



Abigail Adams and “Remember the Ladies”

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Framing Question

How does Abigail Adams’s famous appeal to “Remember the Ladies” reflect the status of women in eighteenth-century America?

Understanding

In correspondence with her husband John as he and other leaders were framing a government for the United States, Abigail Adams (1744–1818) argued that the laws of the new nation should recognize women as something more than property and protect them from the arbitrary and unrestrained power men held over them.

Text

The letters of Abigail Adams, 1775–1776.

- [Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 November 1775](#)
- [Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1775](#)
- [Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776](#)
- [Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776](#)

Background

“Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors,” wrote Abigail Adams (1744–1818) to her husband John in 1776, as he and other colonial leaders were meeting in Philadelphia in the Second Continental Congress. Adams wrote from Braintree, Massachusetts, where she was raising her four young children and managing the family farm. Although her days were busy with the duties of a single parent living both in a war zone — the British Army was only about twelve miles away in Boston — and in an area ravaged by a smallpox epidemic, she still contemplated the political changes taking place, and those changes are reflected in her appeal to her husband. Today that appeal may seem little more than a bit of advice — sassy, flirtatious, but ultimately trivial — offered by a spirited wife to her powerful husband. Indeed, John Adams (1735–1826), who became the second president of the United States (1797–1801), dismissed it with patronizing humor. Yet as the letters offered in this lesson show, Abigail was quite serious when she made her request and for good reason.



Portrait of Abigail Adams, 1776

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

In the 1700s the lives of colonial married women were governed by the legal doctrine of *femme covert* or coverture. Under this doctrine a husband and wife were considered one person, and that person was the husband. A married woman could not own property, sign legal documents, enter into contracts, obtain an education against her husband's wishes, or keep wages for herself. Since only property owners could vote, coverture effectively denied women that right. Like other "dependent" persons, women were not assumed to have separate interests of their own that needed to be represented in politics. Moreover, dependent persons were considered undesirable as voters because they would be under the influence of the person on whom they depended: it would be equal to giving that person two votes. In other words, the welfare of women was completely in the hands of men, and the law offered them little protection from the "tyranick" among them.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the letters excerpted here Abigail Adams focuses on the character of men and on the need for laws to protect women. As we see, she is not at all sure that men are sufficiently virtuous to wield the power they possess; put another way, she is certain that some men are not. In the first letter she discusses the relationship between virtue and power and concludes that men tempted by "revenge, or ambition, pride, lust, or profit" will descend to "base and vile action." While she refers to humankind when, in the second letter, she asserts that "Man is a dangerous creature," she relates that danger to unrestrained power, and it is clear who holds the power in colonial society. In the third letter she rebukes her husband with the charge that men "are Naturally Tyrannical." When she pleads with John to "Remember the Ladies" as he and his colleagues write a new "Code of Laws," she does so as one acutely aware of the vulnerability of women.

In her letter to her friend Mercy Otis Warren, the fourth excerpt in this lesson, Abigail points to one of the few safeguards women possessed at this time, the "Delicacy and Sentiment" of men. In the 1700s those terms did not mean what they mean today. Now we take "delicacy" to refer to fragility and "sentiment" to mean emotion. In the eighteenth century, however, both referred to the ability to respond to another person's suffering or happiness, the ability to feel sympathy for the condition of others. At that time this ability to feel for another person was considered a source of virtue. Women had to rely on delicacy and sentiment to stop men from oppressing them, to make them, as Adams writes, "averse to Exercising the power they possess." Yet she knows that along with "Men of Decency and Sentiment," there exist "the Arbitrary and tyranick," who would "injure [women] with impunity." Virtue, she is saying, is not going to be enough. Those "visionary chains of Decency" she mentions in the first letter have all the holding power of a cobweb. Something stronger is going to be needed. Thus she calls for "Establishing some Laws in our favor upon just and Liberal principals." She asks her husband to "Remember the Ladies."

Text Analysis

Letter 1: Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 November 1775

In this excerpt, Abigail looks at the relationship between private morals and public duty as well as the possible effects of unrestrained power.

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



...I have been led to think...that he who neglects his duty to his Maker, may well be expected to be deficient and insincere in his duty towards the public. Even suppose Him to possess a large share of what is called honour and publick Spirit yet do not these Men by their bad Example, by a loose immoral conduct corrupt the Minds of youth, and vitiate the Morrals of the age, and thus injure the publick more than they can compensate by intrepidity, Generosity and Honour?

Let revenge or ambition, pride, lust or profit tempt these Men to a base and vile action, you may as well hope to bind up a hungry tiger with a cobweb as to hold such debauched patriots in the visionary chains of Decency or to charm them with the intellectual Beauty of Truth and reason....

In the paragraph prior to this one Abigail Adams describes a dinner with Benjamin Franklin, a man she highly respects. She follows that description with this reflection upon the relationship between a person's duty toward "his Maker" and duty toward the public. Summarize the relationship that Abigail believes exists.

How does the image of restraining a tiger with a cobweb illuminate her view of power in the hands of “debauched” men?

With what does Adams contrast the weak restraint of a cobweb?

How effective does Adams think “the visionary chains of Decency” and “the intellectual Beauty of Truth and reason” would be in the face of immorality and temptation?

Letter 2: Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1775

In this excerpt regarding the nature of man, Abigail reflects about a potential form of government and dangers in power that is unchecked, or unrestrained, by government.

