Excerpts from the Letters of Abigail and John Adams

Questions to think about:

1. How does Abigail Adams use the criticisms that her husband and others made of Great Britain to argue for more rights for American women?
2. Based on what you know of women’s lives in colonial America and based on what you have read about Adams in Through Women’s Eyes, what rights might she have had in mind?
3. What sense about the relationship between John and Abigail Adams do you get from John’s reply to his wife’s letter?
   a. Does it seem condescending? If so, how do you account for the tone, given that we know from other letters that John had the greatest respect for his wife’s opinions?

Letter of Abigail Adams to her husband John. This famous letter is sometimes referred to as the “Remember the Ladies” letter. The marriage of John and Abigail Adams is one of the great partnerships of American history. More than that, however, the letters that John and Abigail wrote each other reveal that the two loved each other deeply and that John respected Abigail’s opinions, about politics as well as their family-life. Abigail Adams felt strongly about what she wrote in this letter but note also the playful, chiding tone she uses with her husband.

Braintree, March 31, 1776

I wish you would ever write me a Letter half as long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of Defence Virginia can make against our common Enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able Defence? Are not the Gentery Lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized Natives Brittain represents us to be? I hope their Riffel Men who have shewn themselves very savage and even Blood thirsty; are not a specimen of the Generality of the people.

I am willing to allow the Colony great merrit for having produced a Washington but they have been shamefully duped by a Dunmore.

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equelly Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.


2 Lord Dunmore was the royally appointed governor of Virginia. In November 1775 he issued a proclamation in which he promised freedom to any slave of a rebel (patriot) master who fought on the side of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War. Freedom would not be granted to slaves who ran away from loyalist masters. This was an attempt to destabilize the rebellion, and both Washington and Jefferson viewed Dunmore’s Proclamation as a major threat. Jefferson estimated that 30,000 Virginian slaves fled their masters during the war.
…I long to hear that you have declared an independency – and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John Adams’ response to Abigail’s letter.

Ap. 14, 1776

You justly complain of my short Letters, but the critical State of Things and the Multiplicity of Avocations must plead my Excuse…

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient…

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Collidges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. -- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticot, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy. -- A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the [blank] to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.

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3 That is, God.
4 Ochlocracy = government by the populace; mob rule.
5 Landjobber = land speculator.
6 Trimmer = a person who associates him/herself with the currently prevailing view.
7 Adams has left a blank space here; evidently some word for women was intended to fill the space.