

Designing Women:
How Ancient Philosophy Shaped the Role of Women in the Early Republic

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For a span of one hundred and forty-four years, from the official founding of the country until the passage of the 19th amendment to the Constitution, women in the United States of America did not have the right to vote. How could a nation which so openly touted the principles of freedom and equality commit such an egregious error as to disenfranchise what comprised nearly half of its “free” population for well over half of its existence? To answer this question, it becomes necessary to examine the principles which influenced the founders of the nation and further, to explore how those ideas were implemented and sustained in the rapidly evolving milieu of the post-revolutionary republic. In particular, Aristotelian ideas on public and private virtue and the education necessary for achieving success in those ventures had a dramatic and lasting impact on women’s roles in society that can still be seen today. In the early Republic, women assumed the role of republican wives, masters and purveyors of virtue in the private sphere, intended to shore up and complement their virtuous male counterparts in the public sphere. Over time, women began to see themselves less as counterparts to their husbands and more as equals. This led to an increased demand from women for equality in education and exposure to the public realm previously reserved for men, causing the lines between the public and private spheres to become eroded. It was believed that the success of the republic depended on whether or not virtue could be achieved in both the public and private spheres, but that these realms should remain clearly delineated and controlled by their respectively assigned caretakers. Counter-current to women’s push for equality in the public sphere through education in their role as wives ran the idea that women better served the republic by remaining in the private sphere and being educated as mothers.

It is no great secret that the philosophy of the early United States social and political structure was heavily influenced by the writings of the ancient Greeks and in particular, those of

Aristotle. Aristotle goes to great lengths in his *Ethics* to define what he calls “virtue”, its relation to happiness, and its importance by stating that “...people of superior refinement and active disposition identify happiness with honor; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life”¹, that “...among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue...virtue is better”², and that “...human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”.³ These sentiments are echoed nearly exactly by John Adams writing on the eve of the revolution when he says “...that the Happiness of the People, the great End of Man, is the End of Government...” and “All sober inquiries after truth...have agreed that the Happiness of Mankind, as well as the real Dignity of human Nature, consists in virtue”.⁴ Seeing this nearly verbatim recapitulation of the ideas of Aristotle regarding virtue and happiness, it is no surprise then that other Aristotelian ideas found themselves embedded in the early American zeitgeist. If virtue as the cornerstone of a successful nation and its people is elucidated in *Ethics*, the means for implementing and sustaining virtue in government and society are dispensed through Aristotle’s follow up treatise *Politics*. It is in this work where the concepts that defined women’s roles in the republic are found.

The fundamental organizing principle of an idealized city-state as proposed by Aristotle must be one in which “The members of a state have some things in common and some not.”⁵ This idea defines the concept of the public and private spheres as being distinct, separable realms as opposed to being entirely public (all things in common) or entirely private (nothing in

¹ Aristotle. *Ethics* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 6

² Aristotle, *Ethics*, 6

³ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 11

⁴ John Adams, *Thoughts on Government, Applicable to the Present State of the American Colonies. In a Letter From a Gentleman to His Friend* (Philadelphia, 1776)

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 22

common).⁶ Aristotle then goes on to say that under this system, women and children should be relegated to the private sphere.⁷ Having established that an ideal nation-state should consist of separate spheres and who should occupy those spheres, the characteristics best suited to those who inhabit their respective realms are described. The sentiments expressed regarding the virtue of women and whether their character "...be temperate, and brave, and just"⁸ is paired with their subservient roles such that "A husband and father rules over wife and children ..."⁹ and that the "temperance, courage and justice of a man and of a woman are not the same...the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying"¹⁰ can also be found in the attitudes of pre-revolutionary America. For instance, a newspaper article of unknown authorship from 1773 claimed "The good Wife is one who...is strictly and conscientiously virtuous...chaste, pure, and unblemished in every thought...submissive from Choice, and obedient from Inclination."¹¹ While the inclination may be to assume from the clearly patriarchal attitude that it was written by a man, such an assumption may be fallacious when consideration is given to the fact that many women of the time shared these same views.

