

middle-class family, and of women's new domestic role, thereby received extensive publicity and affected women's expectations and experience for decades to come.

Matrimonial Risks

Emma Willard, 1815

"*Emma Willard to Almira Hart*" (1815), in John Lord, *The Life of Emma Willard* (New York: Appleton, 1873), pp. 44–45.

Marriage for love, and freedom of choice, brought risks as well as rewards. Whatever the counsel of friends and relatives, a woman now bore sole responsibility for her decision to marry; she alone would face the consequences. Such a step required extreme caution, as 28-year-old educator Emma Willard (1787–1870) suggested in a letter to her younger sister Almira Hart in 1815. Emma, who had married a much older man, physician John Willard, in 1809, was then running a female academy in Middlebury, Vermont. She had opened the school when her husband's finances collapsed. Almira lived at the sisters' parental home in Berlin, Connecticut, where she too ran a school. Her suitor was a lawyer named Simeon Lincoln.

In a hard-headed outburst of sisterly advice, Emma alerted Almira to a few of the possible disasters that lay in store in regard to "Mr. L." or presumably anyone else. What if, during courtship, he fell in love with another or revealed some defect of character? What if, after marriage, his business duties made him neglectful, gloomy, or critical? In any case, Willard warned, high hopes were likely to lead to disappointment. Almira ignored her sister's grim counsel and married her suitor in 1817. After his death she was married happily again to lawyer John Phelps. Emma Willard, ironically, eventually needed the advice she gave Almira. At age fifty, when she was a rich, successful woman, she married a much younger man who turned out to be a gambler in need of her money. The marriage disintegrated a few months later.

Middlebury, July 30, 1815

Dear Sister:

You think it strange that I should consider a period of happiness as more likely than any other to produce future misery. I know I did not sufficiently explain myself. Those tender and delicious sensations which accompany successful love, while they soothe and soften the mind, diminish its strength to bear or to conquer difficulties. It is the luxury of the soul; and luxury always enervates. A degree of cold that would but brace the nerves of the hardy peasant, would bring distress or death to him who had been pampered by ease and indulgence. This life is a life of vicissitude. A period of happiness, by softening and ener-

vating the soul, by raising a thousand blissful images of the future, naturally prepares the mind for a greater or less degree of disappointment, and unfits us to bear it; while, on the contrary, a period of adversity often strengthens the mind, and, by destroying inordinate anticipation of the future, gives a relish to whatever pleasures may be thrown in our way. This, perhaps you may acknowledge, is generally true; but you cannot think it applies to your case—otherwise than that you acknowledge yourself liable to disappointment by death. But we will pass over that, and we will likewise pass over the possibility of your lover's seeing some object that he will consider more interesting than you, and likewise that you may hereafter discover some imperfection in his character. We will pass this over, and suppose that the sanction of the law has been passed upon your connection, and you are secured to each other for life. It will be natural that, at first, he should be much devoted to you; but, after a while, his business must occupy his attention. While absorbed in that he will perhaps neglect some of those little tokens of affection which have become necessary to your happiness. His affairs will sometimes go wrong, and perhaps he will not think proper to tell you the cause; he will appear to you reserved and gloomy, and it [will] be very natural in such a case for you to imagine that he is displeased with you, or is less attached than formerly. Possibly you may not in every instance manage a family as he has been accustomed to think was right, and he may sometimes hastily give you a harsh word or a frown. But where is the use, say you, of diminishing my present enjoyment by such gloomy apprehensions? Its use is this, that, if you enter the marriage state believing such things to be absolutely impossible, if you should meet them, they would come upon you with double force. We should endeavor to make a just estimate of our future prospects, and consider what evils, peculiar situations in which we may be placed, are most likely to beset us, and endeavor to avert them if we can; or, if we must suffer them, to do it with fortitude, and not magnify them by imagination, and think that, because we cannot enjoy all that a glowing fancy can paint, there is no enjoyment left. I hope I shall see Mr. L—. I shall be very glad to have you come and spend the winter with me, and, if he could with propriety accompany you, I should be glad to see him. I am involved in care. There [are] forty in our family and seventy in the school. I have, however, an excellent house-keeper and a very good assistant in my school. You seem to have some wise conjectures floating in your brain, but, unfortunately for your skill in guessing, they have no foundation in truth.

Little John says I must tell you he has learned a great deal. He goes to a little children's school, and is doing very well. Doctor has not yet gone to Pittsfield after mother, but expects to set out this week. We both feel very unpleasantly that he could not have gone before, but a succession of engagements made it impossible.

*Yours affectionately,
Emma Willard*