Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence
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Chapter 10, There Is No Sex in Soul
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After World War I, Warren G. Harding captured the nation's mood with his campaign slogan promising a "return to normalcy." Harding's vocabulary was flawed, but his perception of the public's wishes was accurate. Across the centuries, Americans in 1783 would have understood this intense desire to pick up the pieces of a prewar life. Their long struggle for independence had produced a daring experiment in government, creating a republic that altered many white men's relationship to the state, redefined the source of sovereignty, and introduced a new nation among nations. Now the radical impulse behind these innovations seemed spent.

For eight years, American women and men had been caught up in extraordinary drama and crisis, surrounded by violence and death. If they had discovered within themselves untapped reserves of courage and resiliency; by 1783 they nevertheless longed for the comforting demands of ordinary life. Reconstructing that life would not prove easy; for the world many Americans remembered, and hoped to return to, was a shambles. In the South, what one planter called "this cursed war" had left plantations and farms in ruins; in New York and New Jersey; cities and countryside bore the scars of long periods of enemy occupation; in New England, peace had brought economic depression, farm foreclosures, and unemployment in its wake. A new struggle to restore "normalcy," or to re-create an acceptable version of it, would occupy the energies and attention of Americans for years to come.[1]

For the lucky few, the return to normalcy meant a liberation from sacrifice and somber reflection. By 1783, the wealthy Philadelphian Nancy Shippen had marked war's end by abandoning patriotic homespun for "an elegant French hat with five white plumes nodding in different ways." And in Virginia, where young Betsy Ambler had once recorded her frantic flight from the British army, sixteen-year-old Lucinda Lee, daughter of an elite planter, now filled her diary with accounts of postwar parties, dances, flirtations, and the clothes imported from London by her friends. And at Harvard College, John Quincy Adams recorded the return of traditional student antics—getting drunk and smashing windows—by the sons of wealthy merchants, ministers, and political leaders.[2]

Yet for a small group of elite American women and menpoets, essayists, educators, and political leaders—it seemed essential to pause and to consider the lessons the Revolution offered, if any; for women and to decide what changes in women's roles might prove necessary in the new republican society. For a brief but intense postwar moment, these intellectuals engaged in a lively debate over what in the next century came to be called "the woman question." In their arguments, these women and men wove together prewar trends and postwar possibilities. Although they spoke of the Revolution as a watershed, a transforming event, their ideas suggest instead that the Revolution was a hothouse, forcing into bloom gender roles and gender ideals that had been planted long before the Stamp Act and the Boston Tea Party set the colonies on the path to independence. To the twenty-first century reader, some of what

they say will sound modern; they were, after all, the children of the Enlightenment, members of the generation on this side of the Atlantic who ushered in a secular, scientific view of the world and endorsed a belief in the rationality of human beings, the efficacy of education, and the ability of parents and teachers to shape the character of children through instruction and example. Their spirit will strike a familiar chord in the modern sensibility as well. In the nineteenth century, despite the rise of Romanticism and sentimentality, the antebellum and Progressive-era reformers who believed in the perfectibility of society are their heirs. And in the twentieth century, despite the pessimism of postmodernism, their implicit faith in progress remains strong. Yet much of what they understood to be a radical departure would be labeled social conservatism today. Like reformers of any age, their vision of the future was created in the context of their present and in reaction to their past.

The women and men who filled pages of essays, novels, speeches, and poems with thoughts on the woman question were members of an intellectual vanguard. Some, like Susanna Haskell Rowson, novelist, poet, playwright, actress, and educator, were part of a transatlantic cultural community that had linked Americans with the broader world of British and continental European intellectual and creative life before the Revolution. Others, like the essayist Judith Sargent Murray, came out of the liberal religious movement of prewar New England. Still others—like Benjamin Rush, physician, political leader, and educator, who, before the war, had traveled to Scotland for his medical education reflected the growth of the scientific community in the colonies. If they were far more cosmopolitan than their neighbors, they were also far more economically privileged. Their privileged social status shaped their perceptions of the problems the new nation faced as well as the lessons the Revolution had taught just as it shaped their agendas for women in the new nation. The typical woman they conjured up when they spoke of the American woman was not Margaret Corbin or Mammy Kate, but a woman of their own race and social class. And the issues they considered important to that woman were not necessarily the issues facing frontier girls like Betsy Zane or newly freed domestic servants like Mumbet. Like these ordinary women, Abigail Adams and Judith Sargent Murray saw the world through the lens of their own social realities. Nevertheless, many of their arguments about woman's nature and certainly many of the changes they proposed in women's social roles would have altered the circumstances in which all American women lived.[3]

