

## Republican Motherhood: Coverture and Virtue in Early National America

Kim Lorton

---

Women in Colonial America were defined by their relations with men. They could not own property, bring a lawsuit or vote without the help of a husband or father. Their personal value was in the work they could do in the home; that is cooking, cleaning and caring for children. Any activity outside of the home was the dominion of man and very few women had the ability to venture into it independently. The American Revolution, however, opened new opportunities for women. During the war women assumed responsibilities traditionally held by men, and by doing so they earned limited independence. After the war women were viewed as the perfect patriots – virtuous, selfless and pure. It became their job to raise patriotic children needed to make the fledgling nation successful and strong. Women were allowed for the first time to marry for love and were given an education equal to men. Though their rights and responsibilities expanded, women were still considered the dominion of man. Republican Motherhood still relegated women to the private sphere of home and family, but it laid the foundation for future rights that no woman of the Early National Era could have imagined. The focus of this essay will be to define the precedent of Coverture, explain how it affected women’s lives and show that it did not vanish after the Revolution.

Married women’s legal status in Colonial America was defined by English Common Law. The most important precedent that ruled their existence was Coverture. Under this doctrine women were relegated to the dominion of men – that is they were not considered independent individuals. In William Blackstone’s work, *Blackstone’s Common Law* coverture is defined as, “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything...”<sup>1</sup> Single women were considered to be covered by their fathers or guardians. Coverture extended to both property and legal rights. Any property a woman owned, whether it be land or material possessions, passed to her husband when she married. He had full legal rights to use it as he saw fit, and he did not have to ask her permission to sell or alter it in any way. She was also not able to

---

<sup>1</sup>William Blackstone, *Blackstone’s Common Law* (1775).

inherit her husband's estate unless he had no male heirs or relatives. He was also liable for any criminal or monetary legal suits brought against her because she was considered to be acting on his will.<sup>2</sup> This precedent of women acting only on behalf of men had important implications for the type of work she could do and how she should behave in public. Coverture became a way of defining women's work and traditional gender roles.

Coverture affected the lives of women from the settling of the first British colonies. The British ethnocentric views of a woman's place extended to the different groups of people encountered during their imperial expansion – native women who had no experience with English Common Law were perceived to be unwomanly if they performed tasks Europeans delegated to men or if they did not follow the same moral principles. Sara Evans wrote about European views on Native American women in her book *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. In Native communities women did the farm labor as well as more domestic tasks like raising children. When the British saw this they immediately assumed the women were slaves; why else would they do such heavy labor? They did not see that the Natives divided responsibility between men and women. Men hunted while women tended to crops and domestic skills.<sup>3</sup> African women brought to the colonies were also treated with such skepticism. They were described as sexually promiscuous and as a danger to men. European men had to use black women's sexuality as a way to degrade them into servitude; moral consciousness could not exist in such women. They were also said to have easier childbirths which made them more fit for manual labor.<sup>4</sup> These notions were used to defend slavery.

Coverture effected European women in two ways – by defining their legal status and by assigning them a particular gender role. Laws relating to the establishment of women's rights were strict. In Connecticut, for example, an act was passed in 1667 defining suitable grounds for divorce. The only grounds on which a suit for dissolution could be made were for adultery, fraudulent contract, or willful

---

<sup>2</sup>Blackstone,

<sup>3</sup>Evans, "The First American Women" *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989, 1997), 28-37.

<sup>4</sup>Jennifer L. Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": European Depictions of Indigenous Women, 1492-1757, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 37-46.

dissertation.<sup>5</sup> There was no mention of ill treatment or unhappiness. Because these women lived under coverture it was extremely difficult for them to be single. Widows could expect to retain only one-third of their husband's property for as long as they lived. They could not will it away; it was to go fully to her husband's son when she died. The property was only maintained by her so she was ensured a place to live until her death—it never belonged to her.<sup>6</sup> If she did inherit a man's property she was put in danger. Carol L Karlsen writes about one particular danger single, inheriting women faced in “The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: The Economic Basis of Witchcraft”. She argues that single or inheriting women faced charges of witchcraft more than married and/or non-inheriting women. The stories of many women accused of witchcraft in the late 1600's are used to present her case. Ann Hibbens' husband died in 1654 leaving her his full estate (they had no sons together) of £344. Two years later she was accused, convicted and executed for witchcraft.<sup>7</sup> Martha Corey, set to inherit her husband's estate, was convicted before her husband died (he died during interrogation about his involvement in witchcraft).<sup>8</sup> Though by no means the only reason women were charged with witchcraft, these stories are telling. They show that coverture was extremely important in Colonial America; those who defied it put themselves at great risk.

Coverture defined gender roles. If a woman cannot own property or take part in her own legal affairs, then she is confined to a domestic role. Mary Beth Norton describes how very important gender roles were to Colonials. Using the story of T. Hall, a hermaphrodite, Norton shows that men and women were expected to adhere very tightly to their distinct roles. T. Hall broke from these roles when Hall switched back and forth between men's and women's clothing. Hall's peers were so confused they took Hall to court to have Hall's sex made clear by judges. Ultimately the judge and council decided that Hall was both a man and a woman, but Hall was never supported by either sex in

---

<sup>5</sup> “An Act Relating to Bills of Divorce”, 1667, reprinted in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 7th ed., edited by Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron de Hart, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>6</sup> “An Act Concerning the Dowry of Widows, 1672”, reprinted in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 7th ed., edited by Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron de Hart, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> Carol F. Karlsen, “The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: The Economic Basis of Witchcraft,” *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 76-87.

