
Wife or Revolutionary: Historiography of Abigail Adams

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John Adams met Abigail Smith for the first time in the summer of 1759 when his friend Richard Cranch began courting Mary Smith, Abigail's eldest sister, who was considered the prettier of the Smith sisters.¹ John was not impressed the first time he met Abigail. His first impression of her was that she was neither "fond, nor frank, nor candid."² John soon found the maxim that first impressions were not always accurate to be very true. Abigail was in every way John's equal, and they developed a strong attraction to one another. She was highly intelligent, witty, and was fond of poetry and conversation. Abigail also showed a love of writing letters. Throughout their lives, Abigail and John would write numerous letters to one another. In the privacy of these letters, they developed aliases for one another. During their five-year courtship and early into their marriage, "She was his Diana, after the Roman goddess of the moon. He was her Lysander, the Spartan hero." Abigail would often begin these letters with "My Dearest Friend." She saw the great potential and abilities that John had, and he saw the same in her.³

With the rise of gender history in the late twentieth century, more and more historians have tried to locate and analyze women's place in past societies. This is difficult for the same reason that other social histories are: the lack of sources. However, Abigail Adams lends herself to being studied and has allowed historians to gain some insight into womanhood of her times. Hundreds of letters were exchanged between Abigail and John over their lifetimes—a correspondence that exists for posterity. For historians, this is a goldmine yielding great access and information about the life of an eighteenth-century woman. This access has allowed for many historical interpretations of the matriarch of Braintree and has made her one of the most studied and profiled women in American history. These historical interpretations have been influential on our view of Abigail and eighteenth-century women, but have also been unsatisfactory. Prior to the 1980s, most historians viewed Abigail as the dutiful wife of John Adams. Throughout the last three and a half decades, Abigail has come to mean many things to different historians. She has been portrayed as the ideal republican woman, the conservative, the feminist, the revolutionary, and the matriarch. The contradictions of these interpretations are equal to perhaps the most well-known figure of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson. Like Jefferson, Abigail's historiography has become muddled and inconsistent. It is time that historians re-conceptualize Abigail Adams and her relationship to her family and her times.

¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 52.

² John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, L.H. Butterfield, ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1961), 109.

³ McCullough, 54-58.

Abigail as the Loving Housewife

The first modern biography of Abigail Adams was Jane Whitney's *Abigail Adams*, published in 1947. This study of Abigail is a perfect representation of the phrase "behind every great man is a great woman." This work places Abigail in the background as the dutiful republican wife. Whitney's work is as much of a love story as it is history. While she used a great variety of sources and relied heavily on Abigail's letters, she also created her own dialogue throughout the biography (an impermissible act for an historian): "You won't let the Sons of Liberty draw you out into their doings' Abigail murmured. 'No,' said the firm decided voice she trusted."⁴ Abigail loses all complexity in this work and only comes off as a love interest for the revolutionary John Adams. Despite its flaws, Whitney's work was highly influential and is still cited today. Phyllis Lynn Levine's work, also titled *Abigail Adams*, uses Whitney's framework but offers more detail. Published forty years later in 1987, it also falls victim to placing Abigail in the background of her own story and, like Whitney, Levine's work relies too heavily on letters and quotations without providing a satisfactory analysis.

The Republican Housewife

Scholarship since Whitney has closely examined what being a wife during the American Revolution meant. Lynne Withey was one of the first historians to attempt to write a political history of Abigail without looking at her life as revolving around John's political activities during the American Revolution. In her work *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (1981), Withey acknowledges the contradictions of Adams' character and actions throughout her life and attempts to make these contradictions understandable. How can Abigail Adams be a conservative, a revolutionary, and a feminist? Withey argues that Abigail Adams was ultimately a conservative, despite her support of the American Revolution. Revolution made Adams uncomfortable because she valued stability. She viewed family and religion as pillars on which society stood and considered racial inequality a necessity. While she believed in American independence, a larger role for women, and the evil of slavery, Withey notes that these were issues "in her mind (Abigail), that could be ended without threatening the underlying social order."⁵

Withey makes commendable use of available sources to bring the reader into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many historians of gender have wrongly attempted to attribute modern views to an eighteenth-century woman. However, Withey describes Abigail as "a prisoner to her times."⁶ This is an important idea that has been forgotten in the recent historiography of historical figures. Abigail, like all other historical figures, is a person of her times and therefore should not be judged by our twenty-first century worldview. While *Dearest Friend* should be praised, it falls into the same trap as earlier biographies. Withey attempts to bring Abigail out of the shadow of her husband, but is never fully able to do so. This conservative view of Abigail would persist into the twenty-first century.

