

SAMPLE

ALCUIN, A Fierce & Elegant Plea for the Rights of Women
adaptation by Carolyn Balducci
based on the book by Charles Brockden Brown
(b. 1771, Philadelphia. d. 1810, Philadelphia)

Alcuin and Mrs. Carter, fully costumed, take their places on stage. She is seated at a Tea Table pouring lemonade into tall glasses and tea into cups.

SCENE 1

Philadelphia in JULY 1798, the capital city of the USA. During John Adams' administration there is great concern about the undeclared Quasi-War with Napoleon's France in Caribbean waters. The air is thick with political gossip at the residence of a prominent Philadelphia politician or judge. The afternoon salon is presided over by his sister, Mrs. Carter, a childless young widow.

Alcuin, a young Quaker school teacher, approaches the house. He pauses outside to gaze through the windows at the guests inside.

ALCUIN

(addresses the audience)

I called last evening on Mrs. Carter. Her brother is a man of letters, who scarcely spends an evening at home, yet takes care to invite to his house, everyone who enjoys a reputation for learning and probity. Guests who came in search of the man, soon found something in the features and accents of the lady, that induced them to prolong their stay. On the death of her husband, Mrs. Carter became his housekeeper.

A commodious apartment, excellent tea, lemonade, and ice – and wholesome fruits – were added to the pleasures of instructive society. No wonder Mrs. Carter's coterie became the favorite resort of the liberal and ingenious. Her apartment was a lyceum open at stated hours, and to particular persons, who enjoyed the benefits of rational discourse and agreeable repasts. Unfettered conversation that is sometimes abrupt and sententious, sometimes fugitive and brilliant, and sometimes copious and declamatory, is a scene for which I entertain great affection. No wonder I was desirous of knowing how far these valuable purposes were accomplished by the frequenters of Mrs. Carter's lyceum.

At five o'clock I shut up my little school. Shall I go (said I to myself), or shall I not? I looked at my unpowdered locks, my worsted stockings, and my pewter buckles. I bethought me of my embarrassed air, and my uncouth gait. I pondered on the superciliousness of wealth and talents, the awfulness of flowing muslin, the mighty task of hitting on a right movement, the right posture in sitting, and the perplexing mysteries of tea-table decorum. But I was not vanquished.

Mrs. Carter's Salon becomes animated. She pours Lemonade into glasses and Servants serve the Guests. Alcuin enters the house.

ALCUIN

The theme of discourse was political. The edicts of Carnot, and the commentary of Peter Porcupine, an avid Federalist, furnished ample materials of discussion.

He approaches Mrs. Carter.

ALCUIN

Pray, Madam, are you a Federalist?

She does not answer.

ALCUIN

I see my question produces a smile, and a pause.

MRS. CARTER

True. I smile because your question is novel. I pause because it is a difficult one to answer.

ALCUIN

Judging from what I observe here this evening, I should imagine that to you the theme is far from new.

MRS. CARTER

I have often been called upon to listen to discussions of this sort, but I do not recollect when my opinion had been asked.

ALCUIN

Will you favour me with your opinion, notwithstanding?

MRS. CARTER

(sarcastic)

Surely you are in jest. What! Ask a woman – shallow and inexperienced as all women are known to be – her opinion on any political question! What have we to do with politics? If you inquire the price of this ribbon, or where I purchased that set of china, these belong to a woman's province. The daringness of female curiosity is well known; yet it is seldom so adventurous as to attempt to penetrate into the mysteries of government.

ALCUIN

Women are universally trained to maintain the government of a family.

MRS. CARTER

Your inference is that women occupy their proper sphere only when they confine themselves to the tea-table and needlework: but this sphere, whatever you may think, is narrow. Yet when they step outside these bounds, it causes a scandal.

ALCUIN

It is by no means clear that a change in this respect is either possible or desirable. Women's occupations are more honourable than many professions allotted to men. But we can never wholly extinguish in women the best principle of human nature: curiosity. Even if we withhold all knowledge of the past; and limit their incentives to study, they are accurate observers. And, when opportunity arises, they delight in discussing what they see and hear.

MRS. CARTER

I am glad to meet so zealous an advocate. I am ready to adopt a plausible apology for the peculiarities of women. Are you interested?

ALCUIN

Certainly.

MRS. CARTER

According to this system, it would be absurd to blame those who are perpetually prying into other people's affairs!

ALCUIN

My dear Madam, you mistake me. Ignorance and envy are no favorites of mine. If the sexes had, in reality, separate interests, it is the women who would triumph. Together with power and property, men have asserted their superior claim to vice and folly.

MRS CARTER

If I understand you rightly, you are of opinion that the sexes are essentially equal.

ALCUIN

It appears to me that human beings are moulded by the circumstances in which they are placed. In this respect they are all alike. Differences stemming from sexual distinctions are nothing.

MRS CARTER

And yet women are often reminded that none of their sex are to be found among the formers of States, and that Pythagoras, Lycurgus, and Socrates, Newton, and Locke, were not women.

ALCUIN

Neither were they savages nor shoemakers. They would have a better chance of becoming an astronomer by gazing at the stars through a telescope, than by plying the needle. Women are defective. They are seldom or never metaphysicians, chemists, or law-givers. Why? Because they are seamstresses and cooks. Who could read if they never saw an alphabet? Who could write, if their only tool were a needle?

