Transforming Eve: The Dual Role of Women
In Colonial America and in the Newspapers

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Travelers visiting to the United States during the eighteenth century noticed that domestic life remained the center of existence for women. Little, if anything was done to make women independent and learned. A visitor to America explained a woman’s duty as this:

The women everywhere possess, in the highest degree, the domestic virtues, and all others…. Good wives, and good mothers, their husbands and their children engage their whole attention; and their household affairs occupy all their time and all their cares; destined by the manners of their to this domestic life.1

Women in colonial America were expected to serve their husband, train their children, live a life of “duty,” follow the way of life in the women’s realm while never entering the male realm, and remain uneducated and unglamorous.2 The portrayal of women in colonial newspapers helps individuals to understand the gender roles of the time, to understand the clashing viewpoints of men and women, and to understand the significance of the debate questioning a woman’s role in society. This research hopes to help readers understand the dual role of women in the colonies and their portrayal in newspapers of the time.

Even though women played an integral part in the development of colonial America, their status was viewed as one subordinate in nature; thus, when colonial newspapers historically captured the essence of the colonial woman, the virtuous woman of service was advocated. If possible, women were expected to follow a strict moral code of behavior including ”modesty, restraint, passivity, compliance, submission, delicacy, and most important of all, chastity.”3 In contrast to the virtuous woman, the vicious woman was displayed to the public. “She was lazy, ignored her family’s needs, and often was absorbed in evil. She might steal, commit adultery, or even murder.”4 Countless newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides focused on topics of importance to women and the future of the colony; however, topics other than household economics were felt unnecessary for women. Men believed there was no need for a woman, virtuous or otherwise, to experiment with the political or educational realm.

The foundation for this contrast between the virtuous and vicious woman, often referred to as the Jekyll-and-Hyde perception of women5, is found in the religious thoughts and gender hierarchy of colonial America. Shortly after the invention of the printing press and widespread
exchange of the Bible, western thought was dominated by a view of women as either sinner or savior. Colonists strived to understand how Eve could cause the downfall of society through innate curiosity, while Mary could give birth to Jesus. In the book *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* Cotton Mather explains:

As a woman had the Disgrace to go first in that horrid and woful Transgression of our first parents, which has been the Parent of all our Misery; so a Woman had the Glory of bringing into the World that Second Adam, who is the Father of all our Happiness. A Woman had the Saviour of Mankind in the Circumstances of an Infant Miraculously conceive’d within her.

This view of women battling between being vicious and being virtuous along with the social hierarchy that defined males as the superior gender, helped to create the view that women were the chief source of mayhem in society, unless they were kept inferior in status. In turn, newspapers were seen as a way to target a women audience and set parameters and rules that they should live by; so, poetry, birth announcements, obituaries, and religious news were directed in part to the women, hopefully virtuous, in society.

Virtuous women were targeted by the newspapers in several different ways including poetry that explained what characteristics men wanted in their wives, in news that directly reflected the necessity of a woman’s inferior status, in articles on how a woman finds happiness, and by wonderfully written obituaries for women who led a virtuous life. The *American Weekly Mercury* printed a poem describing what a bachelor wanted in his virtuous wife:

If Marriage gives a Happiness to life,
Such be the Woman who shall be my Wife:
Beauteous as the height of fancy can express,
Meek her Nature cleanly in her dress;
Wife without pride, and Pleasing without Art,
With cheerful Aspect and with Honest Heart.
To sooth my Cares, most high, most sweet her Song,
To blame my Faults most low, most kind her Tongue:
In looser Hours, in Hours more dull, still dear,
A gay Companion, and a Friend sincere:
Fond without folly, spirit’ous without rage,
And as in youth shall seem the same in Age.
Ye pow’rs above, if such a Woman be,
(Such cou’d y make) that such a Woman give to me:
She as a Wife must please, and she alone.
O! give me such a Wife or give me none.11

Whether married, single, or widowed, colonial women were expected to be submissive to men in all their acts and thoughts as is seen by this poem of advice seen in the newspaper.12