In her scholarly work, historian Rosemarie Zagarri has attempted to provide women of the time with political agency. Though not exclusively about Abigail Adams, Zagarri's recent *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (2007) picks up the theme of republican women and gives Abigail a prominent role in explaining female patriotism in the late eighteenth century. "Abigail Adams represented a paragon of female revolutionary patriotism," according to Zagarri. Adams sacrificed her own private happiness for the good of the revolution,

⁴ Janet Whitney, *Abigail Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1947), 54.

⁵ Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 1981), x.

⁶ *Ibid*, xiii.

which means that she allowed John to serve the public, while she handled the household affairs.⁷ In this sense, Abigail also comes off as more conservative than her contemporaries such as Mercy Otis Warren. Zagarrri quotes Abigail as saying that female patriotism was “the most disinterested of all virtues.”⁸ This interpretation suggests that Abigail would have supported the revolution and the United States regardless of whether women actually benefitted. Historians such as Charles W. Akers have challenged the idea of Abigail’s conservative values, instead, linking her to the revolutionaries of her times. Zagarrri also seeks to bring Abigail out of John’s shadow, but while reading her work, it seems as though Zagarrri believes that she belongs there. In fact, in a book about women during the early republic, John is actually mentioned more times than Abigail.

Abigail as a Feminist

As some historians explored Adams as a Republican housewife, others made her out a nascent feminist. By the 1970s, feminist historians set out a project to correct male biases in history—sometimes in the process unintentionally created biases of their own. One of the main problems with feminist history is that it can often be anachronistic and impose twentieth or twenty-first century values and morality onto past societies. The word “feminism” did not even exist in Abigail Adams’s lifetime, but her accessibility has made her an easy target for feminist historians to study and claim as their own.⁹ In Elizabeth Evans’s 1975 study *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* asserts that “The most famous advocate for women’s rights was Abigail Smith Adams, wife of John Adams... Refusing to be an obscure mouthpiece for her husband’s views, she influenced many of his political decisions.”¹⁰ This became a popular view of Abigail and still persists today, but it also distorts both Abigail and her times. The most prominent female role in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was in the domestic sphere. The idea that Abigail was a feminist activist is misleading. However, there are more convincing arguments about Abigail and feminism. In *Patriotism and the Female Sex* (1994), Rosemary Keller refers to Abigail as an “enlightened feminist.” In Keller’s view, Abigail’s views were not feminist, but were a precursor to the feminist movement and were comparable to Mary Wollstonecraft’s views of women’s rights. Abigail’s view of women’s rights was only constrained by her time and place.¹¹ Abigail was certainly well-read and extremely intelligent. There is no doubt that living through the Enlightenment and the American Revolution impacted her worldview. While Keller is making the claim that Abigail was a predecessor to the feminist movement, she also argues that, “Abigail had no vision of independent identity and was determined to realize her own existence through John’s.”¹² This conceptualization of Abigail falls into the same trap as Whitney and Levine: they all take away Abigail’s agency. Fortunately, Keller does not warp the reality of the eighteenth century like Evans, but *Patriotism and the Female Sex* is unsatisfactory in that it does not provide Abigail with any independent existence. Feminist historiography of Abigail is messy. While Abigail certainly was not a feminist, she was also much more than the housewife that Whitney depicted. These historians ultimately failed in providing her with agency in the reality of the eighteenth century.

⁷ Rosemarie Zagarrri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 24-25.

⁸ Ibid, 69.

⁹ Leslie F. Goldstein, “Early Feminist Themes in French Utopian Socialism: The St.-Simonians and Fourier,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 1 (Mar., 1982): 92.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Evans, *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Scribner, 1975), 5.

