**Revolutionary Women,**

**Abigail Adams, and Roman Education**

During the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers appreciated “human nature.” From Niccolo Machiavelli's time, they believed that men (humans) were, by their very nature, wicked. Christians, likewise, believe humanity commits evil as a fallen race. Christians differed from the Florentine thinker only in that they believed in possible salvation, whereas Machiavelli taught that humans were beyond redemption.

Enlightenment thinkers often viewed humans as calculating machines, rational people. Yet, they often considered passion as the driving force for human action. Passions can be inspiring since they rouse men to fight for things they treasure, and they fight for things beyond themselves. Nonetheless, passions can also frighten men and women. Enlightenment men were thus educated to control those passions. They practiced Christian and classical virtues so they could think systematically and rationally. Women were often considered incapable of controlling emotions; thus, their education was quite different. Education for girls and young women was geared towards end purposes. Women would not be involved in public affairs and politics. Therefore, education would focus on taking care of the home and family. Girls would also be taught to read and study the Bible. Eighteenth-century women did not need the training in areas required of young men, chiefly in the form of Greek and Latin languages, histories, and literature.

Nevertheless, the growing cult of “politeness” expected in elite female and mixed-company salons brought a greater interest in classical learning. Proper comportment manuals urged women to acquire only enough classical knowledge to maintain lively conversation involving classical references, the sure mark of the well-born and well-bred. Nonetheless, the risk for women in the salons was to make themselves seem pedantic to men and thus unattractive.

Eighteenth-century upper-middle-class women who pursued some classical learning often morphed into the “Roman matron” figure in American literature and art. Revolutionary period women assumed roles reminiscent of prominent elite ancient Roman women. They stood by their patriotic husbands and male relatives in repelling oppressive British policies and forces while creating a new Republic. Like the men, women increased their reading of Roman history and placed liberty as the focus of their revolutionary desideration. Patriotic women used classical references to escape their customary roles and become unfamiliar players in creating a new republic.

Elite patriotic women had their public voice primarily in the “Roman play,” inspirational writings on classical persons and events. Along with literature, painters such as John Singleton Copley, Joshua Reynolds, and Charles Willson Peale represented period women dressed in classical fashions and poses. In early American elite society, there was also a change in the treatment of the Roman goddess Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. She was used as a mode of discourse about the respective qualities, interests, and privileges of men and women. The sculptures and canvases of Venus had once been the exclusive purview of men. Eventually, they became acceptable signs of cultured aesthetics in which women could partake. Still, trepidations of muddled female emotionality were balanced with Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, justice, law, and victory. They elevated Minerva’s image to exemplify a desired quality in women of the new Republic. Minerva is female in form; however, she is considered both rational and “clear-headed as men.”

The three great examples of American patriotic women who studied the classics are all from Massachusetts: Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American poet. All three learned from the same Roman foundations, though from secondary sources. Abigail Adams and other elite women were part of the vanguard, learning to read and write during the 18th century. Nonetheless, other than Phillis Wheatley, women were prohibited from publishing their writings publicly. It was a private civic identity. Women were considered overly emotional, so they were denied the same kind of civic participation as men. Nevertheless, they could still educate their sons for service to the Republic. They played the role of the Roman matron— the virtuous Roman woman. They looked to stories of Marcus Junius Brutus’ wife, Portia, as a model. Brutus came from an ancient family that went back to his ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, formation of the Roman Republic in 509 B.C. The latter Brutus was a fierce defender of the Republic and, in defense of the Republic, had helped murder Julius Ceasar in 44 B.C.

American Roman matrons primarily claimed their civic identity through the education of their sons. As an 18th-century Portia, Abigail Adams taught all four of the Adams boys and hired personal tutors for them. The boys, especially the oldest, John Quincy, had to learn Greek and Latin and master those ancient histories to prepare for future leadership in the new American Republic.

Abigail’s husband, John, had the reputation of a very severe and stern man. Abigail, likewise, presented an equally demanding figure. As a Roman matron, Abigail even signed letters to her husband as “Portia,” demonstrating devotion to the role. She used the character of Portia to claim this republican, civic identity. The “American founding mother” educated her sons on individual self-government. The American Revolution was, in effect, a revolutionary demand for national self-government. Like maturing young adults, colonial Americans had cast off the paternal British government and were subsequently responsible citizens of a nascent independent republic.

As a young girl, Abigail Adams had been taught and encouraged to read by her father, Reverand William Smith, a local Congregational minister. She had received an extensive education using her father’s expansive library. Reverand Smith’s daughter proved to be a bright and inquisitive young woman. As a boy, her brother William studied Latin since it was required for college and

professions. The ancient language "was reserved for bright young males" and found unnecessary for young girls. Later in life, after watching her brother waste his education, Abigail developed an inimical opinion of the elite American education system. William had ended his days as a forty-year-old alcoholic. He had abandoned his family, leaving his wife and child impoverished, while he had lived lasciviously in Philadelphia fleshpots. Sadly, two of Abigail’s sons, Charles, age 30, and Thomas, age 59, met the same tragic fate and died as penniless alcoholics. Two of John Quincy’s sons, George Washington Adams (28) and John Adams II (31), did likewise. William and his nephews wasted their premium education on liquor. It may have been a genetic trait in the Smith-Adams families, though Abigail blamed it on their education. She resented that education was wholly concentrated on young men who squandered it. Her education, unfortunately, only "prepared her for the one option available to women, the domestic role for which her mother was her “noble model."

