

## ■ The Gleaner Contemplates the Future Prospects of Women in this “Enlightened Age”

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**Author:** Murray, Judith Sargent

**Genre:** essay

*“Yes, in this younger world, ‘the Rights of Women’  
begin to be understood; we seem, at length,  
determined to do justice to THE SEX; and . . .  
we are ready to contend for the quantity,  
as well as quality, of mind.”*

### Summary Overview

“The Gleaner” was a male pseudonym for Judith Sargent Murray, who was one of the first American feminist writers. In this essay, “Observations on Female Abilities,” Murray argues for the equality of women, and more particularly for access to equal educational opportunities for women. The essay is part of Murray’s three-volume work, *The Gleaner: A Miscellaneous Production in Three Volumes*, published in 1798 and the first work to be self-published in America by a woman. The book echoes the main ideals of the American Revolution of liberty and freedom for all. Murray was also influenced by the Universalist religion and the Enlightenment concept of reason. Although *The Gleaner* appeared soon after the British feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft had published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, Murray had published a prior version of her ideas, “On the Equality of the Sexes” in 1790. She is therefore considered one of the founders of feminist thought and philosophy.

### Defining Moment

The years immediately after the American Revolution were exciting times, as the new country tried to define itself, its government, and its culture. The Age of Enlightenment, or Reason, which was based on science

and intellectual discourse as a means to reform society, influenced many of the ideas and rhetoric of the time. Although women did not have equal rights, this did not preclude some of them from being active participants in this important political discourse. Through their writing, postrevolutionary women made it clear that they thought themselves capable of forming and sharing public opinions. They may have entered the public sphere of ideas unofficially, but they did so with considerable force.

Judith Sargent Murray started writing during her first marriage, but it was during her second marriage to John Murray, and as a result of his support and encouragement, that she began to make an impact. She was one of the first women to have a magazine column, which appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine*. It was here, under her pseudonyms of “Constantia” and “The Gleaner” that she gained a loyal following of readers. She often interacted with these readers in her columns, responding to their letters to her. In 1790, Murray compiled her thoughts about the equality of women in an article entitled “On the Equality of the Sexes.” She was a strong advocate for the advanced education of women as a way to ensure the stability and continuity of the fledgling American republic. Before this time, most girls and young women only had access to an “ornamental”

education, which included subjects such as music, dancing, and needlework. Murray concluded that in order for the new republic to succeed, all of its citizens, including women, needed a higher level of education.

Murray took her ideas further with the publication of her three-volume work, *The Gleaner*, in 1798, in which some of her columns that had appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine* were reprinted and new articles were added. In fact, only thirty-one of the one hundred articles that appeared in *The Gleaner* were reprints. Murray's writing persona of the Gleaner was styled as a rational male essayist. She did this in order to avoid typical bias against female writers, as she believed that intellect was common to both men and women even though their bodies may be different. However, to avoid the conclusion by the reader that her work was actually written by a man, she eventually uncovered the identity of the Gleaner as "Constantia," one of her better-known pseudonyms, in the final essay of the third volume.

### **Author Biography**

The oldest of eight children, Judith Sargent was born in May 1751 in Gloucester, Massachusetts, to Judith Saunders Sargent and Captain Winthrop Sargent. Her mother's family was a prominent New England one who operated in the maritime industry and her father was a ship owner and merchant. She was therefore a member of the economic and political elite of the then British colony. Sargent was a smart young girl, but her parents did not see the need to formally educate her, as the only career available to her was that of wife and mother. After informal tutoring by an older woman, her parents relented and allowed her to be tutored along with her brother, Winthrop, who was preparing for Har-

vard University. She was even able to study Latin and Greek, which was a rarity for an educated woman.

In 1769, Sargent married John Stevens, a sea captain and trader who came from another prominent Gloucester family. Their marriage lasted seventeen years, and although they did not have any children together, they opened their home to young relatives who needed a home and an education. Sargent began her writing career as a poet, but her talent would later show as an essayist. Under the pen name of "Constantia," she began to advocate for advanced education for girls and women.

