exclusively on the work at hand, without the intrusion of any sexual tension” (US v. Virginia, 1991).

In addition to distracting men, VMI argued that women would negatively alter the environment for men by lowering the physical standards. According to VMI, “a program that would challenge but not discourage female cadets would pose an insufficient challenge for the vast majority of males,” thus, the “morale of the male participants would be adversely affected” (US v. Virginia, 1991).

According to VMI’s experts, women’s inherent weaknesses would prevent them from competing fairly and equally in the adversative method. VMI argued that women are more likely to suffer injuries, and they would have to use “abil-

ity groups” in its physical programs or activities to change certain standards to accommodate women (US v. Virginia, 1991). In addition, because of “physiological differences, the majority of females would not be able to complete the tasks associated with the rat line as currently constructed, at the same levels as males” (US v. Virginia, 1991). Thus, if females were admitted, “the intensity and aggressiveness of the current program would be reduced,” and “requirements for all cadets would be adjusted and rat training would have to undergo extensive changes” (US v. Virginia, 1991) to ensure that women could compete fairly; this would eliminate the rigor and egalitarianism of the adversative method. Essentially, they argued that the adversative method could not be maintained in a coeducational environment.

Historical Arguments of the True Natures of Men and Women

The antebellum characteristics of the “true woman” included physical weakness, timidity, modesty, beauty, gracefulness, innocence, fragility, and an inability to think logically. She sacrificed her own needs and tended to suffer in silence. She was like a child in that she both lacked an ability to care for herself and was not responsible for her own actions. Both women and children depended on men for their care and protection. Like a child, a woman “naturally shrinks from public gaze and from the struggle and competition from life” (White, 1980). In fact, women were not expected to survive in a competitive environment; they lacked the boldness, originality, and inventiveness necessary to survive. They were considered to be malleable and easily influenced by the strong and forceful, who would destroy them in a competitive atmosphere. Women were also thought to be symbols of morality in the community and the household. This led to the notion that “pure” women were incapable of erotic feelings (Scott, 1970).

A woman’s natural abilities caused her to remain in the domestic, private sphere because she did not have what it took to be part of the public realm of life. The “ideal man,” in contrast, was very different. He was strong, courageous, confident, and bore good judgement. He had a natural virility and mastery of the environment. He was physically vigorous and competitive. He was expected to have a quick temper, be ready with a pistol, fond of liquor, chivalrous, and protective of those under his “command” (Scott, 1970). These characteristics, by nature, made men more capable of dominating the public sphere.

Rather than being a thing of the past, this dichotomy still perpetuates today. This perseverance is seen in the VMI case, where VMI defends its position against integration in a manner that is consistent with these antebellum ideals of men and women. VMI relies on these traditional perceptions of womanhood in the South as the basis of its arguments. Dr. Reisman argues that if women were ad-

mitted, VMI would have to drop the adversative method altogether; this argument is based on these traditional perceptions that women simply do not have the natural qualities to survive in the “rough and tumble” male world. This theme is grounded on the traditional perception that women will naturally shrink from competition and the struggles of life and that women are self-conscious individuals. In addition, VMI’s claim that women need protection and the concern that women will cling to men for this protection depends on similar assumptions to those in the antebellum period. These perceptions that women need protection from male sexuality, as well as concerns for privacy issues, are also consistent with the idea that women are pure and amoral, and therefore capable of being victimized and subjected to male vulgarity. Finally the task force’s creation and VMI’s endorsement of the VWIL plan is consistent with the traditional antebellum notion of the separation of spheres for men and women (to be discussed later).

Gender Conventions in Southern Education

Education in the South during the antebellum years was, as in other parts of the nation, based on the perception that men and women should be schooled for different purposes matching their unique qualities. When the North began to open up coeducational opportunities for females during the nineteenth century, education in the South diverged from the curriculum of the North. The South remained reluctant to school the sexes together because it relied on gender conventions that were built on the Southern mythology previously discussed. These gender conventions set guidelines for how the sexes should be treated and became such a strong part of the identity of Southerners that it appeared “natural” to have educational disparities between the sexes. Thus, education became an indirect tool used to reinforce and perpetuate the gender conventions because education taught men and women how to properly inhabit their separate spheres. The South still clings to these powerful myths; this is demonstrated in the arguments made in the VMI case. These arguments were consistent with (and at some points identical to) the antebellum arguments against coeducation. This reliance on gender conventions survived over a century of debate; this is evidence that the South is unwilling to completely eliminate these notions.

In the antebellum years when education became available for women, gender largely determined the content and length of education (Kierner, 1998). Privileged girls went to school for two to four years, usually entering between 12 and 14 years of age. Boys entered earlier, usually between the ages of 8 and 14, and then attended college (Woody, 1966). Both boys and girls learned basic English, grammar, and arithmetic. Then, while the boys continued and learned Greek, Latin, and higher mathematics, girls’ curricula became geared toward ornamental subjects

such as music and dancing (Kierner, 1998). The goal of the informal curriculum of the South was to turn young women into “Southern ladies,” that is, ladies consistent with the image of the Southern belle.