The postwar debate on the woman question began with a resounding rejection of the traditional notion that women were both morally and mentally inferior to men. The Quaker poet Susanna Wright, for example, challenged the religious basis for man's intellectual and moral superiority. “Reason rules, in every one, the same,” she wrote. “No Right, has Man, his Equal to controul, / Since, all agree, There is no Sex in soul.”[4] In a letter to a friend in 1777, Judith Sargent Murray took the argument further, standing the lesson to be garnered from the tale of Original Sin on its head:

> That Eve was indeed the weaker vessel, I boldly take upon me to deny—Nay, it should seem she was abundantly the stronger vessel since all the deep laid Art of the most subtle fiend that inhabited the infernal regions, was requisite to draw her from her allegiance, while

> Adam was overcome by the influence of the softer passions merely by his attachment to a female ... [5]

The mental and moral inferiority of women had been attacked before the Revolution, of course. But the war did more than provide additional fodder for philosophical arguments over gender. Women's participation in the war had given concrete, empirical evidence of their ability to think rationally and make ethical judgments. Since the first protests against British taxation policies, they had formed political commitments and demonstrated their patriotism. There could be little debate that women like Esther deBerdt Reed, who spearheaded the fundraising drive in Philadelphia, and Mercy Otis Warren, playwright and propagandist in pre-Revolutionary Boston, like their husbands, had understood the choice confronting them between continued loyalty to the Crown or independence. The experience of the Revolution thus confirmed the Enlightenment theories that preceded it.

Writers like Wright and Murray also challenged secular assumptions of women's inferiority that grew out of the rise of a prosperous class in the colonies. In eighteenth-century America, as in England, satires and sermons had condemned women for the vanity, superficiality, and materialism that seemed to mark the darker side of gentility. Wright, Murray, and other women intellectuals argued that these defects were not the fault of women's natural weaknesses or limited capacities; instead, the problem could be traced to the poor education their sex had received. The vanity and frivolous behavior critics observed in women were clearly the fruits of social injustice: women had been denied access to formal knowledge at the same time that they were actively encouraged to value beauty over intelligence. In a world where a wag could declare, “Girls knew quite enough if they could make a shirt and a pudding,” what chance did women have to demonstrate their more serious aspirations? The blame for women's folly must be laid at society's doorstep.[6]

This analysis led Murray, Susanna Rowson, and Dr. Rush to the same conclusion: formal education was essential to cultivate women's dormant 'rationality and morality. As reformers, they campaigned for the creation of schools for women that would offer challenging and rigorous curricula rather than lessons in refinement. Geography, not dancing; political philosophy rather than fine needlework—these courses would not only awaken women's intellect but ensure their rejection of luxury and vanity. These claims did not go uncontested. Critics warned that formal education would create masculine women, unattractive in their appearance, negligent in their duties to husbands and family. A knowledge of geography, political theory, and history would inevitably result in a monster, “disgustingly slovenly in her person” and “indecent in her habits.”[7]

Despite strong opposition from these critics, the campaign for female education was remarkably successful. In 1787, the doors of the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy opened, ushering in a revolution in education in the new nation. Similar academies and boarding schools sprang up in New England, the middle states, and the South. The course of study in most cases was the same as the course of study offered in boys' preparatory academies and included history, rhetoric, geography, English composition, and mathematics. This revolution in

education was so successful that, by the end of the eighteenth century, elite society frowned upon a poorly educated young woman.[8]

What accounted for this success? Why, that is, was it now so important to free women from the foibles associated with their sex? The answer lay in the concept of a republic and in the formula that political leaders believed held the key to the survival of that republic. Unlike monarchies, they argued, republics depended upon the rectitude and the patriotism of their collective sovereign: the citizens. Republics required a constant renewal of devotion and self-sacrifice in order to survive. They required informed citizens, able to resist the siren call of the tyrant and the temptations of corruption. Thus, patriotism had to be instilled in each succeeding generation if representative government was to endure. To whom should this vital task of raising patriots be entrusted?