John Stevens emerged from the American Revolution with considerable debts, and he left for the West Indies in 1786 to make money to pay them off. Soon after, Sargent heard that Stevens had died, leaving her a widow. About two years later, in 1788, Sargent married John Murray, a Universalist minister and widower. They had corresponded for many years, and after the death of Stevens, discovered that their friendship had turned into love.

Murray strongly encouraged his wife to write, and she obliged. The religion of Universalism, which advocates universal salvation and universal liberty, lent itself to writing about women's rights and their education as well. After a stillborn son in 1789, the Murrays welcomed their only daughter, Julia Maria, in 1791. They moved to Boston in 1783, where Murray returned to writing and self-published her major three-volume work, *The Gleaner*, in 1798. In the early 1800s, the couple suffered from increasing financial problems that worsened after John Murray suffered a stroke in 1809. After his death in 1815, Murray moved to Natchez, Mississippi, to be with her daughter and son-in-law. She died there in 1820.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Amid the blaze of this auspicious day,  
 When science points the broad refulgent way,  
 Her iron sceptre prejudice resigns,  
 And sov'reign reason all resplendent shines.

The reader is requested to consider the four succeeding numbers as supplementary to an Essay, which made its appearance, some years since, in a periodical publication of a miscellaneous nature. The particular paper to which I advert, was entitled, *The Equality of the Sexes*; and however well I may think of that composition, as I do not conceive that the subject is exhausted, I have thought proper, treading in the same path, to set about collecting a few hints, which may serve as additional, illustrative, or ornamental.

And, first, by way of exordium, I take leave to congratulate my fair country-women, on the happy revolution which the few past years has made in their favour; that in these infant republics, where, within my remembrance, the use of the needle was the principal attainment which was thought necessary for a woman, the lovely proficient is now permitted to appropriate a moiety of her time to studies of a more elevated and elevating nature. Female academies are every where establishing, and right pleasant is the appellation to my ear.

Yes, in this younger world, "the Rights of Women" begin to be understood; we seem, at length, determined to do justice to *THE SEX*; and, improving on the opinions of a Wollstonecraft, we are ready to contend for the quantity, as well as quality, of mind. The younger part of the female world have now an inestimable prize put into their hands; and it depends on the rising generation to refute a sentiment, which, still retaining its advocates, grounds its arguments on the incompatibility of the present enlarged plan of female education, with those necessary occupations, that must ever be considered as proper to the department and comprised in the duties of a judiciously instructed and elegant woman, and, if our daughters will combine their efforts, converts to the new regulations will every day multiply among us. To argue against facts, is indeed contending with both wind and tide; and, borne down by accumulating examples conviction of the utility of the present plans will pervade the public mind, and not a dissenting voice will be heard.

I may be accused of enthusiasm; but such is my confidence in *THE SEX*, that I expect to see our young women forming a new era in female history. They will oppose themselves to every trivial and unworthy monopolizer of time; and it will be apparent, that the adorning their persons is not with them a primary object. They will know how to appreciate personal advantages; and, considering them as bestowed by Nature, or Nature's God, they will hold them in due estimation: Yet, conscious that they confer no *intrinsic* excellence on the temporary possessor, their admeasurement of real virtue will be entirely divested of all those prepossessing ideas, which originate in a beautiful exterior. The noble expansion conferred by a liberal education will teach them humility; for it will give them a glance of those vast tracts of knowledge which they can never explore, until they are accommodated with far other powers than those at present assigned them; and they will contemplate their removal to a higher order of beings, as a desirable event.

