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"America Represented by a Woman"¹ -- Negotiating Feminine and National Identity in
Post-Revolutionary America

Images of women as figures for the colonies and then the nation permeated Revolutionary America. These images symbolically reinforced the revolutionaries' attempt to represent a diverse people as a unified body politic. At the same time, however, they placed the revolutionaries in the paradoxical position of using often independent female figures to depict a nation in which women remained socially, legally, and politically dependent.² After the Revolution, female patriots like Judith Sargent Murray struggled to reconcile this paradox and advance the status of women.

Post-Revolutionary feminism peaked in the early 1790s when even thinkers as radical as Mary Wollstonecraft found a popular audience for their critiques of women's dependence upon and subordination to men. As the decade advanced, however, a backlash developed that characterized the feminine as a dangerous threat to the political order, denied women's authority outside the domestic sphere, and reasserted their dependence upon men. Through readings of two political cartoons by Paul Revere, a popular 1776 sermon by Samuel Sherwood, and Judith Sargent Murray's "Story of Margareta," I argue that this backlash resulted, in part, from the frequent linking of feminine to national identity in American culture. These works by Revere, Sherwood, and Murray demonstrate how both revolutionaries, who were attempting to found the nation, and women's advocates, who were attempting to enhance the role of women in it, yoked the identity of the nation to that of women and imagined political stability as

domestic order. Hence, fears of national instability in the late 1790s spurred a desire to limit women's roles.

American revolutionaries produced numerous images of women figuratively representing the polis. Initially, it was British printers who borrowed from a long tradition of depicting the American continent as a woman to present the rebellious colonists as female figures (Fleming 66-67, 70). These British prints, which first appeared during the Stamp Act Crisis, portrayed the Americans as either a wronged or a willful, but always a dependent, woman (Fleming 65-70). The patriots reworked these images to represent their claims to political legitimacy and, eventually, independence (Olson 103-11).³ In using female figures to argue for independence, the revolutionaries found themselves constructing images of--and narratives about--independent, active women. These images challenged the socially and politically dependent role assigned actual women--a role that the disruptions of Revolution also threatened. Because their intention was to liberate America but not American women, the patriots manifested anxiety about this independence in the ambivalence with which they both advanced and attempted to contain representations of the country as a woman.

Paul Revere created many of the political prints in America, designing some himself and adapting others from British originals. Much of this work was for *The Royal American Magazine*, which Lester Olson reports "produced the largest number of illustrations [in the colonies] pertaining to imperial politics" (8). This decidedly pro-patriot Boston magazine contained a variety of brief essays, poems and notices, as well as regular reports on local, colonial and international politics. Two of the British prints Revere modified show how female figures served the patriots' desire to represent the

Americans as a unified and aggrieved body politic while also betraying anxiety about female independence.

The first, entitled "The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught" (Figure 1), was published in June of 1774, shortly after Parliament passed the Intolerable Acts closing Boston's port to punish the city for the Tea Party. This cartoon appeared as the frontispiece for an issue of *The Royal American Magazine* that condemned British tyranny and celebrated American resolve. In this issue, an essay on modesty exhorts women to satisfy the "violent desire to please" that they "are born with" through the practice of women's virtues which are: "to live at home; to mind only domestic cares; to be simple, just, and modest" (De Lambert 221, 219). However, Revere's cartoon celebrates a defiant America with the image of a far-from ingratiating and modest woman.

"The Able Doctor" depicts the violence of England's response when America does not swallow English law. Lord North, considered the architect of Britain's American policy, tries to force America to consume tea. However, a resistant America spits the tea back in his face. As Lord North grasps her throat, Lord Mansfield holds down her hands and Lord Sandwich secures her ankles and looks up her skirt, America defends herself with the only means available--her mouth. To stress that America's rejection of the tea is not merely the reflexive action of a choking victim but determined resistance, a Pennsylvania version of this print published in August of 1774 re-titled it "The Persevering Americans, or the Bitter Draught Return'd" (Olson 112).

[figure one]

While America tries to fight off an apparent gang rape, a number of interested observers witness her plight. Military law (with a suggestively phallic sword in hand) stands guard. The other woman in the print, Britannia, hides her eyes in shame and, perhaps, denial. Finally, two gentlemen (France and Spain) look on from the left with what is supposed to be sympathetic concern but looks very much like voyeuristic interest. Unlike Britannia, they stare at the scene before them while giving no indication that they intend to come to the defense of the besieged woman. Although the presence of these gentlemen is meant to signify their support of America, she is ultimately left to defend herself.