In particular, it was said that martial happiness could not be achieved without complete submission of the wife to the husband. In the Providence Gazette, a male writer suggested that a woman should not forget the importance of obeying one’s husband.13  The same writer explained, “Be assured a woman’s power, as well as happiness has no other foundation but her husband’s esteem and love, which consequently it is her undoubted interest, by all means possible, to preserve and increase.”14  Some women went to great lengths to please their husbands, like a bizarre story in the Boston Evening Post. The story explained:

that last Week one of the Inhabitants [of Westchester] receiving a Curtain Lecture from his Wife, he wish’d her Tongue was cut out; whereupon the good obedient Woman snatched up a Razor, and immediately cut off great Part of that unruly Member, and had not the great Effusion of Blood put her Life in a little Danger, doubtless it would hereafter be found grateful, as well as unprecedented Sacrifice. [Happy Man! How rare a Thing is it to find a Wife so good natured and obliging in these Parts!]15

Although this type of reaction may be in some respect humorous, the comment seems to be a commentary on how males of the time wished women would respond to their orders.16  If a woman could serve her husband unselfishly, then happiness could be hers. “If she heeded this advice, for instance, her husband would always love her, even ‘when Beauty frail decays,’ because throughout her life she had been adorned in virtue.” 17  To a man in eighteenth century America, purity made a woman beautiful and wanted.

Women of virtue did not try to enter into the domain of male dominance, to enter into the world of education, or to enter into the world of excessive elegance. It was explained that all of these things were for men only. The poem, “ADVICE to a LADY,” explained:

Virtue is amiable, ‘tis mild, serene….
Seek to be good, but aim not to be great,
A woman’s noblest station is retreat;
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight,
Domestick worth, that shuns too strong a light.18
Education especially was seen as unnecessary for woman, because it was viewed as an activity used to “prepare young men for active roles in the public sector and for public services to the state….”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, learning by women outside of providing information on how to be a caregiver to society was deemed not useful:

It has been objected against all female learning, beyond that of household economy, that it tends only to fill the minds of the sex with a conceited vanity, which sets them above their proper business – occasions an indifference to, if not total neglect of, their family affairs – and serves only to render them useless wives and impertinent companions.\textsuperscript{20}

Men even went as far as to ridicule women’s attempts to enter into societal discussions and become independent in nature.

Women, when successful in leading the male’s ideal version of a virtuous life, were celebrated in eulogies.\textsuperscript{21} Men expected women to be virtuous like Elizabeth Prentis, a woman who died in Nansemond, Virginia. The epitaph on her gravestone read as follows:

\begin{quote}
If love for worth of ev’ry kind,  
which all can with and few can find,  
E’er claim’d the tribute of a tear:  
(Here lies a maid whom virtue warm’d,  
With every pleasing grace adorn’d)  
Stop, traveler, and drop it here.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Virtuous goals needed to be accomplished within a woman’s lifetime, or her life would not be celebrated by those she left behind.

In direct opposition to the virtuous woman, was the vicious woman. Sometimes these two different women could be found together on the same page of a newspaper, providing the public with information on the good and evil in female life. David A. Copeland, a researcher of colonial newspapers, explains:

The vicious woman was rarely a thoroughly evil or hardened individual. She was, instead, the woman who refused to submit fully to the will of a male-dominated society. In this way, the vicious woman was demonstrating her ability to be independent, at least in some ways, of men and stood in contrast with the virtuous ideal.\textsuperscript{23}

Any woman, who at any time, did not follow the guidelines of a virtuous life, was deemed
vicious by society; however, vicious women found themselves the brunt of newspaper coverage of women.

Stories about vicious women, especially when involving crime, were far more numerous that the stories that upheld the ideal notion of the virtuous woman. In the male-dominated society of the eighteenth century, any time a woman rebelled against the norms, a woman of a vicious nature was shown in print to the public. The *American Weekly Mercury* explained a new modern woman to the public in 1730. “In an essay covering three pages, the modern woman was described as one who rises late in the afternoon, drinks, gambles, and plays cards all night and then craws into bed next to her hard-working husband just before sunrise.” Although this was not possible activity for all of the colonial population, women were not excluded from being labeled vicious by the papers. Letters and articles were filled with concern that women were not taking part in virtuous tasks and that women had become involved in filling their leisure time with activity such as cards; thus, this use of idle activity was seen as un-virtuous because it took time away from shaping children.