Mild benignity, with all the modest virtues, and every sexual grace—these they will carefully cultivate; for they will have learned, that in no character they can so effectually charm, as in that in which nature designed them the pre-eminence. They will accustom themselves to reflection; they will investigate accurately, and reason will point their conclusions: Yet they will not be assuming; the characteristic trait will still remain; and retiring sweetness will insure them that consideration and respect, which they do not presume to demand. Thinking justly will not only enlarge their minds, and refine their ideas; but it will correct their dispositions, humanize their feelings, and present them the *friends of their species*. *The beauteous bosom will no more become a lurking-place for invidious and rancorous passions*; but the mild temperature of the soul will be evinced by the benign and equal tenour of their lives. Their manners will be unembarrassed; and, studious to shun even the semblance of pedantry, they will be careful to give to their most systematic arguments and deductions, an unaffected and natural appearance. They will rather question than assert; and they will make their communications on a supposition, that the point in discussion has rather escaped the memory of those with whom they converse, *than that it was never imprinted there*. . . .

Such, I predict, will be the daughters of Columbia; and my gladdened spirit rejoices in the prospect. A sensible and informed woman—companionable and serious—possessing also a facility of temper, and united to a congenial mind—blest with competency—and rearing to maturity a promising family of children—Surely, the wide globe cannot produce a scene more truly interesting. See! the virtues are embodied—the domestic duties appear in their place, and they are all fulfilled—morality is systematized by religion, and sublimed by devotion—every movement is the offspring of elegance, and their manners have received the highest polish. A reciprocation of good offices, and a mutual desire to please, uniformly distinguishes the individuals of this enchanting society—their conversation, refined and elevated, partakes the fire of genius, while it is pointed by information; and they are ambitious of selecting subjects, which, by throwing around humanity, in its connexion, additional lustre, may implant a new motive for gratitude, and teach them to anticipate the rich fruition of that immortality which they boast. Such is the family of reason—of reason, cultivated and adorned by literature.

The idea of the incapability of women, is, we conceive, in this enlightened age, totally inadmissible; and we have concluded, that establishing the expediency of admitting them to share the blessings of equality, will remove every obstacle to their advancement. In proportion as nations have progressed in the arts of civilization, the value of THE SEX hath been understood, their rank in the scale of being ascertained, and their consequence in society acknowledged. But if prejudice still fortifies itself in the bosom of any; if it yet enlisteth its votaries against the said despot and its followers, we produce, instead of arguments, a number of well attested facts, which the student of female annals hath carefully compiled.

Women, circumscribed in their education within very narrow limits and constantly depressed by their occupations, have, nevertheless, tinged the cheek of manhood with a guilty suffusion, for a pusillanimous capitulation with the enemies of their country. Quitting the loom and the distaff, they have beheld, with indignation, their husbands and their sons flee in battle: With clasped hands, and determined resolution, they have placed themselves in their paths, obstructing their passage, and insisting, with heroic firmness, on their immediate return to

death or conquest! They have anxiously examined the dead bodies of their slaughtered sons; and if the fatal wounds were received in front, thus evincing that they have bravely faced the foe, the fond recollection of their valour has become a source of consolation, and they have sung a requiem to their sorrows! Women, in the heat of action, have mounted the rampart with undaunted courage, arrested the progress of the foe, and bravely rescued their besieged dwellings! They have successfully opposed themselves to tyranny and the galling yoke of oppression! Assembling in crowds, they have armed themselves for the combat—they have mingled amid the battling ranks—they have sought heroically—and their well-timed and well-concerted measures have emancipated their country! They have hazarded the stroke of death in its most frightful form; and they have submitted to bonds and imprisonment, for the redemption of their captive husbands! . . .

Women have publicly harangued on religion—they have presented themselves as disputants—they have boldly supported their tenets—they have been raised to the chair of philosophy, and of law—they have written fluently in Greek, and have read with great facility the Hebrew language. Youth and beauty, adorned with every feminine grace, and possessing eminently the powers of rhetoric, have pathetically conjured the mitred fathers and the Christian monarchs to arm themselves for the utter extirpation of the enemies of their holy religion.