I wish I knew what mighty things were fabricating. If a form of Government is to be established here what one will be assumed? Will it be left to our assemblies to chuse one? and will not many men have many minds? and shall we not run into Dissentions among ourselves?

I am more and more convinced that Man is a dangerous creature, and that power whether vested in many or a few is ever grasping, and like the grave cries give, give. The great fish swallow up the small, and he who is most strenuous for the Rights of the people, when vested with power, is as eager after the perogatives of Government. You tell me of degrees of perfection to which Humane Nature is capable of arriving, and I believe it, but at the same time lament that our admiration should arise from the scarcity of the instances.

The Building up a Great Empire, which was only hinted at by my correspondent may now I suppose be realized even by the unbelievers. Yet will not ten thousand Difficulties arise in the formation of it? The Reigns of Government have been so long slakned, that I fear the people will not quietly submit to those restraints which are necessary for the peace, and security, of the community; if we seperate from Brittain, what Code of Laws will be established. How shall we be governd so as to retain our Liberties? Can any government be free which is not adminstred by general stated Laws? Who shall frame these Laws? Who will give them force and energy? Tis true your Resolution[s] as a Body have heithertoo had the force of Laws. But will they continue to have?

When I consider these things and the prejudices of people in favour of Ancient customs and Regulations, I feel anxious for the fate of our Monarchy or Democracy or what ever is to take place. I soon get lost in a Labyrinth of perplexities, but whatever occurs, may justice and righteousness be the Stability of our times, and order arise out of confusion. Great difficulties may be surmounted, by patience and perseverance.

Abigail Adams begins this excerpt with a series of rhetorical questions. What is her main concern in the first paragraph?

In paragraph 2, how does Abigail characterize power?

How does the fish imagery illuminate her view of power?

Her husband wrote to her in a previous letter that man can be capable of good. Does she agree? How do you know?

How would you characterize Abigail Adams's opinion of human nature?

In paragraph 3, why does Abigail believe that citizens might not accept a new government?

In paragraph 3 Abigail follows up with another series of rhetorical questions. Her concern has now shifted from whether a government will be established, as in paragraph 1, to the relationship between government and individuals. What questions does Abigail ask regarding the code of law which she feels must be established?

In paragraph 4 Abigail puts forth another reason that citizens might not accept the new government. What is it?

How would you summarize the main themes of this excerpt?

Letter 3: Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776

In this excerpt Abigail shifts her focus from human nature and the need to restrain it to women and the need to protect them. In one of her best known quotations, she urges her husband John to “Remember the Ladies,” but we must see this quotation in the context of 1776, not in the context of modern feminism.

...I long to hear that you have declared an independancy — 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 perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, 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 imitation of the Suprem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

How in the first paragraph does Adams parallel the plight of women with the political condition of the colonies?

What does Adams mean when she says that “such of you [men] as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend”?

What argument does she make in the second paragraph?

Is she asking for full women’s independence? How do you know? Cite evidence from the text.

Letter 4: Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776

This excerpt is from the one letter in this lesson that Abigail wrote to someone other than her husband; she wrote to her good friend Mercy Otis Warren. She discusses her husband’s response to the “Remember the Ladies” letter and flatly states that laws are needed to protect women.

He [John Adams] is very sausy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress. I thought it was very probable our wise Statesmen would erect a New Government and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife ill.

I requested that our Legislators would consider our case and as all Men of Delicacy and Sentiment are averse to Excercising the power they possess, yet as there is a natural propensity in Humane Nature to domination, I thought the most generous plan was to put it out of the power of the Arbitrary and tyranick to injure us with impunity by Establishing some Laws in our favour upon just and Liberal principals.

I believe I even threatened fomenting a Rebellion in case we were not considered, and assured him we would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.

In return he tells me he cannot but Laugh at My Extrordnary Code of Laws. That he had heard their Struggle had loosned the bands of Government, that children and apprentices were dissabedient, that Schools and Colledges were grown turbulent, that Indians slighted their Guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But my 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 complement, he adds, but that I am so sausy he wont blot it out.

Activity: Review

Review the central points of the textual analysis.



In this letter Abigail specifically writes about the laws which she thinks should be changed. Which laws are those?

Why does she think these laws to protect women are necessary?

Why does Abigail believe women must be protected from men who are “arbitrary and tyranick”?

What was John’s tone in his response to Abigail’s ideas? Cite evidence from the text.

Why does John Adams characterize women as the most powerful of the discontented “tribes”?

Glossary

vitiate: weaken

intrepidity: fearlessness

base: lacking in decency

vile: disgusting

debauched: corrupted, especially through excessive pleasure

fabricating: being created

perogatives: a right or privilege due to rank or office

lament: regret

slakned [slackened]: loosened

labyrinth: difficult maze

perplexities: puzzles

foment: encourage

tyrannical: oppressive

sauy [saucy]: humorously disrespectful

averse: opposed

propensity: tendency

arbitrary: unrestricted

tyranick: oppressive

impunity: exempt from punishment

turbulent: violently agitated

slighted: disregarded

insolent: rude

intimation: hint

Texts

- “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 November 1775,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0212>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 320–322.
- “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1775,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0218>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 328–331.
- “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 369–371.
- “Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0257>, ver. 2014-05-09). Source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 396–398.

Image

- Harris & Ewing, photographer. [Portrait of Abigail Adams by Benjamin Blyth]. Photograph. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. *Harris & Ewing collection*. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/hec2009000215/> (accessed September 3, 2014).