

## American Revolutions: Women and Liberty

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Professor Lavender



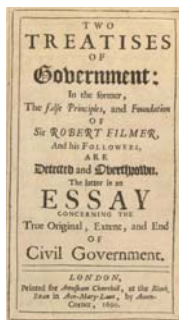
Nancy Morgan Hart detaining the Tories for hanging

## Republican Womanhood

- View that women were at least partly (or even mostly) responsible for fostering republican virtues and ideals of democracy and liberty
- Origins in Enlightenment ideas
  - And Enlightenment debate over women's rights
- And then expressed in Early Republic views of women as representing "Republican Motherhood"

## John Locke & The Glorious Revolution

- First and Second Treatises on Government
- Nuclear family is the base unit of any free society
  - With women as key figures
  - As co-equals with husbands



## Marquis de Condorcet

- "Sur l'admission des Femmes au Droit de Cite"
- (On the admission of women to the rights of citizens)



## Condorcet on Women, 1

- Women had right to speak out in public
- Women were reasonable and sensible
- Women were very often leaders
- Women had a sense of morality
- Argued that women, as people, also must not be unfairly ruled
  - links it to taxation without representation
  - says patriarchy is a restriction of women's rights to representation
  - Male tyranny negates the concept of liberty

## Condorcet on Women, 2

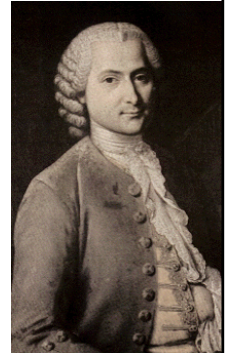
- Condorcet argued women were obviously men's equals
  - except in matters requiring brute strength
  - the brightest women were already superior to men of limited talents
    - and improvements in education would readily narrow what gaps there were

## Condorcet on Women, 3

- Condorcet concluded with his generation's most detailed statement of the political rights and responsibilities of women:
  - "Perhaps you will find this discussion too long; but think that it is about the rights of half of human beings, rights forgotten by all the legislators; that it is not useless even for the liberty of men to indicate the means of destroying the single objection which could be made to republics, and to make between them and states which are not free a real difference."

## Jean Jacques Rousseau

- Rousseau's concept of the "Noble Savage"
- Rousseau believed women to be "noble savages"
  - Closer to nature
  - But capable of citizenship

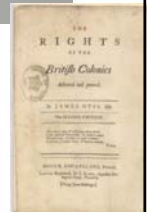


## Enlightenment Debate in America

- Early American politics shaped by the Scottish and French Enlightenments
  - Especially John Locke, seen as the philosophical father of the U.S. Constitution
  - And Condorcet, who was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin
- Some Americans address women's rights directly

## James Otis and the Woman Question

- James Otis of Boston
- Author of a 1764 pamphlet, **The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved**
- Asked questions about the origins of government.
  - And if it was based on the original social compact, he wanted to know who were those present and who were thus parties to that compact.



## James Otis on the Social Contract

- "Who acted for infants and women, or who appointed guardians for them? Had these guardians power to bind both infants and women during life and their posterity after them? What will there be to distinguish the next generation of men from their forefathers, that they should not have the same right to make original compacts as their ancestors had? If every man has such right, may there not be as many original compacts as there are men and women born or to be born? Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature? If every man and woman born or to be born has and will have a right to be consulted and must accede to the original compact before they can with any kind of justice be said to be bound by it, will not the compact be ever forming and never finished?"

## Otis's Embarrassing Questions about Women's Roles in the Revolutionary Republic

- "If upon the abdication all were reduced to a state of nature, had not apple women and orange girls as good a right to give their respectable suffrages for a new King as the philosopher, courtier, petit-maitre and politician? Were these and ten millions of other such...consulted?"

## The Constitution... What About the Women?

- John and Abigail Adams's Letters, 1776



## Abigail to John, 31 March 1776

- "I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."



## Abigail to John, 31 March 1776



- "That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex."

## John to Abigail, 14 April 1776

- "I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented."



## John to Abigail, 14 April 1776



- "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.... which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticcoat.... A fine Story indeed."

## Abigail to John, 7 May 1776

- "I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken -- and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet."



## The U.S. Constitution

- Severely limits who could vote
  - Women were unable to vote
    - But there was a glitch in New Jersey's state constitution, almost immediately corrected, which allowed women and free blacks to vote
- Women will have to fight for rights of suffrage until passage of 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920;
- And Equal Rights Amendment has never become law.

## But... A Crisis of Republican Virtue

- How could the new republic ensure that future generations -- who would lack the purifying fire of the war in which to develop their political consciousness -- would demonstrate civic virtue?
- What mechanism would America use to instill proper republican values in its citizenry?
- Newly created citizens and those born after the Revolution – how will we make sure that they develop a proper sense of “republican virtue”?
- The Answer? “**Republican Motherhood**”

## Republican Motherhood

- To endow domesticity with political meaning
- Women were politicized during war and so was the domestic arena.
  - Consumer boycotts infused daily activities and household production with political meaning.
  - Households provided goods and services to soldiers;
    - and were places to which embattled came for supplies, housing, laundry, clothing, nursing.
  - The expanded role of households during the war was given a new twist in early Republic.
  - The result was the idea and the image of the “Republican Mother”
  - Mothers of the Republic, and Mothers of Republicans

## Images of Women's Republican Virtue



“Edenton Ladies’ Tea Party”  
– English Satire of American Revolutionary Women’s Meetings

## Images of Women's Republican Virtue



Woodcut from *A New Touch on the Times*, 1779

## Republican Motherhood

- The Republican mother's patriotic duty was to educate her sons to be moral and virtuous citizens.
- This linked her directly to state and gave her a degree of political influence, although removed and indirect.



Jane Stuart, “An interior scene at Boston,” ca. 1835

## New Republican Virtue

- In effect, the republican period devised a new definition of disinterestedness
  - not the subordination of self-interest for the common good (which was the revolutionary definition)
  - but a kind of moral purity or capacity, that was rooted in one's distance from the political or public arena of activity.



Charles Wilson Peale, *Mrs. James Latimer of Delaware* (1780s)

## Women in the Republic

- Republican women contributed to their country
  - by ensuring the virtue of their men
  - by teaching them to subdue their self-interest
  - to respect others and seek to ensure their well being
  - by helping them to learn to live for one another
  - and to act in the interests of the family and community.
- By so doing, women would bring about the basis for a moral civic order.
  - Women would dedicate themselves to civic virtue by educating their children in the lessons of republicanism
  - and so help to ensure the freedom, liberty, and success of the new experiment in democracy.

## Women's Civic Roles

- Women now had a civic role and a civic identity separate from and different from that of men
  - and it was a role essential to the state's survival and welfare.
- But it was not a role that challenged the primacy of domesticity for women or women's exclusion from the public arena of politics.
- The future of the republic was ensured, however for the willingness to sacrifice individual advantage for the common good depended upon the private virtue of individuals and to women was entrusted the nurturance of these virtues.

- Women were to display their Republican Virtue through their domestic and consumer activities

- Teaching their children
- Homespun
- Buying (American) Coffee (or chickory) rather than (English) Tea



John Singleton Copley, *Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris)* (1773)



John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. John Winthrop (Hannah Fayerweather)* (1773)



Charles Wilson Peale, *Mrs. Thomas Elliott (Mary Chew)* (1787)



KEEPER NOT INTO THE WAY OF THE WOODS AND GO NOT IN THE PATH OF EVIL MEN

Keep Within Compass - illustration published between 1785 and 1805