In the days of knight-errantry, females, elevated by the importance with which they were invested, discriminated unerringly between the virtues and the vices, studiously cultivating the one, and endeavouring to exterminate the other; and their attainments equalled the heroism of their admirers; their bosoms glowed with sentiments as sublime as those they originated; generosity marked their elections; the impassioned feelings, the burst of tenderness, were invariably blended with honour; and every expression, every movement, was descriptive of the general enthusiasm. Pride, heroism, extravagant attachments; these were common to both sexes. Great enterprises, bold adventures, incredible bravery—in every thing the women partook the colour of the times; and their taste and their judgment were exactly conformed. Thus the sexes are congenial; they are copyists of each other; and their opinions and their habits are elevated or

degraded, animated or depressed, by precisely the same circumstances.

The Northern nations have generally been in the habit of venerating the Female Sex. Constantly employed in bending the bow, in exploring the haunts of those animals, who were the victims of their pleasures and their passions, or of urging against their species the missive shafts of death, they nevertheless banished their ferocity, and assumed the mildest manners, when associating with their mothers, their sisters, their mistresses, or their wives. In their ample forests, their athletic frames and sinewy arms were nerved for battle, while the smiles of some lovely woman were the meed of valour; and the hero who aspired to the approbation of the beautiful arbitress of his fate, authorized his wishes, and established his pretensions, by eminent virtue, and a long series of unbroken attentions.

A persuasion, that the common Father of the universe manifests himself more readily to females than to males, has, at one period or another, obtained, more or less, in every division of the globe. The Germans, the Britons, and the Scandinavians—from these the supposition received an early credence. The Grecian women delivered oracles—the Romans venerated the Sibyls—among the people of God, the Jewish women prophesied—the predictions of the Egyptian matron were much respected—and we were assured, that the most barbarous nations referred to their females, whatever they fancied beyond the reach of human efforts: And hence we find women in possession of the mysteries of religion, the arcana of physic, and the ceremonies of incantation. Writers assert, that several nations have ascribed to women the gift of prescience, conceiving that they possessed qualities approximating to divinity; and the ferocious German, embosomed in his native woods, renders a kind of devotional reverence to the Female Sex.

Such is the character of those periods, when women were invested with undue elevation; and the reverse

presents THE SEX in a state of humiliation, altogether as unwarrantable. The females among the savages of our country, are represented as submitting to the most melancholy and distressing oppression; slaves to the ferocious passions and irregular appetites of those tyrannical usurpers, who brutally and cruelly outrage their feelings. They encounter for their support, incredible hardships and toils, insomuch that, weary of their own wretched existence, the women on the banks of the Oronoko, urged by compassion, not Infrequently smother the female infant in the hour of its birth; and she who hath attained sufficient fortitude to perform this maternal act, esteems herself entitled to additional respect. Commodore Byron, in his account of the inhabitants of South-America, informs us, that the men exercise a most despotic authority over their wives, whom they consider in the same view they do any other part of their property, and dispose of them accordingly: Even their common treatment of them is cruel; for, although the toil and hazard of procuring food lies entirely on the women, yet they are not suffered to touch any part of it, till their imperious masters are satisfied, and then he assigns them their portion, which is generally very scanty, and such as he has not an appetite for, himself.

Thus have THE SEX continued the sport of contingencies; unnaturally subjected to extremes; alternately in the mount of exaltation, and in the valley of unmerited degradation. Is it wonderful, then, that they evince so little stability of character? Rather, is it not astonishing, that their attainments are so numerous, and so considerable? Turning over the annals of different ages, we have selected a number of names which we purpose, in our next Essay, to cite, as vouchers of THE SEX'S merit; nor can we doubt, that their united suffrages will, on a candid investigation, effectually establish the female right to that equality *with their brethren, which, it is conceived, is assigned them in the Order of Nature.*