In what may well be the quintessential expression of a woman's perspective on what a good republican woman ought to be, Esther Reed wrote "The Sentiments of an American Woman" praising the contributions of women to the revolution. In this, Reed took great care to ensure that her accolades fell well within the bounds of the ascribed model of womanhood, kowtowing so low as to describe some of the most powerful women in history as acting in the

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 22

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 26

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 20

⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 19

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 21

¹¹ "The Good Wife," *Virginia Gazette*, January 21, 1773

humble and suppliant nature of the virtuous republican woman.¹² She hints at the idea that women would liked to have had a more active role in the revolution, but capitulates to the accepted social philosophy that they better served the effort through the contributions they were able to make in the private sphere.

Reed then goes on to claim that women should be proud of acting in a virtuous capacity within their defined roles, supporting this claim with a laundry list of liberties they have helped to secure, all the while paying close attention to maintaining a clear division between what lies in the public, men's sphere and the private, women's sphere.¹³ The sentiments expressed by Reed align quite well with Jan Lewis' analysis of what constituted a good republican wife when she notes "...the most important considerations in the selection of a wife were her 'qualifications as a *companion* and a *helper*.'"¹⁴ This is in direct contradiction to other ideas expressed by Lewis that the role of the republican wife was novel, shirking off the concepts of "patriarchal dominion as the republican model for social and political relationships."¹⁵ In assuming the role of companion and helper, the republican wife becomes less an equal and more a counterpart to her husband. Contrary to Lewis' conjecture that men and women in the early republic were entertaining a new, egalitarian model of marriage, the old ideas of public and private spheres and their respective virtues were alive and well, as other writings from this period attest.

Lewis argues that the socio-political views on the role of women and wives in post-revolutionary America were undergoing a revolution of their own, yet the writings of early feminist thinkers such as Judith Sargent Murray paint a distinctly different picture. In *The*

¹² Esther Reed, *Sentiments of an American Woman* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1780)

¹³ Reed

¹⁴ Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic", in *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 44, No 4 (October, 1987), 10

¹⁵ Lewis, 1

Massachusetts Magazine in 1790, Murray argued that the indoctrination of men and women into separate spheres of employment in daily life begins in youth, when for siblings “...the one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science.”¹⁶ This argument is then extended into adulthood and marriage as Murray remarks that under a system of true equality, “Females would become discreet, their judgments would be invigorated, and their partners for life being circumspectly chosen, an unhappy Hymen would then be as rare, as is now the reverse”.¹⁷ In the eyes of Murray, the social structure is still very much dichotomous and marriage a far cry from symbolizing the “...new and different society in which women would be required to play a new and unprecedented role”¹⁸ presented by Lewis. In taking this stance, Murray not only decries the unfairness and inequality of the two sphere system but makes the leap to positing that desegregation of the two spheres would be beneficial to the republic.

The key to removing the boundaries between antiquated republican ideals on the separation of public and private spheres lay in education, according to Murray. She asked of the perceived differences between the sexes, “May we not trace its source in the difference of education”?¹⁹ The differences in education were most clearly defined by Benjamin Rush in his 1798 discourse on the subject titled *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*. In this article, Rush gives a veritable litany of subjects necessary for education of the young men of the republic including politics, agriculture, science, religion and philosophy.²⁰ Only at the end of his

¹⁶Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes” in *Massachusetts Magazine* (March, 1790), 132-135

¹⁷ Murray, 132-135

¹⁸ Lewis, 3

¹⁹ Murray, 132-135

²⁰ ²⁰ Benjamin Rush, “Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic”, in *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Thomas and Samuel F. Bradford, 1798), 6-20

work, as an afterthought, does Rush even address the “separate and peculiar mode of education proper for women in a republic”, and then only to say that “To qualify our women for this purpose, they should not only be instructed in the usual branches of female education, but...liberty and government; and the obligations of patriotism...”²¹ By so strictly limiting the subjects on which women are to be educated, Rush is reinforcing the prevailing ideas of the time - that beyond that which is necessary to function in society, women should only receive additional education so far as it makes them fit to be good, virtuous wives and such that they may play the complement, but not the equal to, their future husbands. Like many of his contemporaries, Rush has again evoked the ideas of Aristotle, who claimed that “...women and children must be trained by education with an eye to the constitution, if the virtues of either of them are supposed to make any difference...”²²