Those who raised this question turned to the family for its answer. In colonial America, fathers had been responsible for the moral education of their sons and daughters. But the contours of the new nation's economy were shifting: the business of prosperous men of commerce, agriculture, and law was moving out of the household. At the same time, the household production that marked the busy day of the notable housewife was contracting. Even before the Revolution, prosperous women, aided by markets in the cities and by slave labor in the South, had seen the duties of housewifery diminish. Indeed, before the decade of protest and the Revolution, increased leisure time seemed to be an identifying mark of the wealthy matron and her daughters. What women did with their leisure time before the Revolution—whether they used it to read novels, decorate their homes, socialize with their peers, or instruct their children—seemed to be a personal, private choice. But during the Revolution, women's choices became politicized. Every woman who raised money for the troops or nursed the sick and wounded rather than retiring to her parlor to read a book or paying a visit to a friend was declaring that her leisure time had civic value.

Thus, after the war, the intellectual recognition of women as rational beings combined with the economic reality of a decline in household production to produce a shift in prosperous women's familial role. It was a matter of emphasis and priorities rather than a newly carved out role, but it transformed the notable housewife into the republican wife and mother. It was the republican mother who would inscribe patriotism upon what Enlightenment philosophers called the blank slate, or “tabula rasa,” of childhood. And it was the republican wife who would keep her husband virtuous by her example. As one postwar young woman put it, her task was to “inspire her brothers, her husband, and her sons, with such a love of virtue, such just ideas of the true value of civil liberty ... that future heroes and statesmen ... shall exhaltingly declare, it is to my mother I owe this elevation.”[9]

It stood to reason that if mothers were to be responsible for rearing patriotic sons and daughters, then society must arm them with the knowledge necessary to the task. Mothers must know enough about government and politics, about past republican experiments and the causes of their failure, about science and its empirical mode of thinking, and about moral philosophy to socialize their children for citizenship in the new nation. Thus the knowledge of

history, political theory, and moral philosophy acquired in the young ladies' academies was not to be an end in itself, an experience of personal growth and self-exploration. It was to have practical value and social significance: republican mothers would nurture republican children. Benjamin Rush provided this rationale in his Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America. 'The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country," he wrote, "makes it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government."[10]

Radical though Rush's vision was, it did not break free of the demands of gentility. The good doctor did not advocate a total abandonment of lessons in dancing, singing, and needlework. But in providing the *raison d'etre* for their inclusion in the curriculum, he confirmed a shift in the meaning of "helpmate" that had begun when the eighteenth century was young. "Vocal music," he wrote in his *Thoughts upon Female Education*, "should never be neglected in the education of a young lady ... it will enable her to soothe the care of domestic life. The distress and vexation of a husband, the noise of the nursery, and even the sorrows that will sometimes intrude into her own bosom may all be relieved by a song .... " A well-educated wife, Rush was arguing, would develop the genteel arts in order to bring solace to her husband just as she would expand her intellectual horizons in order to nurture her sons.[11]

Thus, as postwar intellectuals urged their countrymen and women to acknowledge women's moral and intellectual capacities, they drew a tight circle around the space in which she would apply them: the home and family. Yet this emerging gender ideology was not a male conspiracy. Not even the boldest of the women who engaged the woman question could envision female intellect cut free from the tethers of the helpmate role. Like their male counterparts, these women agreed that female education must be useful to someone—and that someone could not be simply the female herself. "Teach us to prize the power of intellect," Rowson had urged her male reader, and you will reap "the sweet reward" of "an affectionate and faithful wife." By the antebellum era of the nineteenth century, the glorification of the home as a "haven in a heartless world," and of that haven as a woman's domain, would carry Rush and Rowson's advice to its logical conclusion.[12]