Denied a political voice under the English system of virtual representation, America can only respond, like the patriots at the Boston Tea Party, by refusing to drink. Appropriately, this edition of *The Royal American Magazine* includes reports on the continued American refusal to drink, namely the Massachusetts House of Representatives's and the Committee of Correspondence's efforts to establish a non-consumption agreement, a boycott of English goods. This non-consumption pact politicized the private realm of women's domestic life and was dependent upon their support to succeed. It required the participation of women as consumers who would boycott British goods and as manufacturers who would produce domestic alternatives to these goods. Thus, Revere and those who advocated this boycott were inviting American women, like the woman in "The Able Doctor," to resist England by refusing British goods. In his cartoon, Revere unintentionally demonstrated how the patriots were blurring the distinct separation implied in the magazine between the public female figure

of a rebelling America and the apolitical, private woman celebrated in the essay on modesty.

Appearing nine months later, in March of 1775, Revere's "America in Distress" (Figure 2) represents America as a mute, fainting woman over whom several men battle. Her would-be abductors are physicians who wish to bleed (i.e., tax) her into submission. Although she passively reclines with her weapons useless at her side, these threatening doctors still feel the need to restrain her. Lord North holds her both by the hand and by a chain fastened around her wrist as he anxiously exclaims, "She is Mad and must be Chained!" At the same time, Lord Mansfield leans toward America with a dagger and says, "She must let more Blood. Petitions are Rebellious." Agreeing with Mansfield's recommendation to let more blood, Thomas Hutchinson, the former Tory governor of Massachusetts, advises, "Right my Lord. Penalties of that kind seem best adapted." In addition, Lord Bute, former Prime Minister and George III's widely despised right-hand man, emphasizes the danger and urges North to "Secure Her now, or it is all over with Us." America's primary defender is the Marquis of Rockingham, who, as Lord of the Treasury, proposed the repeal of the Stamp Act and here brandishes an axe at Lord North.

[figure two]

The threat America offers lies at her feet: a petition to which, from her reclining posture and parted legs, she appears to have given birth. For North, Mansfield, Hutchinson and Bute, America is dangerous because she can give birth to petitions that may grow into rebellion. While attempting to inspire both sympathy for the American cause and outrage at colonial exploitation by England's political leaders, this cartoon

implicitly depicts as highly threatening to English tyranny women's two indirect means of access to the political system--as petitioners and as mothers of sons who will be citizens.⁴

Tellingly, it is not only America's abductors who find it necessary to secure her. Revere's depiction of Rockingham and America's other two supporters, the Earl of Chatham and Earl Temple, reflects support for the American cause in England. However, it also indicates an unwillingness to allow America to act or to speak for herself. Like her attacker North, her supporter Rockingham holds down one of America's hands. And just as he constrains her ability to act while raising an axe on her behalf, Rockingham seems to appropriate her voice. Rockingham's voice balloon could almost be mistaken for hers. Standing above her head, the men who would represent her cause cover the space where America's voice balloon might appear. America is literally under these men, and their voices take the place of hers.

The petition serves as the trace of America's voice. But just as her representatives cover the space in which her voice might appear, the many voices endorsing her petition are not visible beneath a statement representing (or claiming to represent) their shared interests. America is a threat to her supporters because as a figure for the American people she unites but also represents the diversity of these voices. As America, she embodies, and so presents as a unified body politic, a diverse people. However, as a woman, she is a visual reminder of a group excluded from the body politic and so of the American people's potentially explosive divisions.

In their "solicitude," Revere's Rockingham and his comrades reveal a distrust of female independence that was widely held. Although leaders of contending political factions, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson believed that women must be kept

politically dependent to preserve the nation (just as Revere's America is held down and spoken for). They regarded the inclusion of women in the electorate as symptomatic of a radical democratization that endangered national stability by recognizing national diversity. Writing less than two months before the Declaration of Independence, Adams explicitly warned his correspondent James Sullivan that to recognize women and other disenfranchised groups would be to recognize the fragmented and divergent basis of the nation:

Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open SO fruitful a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise, Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State. (209-12)

Adams's argument equates the vote for women with a radical democratic leveling of voices that would result in "controversy and altercation" by providing all with equal access to the state.