It was commonly accepted that girls should not be prepared for the same occupations as boys: “Educators usually divided high school students into male and female departments, and they did so for supposedly good reasons. While young men trained for college or careers in business, young women were to seek current satisfaction rather than future advancement” (Avery, 1995). In all-male schools, the objective was to teach men the skills that they could incorporate into their future lives. Females, on the other hand, tended to marry earlier and die younger than males (Woody, 1966). Rather than preparing them with skills for the future, school tended to be a place in which females merely passed their time waiting to be married. The atmosphere of female schools was much less serious and formal than that of male schools, with a lower degree of expectations in terms of the academic curriculum: “Women trained to be not doctors or lawyers but daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, companions, and teachers who helped determine the manners, morals and intelligence of the whole community” (Avery, 1995). Thus, females tended to develop closer friendships in school, and schools stressed the moral and emotional benefits of education.

Even though men and women were thought to occupy different spheres, both spheres were considered “equally important.” Deriving from the “separate spheres” argument is the notion that even though women should be treated equally, this did not necessarily mean that they should be treated the same as men. Consistent with this notion, the South was a leader in single-sex education for women: “By the 1850s the prevailing notion was that men and women were equal in intellectual gifts but that these gifts found different expressions” (Farnham, 1994). When education became available to women, the people in the South had conflicting motivations because they were committed to both egalitarianism and to gender conventions that institutionalized inequality. Based on these motivations, the South was a leader in education for women, as long as women’s educational curriculum was consistent with traditional Southern gender conventions and the purpose was to adequately prepare them to inhabit their private spheres.

Between 1850 and 1859, 32 of the 39 chartered women’s colleges in the United States were in the South (Farnham, 1994). The South “evidenced the greatest interest in female colleges of any region in the nation” (Farnham, 1994). The people in the North were unwilling to allow women educational opportunities because they feared an interest in female education would instigate an attack on the sex segregation of the professions. The people of the South, however, had a different ideology. They wanted to educate women, but as a means to uplift women within their own

sphere. The South was unwilling to give women access to established men’s schools because to do so would challenge the existing gender conventions. Whereas the South surpassed the North in creating single-sex educational opportunities for women, the South lagged a decade behind the North in opening coeducational facilities. Furthermore, the last non-military public school in the nation to become coeducational was the University of Virginia in 1970. Because the University of Virginia and VMI remained all-male for so long, this provides evidence of the South’s reluctance to release enduring gender conventions with respect to the proper types of education for men and women.

In a similar vein, VMI agreed that women should have the opportunity to have a “military experience” like men. Therefore, VMI strongly endorsed VWIL, which it claimed “offers an education for women equivalent in rigor, focus, and outcome to that offered to men at VMI” (Virginia Brief, 12/95). Consistent with traditional arguments against co-integration, VMI argued that VWIL is an “equivalent” alternative because it is more like a woman’s sphere. VMI argued that “the educational benefits provided by VWIL to its women students will be equivalent to those provided by VMI and that any differences in methodology are attributable to a professional judgement of how best to provide the same opportunity” (Virginia Brief, 12/95). VMI’s argument remains consistent with the traditional pattern of conceding an equal opportunity for women within their own separate sphere (i.e., VWIL), but it prevents women the opportunity to have the “same” experience as the men in the men’s sphere (i.e., VMI).

Education outside the home for women was largely chosen, and valued, because it served the purpose of making women more attractive prospects for marriage. The primary aim of a woman’s education was to benefit the men in her life—that is, to teach a woman how to inhabit her domestic sphere in a graceful manner. This is shown in at least three ways: 1) females were educated in order that they be good companions and conversationalists, in order to entertain their husbands, 2) females were taught to read the Bible in order to promote religion within the community and the household, and 3) education was seen as a marker of gentility to increase women’s value in the marriage market.

First, prior to the nineteenth century, “women who knew nothing but home skills were seen as dull and trying wives” (Scott, 1970). If women were uneducated and did not travel outside the home, they were considered poor conversationalists. If a man wanted to have an intellectual conversation about the world’s affairs, he could not turn to his wife. Thus, “it was desirable that wives had something more on their minds than the best recipe for scuppernong wine or the most effective treatment for measles” (Scott, 1970). Consequently, the few families who could afford to send their daughters to school were educated to be more pleasant company for men.

Second, women were educated in order to promote religious teachings within the household and the community. Between 1820 and 1861, religion became a powerful force in the South. Simultaneously, there was a growing concern that uneducated women were unable to teach and read the scriptures to their husbands and children. Because religion was a central part of the women's sphere, it was believed that if they were uneducated, religion would not be as important. Thus, women were educated to teach the word of God, which included the implication that women keep a moral "check" on their husbands. With a woman's "influence," they could better ensure that men "not naturally so inclined to virtuous habits" (Scott, 1970) could achieve salvation. Thus, if women behaved morally and piously, men would also have better moral behavior.

