WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND ROLES—18TH CENTURY

INDEPENDENCE AND EQUALITY

An anonymous writer: “Species, Not Sex”

In the eighteenth century, American women began to question their roles of subservience in society. In this letter written by an unknown female, women’s ability to learn is compared to that of men. The writer says learning is more adapted to the female world than the male and explains why. Women no doubt read newspapers in the eighteenth century, and the fact that women wrote letters such as this means they were questioning their traditional societal positions.

New-York Weekly Journal, 19 May 1735

I have often wondered that Learning is not thought a proper Ingredient in the Education of a Woman of Quality or Fortune. Since they have the same improveable Minds as the male part of the Species, why should they not be cultivated by the same method?

There are Reasons why learning seems more adapted to the female World, than to the male. As in the first Place, because they have more spare Time upon their Hands and lead a more sedentary Life. Their Employments are of a domestic nature, and not like those of the other Sex. . . . A second Reason why Women should apply themselves to useful Knowledge rather than Men is because they have that natural Gift of Speech in greater Perfection. . . . There is another Reason why those especially who are Women of Quality, should apply themselves to Letters, because their Husbands are generally Strangers to them. . . . If we look into the Histories of famous Women, we find many eminent philosophers of this Sex. . . . Learning and Knowledge are Perfections in us, not as we are Men, but as we are reasonable Creatures, in which Order, of Beings the Female World is upon the same Level with the Male. We ought to consider in this Particular, not what is the Sex, but what is the Species to which they belong. . . .

A Lady: “Women in Business: Better than Men?”

An anonymous Boston woman wrote to the Boston Gazette to explain how women were just as capable as men to run businesses, perhaps even better. The writer called for equality in education for males and females, saying that if placed on a level playing field, women would be superior to men.

Boston Gazette, 24 March 1740

A new method for making Women as useful and as capable of maintaining themselves, as the men are, and consequently preventing their becoming old Maids, or taking ill Courses. By a LADY. . . .

There are few Trades in which Women cannot weigh and measure as well as Men, and are as capable of selling as they, and I am sure will buy as cheap, and perhaps cheaper: For they can go to the wholesale Merchant’s House, and purchase their Goods; whereas the Men generally transact all Business of this kind in Taverns and Coffee houses, at a great additional Expence, and the loss of much Time, so as even frequently to neglect their Affairs at Home, whilst Women, upon the Conclusion of a Bargain, have no Inducement to make a longer Stay, but go directly Home, and follow their Affairs.

By this means a single Woman may get a handsome and reputable Living, and not be fore’d to a disagreeable Match, or even to marry at all. . . . If Women were train’d up to Business from their early Years ’tis highly probable they would in general be more industrious, and get
more Money, than Men; and if so, what Woman of Spirit would submit to be a Slave, and fling herself away, as many are forc’d to do, merely for a Maintenance, because she cannot stoop to be a Servant, and can find no reputable Business to go into? . . .

An anonymous writer: “Tho’ husbands are tyrants, their wives will be free”

As America moved toward independence from Great Britain, a number of women believed they needed to be free from tyrannical practices by husbands. The number of divorces in America grew during this period as well, and this poem advocates such if women find themselves under harsh and unfair domination by a husband. Note in the poem the use of terms such as tyrant and liberty, terms in vogue in the Patriot political rhetoric of the day.

New-York Journal; or the General Advertiser, 25 October 1770

POET’S CORNER: A New Favourite Song for the Ladies.

Though man has long boasted an absolute sway,
While woman’s hard fate was, love, honour, obey;
At length over wedlock fair liberty dawns,
And the Lords of Creation, must put in their horns;
For Hymen among ye proclaims his decree
When husbands are tyrants, their wives may be free.
Away with your doubts, your surmises and fears,
’Tis Venus beats up for her gay volunteers;
Inlist at her banner, you’ll vanquish with ease,
And make of your husbands what creatures you please;
To arms then ye fair ones, and let the world see,
When husbands are tyrants, their wives will be free.
The rights of your sex wou’d ye e’er see restor’d,
Your tongues shou’d be us’d as a two-edged sword;
That ear piercing weapon each husband must dread,
Who thinks of the marks you may place on his head:
Then wisely waite, till the men all agree,
That woman, dear woman, shall ever be free.
Nor more shall the wife, all as meek as a lamb,
Be subject to “Zounds do you know who I am.”
Domestic politeness shall flourish again,
When women take courage to govern the men;
Then stand to your charter, and let the world see,
Tho’ husbands are tyrants, their wives will be free.

