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Enlightenment Liberal Feminism: Child of the American Revolution

The American Revolution altered the lives of families throughout the colonies, and later throughout the states. As the fight for independence began, it swept up husbands, fathers, and brothers to fight diplomatically or with a loaded gun. In their absence, women were thrust into nontraditional roles formally filled by their husbands. This shift led to the emergence of what is now referred to as Enlightenment Liberal Feminism, first appeaing in Feminist Theory: Intellectual Traditions of America Feminism by Josephine Donovan. The notion of equality of mind spread like wildfire among middle and upper-class women and spurred them into action during the Age of Enlightenment. Women like Abigail Adams stood in their husband's shadows, but used their knowledge and position to whisper suggestions into the ears of influential people in hopes of achieving gender equality. Connections were not the only weapons brandished in this crusade for equality, for there were women who fought with guns and cannons; others with pen and paper. The American Revolution opened doors, albeit briefly, to the idea that women could be equal in mind, rationality, and reason.

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

Despite their socioeconomic status, women living upper class lives were subject to much of the same crushing gender discrimination as those in lower classes. Some rode along with the status quo without protest due to their lack of imagination as to what they could be and what was being kept beyond their reach. Other women, however, read whatever they could get their hands

on and challenged the idea that they were inferior to the opposite sex. Women like Abigail Adams used their influence and intellect to further the feminist movement.

Background

Abigail Adams'seconomic and social standing provided her access to educational opportunities and real-world situations that influenced her feminist views. It was not unusual for upper class women to be educated with the basics, however an education like the one Adams was subject to was rare. Due to her social standing, she had access to limitless educational materials. She had access to the library of her father Reverend William Smith, where she discovered literary role models such as William Shakespeare and John Dryden (Crane 745). Upon marrying John Adams she gained access to his expansive library as well, which was full of intellectually challenging materials like Homer, Plato, and John Locke, among others (Crane 746). Her ability to correspond incredibly well with written word, as well as her contrarian view on the original sin as seen in her letters, demonstrates her ability to understand and form opinions on complex subjects (Erkkila 198-201). While these materials were mentally stimulating, it was not just the information that they provided that registered with Adams, but the fact that the overwhelming majority of these materials were written by men (Crane 747). She understood the world she lived in, and the limits placed on her sex, but with that she also knew how the system worked, and used the importance of women in the concept of republican motherhood as a reason to call for the education of women (Erkkila 198 - 199). As the war for independence came hurtling around the corner, men began to flock towards it, shifting economic and social responsibilities to the women. Adams, now head of the house, took on both masculine and feminine roles (Erkkila 199). With the lines blurred between the traditionally distinct duties of the different sexes, there

were changes in their social and economic roles, henceforth broadening the horizons of what was possible and acceptable (Klein 33).

Involvement In Enlightenment Liberal Feminism

Adams grew up learning the ways of the world as a woman living in prewar America. The feminist movement had not yet fully taken off, so while she recognized the inequalities within her society, she rarely had the stage with which to draw attention to those inequalities, but began developing her capacity for reason and rationality showcasing the ideals of enlightenment liberal feminism.

John Adams became reliant on Abigail for information and support, consequently making her an informal adviser, a position that came with indirect power. This reliance became heightened when he left for the Continental Congress, and again when he became the Ambassador to France, with a tangible trail of letters capturing her influence (Erkkila 198). Her letters showcase her knowledge of the state of politics in America, and their potential influence on her husband's work in establishing America as an independent country. Upon becoming the President of the United States, he wrote a letter to Abigail where he admitted that he "never wanted [Abigail's] Advice and assistance more in [his] Life," displaying the level of respect he had for her (Adams 22 March 1797). Even before Abigail Adams put pen to paper in terms of feminism, she was already an exception.

In the 18th century, the relationship between a husband and wife was not one of mutual trust and respect, but more along the lines of a one way street. Mary Home said that she had no concern in life but to please her husband and tend to his happiness in whatever way possible, "he's the End of every Care I have; if I dress, 'tis for him; if I read a Poem or a Play, 'tis to qualify myself for a Conversation agreeable to his Taste: He's almost the End of my Devotions; half my

Prayers are for his Happiness"(Morley 21 December 1711). Abigail, however, stepped outside the traditional female tropes of obedience and subordination as seen in a letter she wrote to her husband in 1776 when he was in Philadelphia debating whether to secede or to reconcile with Britain (Crane 752). In that letter, she urged him to "remember the ladies" and to move beyond the archaic boundaries to which women were confined, ones where husbands are given "unlimited power'" (Adams 31 March 1776). Despite her scorching letter, John dismissed her plea. However, it would be incorrect to say that she was completely unsuccessful. A little over a month later, he solidified his position on "female political participation" in a response letter to James Sullivan's "'Investigation' of representative government," showing that Abigail's words did not go unnoticed (Crane 756). Abigail Adams may have stood in her husband's shadow, but she used her position to influence the early feminist movement.