At that same time, education became a marker of gentility because it was mainly the rich who could afford to send their daughters to school. Thus, education became a symbol of a civilized lifestyle representing a class of culture and leisure, creating the notions of a "lady" and a "gentleman." Even women with money, however, were still educated to increase their value to men: "College became emblematic of a class means to a type of refinement that labeled one as a lady worthy of protection, admiration, and chivalrous attention" (Farnham, 1994). Parents chose to educate their daughters as a class marker; it increased their daughter's value on the marriage market, thereby ensuring high social status.

A natural extension of this devaluation of women's education was the less importance placed on women's schools. Compared to other schools in the 1900s, Southern women's colleges were not up to national standards. Young women attended school, not as a commitment to education, but rather because it was a socially acceptable thing for females to do until they got married (Farnham, 1994). Even in the 1930s, a study of the catalogues of 54 women's colleges in the South showed that 34 of these either mentioned homemaking specifically in their aims or gave it special emphasis in their course offerings (Newcomer, 1959).

Gender conventions also influenced thinking on preferred teaching methods for each gender in antebellum times. Based on gender perceptions that men are aggressive, violent, and tend to release their emotions in external outbursts, whereas women had a natural proclivity to internalize their emotions, different disciplinary methods were considered necessary. Schools argued that men needed external discipline to control external outbursts whereas women needed internal discipline. Female schools sought to internalize certain behaviors. For example, female school teachers read regulations and administered self-examination sessions in an effort to make females internalize obedience, passivity, and self-negation. Men were more commonly disciplined by external forces, such as suspension

and expulsion, rather than be expected to inculcate any of the rules and to rely on self-discipline (Farnham, 1994). Consequently, segregation was considered necessary to be the most effective means of education for both genders because they learned in different ways.

A central concern for antebellum opponents of women's education was that education would destroy the image of the non-intellectual, but adorable, Southern belle, by giving her masculine qualities, such as intelligence and competitiveness: "belles could not be intellectual. Men were her protectors, her knights... who fought battles for her. She deferred to their superior knowledge, which came from their experiences in this world and did not feel a necessity for enlarging her understanding of his role" (Farnham, 1994). Education would also include a "comradier [sic] of classmates [who] fostered a competitive spirit that was unbecoming to young women and not infrequently impaired their health" (Farnham, 1994). In addition, many people "questioned the use of competition for women because it might promote aggressiveness and other traits considered manly" (Farnham, 1994). Along with the fear that women would gain more masculine qualities by coeducation was the fear that women would participate in masculine activities and consequently lose all their feminine charm. People worried that women would become "coarse" and "would drink, curse, ask questions, and speak out in promiscuous assemblies" (Howe, 1984). People were also concerned that education would create a generation ill-suited for marriage and motherhood—that masculine education would lead women to indulge in masculine crimes and vice.

Underlying VMI's arguments that the adversative method was not for women was the fear that this method would create "masculine women." This method entails characteristics that were traditionally seen as masculine: the strenuous physical and mental rigor, the competitiveness with classmates, the comradery of the peers to endure it, and the atmosphere of violence and aggressiveness at VMI. In addition, the mandatory uniforms and boyish haircuts would virtually eliminate any obvious differences between the sexes; it would be virtually impossible to distinguish the sexes apart from afar. Thus, if women were to be a part of VMI and adapt these characteristics for themselves, a natural fear from the traditional Southern society was that women would essentially become more like men, and therefore, less like the feminine ideal or the Southern belle.

Conclusion

The endurance of the Southern myth and its engrained gender conventions is evident throughout the history of Southern education for women. The 1855 catalogue of Alabama's Judson Female Institution proudly stated that their school's curriculum was different from that of males because it would be undesirable that they be identical due

to the innate intellectual and physical differences between the sexes (Farnham, 1994). From the inception of education for women to the VMI case, “natural differences” have consistently been relied upon to justify gender segregation, the prioritization of men’s education over women’s, and the concomitant limiting of women’s educational opportunities.

The image of the Southern woman was one that was physically and mentally weak and dependent on the male. In turn, the image of the Southern male was one who could provide for and protect his inferior and less capable female. Throughout the course of Southern history we see a pattern in the treatment of women that relies on these enduring images. This pattern has consistently been used to limit Southern women’s opportunities, or delay them considerably, compared to women in other parts of the nation. Though these images are no longer used as prevalently or as blatantly as they once were, they are still alive as a significant part of the accepted Southern culture. VMI incorporated many of these notions either as implicit assumptions underlying their arguments or, at times, as specific arguments themselves. It is apparent from the similarities between historical arguments regarding education for women and VMI’s arguments that these enduring myths are still surviving within Southern society and emerging whenever traditional gender conventions are threatened. Despite the enduring nature of these myths regarding the true image of men and women, VMI and The Citadel have been ordered by the Supreme Court to integrate women, thus giving women the opportunity to achieve roles that are incompatible with the traditional perceptions of the Southern belle. As they embark upon their military experience at these two traditionally all-male institutions, the first step toward the complete destruction of these myths and women’s liberation from the archaic images of a “true Southern women” is finally underway.

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