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An Enlightened Woman: Judith Sargent Murray and the Call to Equality

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Mary is an English major with a Secondary Education concentration. This essay was completed

as coursework in Dr. Ann Brunjes's Early American Literature class. Mary appreciates Dr. Brunjes's guidance and is grateful to her for introducing her to the works of Judith Sargent Murray. Mary plans on teaching English following graduation.

The political and social upheaval of 18th century America is well documented in the writings of many great thinkers of that time. As the Age of Enlightenment stirred debate in many quarters, causing men like Thomas Jefferson to ponder the merits of equality among men, so too did it inspire women to question their own status in an emerging American culture. A little-known writer named Judith Sargent Murray emerged as an early contributor to the discussions of the role women in a changing society. The Sargent family's openness to the study of a progressive faith, Universalism, and rejection of status quo Calvinism influenced the notion of equality upon which Judith developed her personal philosophy in regard to education, marriage and the role of women in American society. Judith Sargent Murray's well reasoned and impassioned Revolutionary Era arguments for marital equality, acknowledgement of the female intellect and access to educational opportunity for women in both "On the Equality of the Sexes" and *The Gleaner* reflect an early feminist philosophy rooted in her embrace of liberal Universalist theology as well as her resentment at being deprived an education. Judith Sargent Murray's willingness to question gender constructs in her writings, both private and public, reflect the ideals of the Enlightenment and reveal her uniquely American perspective on gender inequity based upon both her personal life experiences and her vision for the emerging American society.

Although the input of women was neither sought nor particularly valued in the struggle to define post-Revolution America, Judith Sargent Murray considered herself a patriot and did not shy away from speaking her mind. In one of her decidedly political essays from *The Gleaner*, published in *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1792, Murray wrote:

The genius of liberty, invigorated in this younger world, hath arrayed itself for battle-it hath gone forth-it hath originated opposition-its banners have been displayed-it hath enlisted its worthies-the struggle hath been arduous, but the event hath crowned us with success... independence claps her wings-peace is restored-governments are formed... We are free, sovereign and independent states, and yet to the federal head we are amenable.

Murray felt that her opinions were valuable and viewed her ability to spread her political message as her patriotic duty. She, like many writers of the era,

was devoted to expressing, “The symbolic meaning of America and the social message of how to live and succeed in American society-how to be an American” (Elliot 23A). Murray’s hopes for the changing American culture included a strong central government which would endeavor to direct the social message of equality to reflect changing the role of women in society. Murray was fortunate to grow up in relative privilege, and was exposed to political issues and philosophies more so than many women of her era; therefore her positions on matters of equality were the result of spirited debate and study. Hurd-Smith notes that, “Murray’s mature sentiments about gender roles were a product of her particular experiences and of the transatlantic literary and philosophical tradition that characterized the Age of Enlightenment” (Hurd-Smith17). Murray considered the rights of women to be crucial to establishing an American society worthy of a reasoned people, and, having developed this opinion rationally through her own study and experiences, embodies the spirit of the Enlightenment in this regard.

As the spirit of reason swept across America in the lead up to the Revolution, surging political discourse led to a closer examination of religious doctrine in some quarters. The new, more liberal religious philosophy of Universalism began to gain acceptance in New England among many who questioned the harsh orthodoxy of Puritanism. The Sargent family, finding themselves attracted to the egalitarian nature of Universalism and its message that salvation was available to all, reached out to the liberal theology’s founder John Murray who accepted their invitation to preach (Hurd Smith 22). Although the Sargent family held a position of great esteem within their Puritan community, they questioned Calvinist theology’s premise of God’s “grace” rendering eternal salvation available to a select, predetermined few. They were further troubled by laws requiring financial support of the community’s Puritan meetinghouse as a civic duty for all, regardless of religious affiliation. Feeling they could no longer abide supporting a system with which they had lost faith, the Sargent family found themselves breaking all ties with First Parish Church. Biographer Shiela Skemp underscores the significance of the family conversion in *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*, “They were abandoning their past, rejecting a tradition that had accorded them a privileged place in the community and separating themselves from the intricate network of social and spiritual relationships that shaped their world” (20). The Sargent family’s decision to risk their social status and reputation in pursuit of a faith more in keeping with their values speaks to the premium placed on intellectual curiosity in the Sargent household. This bold move was reflective of their liberal nature and the values they imparted to a young Judith, the same values which led her to question society’s views about women in religious and civic life.