Other Women of Influence

Esther Burr, born Esther Edwards, like Adams, was from a respected family with an authority figure father who was the pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts (Fisher 297). Her status grew in 1752 with her marriage to Reverend Aarron Burr Sr., father of future Vice President Aaron Burr, and whose extensive education and high position in life gave her many advantages when it came to a general understanding of the world (Fisher 297). Burr was an eloquent writer and her access to high-level literature led her to form solid views about what position women should have in society and gave her the intellectual tools to defend them (Fisher 298- 301). Burr was perhaps not as influential as Adams when it came to tinkering with the minds of powerful men, but she regularly clashed with them. For example, she challenged Mr. Ewing, a tutor at the college her husband was president of, on the role of women,

demonstrating her ability to form complex arguments, and use reasoning and logic to defend her position (Fisher 301).

WOMEN OF WAR

The upperclass, educated, and priviliged women of society, while aiding the more thought-provoking and ideological side of the feminist movement, were not the driving force of the cause. Instead, there were women born into a world that not only looked down on them because of their gender, but also based on their social and economic status. There were women who had no influential powers over anyone who could make a difference, and who were maybe even unaware of the significance their actions had in the feminist movement. Some of these women who found ways to fight back became influential players in the bloody game of war.

Background

Deborah Sampson Gannett was not born a fortunate child; in fact, her early childhood was anything but charmed. Her father originally came from a distinguished family, but after not inheriting his father's entire estate, his wealth dropped significantly, as did his social standing (Norwood 148). After a sequence of ill-fated events, Ganett, at that time Deborah Bradford, ended up indentured to a man - Deacon Benjamin Thomas - who would be her guardian until her eighteenth birthday (Norwood 149). Unlike Abigail Adams who read about the disparities between the two sexes, Gannett witnessed them with her own eyes throughout her life. As a result of not receiving a private education and sheltered pampering behind high walls, she stood fully exposed to society and all of its imperfections. She was close enough to feel the waves of the war and revolution come crashing down, and brave enough to let herself be carried away in the currents.

Involvement In Enlightenment Liberal Feminism

The ideology of most of society at that time fell into the overarching view that a "woman is worth more as a woman, but less as a man"(Rousseau 262). However, somewhat ironically, Gannett did more for her country than she ever could have if she remained in the role that had been imposed on her by society. As Gannett matured, she began to want for things society would never allow. She had interests in traveling and understanding the workings of the world, both of which were not interests of traditional women in a conventional society (Norwood 152). Seizing an opportunity as it flew by, Gannett, dressed as a man, joined the Continental Army in May of 1782 under the alias of Robert Shirtliff (Norwood 152-155). Gannett challenged the idea that women lack vigor and strength of mind, that frivolity overrides any robust bone in their bodies (Rousseau 264). It takes strength of mind and body to get shot in the thigh and hide it from a hospital full of doctors, and it takes strength of mind and body to clean the wound with rum and dig the bullet out with a penknife and a needle to protect her secret (Norwood 156).

However, it was not solely her heroism and extreme bravery that justifies her as a player in the game of enlightenment liberal feminism. It was also what she did with that experience. Her true gender was revealed to medical personnel in 1783, when she went down with a terrible fever, and from there her secret unraveled thread by thread until she was discharged from the army by General Henry Knox (Norwood 157-159). While her fight in the war was over, her fight in the feminist movement was only beginning. In 1802, Gannett delivered an address in multiple towns throughout Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York, speaking of her time in the army (Tappan iii). In her address, Gannett stated that she "swerved from the accustomed flowery path of female delicacy to walk upon the heroic precipice of femine perdition," opening the female world to the novel idea that a new and freer route had been forged, albeit far from cleared (Tappan 17). In sharing her story, she was able to receive a small fraction of the

acknowledgement she deserved, and opened the door to women from all walks of life who had been told that their domestic responsibilities were more important than what they thought. Should any of these women have desired to fight for equality, because of Gannett, at least now they knew that they *could.*

Other Women of War

Wars often give rise to mindsets bent on challenging "traditional notions of what is possible," including the commonly accepted view that women cannot have strength of mind or body, that they are fragile and weak (Klein 33, Rousseau 281). The American Revolution produced an ideal situation for this mindset to grow.

Sybil Ludington, a young girl of only sixteen years of age, was the epitome of strength of mind and body (Patrick 271). Despite some exaggerations and untruths that have appeared over the years, Sybil Ludington's story has been found to be mostly accurate. Sometimes referred to as the female Paul Revere, she rode 40 miles in the dead of night to summon Colonel Ludington's regiment to defend Danbury, Connecticut from two thousand British soldiers on April twenty-sixth, 1777 (Patrick 271, Hunt 201). While Sybil's actions were likely driven by her impulse to save the lives of innocent civilians, they still shattered the picture of a woman being passive and weak in comparison to the "active and strong" man (Rousseau 260).