The intellectuals who debated the woman question narrowed rather than expanded women's sphere. In stressing the importance to the republic of a mother's role in socializing the next patriotic generation, they made motherhood a civic imperative, too important to be rejected by any woman. In stressing the growing trend toward companionate marriage between husband and wife, rather than the earlier practical combination of his economic productivity in the field and hers in the household, they focused women's emotional and intellectual energies on the small circle of domesticity. If, in the process, they had increased the self-esteem of women and given their activities civic importance, they had also closed out important areas for debate. Neither expanding women's economic opportunities nor extending their legal rights found a place on the woman-question agenda.

The opportunity might have arisen to discuss both. For the bleakest lesson of the Revolution was, after all, that the unexpected was very likely to happen again. The generation of Revolutionary War women had proved their mettle; they had shown themselves and their fathers, husbands, and sons. that they could “make do,” take over the management of farms and business, defend home and children from danger, and cope with physical dislocation and devastating reversals of fortune. But would the next generation of women be prepared if similar challenges arose? Early in the discussions, Judith Sargent Murray proposed that the republic's daughters be trained in “habits of industry and order” that would allow them “to procure for themselves the necessaries of life.” Here was a radical notion: a generation of women, able to support themselves in the marketplace. Yet few of Murray's peers endorsed this practical plan for creating an independent, self-sufficient woman. Instead, they were satisfied to mold a feminine character that could endure, rather than defeat, adversity. Patience, endurance, frugality, fortitude—these were the virtues that would sustain women should the unexpected happen again.[13]

Women's economic independence and married women's legal rights remained as abysmally restricted as they had been before the war. There was no public demand to reform the legal status of feme covert that left married women without the right to own or buy land, to sue or be sued, or to claim as her property the clothes on her back. No one took up the suggestion made by Abigail Adams in 1776, even before independence was declared, that political leaders “Remember the Ladies” as they made new laws for a new nation. Adams had been quick to see the irony in her husband's demand for an end to tyranny and the limits of his zeal for independence. “I long to hear that you have declared an independency,” she began in her letter to John of March 31, 1776,

> and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire that 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.

Abigail was not asking her husband for woman suffrage. She was asking for a revision of those laws that deprived a married woman of most of her legal identity, placing her in the same dependent category as children and the insane. John understood his wife's meaning all too well. Ready to rebel against the unlimited power of king and Parliament, John Adams was not ready to see the hierarchy of gender destroyed in the process. “As to your extraordinary Code of Laws,” he replied on April 14, 1776, “I cannot but laugh.” His patronizing tone immediately gave way, however, to a nightmare vision of his world turned upside down: “We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. 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 .... “ That discontent could not be accommodated: “Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.” Just as King George might argue that England

had been a mother country, ever solicitous and protective of her colonial children, John Adams insisted to his wife that his “Masculine system” was benign rather than oppressive. “We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude,” he wrote. “We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave Heroes would fight.” In Adams's claim that mastery was a burden rather than a privilege, we can see an eerie echo of the antebellum slave owner's claim of the burdens of his patriarchy.

Abigail attempted to have the last word in this exchange. On May 7, she again took up her pen to press John to see his masculine system for the absolutism that it was. “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.” Although Abigail ended with a threat of female rebellion, she couched it in the only terms she could imagine: the Ladies would charm their masters into surrendering their power.[14]

