Amanda Zapata

Professor Casmier-Paz

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Beginnings of Female Empowerment in American Literature

Women faced difficulty prior to the Revolutionary War, however influential figures such as Sarah Kemble Knight and Phillis Wheatley challenged the role of women in society by being bold and daring. By stepping out of their comfort zones, these women introduced to the world a female perspective of their personal lives. These women made efforts to understand the world and share their relationship with God throughout their writing.

Knight shares in “The Private Journal of a Journey from Boston to New York” her experiences travelling alone. At this time, women travelling alone was unusual, which developed her emotional growth, relationship to God, and overall life experiences. On a feminist note, Knight describes her journey as “encompassed with terrifying darkness; the least of which was enough to startle a more masculine courage” (381). Knight compares herself to men, attempting to ignite a “masculine courage” to her journey as she describes to have been “unwelcoming” and “unpleasant” (381).

Women held traditional household roles, as when Knight arrived at Mr. Haven’s house, his wife welcomed Knight by offering to remove her riding clothes as well as a meal (Knight 382). The woman in Mr. Haven’s house was described by Knight as a “good woman”, as she was a warm and welcoming host. The dichotomy between a good woman and the women Knight encounters in Boston prevails to be grand. On October 6th, Knight encounters a “woman of about seventy and vantage, but of as sound intellectuals as one of seventeen” (383). When Knight shares this sentiment, she provides to the reader insight on how women viewed other women during this time period. Knight also shares that “the Dutch, especially the meddling sort, differ from our women, in their habits go loose,” not many works of women were published prior to the Revolutionary War, and Knight shares how women in different provincial areas were progressing to independence from the way they were dressing (388).

Wheatley, a female African American slave, managed to publish her own book of poems sharing details on her experiences as a slave. In Wheatley’s poem, “Thoughts on the Works of Providence”, she elaborates on her relationship with God. Despite the odds being against Wheatley to practice religion, her faith kept her grounded and connected to the world. Wheatley proclaims in her poem by personifying Love and Reason, “” Thy birth, celestial queen! ‘tis mine to own; “” In thee resplendent is the Godhead shown;””, Wheatley attaches the personification of Love and Reason to herself, mentioning that her relationship to God has transcended to be personal (770).

In both pieces of writing, Knight and Wheatley exemplify the importance of being a female writer by writing the new changes that are occurring within the world. Knight and Wheatley also expressed liberty and independence that comes with being a woman who maintains headstrong faith in God. These women writing during this period carries the upmost significance, as they were one of the first female writers, revolutionizing the world through their feminist efforts.

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