Judith Sargent Murray relied heavily on the Universalist notion of equality in forming her ideas on the extension of equality to women. In arguing that women possess equal intellect to men, Murray’s “On the Equality of the Sexes” admonishes men against the assumption of superiority by offering a theological perspective that: “Our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us; and that we are not fallen lower than yourselves” (729). Murray points out that while men and women were not equals in their corporal existence, no such distinction exists on a spiritual plane. Even the most dogmatic tenets of Calvinism did not argue that men were more inclined to salvation than women. Murray’s thesis follows that if God thought women could be entrusted with salvation, surely they could be trusted with intelligence. Skemp supports this argument in writing that, “Murray’s view of women’s intellectual equality was a logical development of her religious and philosophical beliefs” (111). Murray recognizes the inherent conflict that society, Puritans in particular, had established in requiring women to study the word of God, while discouraging them from the study of the words of men. Universalism, unlike Calvinism, did not require critical examination of personal behavior and religious texts to determine moral failings. Rather, Murray found her new faith to be a source of encouragement to explore greater questions about spirituality and whether the constraints placed on women were implicit divine directives or, rather, the misinterpretations of men. Universalism aligned well with Murray’s liberal views of American society precisely because it was not a religion which confined her to rigid self-examination based on harsh dogmatic teachings of Calvinism, but encouraged her to embrace her own capacity to think and reason.

In Part II of “On the Equality of the Sexes,” Murray draws inspiration from her own liberal interpretation of the Bible to criticize the premise of male superiority, “I am aware that there are many passages in the sacred oracles which seem to give the advantage to the other sex, but I consider all these as wholly metaphorical” (730). She goes on to enumerate the weaknesses of revered men in Biblical tales: “Thus David was a man after God’s own heart, yet see him enervated by his licentious passions...Listen to the curses which Job bestoweth upon the day of his nativity and tell me where is his perfection” (730). Murray then concludes that, “the superiority of man, as exhibited in scripture, being also emblematical, all arguments deduced from thence of course fall to the ground” (730). Murray’s bold stand in questioning the accepted interpretation of a scriptural basis for the presumption of male superiority is followed by her appeal to apply reason. If these men are the standard by which men derive their sense of superiority, Murray argues that no such superiority is evident. Skemp notes of Murray, “As a religious dissenter, she had learned to question

traditional authority in matters of conscience” (69), and thus felt no loyalty to accept the long held patriarchal interpretations of Biblical lore.

While Murray’s public writing is notable for its examination of scriptural content to advance her theory of female equality, a private correspondence to a friend which was later appended to her essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” reveals the extent of her boldness in challenging any Biblical basis for the inferiority of women. Murray presents an analysis of the Story of Creation which serves as an indictment of the flawed nature of men represented by Adam while depicting Eve as an example of women’s intellectual curiosity. Regarding the Biblical Fall from Grace, Murray posits that Eve acted out of inquisitiveness: “A laudable ambition fired her soul and a thirst for knowledge impelled the predilection so fatal in its consequences” (732). She further argues that it required the powerful forces of Satan to deceive Eve into Original Sin because she would not be easily swayed, but that Adam required no such manipulation or deception to participate in their downfall:

Thus it should seem that all the arts of the grand deceiver (since means adequate to the purpose are, I conceive, invariably pursued) were requisite to mislead our general mother, while the father of mankind forfeited his own, and relinquished the happiness of posterity, merely in compliance with the blandishments of a female.(732-733)

Murray theorizes that Eve’s fall resulted from her “desire of adorning her mind” (732) while Adam simply gave in to his physical arousal at the sight of Eve’s naked body state. This suggests that not only does Murray see women as the intellectual equals of men but hints at the possibility of a greater intelligence. Murray’s analysis would have been troublesome, even scandalous, at the First Parish Church where she had previously worshipped; however, because of the Sargent family’s long held liberal theological views, Murray had no qualms about questioning interpretations of religious texts which she could not reconcile with her own views concerning gender equality.