## GLOSSARY

**admeasurement:** determination or comparison of dimensions; apportionment

**arcana:** secrets, mysteries, or specialized knowledge

**benignity:** kindness or tolerance toward others

**exortium:** should be “exordium”; beginning or introductory part of a discourse or treatise

**knight-errantry:** medieval knights who wander the world in search of adventures to prove their chivalry (bravery, courtesy, honor, and gallantry toward women)

**the loom and the distaff:** traditional women’s work; both are tools used in weaving

**meed:** fitting reward or recompense

**moiety:** part or portion; approximately one-half

**pedantry:** paying excessive attention to unimportant details to traditional rules, especially with academic subjects

**pusillanimous:** being timid; showing a lack of courage

**refulgent:** shining brightly; resplendent

**suffusion:** process of permeating or infusing something with a substance; diffusion

**Sibyls:** women from ancient times able to foretell the future; a female prophet

**usurper:** one who seizes a powerful position of someone else illegally or wrongfully

**votaries:** devoted followers, adherents, or advocates of someone or something

## Document Analysis

In this essay, “Observations on Female Abilities,” which appears in the second volume of *The Gleaner*, Judith Sargent Murray makes a strong case for the advanced education of women in the new American republic. She begins by providing the reader with a number of arguments as to why all women should be educated. In support of these arguments, she cites a number of examples from history.

The essay follows the rhetorical theme of liberatory civic discourse, which was popular in the formative nation-building years in America. This theme focused on a citizen’s civic duty to the new republic in order to create political change. Murray’s premise for political change was to educate women to create virtuous mothers, who would then transmit their newfound virtue to the next generation of republicans. In this way, the new country would be assured of stable and competent leadership.

Murray introduces the topic of her essay through four lines of poetry, wherein she alludes to the importance of science, which had gained prominence during the scientific revolution that had occurred over the past two centuries. She notes that prejudice has resigned

in favor of “sovereign reason,” meaning that the prejudice against women has been replaced by the reason that rules in the new republic. Here, she shows she is conversant with the thinking of the Enlightenment, the cultural and intellectual movement that advocated reason and intellect as a means to reform society.

## Educating Women as Nation Builders

Murray begins her essay by referring explicitly to her previous essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes.” She states that the topic is not “exhausted” and that this essay will expand on it. She also admits to “collecting a few hints” to enhance and strengthen her previous argument. By 1798, at the time of publication, Mary Wollstonecraft’s popular work, *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*, had been published in 1792, so the topic was of current interest and under active debate.

Murray begins with an optimistic tone about women’s potential. She notes in the “exortium,” the introductory part of the essay, that women have benefitted from the American Revolution. Instead of needing only basic literacy and needlepoint skills, American women are now spending somewhere near half, “a moiety,” of their time in the pursuit of higher education. She re-



fers here to the number of "female academies" that are being established. These were women-only places of learning, where women were being educated in more solidly academic topics such as composition, geography, and history.

As Murray was writing *The Gleaner*, America was in the midst of nation-building, trying to create a separate national identity and a separate culture from Britain while building on neo-classical republican ideals of politics and governance. Murray refers to this new American nation as "this younger world." She clearly has a vision of this new republic as also providing a new era of gender equality for women, to whom she refers simply as "THE SEX." She references Wollstonecraft's prior work, but believes that America can improve on her ideas. This shows a desire on Murray's part to differentiate America from Britain, and to improve upon their ideas, which is mirrored in the rhetoric of many other writers in the republic at the time. Murray wants to ensure that all women have access to an education, not just a chosen few: "we are ready to contend for the quantity, as well as quality, of mind." She then urges younger women to advocate for their own education, but in a reasoned way. The more often younger women come together to rationally refute the arguments of opponents to women's education, the more these opponents will fade away, until "not a dissenting voice will be heard." Murray uses an old maritime saying of "contending with wind and tide" to explain how futile it would be to argue against the benefits of educating all women.