Unlike her brother’s education, Abigail had no set curriculum. She read famous authors such as Shakespeare and Milton. She also read the early 18th-century journal *The Spectator*, especially essays by Joseph Addison. These works dealt with moral decency and political corruption in England and contained many references to the classics. After all, Addison’s most famous work was his play *Cato, A Tragedy.* He often began his essays with Latin quotes from Roman poets such as Virgil, Horace, or Ovid. He regularly referred to Greek and Roman history proceedings to give his arguments credibility. Through Addison’s essays, Abigail experienced Roman history and ideas. With a base in the Roman world, she explored newer works such as Alexander Pope and James Thomson. She examined issues such as marriage, family, and women's education through Samuel Richardson’s novels.

Students can appreciate Abigail Adams knew ancient Roman history through her references to antiquity in her letters, especially those to her husband, John. Even though John ended up using the pseudonym "*Lysander*" once they were married, Abigail replaced the name "*Diana*" (Roman goddess of the Hunt) with "*Portia*," Brutus’ wife and "the virtuous Roman matron of history. Portia was also the learned woman jurist in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia was the name Abigail used in letters to friends and family for the rest of her life. In a December 26, 1783, letter to her son, John Quincy, Abigail cited ancient Roman history, comparing the excessive hubris of the Romans before the fall of the empire to that of the British before the American Revolution. In the letter, she quotes Joseph Addison’s *Cato* because of its portrayal of Cato the Youngerand its themes of patriotism and democracy. Abigail wrote to her son:

Let your observations and comparisons produce in your mind an abhorrence of Domination and power, the Parent of Slavery, Ignorance, and barbarism, which places Man upon a level with his fellow tenants of the woods. ‘A day, an hour of virtuous Liberty, is worth a whole eternity of Bondage’ (from Addison’s Cato).

The Romans most definitely affected Abigail’s life. Nevertheless, she was concerned with the educational value of Roman and Greek authors. She only read them in English and thought Latin and Greek separated her from the men. Writing to John, she demonstrated reluctance to formal, classical education. The couple constantly discussed their children’s tutelage, especially since John was absent for long stretches, as he sacrificed much for the nation.

Abigail had serious concerns about all formal education, though. She believed that formal education outside the home corrupted children’s morals. Never naming any Roman or classical authors in complaints, her attitude illustrates Abigail’s conviction that formal education was responsible for the moral decay in her society’s youth. Abigail was determined that her children would be taught at home by private tutors.

Though Abigail never recorded a derisive opinion regarding classical education, John, in an October 13, 1810 letter to Benjamin Rush, wrote, "Mrs. Adams says she is willing you should discredit Greek and Latin because it will destroy the foundation of all the pretensions of the gentlemen to superiority over the ladies and restore liberty, equality, and fraternity between the sexes." Her strong dislike of the classics placed her diametric John, a lover of Rome, particularly Cicero. Her most significant objection came from women being denied classical education in Latin, as her brother had received and had subsequently squandered. Her objection to classical education seemed rooted in solid opposition to formal education because it was reserved for men. Rush, a scientist and physician, objected to classical education as part of a growing movement to eliminate the classics from schools. Dr. Rush considered the classics "as remnants of aristocratic education unsuited to a republican nation and an industrial economy." Classical education had become such a hallmark of the aristocracy that, in the eyes of women and the lower classes especially, the subject lost its intellectual value. It seemed to stand in contrast to the republican equality fought for in the American Revolution.

There is no question that educational opportunities for women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were far from equal to those available to men. In 1798, Benjamin Rush wrote, "One cause of the misery of many families, as well as communities, may be sought for in the mediocrity of knowledge of the women. They should know more... . in order to be happy themselves, and to communicate happiness to others." This statement foreshadowed the changes that were to come in the American educational system, positive changes that would eventually bring women to a level of equality with men. These changes, however, would also lead to the demise of classical education in American schools. Whether or not the classics were to blame for the discrepancy in learning between men and women is a matter of debate. The reason that Abigail Adams was against classical education, while her husband esteemed it, can be seen in their different experiences with the classics. Nevertheless, Abigail could not escape the classical Roman heritage of her day, especially in her letters signed by Portia.

As the 19th century dawned, the Enlightenment’s rationality gave way to Romanticism’s embrace of the emotional. Although the early 19th century “Cult of True Womanhood” and “Cult of Domestication” did not encourage the Roman matron, they did encourage women to practice piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Despite the cults, we do see women, nonetheless, becoming more public and civically involved. Upper and upper-middle-class women began to organize temperance leagues to combat alcohol abuse. They also organized moral reform societies to bring civil and moral reforms to the masses. Numerous women in the North organized abolition societies to end slavery in the U.S. Many of these women began to clamor for women’s suffrage, as they witnessed state after state adopting universal white manhood suffrage, giving all white men over 21 the franchise, regardless of property and financial qualifications. Gradually, American culture began to change as more women made significant contributions to society outside the home. The question remains, however, whether the effects of classical education during the later 18th century led to increased women's involvement in American civic life or had impeded it.

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