¹¹ Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Patriotism and the Female Sex: Abigail Adams and the American Revolution* (New York: Carlson Pub, 1994), 186.

¹² Ibid, 187.

“Remember the Ladies”

Historians often point to the letter from Abigail to John dated March 31, 1776, as proof of Abigail’s egalitarian views towards women. She wrote John, “I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors.”¹³ Feminist historians, such as Rosemary Keller, claim that Abigail believed in a perfect equality for men and women and was an early advocate for women’s suffrage. Keller argues that “Abigail’s word in support for her sex grew out of her distress over educational, voting, and other legal restrictions of women in Massachusetts and her hopes that these wrongs would be redressed during the Revolution.”¹⁴ Historians, especially in recent years, have disputed this claim. Rosemarie Zagarri and Woody Holton have both reminded readers that Abigail was not trying to be an activist for women’s rights when she wrote this letter. She was writing to an audience of one, John Adams. The common denominator between Zagarri and Holton was their belief that Abigail’s words revolved around marriage rights. Mary Beth Norton made the claim that Abigail was not arguing for women’s suffrage. Instead, in the March 31st letter Abigail revealed “her conclusion that the major problem facing women in the revolutionary era was their legal subordination to their husbands.”¹⁵ Zagarri wrote that Abigail “was not demanding the vote. She was more concerned with married women’s lack of property rights and lack of protection against abusive husbands.”¹⁶ Holton noted that Abigail had experience with spousal abuse, as her alcoholic brother was known to be abusive towards his wife. Since the ancient times, whether a woman “was to be happy or miserable depended infinitely less on who ruled her colony or state than on who governed her household, the most significant relationship that a woman had was with her husband.”¹⁷ Marriage has played a big role in the historiography of Abigail and other women of the Revolutionary Era; from Whitney, who thought of Abigail as the loving wife, to Zagarri and Holton, who believed that Abigail’s political beliefs revolved around marriage. Because of the correspondence between John and Abigail, historians have more insight into their marriage than any other married couple of the time period. What influence Abigail had on the marriage and on John’s politics has been examined tirelessly by historians since the feminists of the 1970’s.

The Attempt to Give Abigail Political Agency

Historians have struggled to bring Abigail out of John’s shadow largely because it is impossible to completely separate Abigail from John without impeding the ability to understand either person. Historian Edith B. Gelles believed that Abigail has not only been overshadowed by her husband, but she also was overshadowed by the American Revolution in historical scholarship. In the introduction of her work *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams*, Gelles wrote, “As long as Abigail’s life is told against the background or context that emphasizes events in which John took a major role during the Revolutionary War and the early republican era, the story tends to slip into his world.”¹⁸ While what Gelles attempts is noble, there remains a huge problem with *Portia*. She correctly argues that Abigail’s times overshadow her. The American Revolution was bigger than any one person. People are shaped by their times as much as any other factor; Abigail was no exception. She cannot be understood without understanding the American Revolution and its impact. With

¹³ Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, in *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family*, L.H. Butterfield et al., eds. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1975), 121.

¹⁴ Keller, 89-90.

¹⁵ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 50.

¹⁶ Zagarri, 29-30.

¹⁷ Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 99.

¹⁸ Edith Belle Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xv.

Gelles, we only get a distorted understanding of Abigail without the influence of her husband and the major events of her times.

In *Portia*, Gelles assumes the existence of separate male and female spheres. This is an idea that has been hotly debated amongst historians since the 1960's.¹⁹ Withey in *Dearest Friend* uses this idea as well, but in her work these spheres are intertwined. Gelles separates these two spheres entirely, almost as though women and men live in completely different worlds. To assume this is to assume that one sphere does not influence the other. Whether or not these spheres exist or how they are connected is for other historians to debate. Considering these assumptions and arguments that Gelles makes, *Portia* is an ironic title. Portia, who was the wife of the Roman politician Brutus, was Abigail's pen name when writing to John. Even in this name, posterity can grasp the interconnectedness of Abigail's and John's worlds. Gelles' position ultimately takes away from what we can understand about Abigail Adams. She did not live in a separate world from her husband. Her life in Braintree intertwined with John's wherever he was. Despite the shortcomings of *Portia*, Gelles did establish a unique way in which historians can provide Adams with agency without shaping her into someone who is a woman beyond her times.