Continuing with her theme of optimism, Murray feels confident that America's young women would form "a new era in female history." In order to do this however, they would have to turn away from the more ordinary female pursuits that take up much of their time, such as activities designed to enhance their beauty. A person's worth, to Murray, does not equate to personal appearance, but rather to virtue and humility, which a liberal education would help promote. She wants women to spend less time paying attention to their appearance, which is "an unworthy monopolizer of time" and more time developing their minds. In essence, she is advocating for a change of focus on the values that women hold for themselves. This emphasis on education leading to virtue is a recurring theme in Murray's writings.

Even though she was a radical thinker when it came to the equality of women's intellect and education,

Murray is conservative in how she views the relationship between men and women. She realizes that the universal education of women may have disruptive effects on the traditional gender roles in society, and she takes pains to explain to young women how they should behave with their newfound knowledge. They should be kind, tolerant, modest, just and virtuous, in order not to upset the traditional roles between men and women too much. They will need to retain a "retiring sweetness" that will ensure men's "consideration and respect" toward them. Women will also need to use reason at every turn, and this will serve to deflect any "invidious and rancorous passions" they may feel. Murray also explains how women should enter into more academic discussions, saying that they should "shun even the semblance of pedantry"; in other words, women should avoid discussions where they could become overly involved in obscure and trivial details. They need to "rather question than assert" when making a point, and to assume the person—here she means the man—they are having a discussion with has simply forgotten the point of the argument, as opposed to never having thought of it in the first place.

This, then, is her ideal for the "daughters of Columbia," meaning the women of America. Columbia was a common name for America during this time period, and was always symbolized as a woman. Murray's ideal woman includes her central role as mother, which means she would have a great influence on the family unit. A woman's responsibility, to Murray, is to raise children who would be the future of the republic, and this was an extremely important role. In essence, she discusses the aims and theory of "Republican Motherhood." If women were successful as the keepers and transmitters of the ideal of civic virtue through their role as educated mothers, then the republic would be secure. This ideal mother is "sensible and informed," handles all domestic duties competently, ensures the morality of the family with the help of religion, and has impeccable social manners and conversation skills. Murray believes that the end result will be the "family of reason." Education will enrich women's lives; this will enrich families, which will, in turn, enrich the republic.

#### **Arguments for the Equality of the Sexes**

After explaining to the reader the benefits of educating women, Murray turns her attention to historical examples that will support her argument. Her view is

that the inequality of women should be completely unacceptable within an “enlightened age.” It is, she states, the mark of a civilized nation to understand and acknowledge the worth of women. Murray is not naïve, however. She realizes that prejudice against women has its followers, and therefore she is explicit in the logic of the ordering of her essay: “we produce, instead of arguments, a number of well attested facts.”

Murray begins this section by explaining that women have historically shown great bravery and heroics in battle despite limited education and being depressed by their traditional work. “Quitting the loom and distaff” means leaving the confines of this traditional female work behind. Her point here is that women can be heroes as well as men, and Murray introduces her reader to numerous examples. She starts with women’s activities when their sons and husbands are on the battlefield. She explains that if men begin to flee the battlefield, women will stop them. Mothers will also scour the battlefield after the fighting has ended to find their sons, and if they find they have died from a wound in the front—and not the back, implying cowardice—they will sing a “requiem,” or mass for the dead. Murray then asserts that women themselves have taken an active role in war; they have stopped the progress of the enemy and have rescued homes that were under siege. They have taken up arms and “mingled amid the battling class” in order to help oppose tyranny and liberate their countries. She concludes her discussion of women’s role in war by speaking of the bravery of those women who were voluntarily imprisoned to try to secure the release of their husbands captured by the enemy.

Murray turns next to women’s intellectual contributions. She states that they have debated on points of religion, and have been top professors, or “chairs,” in subjects as erudite as philosophy and law. Many have command of other languages, and she notes Greek and Hebrew as examples. She also mentions that women have persuaded Christian kings and bishops, using their intellect and rhetoric, to go on crusade against the enemies of Christianity.