MRS. CARTER

Yes, of all forms of injustice, the most egregious is to make sex a reason for excluding one half of mankind from those paths which lead to usefulness and honour.

ALCUIN

Yet, if a fraction of every community is condemned to servile and physically arduous professions, it matters not which sex they may be. Perhaps there should be a precept that requires that each individual to share the labour so that tasks might be divided among the whole.

MRS. CARTER

But, the burden is unequal since the strength of the females is less. Nature has subjected us to peculiar infirmities and hardships. In consideration of what we suffer as mothers and nurses, ought we not be exempt from the same proportion of labour.

ALCUIN

Is not the care of infants a privilege? Transferring to men the task of nurturing young children, would not be acceptable to mothers.

MRS. CARTER

On the contrary, we have the highest reason to complain of our exclusion from professions which might afford us a means of subsistence for ourselves and our children.

ALCUIN

Cannot a female be a trader? You may, at any time, draw wages. You might possess livestock and hire laborers, furthermore, there is no species of manufacture which you are forbidden to employ.

MRS. CARTER

But are we not excluded from the liberal professions?

ALCUIN

You have free access to the counting-house. To see you at the Exchange, or superintending the delivery of cargo would attract notice because it is uncommon, not because it is disgraceful or illegal. The profession of a merchant may be pursued without needing to visit the quay or the coffee-house. In the cities of Europe there are women bankers and merchants who are respected for their skill, their integrity, and their opulence.

MRS. CARTER

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

ALCUIN

My grandmother was a tolerable physician. She was in great demand among her neighbors though she never tampered with diseases of a complicated nature.

MRS. CARTER

But the law —

ALCUIN

We are not accustomed to see female pleaders at the bar, and I never wish to see them there. But the study of law is open to their curiosity. Thus, a woman may become an excellent counsellor without exhibiting herself in court.

MRS. CARTER

Let us turn to the pulpit, a sanctuary women must never profane.

ALCUIN

Only in some sects would the business of explaining our religious duty be called a trade. But other sects admit females into the class of preachers, though it is not an occupation that yields much profit to whoever practises it. But there is no religious society in which women are debarred from the privileges of superior sanctity.

MRS. CARTER

It is evident that the liberal professions, the ones requiring the most vigor of mind, the greatest extent of knowledge, and the most commerce with books and enlightened society are occupied only by men. If contrary instances occur, they are rare, and must be considered as exceptions.

ALCUIN

I entertain little respect for what are called the liberal professions. Usefulness is more important: whoever can stop the ravages of a pestilence, for example. How does a mercenary preacher, lawyer, or physician, differ from a dishonest chimney-sweep? The most that can be dreaded from a chimney-sweep is smoke, but what injuries may we not dread from the abuses of law, medicine, or clergy!

MRS. CARTER

But nothing matters if our education does not qualify us to enter a profession. What think you of female education? Mine was frivolous. I was taught to make a pie and cut out a gown. If I have added anything to these attainments, it is through my own efforts, not through the encouragement of others.

ALCUIN

And ought it not be so? You were taught to read and write: quills, paper, and books were at hand. If you are indifferent to the pleasures and benefits of knowledge and remain ignorant, it is not due to the lack of encouragement.

MRS. CARTER

I find no difficulty to admit that the system does not condemn all women to stupidity. As it is, we have only to lament that such an unjust sentence is executed on the majority. You forget how seldom even those who are the most well situated are permitted to cater for themselves. Their conduct is subject to the control of others who are, in turn, guided by established prejudices. They think a woman is to be instructed in a manner different from a man. For males, there are schools and colleges and instructors in all the sciences and learned languages; but are not women totally excluded from them?

ALCUIN

First, consider whether a public education is favorable to moral and intellectual improvement. Before we lament the exclusion of women, let us acknowledge that academies are as numerous for females as for males.

MRS. CARTER

But they offer very different courses of instruction. I know of no female school where Latin, or geometry, or chemistry are taught.

ALCUIN

Yet, Madam, there are a number of female geometricians, and chemists, and scholars. The assistance of a college is not indispensable.

MRS. CARTER

It is not possible to educate oneself in the complex study of medicine.

ALCUIN

Suppose an anatomist should open a school to pupils of both sexes. Would you comply?

MRS. CARTER

No, because that pursuit has no attractions for me. But if I had a friend whose curiosity was directed to it, why should I discourage her?

ALCUIN

Perhaps you are unacquainted with the requirements of such a study.

MRS. CARTER

Objections on the score of delicacy, would be eliminated by making the whole company, professor and pupils, female. But in all other circumstances, nothing has been more injurious than the separation of the sexes.

ALCUIN

Injurious to whom?

MRS. CARTER

Male and female associate in childhood without restraint; but the time arrives when they are obliged to take different paths. Ideas, maxims, and pursuits, wholly opposite, engross their attention. All intercourse between them is fettered and embarrassed.

Mrs. Carter mimics the awkward interaction between a young woman and a young man.

MRS. CARTER

On one side, all reserve and artifice. On the other, adulation and affected humility. The man must affect a disproportionate ardor, while the woman must counterfeit indifference and aversion. Her lips belie the sentiments of her heart and she dictates of her understanding. That is what is called "courtship."