Even in such a democratic state, Thomas Jefferson saw no role for women. In an 1816 letter to Samuel Kercheval, he wrote:

Were our State a pure democracy, in which all its inhabitants should meet together to transact all their business, there would yet be excluded from their deliberations . . . Women, who, to prevent deprivation of morals and ambiguity of issue, could not mix promiscuously in the public meetings of men. (45-46)

In their ability to be seduced and to reproduce, women menaced the unity of the state with illegitimate progeny. As embodiments of the nation, reproducing women threatened to multiply rather than unify the body politic, thereby becoming signs of the state's divisibility rather than its indivisibility. As members of the nation, actual women who could reproduce or represent themselves as political subjects threatened the state's unity with the difference of gender. Thus, the woman's ability in *America in Distress* to give birth to petitions had to be carefully controlled by those who would speak for her (hence Rockingham's hand holding). To recognize the women of the nation as well as the nation as a woman was to acknowledge that there was not one American voice, but rather, a discordant multiplicity of ambiguous issue, male and female, with regional, social, economic, cultural and racial differences.

Colonists not only saw themselves collectively depicted as a threatened and threatening woman in political cartoons; they also heard a similar story from the pulpit. Published sermons, like political cartoons, afforded an effective way to disseminate political ideas to a popular audience. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, the most popular sermon of 1776 was Samuel Sherwood's "The Church's Flight into the Wilderness," which argued for American independence (125). Like the cartoons, this sermon anxiously advances the image of the nation as a woman. Sherwood preaches that America is the land God willed to his spouse--the true church. As Jay Fliegelman points out in his discussion of this sermon, the church, figured as God's bride, also stands for the people of America: "The woman on the verge of bringing about a new and virtuous generation was at once America and the Protestant Church" (*Prodigals and Pilgrims* 122). While the trope of the church as Christ's bride can be found in the Bible,⁵ this sermon wrestles with

anxiety over the propriety of a woman representing God's people since it uses this image not only to celebrate the people's dependence on God, but also to defend their independence from England.

In the sermon, the church's marriage to Christ places her in a relation of coverture⁶ with God, who protects and guides her:

She is elsewhere spoken of as the spouse of Christ, who owns himself to be her head and husband. A woman, we know, is the weaker sex, and looks to her husband for support and protection. . . . This woman, the church being in such a near relation to Christ, the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of his person, amidst all her own natural weakness and infirmity has never appeared contemptible.

(Sherwood 19)

Sherwood rationalizes that although as a woman she is necessarily weak and inferior, God has chosen her, acknowledges his responsibility, and through his proximity raises her above the merely female and therefore "contemptible." Besides being "her head," Sherwood explains that God has placed "on her head, to complete her glory, a crown of twelve stars, an emblem of her being under the light and guidance of the twelve inspired apostles" (20). Much as Rockingham, the Earl of Chatham, and Earl Temple stand over America's head in "America in Distress," God places over his spouse his twelve apostles.

In pausing to account for her gender and place her under the apostles, Sherwood betrays anxiety about this representation of the church as a woman. Moreover, he is careful to distance himself from this representation by reporting that it originates "elsewhere." The reason for his anxiety quickly becomes clear as he explicates the

metaphor of the church as God's wife in order to defend American independence. God has done something truly revolutionary. He has given his spouse her own property--he has given her the land of America:

[It] is worthy of notice, that when the woman fled into the Wilderness, she came INTO HER PLACE. This American quarter of the globe seemed to be reserved in providence, as a fixed and settled habitation for God's church, **where she might have property of her own, and the right of rule and government** so as not to be controul'd and oppress'd in her civil and religious liberties, by the tyrannical and persecuting powers of the earth, represented by the great red dragon [England]. The church never before this, had *prime occupancy* or first possession of any part of this terracueous globe, in any great extent of territory. (Sherwood 24, bold added)

Wives in America never had such rights of property and self-government. Denied legal identity under coverture, married women were unable to control their own property (Gundersen 60). Control of property was directly linked, as Sherwood indicates, to "the right of rule and government." Property ownership was a primary prerequisite for enfranchisement. In giving her independent property, God has made his spouse an independent, self-governing woman. Despite his preliminary assurances that this woman remains under the rule of God and the guidance of the apostles, Sherwood generates a female character that circumvents the constraints of coverture.

