

her husband, John Adams, that the men drawing up the new government and its code of laws should "remember the ladies" is probably the most famous expression of the handful of elite women who hoped to see at least modest changes in women's status (see Figure 2.2, p. 104). The issue attracted a significant amount of attention in the decade after the Revolution. Following publication in the United States in 1792 of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by the English activist Mary Wollstonecraft, American magazines debated women's rights and roles. Some articles referred to marriage as a form of slavery. Others blamed women's limited education for women's vanity and superficiality.

Did the flurry of attention to women's rights in the postrevolutionary era lead to an improvement in white women's status? The states in the new nation were now free of British legal statutes and could theoretically construct laws in keeping with the new emphasis on protecting individual rights. Divorce law was one area in which women did benefit. British common law did not allow divorce, but now all states except South Carolina permitted it. Still, the procedure was difficult. In most states, divorce petitions required action by the state assembly. Courts in Pennsylvania and the four New England states could decree divorce. Causes offered for divorce changed over time, hinting at a slight shift in marital expectations. During most of the colonial period, women were far more likely than men to seek a divorce, usually doing so on the grounds of desertion. After the Revolution, the grounds women used expanded to include adultery, and more men began to seek divorce, usually for desertion. The changes were subtle ones, as one historian concedes: "All one can say, and perhaps it is enough, is that after the war women were physically moving out of their unhappy households, an action that, judging from the divorce literature, had been relatively uncommon before the war."⁴¹

In other legal matters, white women gained little. In many states, widows' rights to their dower was, if anything, eroded in the years after the Revolution. In addition, states maintained the British system of coverture, a major impediment to married women's autonomy. Women continued to be excluded from juries and from legal training and thus were excluded from the male political culture that centered at the courthouse.

Most significantly, women were denied the vote. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric of equality, the majority of the founding fathers believed that in a democratic republic only independent people should be permitted to vote, and independent people, by definition, owned property. Thus propertyless men and all women were excluded. In the case of women, however, exclusion was less a matter of property than of sex. Married or not, women were assumed to be dependent creatures by nature. The fleeting exception to this assumption was New Jersey, whose 1776 state constitution did not explicitly define the qualifications for voters, declaring only that "all inhabitants" who met certain property and residence requirements "shall be entitled to vote," thus technically permitting both white women and blacks to vote. In the 1780s, some property-holding women seized the initiative and voted in local elections. A 1796 statute specifically excluded black men and women, but reaffirmed white women's right to vote.⁴²

By 1800, however, criticism of women as voters in New Jersey had mounted. That wives and daughters living at home, who were thus not independent, and men without property sometimes voted increased concern. When an 1807 referendum election revealed extensive fraud, the legislature moved to tighten suffrage requirements. All women were excluded on the grounds that they were easily manipulated by men and were thus not independent. But at the same time the state expanded suffrage to include propertyless white men and sons living at home, further emphasizing the different political stature of men and women.

The results in New Jersey lend credence to the conclusion that while men gained as a result of the Revolution, white women actually lost ground. After 1800, as states granted universal white male suffrage, women's exclusion from suffrage more sharply defined their political dependence and inequality than ever before. But to define women's experience solely in terms of their formal political and legal roles obscures other significant factors that shaped their lives. For many women, the revolutionary years sparked a political consciousness, one that encouraged women to move outside their preoccupations of home and family. At the same time, improvements in white women's education—the substantial number of revolutionary women's diaries and letters indicate that more women had become fully literate—helped to broaden women's vision and open some opportunities.

The move for improved education for both men and women accelerated after the war—for practical as well as ideological reasons. As the new nation began the long process of industrialization, its more complex economy required literacy and other skills. Formal education became more necessary as print replaced oral tradition as the means of communication. Americans also believed that the new republic needed an educated, enlightened citizenry. Thomas Jefferson understood that schools were now needed to "instruct the mass of our citizens in these their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens."⁴³ For women, the interest in educational reform was linked to the civic good. Observers roundly criticized the type of education elite white women most often received. Beyond basic literacy, women were taught domestic skills and refinements meant to enhance their position in the marriage market. But what sort of wife and mother could such a poorly educated woman become? The image of flighty women concerned primarily with fashion and sentimental novels seemed especially out of step with the expectations of the new nation.