John Carter: “Tribute to Sarah Goddard”

Sarah Goddard became a newspaper printer around age sixty-five when she took over the Providence Gazette; and Country Journal operations from her son William. William began the Gazette in 1762, but the publication continually lost money or barely broke even under his guidance. In May 1765, William left the paper under his mother’s supervision, and she turned it into a profitable business, selling it to John Carter in 1768. Goddard moved to Philadelphia where she assumed part control of her son’s printing business there. This obituary extols her business sense and reinforces the idea that women in colonial society were capable at business.
Providence Gazette; and Country Journal, 10 February 1770

IN the last New-York Gazette, under the Philadelphia head, I find the following article, dated the 8th instant: “Last Friday morning died, in an advanced age, Mrs. SARAH GODDARD, late of Providence, in Rhode-Island; and yesterday her remains were decently interred in Christ Church burying-ground, in this city, attended by a number of respectable inhabitants. She was widow of Dr. GILES GODDARD, formerly of New-London, in Connecticut.

This is so very short and simple an account of the decease of a very amiable person, who was really an ornament and honour to her sex, that in justice to her character I think myself obliged, though no relation to the family, nor very intimately acquainted, to mention the following particulars, which have come to my knowledge. . . . Having taken a liking to the Printing business, through her means her son was instructed in it, and settled in a Printing-House in the town of Providence, to which place she soon after removed, and became a partner with him in the business, which was carried on several years to general acceptance, the two last years under more immediate joint management and direction; the credit of the paper was greatly promoted by her virtue, ingenuity and abilities. . . .

An anonymous writer: “The Story of Hannah Snell”

One way for women to gain independence in a male-dominated society was to assume the role of a man. While few chose to do so, one who did was Hannah Snell, and her story became one of the most widely publicized of 1750. Snell became a Marine and served seven years, her sex never being detected. For her bravery, Snell received a lifetime pension from the British government.

South-Carolina Gazette (Charleston), 8 October 1750

Last week one Hannah Snell, born at Worcester, who was seven years in a Marine Regiment by the name of James Gray, went to the East-Indies in Adm. Boscawen’s Squadron, and was at the Siege of Pond-cherry, presented a Petition to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, praying some Provision might be made for her now she is discharged the Service. His Royal Highness referred her Petition to General Frazer, to report it to him, and make her a suitable Provision, according to her Merit. It seems her sweetheart being impressed into the Marine Service, she put on mens Cloaths and entered in the same Regiment, went to the East-Indies in the same Ship with him, and was his mesmate while he lived (he dying in his voyage) and was a Servant to one of the Lieutenants. She behaved with great intrepidty as a Sailor and Soldier, and her sex was never discovered by either her Sweetheart or any of her Comrades, ’till she made the Discovery of herself by the above mention’d Petition.

DOMESTICITY AND SERVICE

An anonymous writer: “Maxims for Promoting Matrimonial Happiness”

One way that males sought to keep women in a position of servitude and domesticity during the eighteenth century was through writings that described the proper way for women to act. Almost always, these rules or maxims stressed service to husband and family for women. In the set provided here, the rules applied to all women whether married on not.

Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia), 8 October 1730

RULES and MAXIMS for promoting Matrimonial Happiness. Address’d to all Widows, Wives, and Spinsters.
THE likeliest Way, either to obtain a good Husband, or to keep one so, is to be Good yourself.

Never use a Lover ill whom you design to make your Husband, lest he either upbraid you with it, or return it afterwards: and if you find, at any Time, an Inclination to play the Tyrant, remember these two Lines of Truth and Justice.

\[\text{Gently shall those be rul'd, who gently sway'd;}\]
\[\text{Abjection shall those obey, who haughty were obey'd.}\]

Avoid, both before and after Marriage, all Thoughts of managing your Husband. Never endeavour to deceive or impose on his Understanding: nor give him Uneasiness . . . but treat him always beforehand with Sincerity, and afterwards with Affection and Respect. . . . Always wear your Wedding Ring, for therein lies more Virtue than usually is imagined. . . . Let the Tenderness of your conjugal Love be expressed with such Decency, Delicacy and Prudence, as that it may appear plainly and throwly distinct from the designing Fondness of an Harlot.