Sherwood further subverts the traditional understanding of the dependent role of women by denouncing England as a villain for attempting to seduce this woman from her

God-given independence with "the darling doctrines of arbitrary power, passive obedience and non-resistance" (Sherwood 30). This revision of women's role was not lost on loyalists such as Joseph Galloway, who argued that the radical doctrines of those like Sherwood had turned America's head: "That America has been wandering in a wrong path, bewildered among the erroneous principles upon which her advocates have attempted in vain to support her rights, is apparent from all her conduct" (Galloway 369). However, Sherwood could only construct this subversive female character with the double assurance that Christ owned "himself to be her head and husband" and that she acted under the guidance of the twelve apostles perched on her head. His America was at once a profoundly oppressed and a radically independent woman. Her split position is symptomatic of the anxiety and ambivalence which a woman, representing American claims to independence, could generate.

Revere's cartoons and Sherwood's sermon employed the female figure of America to advance a political position, which by 1776 had become an explicit call for independence. The more radical the political position America assumed, the more she was circumscribed by male figures. In 1774, men passively supported her in Revere's "The Able Doctor." In 1775, they stood over and spoke for her in Revere's "America in Distress." In 1776, men sat on top of America as her husband and apostolic headgear in Sherwood's "The Church's Flight into the Wilderness." E. McClung Fleming's and Lester Olson's surveys of political iconography make clear that the trend to contain images of women seizing independence was not limited to these three examples.

As the Revolutionary crisis escalated, female characters became both more aggressively independent and more thoroughly dominated by male authority. Olson

shows that, with the start of armed conflict, colonial propaganda depicting America as a woman conveyed the colonists' more resolute assertion of independence. This resolution was demonstrated through America's props, including a more numerous and a broader array of weapons, and through her actions, such as breaking restraints and grasping the liberty pole (Olson 88-89). But as America became more forceful in claiming independence, men increasingly accompanied, aided, and finally replaced female figures of America. Fleming notes and Olson demonstrates that during the war male rather than female figures increasingly represented America (Fleming 74, Olson x). The iconographic disappearance of women followed the logic of coverture in which women perform independence under the "wing, protection and cover" of men with the result that their "very being . . . is suspended" (Blackstone 430). Through this logic, the patriots could contain and then appropriate the work of cultural legitimization that the female characters performed for the cause of independence, while displacing them (and any suggestions of women's independence they might convey) with male characters who first protected, then covered, and finally replaced them.

Before the war, female characters provided images of a unified body politic onto which the patriots could project their claims for independence while distancing themselves as the motivators of revolution. Thus, the patriots depicted themselves, like Rockingham, as honorable defenders of a besieged America rather than as instigators of revolt. During the war, male characters allowed a more direct and aggressive assertion of independence without the mediation of gender. Having used female figures to legitimate their cause, the patriots could deploy male characters to represent their military resolve. With the end of hostilities, female figures once more dominated the images of America.

As the revolutionaries moved from embattled assertions of independence to founding claims of legitimacy, stability, and unity, female figures again performed the vital work of representing a viable body politic.

By the 1790s, women had re-emerged as symbols for the new nation. At the same time, women's advocates were campaigning to raise the status and expand the opportunities available to American women. One of the leading advocates for women's rights in the early United States was Judith Sargent Murray. Linda Kerber describes her as one of the "central architects of the new female ideology" (11), and Gordon Wood deems her "[t]he most famous American feminist" of the early national period (175). It is not necessarily surprising that male patriots like Revere, Adams, Jefferson, and Sherwood regarded women's independence as a threat to national stability. However, it is cause for reflection when even such a prominent woman's advocate as Judith Sargent Murray believed that the subordination of women was necessary to preserve the state.

In the spring of 1790, using the pseudonym Constantia, Murray published an essay entitled "On the Equality of the Sexes" in *The Massachusetts Magazine*. In this essay, she argued that the only barrier to women's intellectual equality with men was their lack of sufficient education and mental stimulation. Murray further developed this theme of equality between the sexes in the mid-1790s while writing under the pseudonym of "the Gleaner."⁷ In four essays, Murray defined women's intellect very broadly to establish women's equality with men in ten areas, including literary talent, patriotism, and even the ability to govern states. Yet, despite her desire for women's rights and her belief in the intellectual equality of the sexes, Murray regarded women's subordination to men as necessary for national order.

