

On Women In Rome By Rufus

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Introduction

Musonius Rufus, a first-century Roman Stoic teacher, argues that women should study philosophy because women and men share the capacity for virtue. The surviving discourse commonly titled “That Women Too Should Study Philosophy” is striking within its historical setting because it rejects the assumption that moral education belongs only to men. The original response paper correctly identifies Rufus’s support for women’s education and his use of questions, but it sometimes describes his position as modern social equality. Rufus remains a thinker of the Roman household who expects women to be modest, disciplined wives and managers of domestic life. His argument is therefore both radical and limited: it expands philosophical education while preserving many gendered duties of the society in which he lived.

Rufus and Roman Stoicism

Rufus taught during the first century CE and belonged to the Roman Stoic tradition associated with self-control, reason, duty, and freedom from domination by destructive passions. Stoicism treated virtue as the only true good and argued that external conditions such as wealth, status, illness, and reputation do not determine moral worth. This framework gives Rufus the basis for his discussion of women. If virtue depends on rational judgment rather than political privilege or physical strength, women cannot be excluded merely because Roman custom assigns them fewer public roles. His educational claim is not based primarily on individual preference or career advancement. It follows from the Stoic conviction that every person responsible for moral action needs training in how to judge, desire, and act well.

The Central Question

Rufus asks why women should not study philosophy when women possess the same basic rational capacities and must cultivate the same virtues as men. The rhetorical question exposes an inconsistency in the audience’s assumptions. Romans expected women to practice self-control, courage, justice, and practical wisdom, yet many denied them systematic instruction in the discipline intended to develop those qualities. Rufus does not need to prove that every woman will become an outstanding philosopher. He asks why sex alone should disqualify a person from moral education. The argument shifts the burden of proof from women who seek learning to those who defend exclusion. This reversal gives the discourse much of its force even when its social conclusions remain conservative.

Virtue Is Not Divided by Sex

The argument depends on the unity of virtue. Justice is not one quality for men and another for women, and self-control does not become unnecessary in the household. Rufus observes that women must recognize wrongdoing, resist harmful desire, endure hardship, and act courageously. These are philosophical tasks because they require disciplined judgment. He also presents household management as morally serious rather than naturally effortless. If a woman is expected to manage resources, relationships, children, servants, and personal conduct, she needs practical wisdom. Rufus therefore uses the responsibilities already assigned to women as evidence for their education. The logic challenges exclusion while accepting the household as the primary field in which female virtue will be displayed.

Philosophy as Practice

For Rufus, philosophy is not mainly the study of abstract theories or impressive speeches. It is training for life. A student learns to govern appetite, tolerate discomfort, reject luxury, speak truthfully, fulfill obligations, and prefer moral integrity to reputation or wealth. This practical understanding explains why he considers philosophy useful to women. Education should make a person more reliable in ordinary relationships and more capable of acting well under pressure. The original essay describes philosophy as knowledge of values, which is partly correct, but Rufus demands repeated practice rather than information alone. A person does not become courageous by defining courage. Courage develops through choices in which fear, loss, or social pressure could otherwise control conduct.

Marriage as a Partnership

Rufus describes marriage through mutual affection, fidelity, shared life, and willingness to endure prosperity and hardship together. Husband and wife should care for one another and treat their interests as connected. This emphasis gives marriage an ethical seriousness that goes beyond reproduction or property. The original response notes sacrifice, respect, and support, but Rufus's ideal should not be confused with full legal equality. Roman law and custom gave husbands and male citizens greater authority, and Rufus does not propose dismantling those structures. His contribution lies in judging marriage by moral reciprocity rather than by domination alone. A spouse who treats the other merely as a servant fails the Stoic duty to live justly within the closest human association.

Education and Child Rearing

Rufus also connects women's philosophical education with the upbringing of children. The argument can sound instrumental, as though women deserve education only because educated mothers produce better citizens. Yet it also recognizes that moral formation begins in daily relationships and

that the person supervising children exercises intellectual and ethical responsibility. A mother who can reason about justice, appetite, courage, and truth is better prepared to model and explain those qualities. Modern readers should preserve the insight while rejecting the idea that women's education must be justified through motherhood. Women have an independent claim to intellectual development. Rufus's historical argument opens a door that later ethical reasoning can extend beyond the domestic purposes he emphasizes.

