AMERICAN WOMEN'S FIGHT FOR RIGHTS DURING ENLIGHTENMENT

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Abstract: *The development of science in the 17th century created the premises for the construction of a system increasingly based on reason, innovation, but also the need for a change felt throughout human society. All this would give birth to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Even though the new clones overseas were in the early stages of development, there was also a strong movement of renewal and remaking in America. The particularity of this continent is given by the need to free itself from the tutelage of England. The culminating moment of the Enlightenment in America was the Revolution that gave birth to the USA. Unlike England, the American Enlightenment tried to be much more practical and materialize in increased freedoms of the citizen. Women defending their right to education and freedom could not be missing from such a movement.*

Key words: *Enlightenment, intellectuals, American Revolution, Republican Mother, freedom*

Before the American Revolution, women in the new colonies were restricted to the same traditional trades as those in Europe. The intellectuals of the Enlightenment realized that all people must be included in the extensive process of transforming society, and women discovered in this a favorable moment to defend their rights violated for centuries. Although these transformative times opened up the opportunity for women to make their voices heard, they also defended the rights of other disadvantaged groups—children, slaves, and indigenous people. Although they understood that they were victims of the patriarchal social order, women did not see in this impediment a reason to be insensitive to the suffering of other categories. On the contrary, they understood that fighting for others can only make them stronger. The moment of the American Revolution demonstrated that women also had political convictions, and even strong ones. As they would do during the First and Second World Wars, women felt the need to show solidarity and loyalty to society and even to the state, even though the state was the one that restricted their rights. Unfortunately, the society that received this help from women would be ungrateful. And, after the Revolution, as after the two wars, an attempt was made to remove those who made an effort as brave as the soldiers.

Although the Revolution raised the question of civil rights, women gained far too little from these pretenses. But maybe the real fight has to be fought in small steps. And the first was that women promoted a new image of themselves. Republican Mother was a notion that allowed them to participate, even peripherally, in the social and political life of the new nation but also to have access to education. As the world's democracies grew stronger, women demanded more and more from the societies they had actively participated in building. But America proved far more conservative and unwilling to make changes than Europe was willing. Perhaps this fact can be explained by the characteristics of the newly formed country. Frail at the start of the journey, America was not ready to become the reformer it was in the declarations of intent. And this has affected American women. Few women received state aid after their husbands died in war, and even if theoretically recognized, divorce was not widely practiced.

One of the prominent representatives of the American Enlightenment was **Susanna Wright** (1697-1784). Born in England to a Quaker family, Susanna had the chance to receive

a choice education. Susan can speak French, Italian and Latin, but she was equally attracted to the sciences. Although she was not a very beautiful woman, her pleasant character, erudition and discretion made her pleasant company. At the age of twenty-one he travels to America, Pennsylvania, to join the family already settled there for three years. Shortly after her mother's death, Susan takes over the running of the household. In 1728 the family moved to the frontier of Pennsylvania and Susan enjoyed more and more freedom because the peripheral areas were not affected by preconceptions. Her fascination with nature leads her to study the local flora. All her observations were meticulously noted in the essays and the fact that she knew the book propelled her as the clerk of the local court. Her empathy led her to use her knowledge of botany to use it medicinally to help the poor "she took great delight in manufacturing articles required for domestic use, distilling simples and compounding medicinal herbs."[1]

After her father's business partner dies, Susan inherits a mansion and its lands that bring her financial independence. Her sharp mind leads her to want more and more and she opens a business raising silkworms which she exports to England. This also led to the development of local industry. At the same time, Susan begins to meet more and more intellectuals of the time, including Benjamin Franklin, with whom she maintained an active correspondence. Writing, Susanna's other passion, develops as she publishes essays and poems and becomes a member of the Milcah Martha Moore Club. Through the care of her friend Martha Moore, many women were able to publish their writings at a time when women could not do it alone. Grateful to fate for personal independence, Susanna was a fervent defender of America's independence from England but also of the freedom of women whose liberty in the new colonies was much restricted.