One of the most recent works on Adams, written by historian Woody Holton in 2010, also makes the domestic sphere his primary focus for studying Adams. Holton weaves his work around the idea of Abigail as an economic opportunist and the manager of family affairs. John spent a majority of the years of his public life away from home. It was therefore up to his wife to keep the household afloat. Holton states in the introduction, "Adams's determination to enact some of her proto feminist ideals within her own household—to act as though the doctrine of coverture lost its force at her front door—is only one of the many surprises concealed within the pages of this woman's extraordinary life history."²⁰ Other surprises that Holton refers to are mostly Abigail's economic dealings. Holton points out that, unlike his successors and fellow founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, John Adams died fairly wealthy with little debt. The explanation provided is that "it may well be that if his (John) financial records had survived the ravages of time as well as his correspondence did, they would show his wife making a larger contribution to the family's wealth than he did."²¹ While assumptions usually do more harm than good to historical analysis, Holton provides substantial evidence to support this claim. The wealth that John made as a public servant was not substantial, but Abigail was actively managing the household finances. She did several things with the family's money of which John highly disapproved. Abigail speculated on land and government securities among other economic exploits.²²

Holton's work is perhaps the most detailed of any of the studies on Abigail Adams. Like most works on Adams, Holton relies heavily on correspondence, but uses it far better than any previous historian of Abigail Adams. However, Holton attempts to twist Abigail and her world in a way that is not consistent with the time in which she lived. He downplays much of Abigail's conservative values. Instead of having a mutually dependent relationship with her husband, Holton all but makes the claim that John needed Abigail much more than Abigail needed John. For Holton, Abigail's economic exploits were much more than just the source of financial stability for the Adams household, they were a way in which Abigail could resist her subjugated position as a woman in the eighteenth century.

¹⁹ Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, No. 1 (June, 1988): 10.

²⁰ Holton, xx.

²¹ *Ibid*, 277.

²² *Ibid*, xx.

Abigail the Revolutionary

Most interpretations of Abigail place her almost exclusively in the Adams household. Linda Kerber has noted that Abigail was one of the few women of her time to believe that she could be both a wife and mother and a political being.²³ More recent explanations of Abigail have tied her to the founding fathers as a revolutionary figure. Scholars that have labelled Adams a revolutionary have attempted to take her out of the domestic sphere which she usually occupies. Instead, in these interpretations, Abigail enters the political sphere which in the eighteenth century was seen as exclusively for men. Historians such as Charles W. Akers challenged the notion that Abigail strictly belongs to the domestic sphere and attempted to provide her with political agency. In his book, *Abigail Adams: A Revolutionary American Woman* (2007), Akers ascribes Abigail's political experience to her husband: "Marriage to John Adams brought his wife a range of experience unequaled by any other American woman of her day."²⁴ Unlike a lot of Abigail's biographers, Akers admits that John had a lot to do with her ability to participate in the political discourse of the day. It was through her husband, Akers argues, that Abigail became politically influential. "Denied a public voice, she helped shape the political views of her husband and sons."²⁵ Akers provides the scholarship of Abigail with a lot of balance. John does not overshadow Abigail as in other works, and she is given her due as a political agent without the anachronisms of some feminist interpretations.

Conclusion

Abigail Adams has the most vast historiography of any American woman of the Revolutionary Era, perhaps even in American History. As the popularity of women and gender history grows, so will Adams's historiography. It is amazing in the short time since all of her correspondence was released in the 1950's how varied interpretations of Abigail have become. Historians need to continue to examine her correspondence and the records of other women of the era to get an even fuller understanding of what life was like for the American woman during the American Revolution and the Early Republic. While Abigail has been seen as a revolutionary, a conservative, a feminist, and the model republican wife, historians must first keep in mind that Abigail was a woman of her times. She was, above all, a woman from Massachusetts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This should be the starting point for any historian attempting to examine her life. Anything more or less is doing her historical reputation a disservice. Being a person of her times does not take away from her uniqueness.

²³ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 36.

²⁴ Akers, xi.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 37.