The Sargent family’s liberal social positions extended beyond their religious life and into the realm of education, although they fell far short of providing the true equality of opportunity which a young Judith Sargent Murray longed for in her studies. Murray’s parents, recognizing the intellectual curiosity and potential of their daughter, arranged to have her privately tutored, but never fully committed to providing their daughter with the education she felt she deserved. Skemp notes that when her knowledge and abilities surpassed the scope of her

tutoring, “She begged her parents to allow her to sit in on Winslow’s lessons. She especially wanted to learn Latin, the mark of any genteely educated man” (Skemp 13). Despite their liberal philosophy, her parents saw no practical application for a young woman, even one of Murray’s exceeding intelligence, to have a Classical education, although they did allow and encourage her independent study from their extensive personal library and permitted Winslow to tutor her on his own breaks from Harvard. Murray did not blame her parents for halting her formal education; rather, she blamed the larger society for denying formal educational opportunity to women, and focused her writing on the injustice to women in such policies.

Murray’s ire over the restrictions placed on her education is evident throughout her essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” where she pointedly asks of the perceived differences in men’s and women’s acumen: “Yet it may be questioned, from what doth this superiority, in thus discriminating faculty of the soul proceed. May we not trace its source in the difference of education, and continued advantage?” (727). She cites the disparity between the sexes by echoing the situation in her own home: “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” (728). Rather than stew in her own resentment, Murray pours her efforts into extolling the virtues of education not only for herself, but for all women. In her essay “Women’s Attributes as Breadwinners” from *The Gleaner*, Murray writes that “To neglect polishing a gem, or obstinately to refuse bringing into action a treasure in our possession, when we might thus accumulate a handsome interest, is surely egregiously absurd, and the height of folly” (Hurd-Smith 146). Murray sees herself and all women denied a proper education as unpolished gems. The imagery of the gem is especially powerful as a metaphor, not only because of the obvious connection to women’s perceived vanity and affinity toward jewelry, but because the gem itself represents the essence of how women may be seen as beautiful adornments to be admired without much thought given to their substance. Murray’s arguments in both “On the Equality of the Sexes” and *The Gleaner* urge that women be valued for their intellect and that they be permitted to increase their value through education.

Murray, while certainly on the forefront of American feminist theory in her writings on the female intellect, was not alone in debating the Enlightenment era concept of intelligence. She is notable for being a more radical voice than her contemporaries in standing against those beliefs, “Within the conventions of European philosophies of mind that set the initial terms of U.S. conceptions, (that) women’s intelligence occupied a lower order than men’s” (Olwell 37). Not content to accept this European philosophy, Murray’s “On the Equality of the Sexes”

explores the question of whether there exists any difference in male and female intellect which cannot be accounted for by means other than lack of opportunity. Murray reasons, "May not the intellectual powers be ranged under their four heads—imagination, reason, memory and judgment?" (727). She then buttresses her argument with a series of witty observations detailing the stereotypical manner in which women are viewed to utilize the power of imagination, including fashion as well as more manipulative pursuits. Of women's imaginations, she notes, "Another instance of our creative powers is our talent for slander. How ingenious are we at inventive scandal?" (727). Murray's tongue in cheek approach humorously demonstrates that women have clearly equaled or surpassed men in mastery of these areas of intellect. She goes on to propose that by allowing women the ability to direct these intellectual powers in more worthy pursuits, no gender distinction would exist (728). These sentiments would later be echoed by Hannah Mather Crocker who would cite the theory that "Reform of female education would eventually eliminate any appearance of systematic, innate differences in the intellectual capacities and interests of the sexes" (Hunt-Botting/Houser 270). While Crocker, the granddaughter of Cotton Mather, had herself come from a family which valued education, her beliefs exemplified the emerging concept of "Republican Motherhood" which put forth, "The idea that women should exemplify, teach, and guard the spirit of the republic within the family," (Kritzer 150). Murray's regard for women's intellect and the prospects of their education reflected her progressive beliefs that the usefulness of women's education was not limited to the domestic realm.