The revolt against the society that limits the right of women to decide their own existence is reflected in two poems addressed to Eliza Norris. The harsh tone of the poem shows that it denies the man's right to dictate to the woman, in the name of a higher principle - reason. Susanna urges women to leave the victim status and defend their rights but also to defeat the stereotypes that were inoculated to them - the weakness often invoked by the male sex

"Since Adam, by our first fair Mother won
To share her fate, to taste, & be undone,
And that great law, whence no appeal must lie,
Pronounc'd a doom, that he should rule & die,
The partial race, rejoicing to f ulfill
This pleasing dictate of almighty will
(With no superior virtue in their mind),
Assert their right to govern womankind.
But womankind call reason to their aid,
And question when or where that law was made,
That law divine (a plausible pretence)
Oft urg'd with non, & oft with little sense,
From wisdom's source no origin could draw,
That form'd the man to keep the sex in awe;
Say Reason governs all the mighty frame,
And Reason rules in every one the same,
No right has man his equal to control,

[1] Gertrude Bosler Biddle, Sarah Dickinson Lowrie, *Notable Women of Pennsylvania*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1942, p. 25

Since, all agree, there is no sex in soul;
Weak woman, thus in agreement grown strong,
Shakes off the yoke her parents wore too long;
But he, who arguments in vain had tried,
Hopes still for conquest from the yielding side,
Soft soothing flattery & persuasion tries,
And by a feign'd submission seeks to rise,
Steals, unperceiv'd, to the unguarded heart,
And there reigns tyrant." (To Eliza Norris — at Fairhill)

Susanna champions the cause of equal opportunity as the Creator intended. Susanna's radicalism may be due, on the one hand, to the disappointment that her own father disinherited her, leaving the entire fortune to his sons. On the other hand, financial independence showed the young colonialist that men's power over women is only due to their financial supremacy. This abuse of power, Susanna believes, could cost them in the afterlife, for the attempt to dominate another soul, to take away its freedom, can only eternally condemn the one who does it. The unwavering belief that women are equal to men, even if Susanna never got to see it legislated, led her to constantly push her limitations.

SOCIETY you know's a Bliss design'd
To form the Manners and instruct the Mind;
By mutual Converse mutual Wants supply,
To teach us how to live and to die;
By free-born Thoughts to form a Judgment clear,
Know right from wrong, and what is bad to fear:
And must I then the social Bliss forego?
'Cause Woman's frail, or Woman may be so?
Must I obey? Decree too hard I find,
Must Woman live a-part from all Mankind? (Carolina, A Young Lady)

Susanna Wright proved that a woman can be intellectual, entrepreneurial and writerly just like a man. She was "a forerunner of the modern woman, taking a leading part in meeting the responsibilities of her time, and using every opportunity to the fullest advantage for service and helpfulness to her neighbours and friends."[2]

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) was born in Massachusetts into a family opposed to British rule. In 1754 Mercy marries James Warren, supporter of George Washington. The two hosted meetings of the revolutionaries in their house and Mercy becomes more and more attracted to political activism. Mercy has an increasingly intense correspondence with influential politicians of the time - Washington, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and especially John Adams. But Mercy wrote and published several literary works such as *The Adulateur* (1772) - a satire on the British governor of Massachusetts - Thomas Hutchinson. Amidst American citizens' dissatisfaction with British rule, Mercy's play was highly praised. A year later, in 1773, Mercy publishes another play - *The Defeat*. In 1775 Mercy comes with a new satire, *The Group*, and in 1788 he comes with a political article, *Observations on the New Constitution*.

All of Mercy's published works resulted in stimulating other citizens in their efforts to reform, free themselves from British rule, and eventually create an independent state. If the works of this daring woman were published anonymously until 1790, after this date,

[2] Gertrude Bosler Biddle, Sarah Dickinson Lowrie, *Notable Women of Pennsylvania*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1942, p. 25

encouraged by the success but also by the intellectuals of the time, Mercy publishes under her name *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* (1790). The book was under the patronage of George Washington as the author herself writes in the introduction "I only asked the illustrious Washington to permit a lady of his acquaintance, to introduce to the public, under his patronage, a small volume written as the amusement of solitude, at a period when every active member of society was engaged, either in the field, or the cabinet, to refill the strong hand of foreign domination."[3] The volume contains patriotic lyrics, poems written as tributes but also two tragedies *The Sack of Rome* and *The Ladies of Castille* which emphasize the values and principles that must be promoted in the fight for independence. For the newly built society to be superior to the ones America was leaving behind. Thus, the vain ways of luxury, corruption and cowardice must be abandoned.