A number of critics addressed the issue of women's education at length, including Mercy Otis Warren (see Figure 2.1, p. 103), Judith Sargent Murray, and Dr. Benjamin Rush. Although they challenged conventional assumptions that more fully educating women would make them less feminine and more discontented with their lot, these critics rarely recommended that women be educated primarily to move beyond the domestic sphere. Most of the proponents of improved education for women articulated an ideology that historians have called Republican Motherhood, the idea that women had vital roles in educating their children for their duties as citizens. ~~One writer, Abigail Adams, wrote that~~

Yet, by men in this country, as by the Jews, when Moses was leading them to the promised land, every thing has been done that inherited depravity could do, to hinder the promise of heaven from its fulfillment. The cross here as elsewhere, has been planted only to be blasphemed by cruelty and fraud. The name of the Prince of Peace has been profaned by all kinds of injustice toward the Gentile whom he said he came to save. But I need not speak of what has been done towards the red man, the black man. Those deeds are the scoff of the world; and they have been accompanied by such pious words that the gentlest would not dare to intercede with "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Here, as elsewhere, the gain of creation consists always in the growth of individual minds, which live and aspire, as flowers bloom and birds sing, in the midst of morasses; and in the continual development of that thought, the thought of human destiny, which is given to eternity adequately to express, and which ages of failure only seemingly impede. Only seemingly, and whatever seems to the contrary, this country is as surely destined to elucidate a great moral law, as Europe was to promote the mental culture of man.

Though the national independence be blurred by the servility of individuals, though freedom and equality have been proclaimed only to leave room for a monstrous display of slave-dealing and slave-keeping; though the free American so often feels himself free, like the Roman, only to pamper his appetites and his indolence through the misery of his fellow beings, still it is not in vain, that the verbal statement has been made, "All men are born free and equal." There it stands, a golden certainty wherewith to encourage the good, to shame the bad. The new world may be called clearly to perceive that it incurs the utmost penalty, if it reject or oppress the sorrowful brother. And, if men are deaf, the angels hear. But men cannot be deaf. It is inevitable that an external freedom, an independence of the encroachments of other men, such as has been achieved for the nation, should be so also for every member of it. That which has once been clearly conceived in the intelligence cannot fail sooner or later to be acted out. It has become a law as irrevocable as that of the Medes in their ancient dominion; men will privately sin against it, but the law, as expressed by a leading mind of the age,

"Tutti fatti a sembianza d'un Solo,
Figli tutti d'un solo riscatto,
In qual'ora, in qual parte del suolo
Trascorriamo quest'aura vital,
Siam fratelli, siam stretti ad un patto:

Source: Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843), 8-12.

It should be remarked that, as the principle of liberty is better understood, and more nobly interpreted, a broader protest is made in behalf of Woman. As men become aware that few men have had a fair chance, they are inclined to say that no women have had a fair chance. The French Revolution, that strangely disguised angel, bore witness in favor of woman, but interpreted her claims no less ignorantly than those of man. Its idea of happiness did not rise beyond outward enjoyment, unobstructed by the tyranny of others. The title it gave was citizen, citoyenne, and it is not unimportant to woman that even this species of equality was awarded her. Before, she could be condemned to perish on the scaffold for treason, not as a citizen, but as a subject. The right with which this title then invested a human being, was that of bloodshed and license. The Goddess of Liberty was impure. As we read the poem addressed to her not long since, by Béranger, we can scarcely refrain from tears as painful as the tears of blood that flowed when "such crimes were committed in her name." Yes! man, born to purify and animate the unintelligent and the cold, can, in his madness, degrade and pollute no less the fair and the chaste. Yet truth was prophesied in the ravings of that hideous fever, caused by long ignorance and abuse. Europe is conning a valued lesson from the blood-stained page. The same tendencies, farther unfolded, will bear good fruit in this country.

Maladetto colui che lo infrange,
Che s'innalza sul fiacco che piange
Che contrista uno spirito immortale."

"All made in the likeness of the One,
All children of one ransom,
In whatever hour, in whatever part of the soil,
We draw this vital air,
We are brothers; we must be bound by one compact,
Accursed he who infringes it,
Who raises himself upon the weak who weep,
Who saddens an immortal spirit."

This law cannot fail of universal recognition. Accursed be he who willingly saddens an immortal spirit, doomed to infamy in later, wiser ages, doomed in future stages of his own being to deadly penance, only short of death. Accursed be he who sins in ignorance, if that ignorance be caused by sloth.