WOMEN OF LITERATURE

Where some who felt the oppression of a patriarchal society chose the path of fighting, others took the path of letter and wit. Women such as Judith Sargent Murray challenged the views on women's educational and societal roles, claiming that women were in fact equal in mind, severely contrasting with the popular view that women were "dull, thoughtless, and stupid" in comparison to the opposite sex (Arezki 3, Rousseau 271).

Background

Unlike women like Abigail Adams, who had access to educational materials from the day they learned how to read and write, with family members set on furthering their education, Judith Sargent Murray was not so lucky (Arezki 3). While her brother continued on to get a higher education, Murray's parents did not allow her to do the same (Arezki 3). Murray learned first hand of the educational inequalities facing women, which later influenced her literary works, and her belief that intellect and sensibility did not vary between sexes, which impacted her strength as a writer (Gustafson 821-822).

Involvement In Enlightenment Liberal Feminism

In simple terms, Judith Sargent Murray eloquently challenged previous views that women were incapable of reason and rationality and that an education would be unnecessary, and possibly corrupt their minds (Rousseau 267-268). Murray strived to uncover the inequality of refusing women an education and forcing them into a role of a "subordinate creature," championing the enlightenment liberal feminism pillar of equality of mind (Arezki 3). Murray's *On the Equality of the Sexes* overarchingly attempts to persuade that women should not be judged on the basis of sex, but rather on that of "critical thinking and imagination" because "the mind has no sex"(Arezki 4, Gustafson 821). She stresses that previous verdicts pertaining to sex-based variations of quality of mind cannot be relied upon seeing that it is biased to judge an area of expertise where one sex is soceitally deprived from reaching their full potential (Arezki 4).

The existing limits to which a woman could receive an education were dictated by the concept of republican motherhood as well as pleasing future husbands (Rousseau 263). It was commonplace for a mother to be the original teacher of manners, passions, tastes, pleasures and

happiness, and, as a result, it was strongly believed that the "whole education of women ought to be relative to men" (Rousseau 263). Educating women was not designed to make them beneficial contributors to society, but rather compliant contributors inside the home. Murray, however, stressed the intellectually-backed minds that could be giving rise to a stronger and more intelligent nation (Murray 2). She argued that the act confining a woman's mind to matters of the house was a misuse of a mind so apt to creative intelligence and a decision lacking sufficient reason (Murray 2). Education of women could progress beyond adolescence when the situation called for it, however it was still restricted. While learning what they wanted for their own pleasure was out of the question, women such as Mary Home were taught to absorb necessary information, but only to "qualify [themselves] for a Conversation agreeable to his Taste" (Morley 21 December 1711).

A woman's education was also stunted by the idea that those of the female sex are inately less intelligent, and, if compared at a young age, the opposite sex would stand out as far superior (Rousseau 271). Murray, on the other hand, challenged the timeworn tradition of domesticating and mentally starving society's women while the males find themselves facing a table laden with food but too full a stomach to continue (Murray 3) She argued that if the result of comparing one male and one female of two years old is that the female sex would more often be observed as having a higher capacity for wisdom, then why should a woman have to feel a "mortifying consciousness of inferiority" when they in fact possess untapped intellectual powers that have the possibility of challenging any man (Murray 1-3). Throughout her literary career, she capitalized on the novel idea that women were capable of reason and rationality, and therefore should have a right to education.

Other Women Of Literature

Another prominent writer of the era was Annis Boudinot Stockton. As a female poet whose work appeared in the "most prestigious newspapers and magazines," her achievements can be seen through the lens of enlightenment liberal feminism (Gustafson 820). Although her writing was not as starkly progressive as Murray when it came to advocating for women's right to education, her presence in a male dominated tier of literature showcased the enlightenment liberal feminism backbone of quality of mind (Gustafson 820). However, it would be entirely unjust to think of her as submissive to the male patriarchal system. In fact, in several of her poems, she insisted that women were capable of reason, and should be allowed to use their own when it came to viewing the world, instead of relying on their male counterparts (Gustafson 821). This concept was far from the prosaic female duties of wife and mother, and represented a challenge to the customary confinements on the extent of the female mind (Klein 33).

CONCLUSION

The enlightenment liberal feminist movement is one often overlooked, despite opening many doors to the future, including more productive feminism waves. These women, along with many others not mentioned in this paper, were pioneers in the feminist movement. Women were pushed down and told they were inferior, but those few who stood up and walked into the spotlight gave others the knowledge that strength of mind and body were possible. The American Revolution, having caused a shift in gender roles, can be credited with promoting "new attitudes, self-conceptions, and ideas" on the female sex, as well as giving rise to a "new consciousness"(Klein 33), a consciousness that tore down the stereotypical role of a weak, submissive woman and built up one of intelligence, rationality, and reason.

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