"True virtue might each obstacle surmount;
Rome, like a phenix, from her smoking towns
Dissolving columns, cities wrapped in flame,
Might yet emerge and more illusions shine.
If party rage and luxury should cease,
And peace give time to make a just reform
Through each corrupted channel of the law
Or if simplicity again returns,
And government more energy assumes."[4]

Mercy's last published work was in 1805—three volumes narrating the rise, progress, and end of the American Revolution. Given Mercy's access to official documents and the political circles where decisions were made, this history can be considered the most accurate. Although Mercy started her fight timidly, gradually, the encouragement from readers, acquaintances and politicians she met, led her to put more and more pathos in her works. Even though her style can be characterized as romanticized and emphasizing moral lessons, Mercy Warren has the great merit of being the first woman to document the history of the American Revolution through her own experience. At the same time, Mercy was a supporter of women's right to education and the involvement of this disadvantaged category in the political life of the new country.

Born on the island of Madeira, **Milcah Martha Moore** (1740–1829) was the daughter of a doctor who after a while moved with her family to Pennsylvania. Although it was difficult for a woman to publish, most of those who had a chosen education collected correspondence, poems or even recipes that they published in manuscript but Martha's credit is for having collected such literary creations of several ladies. Martha's book brings together some of the most diverse topics addressed by intellectuals of the time. This proves the growing interest and concern of women to make their voices heard by the whole society. The next century would increasingly popularize such writings in the newspapers of the time. In 1787 Martha publishes *Miscellanies, Moral and Instructive, in Prose and Verse; Collected from Various Authors, for the Use of Schools, and Improvement of Young Persons of Both Sexes*, work that was to be used in local schools. Martha later founds an all-girls school where she taught until her death.

Abigail Adams (1744-1818) was born into a well-known Massachusetts political family. Although raised with slaves, Abigail would come to support the anti-slavery cause. Even though she was not sent to school, Abigail studies on her own and ends up reveling in English and French literature. At the age of twenty, she married the lawyer John Adams, who

[3] Mercy Otis Warren, *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*, Thomas and E.T. Andrews. At Faust'sStatue, no. 45, Newbury Street, 1790, p. III
[4] Idem, p. 16

would become one of America's founding fathers and president. Loved and respected by her husband, Abigail flourishes. After four years, the couple moved to Boston. Even though her husband was still very successful in law, Abigail was investing in government securities. For four years, between 1784 and 1788, the husband receives a diplomatic post in Paris. Although she was initially not thrilled with the French capital, Abigail discovers the joy of culture. In 1797 John Adams becomes the second president of America and Abigail has the chance to prove her political flair as she did not stay away from official affairs. In 1798 the Federalist-controlled Congress passed four laws, known collectively as the Alien and Sedition Acts. Through these acts, aliens who harmed America could be deported. Society revolted at the abuses and these laws would be repealed in 1800. But, this was a first attempt, historically speaking, to suppress free speech. In 1800 the president's residence was changed to the White House in Washington, D.C. and Abigail became the first lady to live here. Beyond her obvious political conservatism, Abigail was an ardent supporter of women's freedom to own property and access education. Abigail was named "America's first suffragette, who championed both the rights of women and the abolishment of slavery."[5]

Abigail advocated whenever she could for the access to knowledge both for the young people, the future generation of the country, and for the women who represented the foundation stone of the new country "With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of Education. I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women."[6]

Judith Sargent Stevens Murray (1751-1820) was born into a merchant family in Massachusetts. Her education was self-taught because Judith was passionate, since childhood, about history, philosophy, geography and literature. Although her family encouraged her intellectual thirst, Judith was aware of the barriers society imposed on women. This disillusionment with the views of his time was embodied in the essay *On the Equality of the Sexes* (1790), published in two parts in two separate issues of *Massachusetts* magazine. *On the Equality of the Sexes* is a diatribe against those who have decided that women are inferior. Judith points out that there is no difference in reason between the two sexes as invoked by those who denied women the freedom to educate themselves. The poet reveals the treacherous mechanism by which women are robbed of their dignity and the means to improve themselves, after which they are accused of imbecility. Judith reverses the passion argument that patriarchal society invokes to keep women away from decision-making power as the most powerful weapon, the one that provides the strength to break away from imposed dominance.