While the emerging "Republican Motherhood" movement dictated a decidedly more conservative approach to the ties between marriage and education, Judith Sargent Murray's philosophy and life experiences again led her to advocate a progressive stance toward women's education and employment in her writing. Although women's employment opportunities were restricted to the domestic arena, Murray joined other progressive women of her time in suggesting that were women able to obtain the same level of education which had long been afforded men, it would follow that they be granted the same access to employment as well (Nash 31). Given the unhappiness and occasional poverty she endured in her marriage to Stevens, Murray resolved that women's education should be seen as a means to improve not only the situation of married women, but of widows and the unmarried. Murray addresses this notion in her *Gleaner* essay "Women's Attributes as Breadwinners", writing, "The chance of a matrimonial coadjutor is no more than a probable contingency; and if they were early accustomed to regard this *uncertain* event with suitable *indifference*, they would make elections with that deliberation" (Murray 146). Murray realized that just as women were entitled to both

educational opportunity and equality within marriage, so too were they entitled to their own pursuits should they choose not to marry. While the "Republican Motherhood" agenda stressed education for the betterment of family life, the liberal minded Murray realized, "An even more compelling reason for women to be self-supporting was their desire for self-determination" (Nash 31). Murray viewed access to education as a means of improving women's lives, not merely for the sake of self-improvement, but because it opened up a world of economic possibilities to unmarried women or those who found themselves widowed without any financial resources as she had following the death of her first husband.

Murray's belief in the need for society to embrace true equality for the benefit of marriage and family life was an extension of her faith and personal philosophy. In "On the Equality of the Sexes," Murray writes, "Females would become discreet, their judgments would be invigorated, and their partners for life being circumspectly chosen, [and] an unhappy Hymen would then be as rare as is now the reverse" (728). This essay, written following Murray's unhappy first marriage to John Stevens, reflects not only her hopes for improving the institution itself, but speaks to her dissatisfaction with her own prior marriage. In the essay, Murray relies upon her own interpretation of her faith to determine that women not be bound to suffer in silence as subordinates within their marriages, asking:

Is it reasonable that a candidate for immortality, for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of the Deity, should at present be so degraded as to be allowed no other ideas than those which are suggested by the mechanism of a pudding, or the sewing the seams of a garment? (729)

Skemp writes, "She could not imagine that God thought wives should embrace false doctrine simply for the sake of marital peace" (Skemp 69). Murray would later find the opportunity to be treated as an equal partner upon her second marriage to her longtime friend Rev. John Murray, one of the founders of Universalism. Working together to spread the message of Universalism, their partnership represented the sort of union theorized in Murray's essay: a modern marriage based on love and mutual respect reinforced through their shared faith.

As a period of great societal change fueled the public discourse on the future of America and her people, Judith Sargent Murray bravely spoke out in the hope that her voice would help steer the discussion toward gender equality. Although true equality would not soon follow, Murray's fearless commitment to progress and granting women equality in social standing,

marriage and educational opportunity represents the spirit of independent thought and reason so valued during the Enlightenment. In both "On the Equality of the Sexes" and *The Gleaner*, Murray's message of equality is consistent with these values and reflect her the influence of her family's rejection of Calvinist restrictions in favor of Universalism's liberal theology. Judith Sargent Murray's progressive views in support of women's intellect and equality permeate her writings and reveal her to be an inspirational voice of early American feminism and a product of the Enlightenment in America.

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