An anonymous writer: “The Likeliest Way to Obtain a Good Husband”

Forty years passed between the above essay and the one below, but men were still telling women what was needed to ensure marriage and marital happiness. In this essay, the word obey is stressed as vital to women’s role in society.

Providence Gazette; and Country Journal, 6 January 1770


THE likeliest way to obtain a good husband, or keep one so, is to be good yourself. Never use a lover ill, whom you design to make your husband, lest he should either upbraid you with it, or return it afterwards. . . . 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.—Do you therefore study his temper, and command your own; enjoy his satisfactions with him; share and soothe his cares, and with the utmost diligence conceal his infirmities.—Read frequently, with due attention, the matrimonial service; and take care in doing so not to overlook the work OBEY . . . . Let not many days pass together without a serious examination how you have behaved as a wife; and if, upon reflection, you find yourself guilty of any foibles or omissions, the best atonement is to be exactly careful of your future conduct. . . .

Obituary: “Mrs. Rebeccah Fisk”

Obituaries in the first half of the eighteenth century were generally reserved for the famous. Listings of all who died in a community would come later in the century. Women’s obituaries, with notable exceptions such as the one of Sarah Goddard in the readings on independence and equality, generally were dependent upon the significance of the husband. The obituary of Rebeccah Fisk is typical. Her husband and lineage are of prime importance. After that, she is described in terms of her service to society and how well she fit into the role of domesticity.

Boston Evening-Post, 1 October 1750

On the 13th Instant, died, and this Day was decently interred here, Mrs. Rebeccah Fisk, Consort of Capt. Thomas Fisk, late of Wenham, and Daughter of the Rev. Mr. Perkins of Topsfield; a Woman of good Education, uncommon Courtesy and Civility, a sincere hearty
Friend, given to hospitality, a lover of good Men, the Ministers of Christ particularly, and of a blameless Christian Life and Conversation. Having acted her Part upon the Stage agreeable to such noble and divine Principles, she is gone off with Approbation form her Acquaintance, and to the Grief of her particular Friends, who while they lament her Death, should carefully imitate the Vertues of her Life.

An anonymous writer with an editorial note by Thomas Fleet: “An Obliging Wife”

In this news article, a wife cut off her tongue after her husband said he wished it cut out. The story demonstrates how women were expected to do as men said, and the printer’s note by Thomas Fleet praises the woman for doing such a selfless act for her husband.

Boston Evening-Post, 8 October 1750

We hear from Westchester, that last Week one of the Inhabitants 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 a little in Danger, doubtless it would hereafter be found a 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!]

An anonymous writer: “A Poor and Unhappy Rascal”

As much as men wrote to newspapers describing what virtues they wanted in wives, over piety was not one of those traits. In this anonymous letter, the writer laments the fact that his wife—while a paragon of virtue—tends to overlook some of his needs. The writer wants to know how he can keep his wife subservient but a bit less religious.

Providence Gazette; and Country Journal, 2 March 1765

I AM an unhappy poor Rascal, and have, to my unspeakable Mortification, been married these three Years, to a Woman of extraordinary Piety and Virtue.—Don’t be surprised—I am neither angry with her Piety, nor offended with her Virtue: on the Contrary, I revere her for both the Qualifications; but they are attended with Consequences. . . . Sir, her Sanctity renders her commons as cross as the very Devil, and if I say a single Syllable, I am sure to hear a Volley of charitable Ejaculations for the Welfare of my poor Soul, and to be treated the Remainder of the whole Day like a down right Reprobate. . . . Is there no Way, Mr. Printer, of curing this unaccountable Malady of being Righteous overmuch? Is there no Way of convincing these narrow-minded Women, that a Moroseness of Temper, or a Disregard of rational Enjoyments, are in no Manner encouraged by the Sentiments of Religion; but that on the Contrary, a Sweetness of Dispositon, and an Endeavour to discharge the necessary Duties of Wife and Mother, are particularly some of its most beautiful Characteristics.—I don’t think this Subject would be unworthy the Pen of our most eminent Divines.—Suffer me, through your Paper, to beg some of them will consider it, since it is more likely that a Lesson on this Matter will come with more Weight from the Pulpit than any other Quarter. . . .