The newspapers were filled with vicious mothers making the male’s nightmares come true. Articles about the abuse of children and the failure of women to adhere to the virtuous tasks set before them were seen in print many times. The newspapers told stories of “children left on ice to die,” of children “left in boxes on highways,” and of children “locked naked in small rooms.” Newspapers hinted that if these women had fulfilled their obligations to virtuous tasks and submitted to men, these events would not have happened.

Vicious women were portrayed as murderers, adulteresses, and cheaters. The *New-York Evening-Post* reported on a woman who was poisoned by his wicked, vicious wife. One man thought that his wife was having an affair while he was at work. He later caught her in the act. Even though there is a large difference between these criminal women and those who spent their idle time playing card games, both were labeled vicious by the newspapers.

Even though there was a drastic contrast between the portrayal of vicious and virtuous women, this did not stop women from trying to become independent, trying to participate in
local politics, or trying to participate in discussions in the public arena. During the eighteenth century, women used the press to try to break free from the constraints of the home. After the Boston Tea Party occurred, a bold stance against The Tea Act of 1773 came from an interesting source:

On October 25, fifty-one women—members of the Edenton Ladies’ Patriotic Guild—gathered at the home of Penelope Barker and made this promise: ‘We, the Ladys of Edenton, do hereby solemnly engage not to conform to the Pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea…We Ladys will not promote ye wear of ay manufacturer from England until such time that all acts which tend to enslave our Native country shall be repealed.’

Actions such as these caused intense debate throughout the colonies about the topics of women in politics and of sexual inequality.

After events like the one in Edenton, men tried to reaffirm the traditional view of a women’s inferiority by using newspapers as a forum for public debate. Strong language and a continuous publication of opinion helped men to reinforce their superiority. Colonial men were outraged when women began to try to invade the traditionally male aspects of society; thus, objections were published anonymously in newspapers such as Parker’s New-York Gazette in 1760:

Women famed for their valour, their skill in politicks, or their learning, it is to be fear’d have left the duties of their own sex in order to invade the privileges of our’s. The modest virgin, the prudent wife, or the careful mother, are much more serviceable than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago Queens….Their tenderness is the proper reward for the dangers we undergo for their preservation; and the ease and cheerfulness of their conversation, are desirable retreat from the fatigues of study, war, or business.

Most men of the period felt that gender roles should remain unchanged in the colonies.

Although men tried to persuade women against education, women yearned for the knowledge needed to get them a larger role in society. Women wrote to newspapers in order to get their ideas into the marketplace of ideas. Despite the objection of the male population, women began to question their inferior role in American society, as explained by an anonymous writer in “Species, Not Sex” in New-York Weekly Journal in the year of 1735:

I have often wondered that Learning is not thought a proper Ingredient in the Education
of a Woman of Quality of Fortune. Since they have the same improvable Minds as the male part of the species, why should they not be cultivated by the same method.\textsuperscript{35}

The writer goes on to explain to the reader that education seems to be more adaptable to women because they have more time and lead a relatively inactive lifestyle.\textsuperscript{36}

Colonial men feared that an educated woman could change the social hierarchy and the way of life in eighteenth-century America; thus, opinions were voiced in newspapers.

You apprehend that knowledge must be hurtful to the sex, because it will be the means of their acquiring power. It seems to me impossible that women can acquire the species of direct power which you dread: the manners of society must totally change before women can mingle with men in the busy and public scenes of life.\textsuperscript{37}

Women of the time realized their natural ability to learn and use the mind in the marketplace of ideas; yet, columns written by men in the newspaper and other women tried to persuade them of the viciousness of their possible actions. These independent women were cautioned and told to lead the virtuous life.

The role of the press was crucial to the eventual women’s movement that would occur during the nineteenth century in America. The articles that were published in the eighteenth century presented the public with two different versions of the colonial woman, virtuous and vicious; however, these same articles also sparked debate about the ideal role of women in the colonies. The differing opinions helped women to develop a good argument for their right to education, to independence, and to equality. If men and women in the marketplace of ideas did not use these newspapers as a forum for debate, it is likely that women would not have voiced their ideas about gender roles. If these ideas were not debated, progress toward women’s liberation would have been severely hindered.


4 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 152.

5 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 152.


9 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 156.


16 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 158.

17 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 158.


20 Lady Sarah Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to her Absent Daughters* (1761), 1770, pp.44-46, quoted


34 Parker’s *New-York Gazette*. 4 December 1760.