The paragraph on the “days of knight-errantry” discusses women in the Middle Ages. Within this time period, Murray notes that knights and their ladies were engaged in a mutually supportive quest for chivalry, which meant demonstrations of bravery, courtesy, honor, and gallantry toward women. For their part, women were the judges of virtues and vices, and tried

to encourage all things virtuous. Murray states that the characteristics of “pride, heroism, extravagant attachments” were equally shared by both men and women. Women of the same social station as knights shared the same adventurous experiences as their knights. In this way, Murray again demonstrates the equality of women: “they are copyists of the other” and they share the same opinions, habits and emotions of the other sex. She includes here that the “Northern nations,” presumably Germanic and Scandinavian peoples, have always venerated women. While these men were hunting in forests or engaged in battle, the prize for their “valour” was the smile of a woman.

The next part of the essay discusses women’s spirituality and their ability to communicate with the divine. Murray explains that “the common Father of the universe manifests himself more readily to females than to males.” Here, she does not focus solely on the Christian ideal of God. She uses as examples ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Egyptian women who worked as prophets and seers, those who could foretell the future. She then describes the more “barbarous nations,” assuring the reader that here, too, women were capable of great spiritual work, including knowledge of the “arcana,” or secret knowledge or mysteries. Murray reports that women from many nations have had “prescience,” the ability to tell the future, and have also “possessed qualities approximating to divinity.”

After explaining to the reader the reasons for the education of women and the many historical precedents for it, Murray calls the veneration of these historic women “undue elevation.” This warning against raising uneducated women too high is another argument for equality among the sexes. Murray then changes strategy to discuss the dangers of not educating women. In order to illustrate this alternate view, she provides examples of degradation, rather than veneration, of women. She states that “females among the savages of our country”—American Indian women—are treated poorly and live “in a state of humiliation.” In this paragraph, Murray borrows liberally from an unsigned 1775 work usually attributed to Thomas Paine, entitled “An Occasional Letter On The Female Sex.”

In discussing the situation of uneducated South American Indian women, Murray states that they are treated “brutally and cruelly” and have to bear “incredible hardships and toils.” As a result, some decide to kill their female babies instead of destining them to



the same fate as their mothers. Note the use of the term "banks of the Orinoko," which refers to the Orinoco River of South America; this term eventually came to mean any exotic place or thing, regardless of actual location. Murray then cites John Byron, who had published *An Account of a Voyage Around the World* in 1768. Reporting on women in South America, Byron states that they are treated as property by their husbands, who can buy and sell—"dispose"—them at will. Although the women are completely responsible for obtaining food, they are not allowed to touch it until their husbands eat, at which point their portion is "very scanty."

In the conclusion of Murray's essay, she highlights the two different images of women she has described, both the exalted version and the humiliated one. She tells the reader that this extreme difference in the treatment and position of women has led to women's lack of "stability of character." She notes that their accomplishments in the face of this differential treatment are therefore quite astonishing. Murray then sets the stage for her next essay in *The Gleaner*, which focuses on the exploits and accomplishments of famous women to provide further proof—"vouchers"—of their equality with men. She ends her essay by asserting that women's equality is due to them because it is part of the "Order of Nature," the natural order of things.

### Essential Themes

Judith Sargent Murray's key themes of the inherent equality of women and the importance of universal education for women were radical for her day. Many historians have called her America's first feminist because of these views. But she was also a woman of her time. She held conservative views about women's public roles, even though she herself challenged this role through her writing. She believed that the education of women would help stabilize the new republic, but only through their roles as mothers, raising educated and virtuous children who would continue to build America.

Murray was not the only writer to call for women's education during this time period. In Britain, Mary Wollstonecraft held similar beliefs. As a result of the Enlightenment, other writers and philosophers were beginning to examine the role and societal treatment of women. In America, several male writers, such as Benjamin Rush, also called for the education of women.

They, too, believed that the future of the young republic depended on the education of all of its citizens.