<sup>8</sup> Karlsen, 76-87.

society. The women were convinced that Hall was not a woman. The men seemed less concerned, but Norton points out that, as Hall reported not being able to use his male parts, they would have viewed him as being unmanly. Norton explains the meaning behind clothing, “Clothing, which was sharply distinguished by the sex of its wearer, served as a visual trope of gender. And gender was one of the two most basic determinants of role in the early modern world.”<sup>9</sup>

Dress was not the only way a woman could break gender bounds. Anne Hutchinson was tried in 1637 for “promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble... [Speaking] divers things as we have been informed very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers... and maintained a meeting and an assembly...not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting your sex...”<sup>10</sup> The Governor, Mr. Winthrop, argued that Anne had dishonored the colony by encouraging dissenting opinions. It is interesting; however, that Mr. Winthrop’s main concern was that she allowed men into her meetings. He says, “For this, that you appeal to our practice [of holding women’s meetings] you need no confutation. If your meeting had answered to the former it had not been offensive, but I will say there was no meeting where women were alone, but your meeting is of another sort and there are sometimes men among you.”<sup>11</sup> Obviously it did not matter to the governor that women were dissenting, but if men were as well then it was a problem. This shows that women had relatively little political power outside of men. Who cared what they thought?

Overall coverture greatly affected the lives of women. It remained forceful until the Revolution when war disrupted most traditions. Suddenly women were forced to act in society because the men were not there to do it for them. Many women joined men in the fighting, an unprecedented change in gender roles. Sarah Osborn wrote about her experiences traveling with troops to Yorktown. When General George Washington asked her if she was afraid on the battlefield she replied, “The bullets would not cheat the gallows....”<sup>12</sup> This meant she would

---

<sup>9</sup>Mary Beth Norton, “Searchers Again Assembled’: Gender distinctions in Seventeenth-Century America,” *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 65.

<sup>10</sup>“The Trial of Anne Hutchinson, 1637”, reprinted in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, 7th ed., edited by Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron de Hart, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 73-75.

<sup>11</sup>“*The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*”, 74.

<sup>12</sup>Sarah Osborn, reprinted in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, 7th ed., edited by Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron de Hart, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135-136.

stand in defiance of the king just as the men did. She was not afraid. Other women remained in their traditional roles, but they were optimistic that their lives would be changed by the revolution. Judith Sargent Murray wrote, "I expect to see your young women forming a new era in female history."<sup>13</sup> Linda Kerber expands this idea in her article "The Republican Mother and the Woman Citizen: Contradictions and Choices in Revolutionary America." Women were to become Republican Mothers. A Republican Mother is described as: "...competent and confident. She could resist the vagaries of fashion; and she was rational, independent, literate, benevolent, and self-reliant."<sup>14</sup> This idea was greatly at odds with coverture, and the battle women faced after the Revolution was to see which idea would remain. Kerber argues that ultimately coverture was dominant. Republican Mothers could only survive in the family – they were to teach their children to be good citizens. So, really, very little was changed for women by the Revolution.

One example of strong Republican Mothers became extremely important during the first two decades after the Revolution. When the capital of the new nation was moved to Washington D.C. in 1801, white, middle class women were crucial to building both the physical and social structure of the new city. Catherine Allgor writes extensively about these women in her book *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a Great City and a Government*:

Washington women—both well-known and not—appear as political actors in their own right, using social events and the "private sphere" to establish the national capital and to build the extraofficial structures so sorely needed in the infant federal government. Unlike their more lurid political sisters, these women acted not as femmes fatales but as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Like other women on farms and in shops, they participated in the family business—in this case, however, the family business was politics.<sup>15</sup>

The "private sphere" Allgor mentions was critical to the world these women lived in. It implied living behind the closed doors of the

<sup>13</sup> Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother and the Woman Citizen: Contradictions and Choices in Revolutionary America," *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 147.

<sup>14</sup>Kerber, 147.

<sup>15</sup>Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a Great City and a Government*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 1.

home where women could indirectly affect the world from their parlors. Men lived in the public sphere where the daily actions of government and business occurred. Women could not be an active participant in the public world because it was not viewed as suitable. Though they did not act in the public world of their husbands they did have considerable power over it. Women like Martha Washington and Dolley Madison held elaborate parties, or levees, where their husbands could mingle with like-minded (or decidedly different) men and women. At these levees important social connections were made and the political questions of the new nation answered. Even though Washington women did not argue on the capital floor, they did have influence on how the government functioned. It is important to remember, however, that this all occurred under the guise of Republican Motherhood. These women all worked on behalf of their husbands.<sup>16</sup> Allgor writes of Dolley Madison's role, "It is important to note that Dolley Madison succeeded not in spite of her gender, a female achiever in a male world, but precisely because she was a woman, and therefore a politically innocuous, a mere wife and mother... Dolley visibly, even flamboyantly, embodied the traditional roles of wife and helpmeet, mother, hostess, lady, and physically attractive woman from which she derived her authority. Her power came not from being like James Madison or trying to do what he did, but from playing to the hilt the role her culture had given her."<sup>17</sup> Coverture was alive and well in Washington D.C.