While Murray argued for women's equality, she also assured the reader that this equality would better fit women for their sphere--that is for "those necessary occupations, that must ever be considered as proper to the department and compromised in the duties of a judiciously instructed and elegant woman" (*Gleaner* 703-4). In the "Story of Margareta" which forms part of *The Gleaner* essays, Murray provides an exemplary tale of the upbringing of a young girl. Margareta's education for a "career" as a "philanthropic moralist" (348) includes the study of academic subjects like history and natural science as well as lessons in the practical duties of her sphere. The *Gleaner* assures the reader: "No, Mr. Pedant, she was not unfitted for her proper sphere; and your stomach, however critical it may be, never digested finer puddings" (61). If Mr. Pendant's stomach does not confirm Margareta's fitness for her sphere, her silence will because Margareta has also learned not to speak in public:

she can deliver herself upon any subject, on which she ventures to speak, with great ease; but in large or mixed companies, she engages in conversation with manifest reluctance and I have heard her declare that she hath frequently, when encircled by strangers, felt alarmed at the sound of her own voice. (*Gleaner* 63)

Murray is careful to demonstrate for Mr. Pendant and her readers that her ideally educated young woman will not assert herself outside of her "proper sphere."

Murray's privileging of male authority follows from her belief in a hierarchical society with a "regular chain of subordination" (*Gleaner* 214). Opposed to democracy, Murray aligned herself with Federalists like Adams. She argued that an educated elite with "sufficient leisure to investigate, with the requisite attention, the great art of

government" should lead society (*Gleaner* 695). To disrupt the social order by challenging the boundaries of gender or of class would be to threaten the nation with the convulsions Adams and Jefferson also feared. Thus, her *Gleaner* states that: "He who violently or insidiously destroys the unquestionably necessary series of subordination, who produces the various classes of mankind as usurpers on those orders, which, in the scale of being, take rank above them, must inevitably throw a nation or a state into strong convulsions" (*Gleaner* 696)

Murray envisioned the family as the basic unity in this social hierarchy. Thus, women provide the foundation for social and political stability by virtue of their roles as domestic authorities and through their subordination to their husbands who connect the home to the larger world. On the one hand, this vision prevents Margaretta from disrupting the social order with her private voice. On the other hand, it allows Murray to call upon her authority as a wife, mother, and domestic advisor to comment upon a public world based in the family. Yet, if Murray felt authorized by these female roles, she nevertheless delivered much of her public commentary through her male character, the *Gleaner*. In so doing, she circumvented the cultural bias against women's public speech. Essentially, Murray followed the same logic as that of the male patriots in which women legitimate or authorize male voices, but men do the talking. Thus, Rockingham (and, by extension, Revere) speaks for America and the *Gleaner* speaks for Murray.

Murray advocated equality and respect for women within their domestic roles by asserting the value of these roles for the nation as a whole. While patriots like Revere and Sherwood were clearly anxious about their linking of feminine and national identity to campaign for political independence, Murray seized upon the opportunity to improve the

status of women by depicting them as essential to the nation. However, in tying women's domestic roles to national stability, Murray, like the male patriots, limited the independence women could claim and left unchallenged their legal and political dependence upon men.

Yoking women's roles to national stability, Murray used the analogy of the Gleaner's family to prove her thesis that without a clearly defined social hierarchy (in which a woman's subordination to her husband is foundational) disorder and anarchy are the inevitable result: "There is no calculating the disorders which may result from relaxing the series of subordination" (*Gleaner* 216). In this parable, the Gleaner awakens one day to find democracy and, hence, disorder have come to his home. The precipitous spiral into anarchy begins when his wife refuses to order breakfast from the servants, arguing that he could order it himself. From this initial act of female insubordination, "convulsions" inevitably radiate. Communal labor results in a ruined breakfast when "possibly, after many entreaties, the females may all combine" to prepare it but, "having no one to direct, the process is impeded and confused" (*Gleaner* 216). Next, the laborers ignore the Gleaner's orders, each having his own idea of how to do things. Arguments degenerate into brawls, nothing is accomplished, and "anarchy reigneth supreme" (*Gleaner* 216-17). By having this anarchy begin with the Gleaner's wife, Murray positioned women at the center of the sociopolitical order, then demonstrated their ability to disrupt the social order, and so linked the subordination of women to the stability of the state.