We sicken no less at the pomp than the strife of words. We feel that never were lungs so puffed with the wind of declamation, on moral and religious subjects, as now. "We are tempted to implore these 'word-heroes,' these word-Catos, word-Christos, to beware of cant** above all things; to remember that hypocrisy is the most hopeless as well as the meanest of crimes, and that those must surely be polluted by it, who do not reserve a part of their morality and religion for private use. Landor says that he cannot have a great deal of mind who cannot afford to let the larger part of it lie fallow, and what is true of genius is not less so of virtue. The tongue is a valuable member, but should appropriate but a small part of the vital juices that are needful all over the body. We feel that the mind may "grow black and rancid in the smoke" even "of altars." We start up from the harangue to go into our closet and shut the door. There inquires the spirit, "Is this rhetoric the bloom of healthy blood or a false pigment artfully laid on?" And yet again we know where is so much smoke, must be some fire; with so much talk about virtue and freedom, must be mingled some desire for them; that it cannot be in vain that such have become the common topics of conversation among men, rather than schemes for tyranny and plunder, that the very newspapers see it best to proclaim themselves Pilgrims, Puritans,

* Manzoni.

** Dr. Johnson's one piece of advice should be written on every door; "Clear your mind of cant." But Byron, to whom it was so acceptable, in clearing away the noxious vine, shook down the building. Sterling's emendation is worthy of honor: "Realize your cant, not cast it off."

Heralds of Holiness. The king that maintains so costly a retinue cannot be a mere boast, or Carabbas fiction. We have waited here long in the dust; we are tired and hungry, but the triumphal procession must appear at last.

Of all its banners, none has been more steadily upheld, and under none have more valor and willingness for real sacrifices been shown, than that of the champions of the enslaved African. And this band it is, which, partly from a natural following out of principles, partly because many women have been prominent in that cause, makes, just now, the warmest appeal in behalf of woman.

Though there has been a growing liberality on this subject, yet society at large is not so prepared for the demands of this party, but that they are and will be for some time, coldly regarded as the Jacobins of their day.

"Is it not enough," cries the irritated trader, "that you have done all you could to break up the national union, and thus destroy the prosperity of our country, but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen hearth to vote at polls, and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every means of improvement, every indulgence."

"Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these *indulgences*?"

"No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to wish what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions."

"Consent—you? it is not consent from you that is in question, it is assent from your wife."

"Am not I the head of my house?"

"You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own."

"I am the head and she the heart."

"God grant you play true to one another then. I suppose I am to be grateful that you did not say she was only the hand. If the head represses no natural pulse of the heart, there can be no question as to your giving your consent. Both will be of one accord, and there needs but to present any question to get a full and true answer. There is no need of precaution, of indulgence, or consent. But our doubt is whether the heart does consent with the head, or only obeys its decrees with a passiveness that precludes the exercise of its natural powers, or a repugnance that turns sweet qualities to bitter, or a doubt that lays waste the

fair occasions of life. It is to ascertain the truth, that we propose some liberating measures."

Thus vaguely are these questions proposed and discussed at present. But their being proposed at all implies much thought and suggests more. Many women are considering within themselves, what they need that they have not, and what they can have, if they find they need it. Many men are considering whether women are capable of being and having more than they are and have, *and*, whether, if so, it will be best to consent to improvement in their condition.

This morning, I open the Boston "Daily Mail," and find in its "poet's corner," a translation of Schiller's "Dignity of Woman." In the advertisement of a book on America, I see in the table of contents this sentence, "Republican Institutions. American Slavery. American Ladies."

I open the "*Deutsche Schnellpost*," published in New-York, and find at the head of a column, *Juden und Frauen-emanicipation in Ungarn*. Emancipation of Jews and Women in Hungary.

The past year has seen action in the Rhode-Island legislature, to secure married women rights over their own property, where men showed that a very little examination of the subject could teach them much; an article in the Democratic Review on the same subject more largely considered, written by a woman, impelled, it is said, by glaring wrong to a distinguished friend having shown the defects in the existing laws, and the state of opinion from which they spring; and an answer from the revered old man, J. Q. Adams, in some respects the Phocion of his time, to an address made him by some ladies. To this last I shall again advert in another place.

These symptoms of the times have come under my view quite accidentally: one who seeks, may, each month or week, collect more.

The numerous party, whose opinions are already labelled and adjusted too much to their mind to admit of any new light, strive, by lectures on some model-woman of bride-like beauty and gentleness, by writing and lending little treatises, intended to mark out with precision the limits of woman's sphere, and woman's mission, to prevent other than the rightful shepherd from climbing the wall, or the flock from using any chance to go astray.