If Washington women enjoyed the privilege of being indirect players on the national political scene did that hold true for common women? For the majority of women life was much like had been before the Revolution. Coverture affected their lives. They still did not enjoy full liberty of their lives or possessions. They were also not included in the new rights espoused by the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. By not giving women the right to vote or hold property the Revolutionary generation reduced one half of the citizenry to virtual non-citizenship. Joan Gundersen argues in her book *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America* that by not allowing women to hold estates separate from her husband the new government of the United States denied women the right to be full citizens by controlling property ownership. Since in early America property ownership was one condition of full suffrage, women were excluded from being active participants in government.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Allgor, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Allgor, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Joan R. Gundersen, *To be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America 1740-1790*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), chpt 10.

Another important distinction of Republican Motherhood was that it prized the domestic, private sphere over the worldly public arena. Economic status played a large role in their day-to-day lives. Gundersen states, "Women's production was no longer defined as 'work.' Women were seen as dependent consumers in a market economy."<sup>19</sup> They still produced goods like clothing and food, but these tasks were seen as being for the family and not for the larger society. Tied to the idea of family economy was the notion that women were to be virtuous mothers for society. Gundersen writes, "...virtue had been domesticated. Public virtue (civic responsibility) had been merged with private virtue. If virtue was to check power, women would have to civilize men and teach them virtue. For women the way to serve the public was to purify their lives and pray for the community."<sup>20</sup> Implicit in this was the idea that mothers should teach their children to be virtuous citizens. It was believed that mothers had the power to shape their children's morals. In the early republic citizenship was a very virtuous and moral matter. Patriotism was also something mothers must teach their children. For the nation to survive the citizens must remain true to the ideas espoused in the Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness...But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.<sup>21</sup>

With these words Thomas Jefferson painted a picture of American virtue. Independence and government for and by the people would be the goal for all white, American men in the early republic. To this end they firmly believed that women, mothers in particular, were vital to the following generation's virtue and patriotism. "Women's virtue now

---

<sup>19</sup> Gundersen, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Gundersen, 172.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

stood for that of the nation. Just as women could be seduced by conscienceless men, so could a citizenry. Only through marriage (republican government) could seduction be thwarted and virtue and innocence maintained. If women did not remain pure, what hope was there for men?"<sup>22</sup> She was a disinterested patriot above the pettiness of elective politics. By keeping women in their domestic sphere the virtue of the nation was ensured.<sup>23</sup>

Although women remained in the private sphere they enjoyed some expansion of their rights. For the first time women were encouraged to choose their own marriage partner based on emotional love and not just economic advantage. "They were encouraged to stay single until they were sure of their choice."<sup>24</sup> They were responsible for their own virtue, and pre-marital sex and pregnancy gained a stigma that had not existed prior to the Revolution. Also, they gained better access to divorce because of the idea that citizens should not have to live under tyranny at any level.<sup>25</sup> Because education was believed to be helpful for women to teach their children, women gained better access to schooling. "Women's education could no longer focus on 'graces' – music, dancing, drawing, and needlework (although these remained subjects) – but rather on the practical subjects they needed to share with sons – grammar, history, geography, and arithmetic."<sup>26</sup> The Boston School Act of 1789 stipulated that boys and girls should receive schooling in the same subjects. Also, school mistresses appeared widely for the first time in the United States. The expansion of these rights can be misleading. If one were to look two hundred years later it may seem that women were becoming members of the wider world, but that was not the case. Women only received these rights because they were deemed necessary for the creation of virtuous *men* needed to run a virtuous nation. A good marriage was needed to control a man's desire to be selfish, and education was needed to teach sons morality and patriotism. Women still lived to serve the needs of their husbands and sons. Gundersen points out that, "widespread literacy among the upper- and middle-classes helped to spread the ideas of domesticity, separate spheres, and republican motherhood."<sup>27</sup> Even these new rights expanded coverture.

Coverture defined women's role in the legal system and in society. Traditionally women could not own property or speak for themselves in

---

<sup>22</sup>Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World*, 173.

<sup>23</sup>Gundersen, 173.

<sup>24</sup>Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World*, 173.

<sup>25</sup>Gundersen, 173.

<sup>26</sup>Gundersen, 173.

<sup>27</sup>Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World*, 174.



court. Everything they owned, including their liberties, became their husbands when they married. This ownership had a great impact on their lives. If women tried to break the rules they were at risk of being disciplined or killed. Indigenous women were not immune – the ideas implicit in coverture were applied to them as well. Many women believed the American Revolution would change their standing, but it was not to be. Republican Motherhood and strong women were quickly incorporated into the family; essentially taken out of the public sphere. Women lived for their husbands and children in Colonial and Early National America.