Murray used this example of the dangers of democracy in the home (which begins with a female rebellion so mild that the good Gleaner is not even forced into the

predicament of either cooking for himself or going hungry) to show the impossibility of democracy in the nation: "But if the *theory* of **equality** is not *practicable* in the contracted circle of domestic life, much less will that experiment succeed which would realize it, in regard to the heterogeneous collection of beings who constitute a nation" (*Gleaner* 218, bold added). Murray directly related the necessity of women's subordination in the domestic sphere to a Federalist argument against broadening the suffrage to include more of the "heterogeneous collection of beings" who constituted the nation. Whether in the home or at the ballot box, one voice must clearly be established as dominant, or the many voices will bring anarchy. In Murray's parable of domestic disorder leading inevitably to national collapse, a challenge to the ideology of the separate spheres was a challenge to the fragile stability of the new nation.

Judith Sargent Murray saw women's roles as a matter of social stability and, ultimately, national identity because she believed women were already and should continue to become significant members of the polis. In essence, like other women's advocates, particularly those who would propound "Republican Motherhood," Murray took seriously the figurative equation of women with the nation exemplified in Revere's cartoons and Sherwood's sermon. These early feminists frequently invoked this symbolic role to argue for expanded rights for women in the United States. However, to the extent that these rights derived from women's status as symbols for the nation rather than as members of the polis, they were subject to the volatilities of a developing national identity. Thus, the specter of political instability and national destabilization arising in the latter 1790s (as a result of the violence of the French Revolution, the end of George Washington's presidency, the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, and the generally

fierce rhetoric of partisan politics) contributed to stalling American feminism. It would take until the 1848 Declaration of Rights and Sentiments in Seneca Falls, New York for American feminists to reject the logic, shared by Murray and her male peers, which linked feminine to national identity and women's subordination to national stability.

Notes

¹ This is the title given a female figure in the political print "Liberty Triumphant, or the Downfal of Oppression" (1774).

² The use of female figures to represent a nation in which women are disenfranchised is not unique to Revolutionary America. See, for example, Joan Landes's *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* and Lynn Hunt's edited collection *Eroticism and the Body Politic*. However, the use of female figures in Revolutionary America is of particular interest because it shines light on the limits of the early American experiment with democracy and because it helps explain why American feminism lagged behind that of many European countries.

³ In *Emblems of American Community*, Lester Olson argues that British printers developed the image of America as a Native American woman to use both ethnicity and gender to represent the colonies as alien and inferior (4). Although more than half of all American political prints were adapted from prints in English publications, Olson shows how colonists modified the originals to express their dissenting political stance (103). Early in the conflict, the colonists tended to accept a dependent position. However, they challenged the implication that they were alien with alterations like lightening America's skin (Olson 103-7). As relations between the colonies and England deteriorated, the rebelling colonists reversed this pattern. In these later prints, the rebels highlighted ethnic and gender difference as a mark of their alienation, while rejecting the implication that they were inferior by stressing the woman's independence or by suggesting

that, as in the Boston Tea Party, they merely assumed the inferior status of a woman or Native American for the covert operations of revolution (Olson 103-11).

⁴ See, Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic* 7-12, 33-114, 265-88 and Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* 297-98 for discussions of women's political roles during and after the Revolution.

⁵ See Ephesians 5, 25-27.32 and Revelation 21, 2.

⁶ Coverture was a practice of the English Common Law that denied married women, or *femes covert*, a legal and political identity independent of that of their husbands. A *feme covert* could not sign contracts, control property, or vote. As William Blackstone explained in his 1765 *Commentaries on the Law*, under coverture “the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: **under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing**” (Blackstone 430, bold added). Coverture did not deny a woman's legal identity by claiming she had none, but by asserting that her identity was subsumed into her husband's.

⁷ In 1798, Murray published *The Gleaner, A Miscellaneous Production* that included the essays she had published in *The Massachusetts Magazine* through 1794 as well as additional material. The collection proved a profitable confirmation of the "Gleaner's" appeal and Murray's connections. John and Abigail Adams and George and Martha Washington were among the 759

subscribers who purchased the 825 copies of the book (Baym, Introduction viii, iii).

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