There was no room in John Adams's masculine system for female legal or economic independence. Nor was there any room in his new republic for female political participation. While all those who debated the woman question agreed on the intellectual and moral equality of the sexes, few believed that the two sexes should employ their abilities in the same arenas. Alone among then, Judith Sargent Murray raised the possibility of women's entrance onto the political stage. In her “Observations on Female Abilities,” Murray insisted that women were “as capable of supporting with honour the toils of government” as men. If a willingness and ability to lay down one's life for one's country was the *sine qua non* of citizenship, history—both distant and recent—provided numerous examples of women who risked their lives on the battlefield and performed those acts of heroism normally associated with men. Much like Esther deBerdt Reed's Sentiments of an American Woman, Murray's Gleaner essays reminded the reader of heroic queens and female warriors, women who ruled wisely and led their armies into battle courageously. If America had not yet produced a female Washington, this did not deny the possibility that one would arise in the future. And yet Murray, like Abigail Adams, was ultimately more comfortable calling upon women's ability to influence and persuade than upon their powers to legislate or command. If she urged women to have political interests, it was because their roles as “wives, as Mothers, and as friends” required that they care about the future of the nation.[15]

America's political leaders concurred. Influence and example were women's political tools; the ballot and the legislative halls remained men's domain. In the single state that granted women the right to vote, oversight rather than foresight was responsible. In their eagerness to prevent property less men from voting, New Jersey legislators drafted a constitution that defined voters only as “all free inhabitants” who met certain property and residency requirements. Thus from 1776 to 1807, New Jersey women of wealth claimed their right to vote in local elections. But in 1797, when women voters in Elizabeth, New Jersey, almost cost an ambitious candidate his election, woman suffrage became a political topic. His opponents, members of the Federalist Party, praised the women in speech and poetry, declaring

Let Democrats with senseless prate,
Maintain the softer Sex, sir;
Should ne'er with politics of State
Their gentle minds perplex Sir;
Such vulgar prejudice we scorn;
Their sex is no objection ...

To many, however, their sex was indeed an objection. In October 1802, the Trenton True American published an article from "A Friend to the Ladies." Women's votes, the anonymous author declared, undermine representative government for they "are rarely, if ever unbiased." By nature, he continued, women were "timid and pliant, unskilled in politics, unacquainted with all the real merits of the several candidates, and almost always placed under the dependence or care of a father, uncle or brother." The result was inevitable: "they will of course be directed or persuaded by [their male protectors], and the man who brings his two daughters, his mother, his aunt; to the elections really gives five votes instead of one .... "As a friend to the ladies, the author assured his readers he had no wish to deprive women of their rights. But as their friend, he felt compelled to remind New Jersey's voting ladies that "female reserve and delicacy are incompatible with the duties of a free elector." By 1807, New Jersey's government had disfranchised both women and free African Americans, and thus "the safety, quiet, good order and dignity of the state" was restored.[16]

What had happened to the keen interest in politics that had only a few years earlier prompted Eliza Wilkinson to note proudly that she and her friends had "commenced perfect statesmen"? Where were the women who had boldly announced their political actions in Edenton and other American cities and towns? Most were preoccupied with helping their husbands and fathers restore their farms and shops, or with re-establishing the much-desired rhythms of daily life for their children and themselves. In cities like Philadelphia, war widows were too busy attending to the needs of the boarders they had to take in to follow the news of politics and diplomacy. Free African American women, recently manumitted by masters or by state-mandated abolition of slavery, were too engaged in helping to create churches and other institutions for their own communities to follow the election rivalries among white men. Those African Americans who remained enslaved were caught up in daily struggles for survival that political leaders in the South condoned. Even in genteel society, few "perfect statesmen" could be found among the daughters and granddaughters of the Revolutionary War generation.

Had the war made little lasting impact on women's role in American society? In the rush to a "return to normalcy" did American women and men embrace a social amnesia that allowed them to forget the Edenton Ladies, the Molly Pitchers, the Sybil Ludingtons, and the Eliza Wilkinsons? Would the changes that marked the great divide between colonial America and the new nation—the new acceptance of women's moral and intellectual abilities, the new emphasis on mothering rather than housewifery, the expectation of a companionate rather than an instrumental marriage—have occurred without the war for independence? Perhaps it would be well to remember that only seventy-two years after the Declaration of Independence—only a

moment in the long flow of history—a group of women gathered at Seneca Falls to draft their own declaration. With it, a second war for independence was begun.