Rhetorical Questions and Audience Strategy

Rufus addresses listeners shaped by customs that associated advanced education and public philosophical life with men. Directly demanding modern equality would not have matched the concepts available to that audience. He therefore reasons from values they already accept. If a good woman should be just, self-controlled, courageous, and capable of managing a household, then training in virtue is appropriate. His rhetorical questions invite listeners to discover the contradiction themselves. He also reduces fear by insisting that philosophy will not make women neglect duty or pursue scandal. This strategy is persuasive but revealing: he must reassure men that educated women will remain within respectable roles. The argument's effectiveness depends partly on accommodating the anxieties that limit its emancipatory reach.

The Problem of Domestic Respectability

The original essay suggests that philosophy would make women more loving, nurturing, and committed to household duties. Rufus does connect education with these qualities, but the language can reinforce the belief that women's worth depends on service to family. His discourse rarely considers women who do not marry, who pursue public work, or who resist unjust domestic authority. Philosophy is offered as a way to perfect the role assigned to women rather than to let women redefine their social possibilities. This limitation matters because education can either enlarge agency or train people to accept unequal arrangements more efficiently. A critical response should appreciate Rufus's attack on intellectual exclusion while asking why rational equality does not lead him toward broader legal and political equality.

Stoic Self-Control and Modern Criticism

Self-control is central to Rufus, but modern readers should distinguish discipline from suppression. Stoic practice asks people to examine judgments and refuse enslavement to appetite or fear. It does not require denying grief, affection, or vulnerability. Women have often been expected to endure injustice silently under the language of patience and sacrifice, so appeals to endurance need ethical limits. Courage may require leaving an abusive relationship, challenging authority, or demanding institutional change rather than simply tolerating hardship. Rufus provides resources for this criticism

because Stoicism values justice and moral independence. His own application remains narrower than the principle. A modern response can use Stoic reason against social practices that ask one group to bear unequal burdens.

Equality, Sameness, and Difference

Rufus's statement that women and men share the capacity for virtue does not require claiming that every person has identical talents, experiences, or social needs. Moral equality concerns worth and eligibility for education, while individual differences remain. The important question is whether a relevant difference justifies exclusion. Sex does not make a person incapable of understanding justice or practicing courage. Modern educational equality also requires attention to barriers such as legal restriction, economic dependence, violence, and expectations about caregiving. Merely announcing that women may study is insufficient when institutions are organized around male freedom from domestic labor. Rufus identifies the intellectual error in exclusion, but contemporary analysis must also examine the material arrangements that determine who can actually learn.

Historical Significance

Within Roman philosophical literature, Rufus's defense of women's study is notable because it gives a systematic reason for including women in moral education. Stoicism had resources for universal moral community, yet actual philosophical schools and civic institutions were deeply shaped by status, sex, slavery, and citizenship. Rufus did not overcome these contradictions, but his argument demonstrates how a principle can exceed its author's social program. Once rational capacity and virtue are acknowledged across sex, later thinkers can ask why education, property, profession, and political voice should remain unequal. Historical significance does not require treating Rufus as a modern feminist. It requires seeing how his reasoning both challenged and remained confined by Roman patriarchy.

Personal Response

The most persuasive part of Rufus's work is his insistence that moral expectations create educational obligations. Society should not demand judgment, responsibility, and courage from people while denying them the knowledge and practice needed to develop those capacities. His discussion also shows that education is not valuable only for employment; it shapes relationships, self-command, and public character. I disagree, however, with making women's access to philosophy depend on becoming better wives or household managers. A woman's rational life has value whether or not it benefits a husband or child. Rufus's argument should therefore be read as an important beginning rather than a complete account of equality. Its Stoic principle is stronger than its domestic conclusion.

Conclusion

Musonius Rufus argues that women should study philosophy because women possess reason and need the same virtues expected of men. He uses rhetorical questions, practical examples, and the accepted duties of marriage and household management to expose the inconsistency of excluding women from moral education. His position was significant in the Roman context, yet it did not establish modern equality in law, politics, work, or family authority. The discourse is most valuable when read in tension: it recognizes women as rational moral agents while directing their education toward traditional domestic roles. A critical response can honor the first claim and challenge the second, extending Rufus's own Stoic commitment to justice beyond the social limits he accepted.

Works Cited

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