During her own time period, Murray had a significant impact. She developed a wide readership through her columns in the *Massachusetts Magazine*, which she was able to translate into subscribers to *The Gleaner*. These subscribers included important American leaders such as George and Martha Washington and John and Abigail Adams. Murray began selling the book through subscriptions, or pre-sales, as early as 1796, and because of the wide readership of her columns and the backing of her powerful friends, 759 sets of the 825 to be published had been sold by the time she went to print. She was also the first woman to self-publish a book in America, which supported the prevailing belief that America needed to build a strong indigenous culture, separate from Britain, through its own publishing industry. Her influence soon waned, however, as *The Gleaner* failed to garner enough support for a second edition. By the mid-1850s, Murray's writing had largely been forgotten.

It was not until interest on women's history emerged in academic circles over the past few decades that Murray's work was rediscovered. Her writing is being examined by a new generation of educated women, which seems fitting given her strong support for the education of women in the early years of the United States of America.

Lee Tunstall, PhD

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- Moore, Lisa M., Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton, eds. *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.

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### **Additional Reading**

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- Harris, Sharon M., ed. *Women's Early American Historical Narratives*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
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- . "On the Equality of the Sexes." *Massachusetts Magazine*. 1 Mar. 1790: 132–135; April 1790: 223–26. Print.
- Skemp, Sheila L. *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009. Print.
- Smith, Bonnie Hurd, ed. *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790: Observations, Anecdotes, and Thoughts from the 18th-Century Letters of Judith Sargent Murray*. Cambridge: Curious Traveller, 1998. Print.

## LESSON PLAN: A New Era in History

Students analyze an essay by Judith Sargent Murray to trace women’s changing roles after the American Revolution.

### Learning Objectives

Compare and contrast differing views of women throughout history; examine the influence of ideas from the revolution on women’s roles in the new nation; identify relevant historical antecedents to contemporary equality movements.

**Materials:** Judith Sargent Murray, *The Gleaner: Contemplates the Future Prospects of Women in this “Enlightened Age,”* (1798).

### Overview Questions

What is Murray’s perspective on women’s rights and gender equality? How does she think the American Revolution altered women’s roles? In what ways does Murray see these changes as an improvement from previous eras? How might these roles continue to change as the new nation develops?

### Step 1: Comprehension Questions

Why does Murray consider it as dangerous to exalt women as to degrade them? How does she think women should be treated instead?

- **Activity:** Have students summarize the final paragraph in their own words. Ask students to locate examples in the passage of how women have been elevated and denigrated. Discuss why Murray sees both extremes as incongruous with the principles of equality she promotes.

### Step 2: Context Questions

What differences does Murray perceive between women in the late 1700s and women from previous eras? What new opportunities are available to the next generation of women after the American Revolution?

- **Activity:** Pair students to make a two-column chart listing views of women from the historical periods Murray identifies, and new opportunities for women from her era. Have students use their lists to consider the reasons for Murray’s optimism.

### Step 3: Context Questions

In what ways did women participate in the American Revolution? How did women contribute to the independence movement, and how were their lives altered as a result?

- **Activity:** Have students read aloud paragraph eight and write a paragraph describing women’s efforts during the time of the American Revolution. Ask students how women’s experiences during the war might have led to the more powerful, public roles Murray describes.

### Step 4: Historical Connections Questions

What qualities does Murray think the ideal woman should possess? In what ways do these qualities represent a radical change from traditional views of women? How radical do they seem today? How might thinkers like Murray have influenced later movements for women’s equality?

- **Activity:** Have students list the traits Murray associates with ideal femininity. Ask students whether these seem like radical ideas. Discuss how these views differed from previous perceptions and helped lay the groundwork for later feminist thinkers.

### Step 5: Response Paper

Word length and additional requirements set by Instructor. Students answer the research question in the Overview Questions. Students state a thesis and use as evidence passages from the primary source document as well as support from secondary historical document/s assigned in the lesson.