In the decades following the revolution, the push for equality among women and men slowly gained ground. The thoughts of women like Judith Sargent Murray in 1790 would soon be echoed by English women such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft’s seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, published in 1792, contained many of the same sentiments as Murray’s *On the Equality of the Sexes*, including the lamentation of domestic duties reserved for women, inequality in their mode of education, and the trappings of a society which relegated women to the private sphere.²³ To be fair, though Wollstonecraft did share many of the same thoughts as Murray, these two women were writing from within socio-political systems that differed in notable ways. The situation for

²¹ Rush, 6-20

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 22

²³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1790)

women in America, while far from being fair and equal, was a great deal better than that of Europe. This difference was remarked upon as late as 1820 by another English woman, Frances Wright in her letter to the *Journal of Society and Manners in America* where she notes that “In the education of women, New England seems hitherto to have been peculiarly liberal.”²⁴ Yet despite the differences between women in Europe and America observed by Wright, and despite the progress that was made from Murray’s 1790 publication, many of the old ideas were still ingrained. This is evidenced by Wright’s remarks that education for women in America was proceeding in the manner “...that your friend Dr. Rush conceived to be so requisite.”²⁵ Thirty years had passed since Murray and Wollstonecraft first made their arguments in favor of equal education and the liberation of women, yet they still would not have their day. In fact, another of Rush (and by extension Aristotle’s) ideas – an idea that would throttle the ambitions of early feminists - had taken firm root; the idea that women should be educated, not to participate directly in society as free-thinking individuals, but as mothers.

The idea that women best serve societies needs by acting as mothers likely predates recorded history. That as a mother, women were the primary means for imparting the values of a society onto its youth was old hat in the early republic, but a new spin was given to the role of motherhood as well. If women as mothers were educated in the school of virtue and patriotism, then as they raised their children with those same values, they too would become active participants in the political world. Unfortunately, this was just a self-aggrandizing and apologetic means of perpetuating the subjugation of women into their traditional roles in a patriarchal society without giving them any real voice or power. This is not to say that the

²⁴ Frances Wright, “Letter XXIII: Condition of Women”, in *Views of Society and Manners in America* (London: Longman, 1821)

²⁵ Wright

notion of “Republican Motherhood” was entirely without merit. Frances Wright commented that the American views of women were radically different and more empowering than that which could be found in Europe at the time.²⁶ Later analysis by Linda Kerber would agree with Wright, yet by and large the preponderance of support for the value of motherhood in the early republic came not from the few advantages it granted women, but rather its capacity to act as a diversionary tactic meant to assuage those who would challenge the ancient notions of separate spheres of life for men and women.²⁷ As Kerber summarizes, “Women could be encouraged to contain their judgements as republicans within their homes and families rather than to bridge the world outside and the world within.”²⁸

Amid the fervor of liberty and democracy in the newly founded United States and on the growing wave of early feminist literature from authors such as Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft, the idea of Republican Motherhood somehow managed to settle deeply within the American consciousness, stemming the tide of progress towards true equality for women. So what happened then, to cause this shift? Dismantling an age old system of oppression is no easy task and certainly could not be expected to occur overnight, but another force was also crashing headlong into the early women’s movements, devouring what little momentum they had. Most scholars agree that by 1830, the transition to a market society had taken full effect. With this, the separation of public and private spheres became even more distinct, taking on a much more literal physical aspect in the separation of home and labor. Combined with the philosophical aspects of separate spheres and who should inhabit them, these social changes would embed

²⁶ Wright

²⁷ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1986), 282

²⁸ Kerber 287

themselves deeply enough in the American mindset that they would continue well into the nuclear, “Father Knows Best” culture of the mid-20th century and beyond. While immeasurable progress towards reimagining women as something more than wives and mothers has been made, there is still a long way to go. The medical community has long since disregarded the four humors of Hippocrates and the scientific community has discredited the Ancient Greek’s ideas of the four elements – perhaps it is time to abandon Aristotle’s concept of the two spheres as well.

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