Yet cannot I their sentiments imbibe
Who this distinction to the sex ascribe,
As if a woman's form must needs enroll
A weak, a servile, an inferior soul;
And that the guise of man must still proclaim
Greatness of mind, and him, to be the same.
.....
They rob us of the power t'improve,
And then declare we only trifles love.

[5] P.L. Levin, P.L., *Abigail (Smith) Adams (1744-1818), First Lady: 1797-1801*, in *American first ladies Their lives and their legacy*, New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., p. 43

[6] Apud. Mohammed Albalawi, *Notes on the Seminal Letters of Abigail Adams* in *Journal of Cardiovascular Disease Research*, ISSN: 0975-3583, 0976-2833 VOL 12, ISSUE 03, 2021, p. 2261

.....
Yet nature with equality imparts,
And noble passions, swell e'en female hearts.

But the young woman, driven by the desire to prove her capabilities, also wrote poetry and two comic plays. Between 1791 and 1794, Judith published essays in *Massachusetts* magazine, later collected in a volume published in 1798, *The Gleaner*. These writings would play an important role in the Republican Motherhood movement initiated by Abigail Adams. Her first essay was published in 1784 for the *Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine* and was written for purely financial reasons as her first husband had suffered substantial losses. Judith originally wrote under the pseudonym Constantia. In 1786, Judith's husband leaves America for fear of debtors and soon ends up in the West Indies. Two years later, she marries Reverend Murray. Judith wrote three plays *The Medium or Happy Tea-Party* (1795), *The Traveler Returned* (1796) and *The African* (1805).

Some of his poems, even if they do not have the chiseling of a literati, end up moving the reader with the finesse of the images created. Thus, the sonnet *Invocation To Hope* invokes the healing force of hope When pain comes to destroy the human soul. The iambic pentameter that Judith uses reveals the poet's inspiration - traditional English poetry. Hope becomes, as in Greek mythology, an embodiment of human desires. She is the only one who can give man the desire and strength to live. Even though the poem does not have a complex structure, it reveals both the writer's feelings and her deep belief that if a human being wants something, it can happen. It must be considered in historical context, in which most of her fellow citizens hoped for liberation from British rule.

The grated prison, and the love-form'd bower,
The wretch whom disappointment wastes away,
The frugal hut, the gilded dome of power,
Joy in thy smile, and court thy equal sway.

By thee, the friendless sufferer learns to bear,
By thee, the patient heart forgets its woe,
Thou mak'st misfortune's iron aspect fair,
And e'en the frozen cheek of mis'ry glow.

The Enlightenment brought the desire for autonomy to the human being, which was legitimized by reason. If the lack of reason can be read as chaos, both intellectually and socially, its opposite is the human faculty of reasoning. The same theme is found in the poem *Rebus* written by Judith.

Though most incongr'ous my selection flows,
Yet, as from chaos light and order rose,
In three short words the initials find their place,
And name the theme of elegance and grace.
Wit, sense, and judgment in her bosom sway,
Benignly good, and rationally gay,
Bright beauty's scepter she so mildly wields,
That even envy to her merit yields.

The appeal to reason and hope returns as a leitmotif in several poems, such as *An Hypothesis*, *The Consolation*, *Lines*, etc.

Elizabeth Burgin (1760-1801) went so far as to endanger freedom for the revolution by helping numerous prisoners of war to escape from the British army. American prisoners were exterminated, being held in unsanitary conditions on ships in Wallabout Bay. Elizabeth

risked her life initially helping with food and clothing, later helping many soldiers escape. She escapes by reaching Philadelphia.

Considered incapable of political and public responsibilities due to the fragility of their reason, women were removed from important decisions that also affected them. The revolutions that swept Europe and America brought with them a sense of all possibilities. If political regimes and dogmas were able to be changed, it would not have been impossible for citizens within society to change their status. Such moments in history are meant to remind us that as long as there is a will, anything is possible. Once they were recognized, even if unofficially, with the capacity for reason to have discernment in society, women took on another task - that of advising their husbands and children on matters of society. During the American Revolution, women fought a double battle-one of the country which wanted to be freed and one for their own freedom.

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