

**“The Day Which Will Fix My Future Destiny”: Courtship, Marriage, and the Companionate
Ideal in Early Republican America**

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In 1782, Sarah Fisher contemplated a friend's marriage and asserted, "how much Caution does this important step require, as it 'Cast the Die' for the remainder of our lives!"¹ Acknowledging that matrimony could indelibly alter a woman's existence, Fisher recognized that the choice of a suitor could either secure or preclude her felicity, and illustrated the gravity with which young women viewed courtship in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Far from being a transitory period in which they moved from childhood reliance to marital submission, courtship was a transforming and potentially angst-ridden period for many young women. Though relegated to dependence on male patriarchs throughout their lives, during courtship, women wielded a uniquely gendered power. Attaining a wife could effectively establish a man's place as an efficient patriarch in society, making marriage a vital element of male mastery.² Unsurprisingly, then, men exhibited deference, while women held considerable sway in the formation of their suitors' identities.³ Furthermore, with the rise of the companionate marriage ideal, women increasingly sought to fulfill their own interests in matrimony. Female contentment became a legitimate concern. Accordingly, courtship became a short, yet immensely important, time in which a woman chose the man in whom she would place her future happiness. It was a unique and transformative period in which she made significant choices that would ultimately shape, if not change, the character of her future dependence.

Many historians have debated the meaning of masculinity in the early republic, addressing the experience of young men in an attempt to discover how they made the transition from

¹ Sarah Fisher Dawes to Sally Fisher Corbit, March 30, 1782, in *The Norris-Fisher Correspondence: A Circle of Friends, 1779-1782*, North American Women's Letters and Diaries, <http://ezproxy.ithaca.edu:2472/nwld.search.advanced.html> (accessed September 24, 2009), hereafter cited as NAWLD.

² In her examination of masculinity in the South, Lorri Glover illustrates that men, "who would wield great legal, economic, and physical power once married," actually yielded immensely to their female suitors during courtship. See Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 137. For an examination of gendered power in courtship, see Timothy Kenslea, *The Sedgwicks in Love: Courtship Engagement, and Marriage in the Early Republic* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 2006), 49-50.

³ Kathleen Brown has illustrated that despite the intensely male-dominated and patriarchal construction of Southern society in the colonial period, courtship represented an "unusual time in which the balance of power tipped briefly in favor of young women." See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 249.

childhood dependence to patriarchal mastery. Both Lorri Glover and John McCurdy, for example, have highlighted the bachelor experience. They argue that as bachelors, men were forced to assert mastery and establish their position as legitimate wielders of patriarchal authority. Pointing out the uniqueness of bachelorhood as an identity, they framed it as a distinct period of autonomy for young men and argued that young women lacked a comparable experience, due to their continued dependence on male patriarchs.⁴ On the other hand, women's historians have emphasized the experience of married women in their examinations of early republican femininity.⁵ As most women did, in fact, marry in the early republican period, historians have understandably debated the ways in which women negotiated their political identities and social roles as wives and mothers, while placing less emphasis on how young women prepared for these roles during adolescence. Though not discounting the experience of young men or married women, this paper examines the experiences of young, single women in detail, discerning the ways in which they experienced and grappled with issues of gendered power in the early national period.

Primarily, this paper focuses on women of the elite class. As members of the upper echelons of society, they were more likely to experience a significant period of semi-dependence in the years before marriage. Freed from household duties and responsibilities, many elite young women were able to attend balls, entertain numerous suitors, and immerse themselves in the social

⁴ For a discussion of early republican masculinity and how it related to courtship and marriage, see Glover, *Southern Sons*, 116-146; John McCurdy, *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 87-101. For a discussion of changing conceptions of masculinity in the early republic, see Glover, "An Education in Southern Masculinity: The Ball Family of South Carolina in the New Republic," *The Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 1 (February 2003): 40-44, <http://jstor.org> (accessed November 17, 2009).

⁵ On the social and political position of women in the early republic, particularly concerning the construct of republican motherhood, see Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*; and Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." Kierner also highlighted women's marital and domestic roles in her examination of the Revolution's impact on notions of Southern femininity. See Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 27-35, 71-144, 211. Similarly, Rosemarie Zagari highlighted the conservative backlash that pushed women back into domesticity. After the Revolution, she argues that society began emphasizing women's roles as mothers, rather than political beings. See Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Laurel Thatcher Ulrich also examined the social roles of early republican women in her microhistory on Martha Ballard. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

rituals of courtship. Further, as upper class households were equipped with the financial resources to educate their daughters, elite young women were also more likely to be literate, and as a result, leave substantial records behind.⁶ A close examination of these writings demonstrates the numerous complexities that characterized young women's courtship experiences, as well as the ways in which women used these experiences to challenge—yet ultimately accept—the hierarchical nature of marital relationships.

In her examination of the courtships of Laura Wirt, Anya Jabour explores this notion, demonstrating that early republican women were forced to confront the challenge their own self-development posed to ideals of femininity. Oftentimes, they were instructed to develop their own faculties, but only for the sake of their husbands and society. While women expected to find self-fulfillment in marriage, they often found dependence.⁷ Similarly, Nicole Eustace examines the issue of gendered power in courtship, showing that while women held a degree of power in the process, they often recognized its ephemeral nature and sought to cloak their influence in diffidence, in order to achieve the approbation of their male suitors.⁸ Women realized their power was far from absolute. Men assumed a position of deference in the courtship process, but they would ultimately assume the role of a dominant male patriarch in marriage, thus, asserting their mastery in stark opposition to their wives' dependence. Though men often pursued their sweethearts with lengthy displays of love and dedication, these ploys were ultimately a strategy by which they could accomplish a vital element in the process of male mastery: attaining a wife.

⁶ Catherine Kerrison argued that literacy in early America conveyed social status, race, and gender; it was used, primarily by elites, as an illustration of power. In the early seventeenth century, female literacy rates were below twenty percent, rising to only fifty percent, even by 1850. Further, elite women were far more likely to attain literacy than their counterparts in both the middling and lower classes. See Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 11-17.

⁷ Anya Jabour, "It Will Not Do For Me to Be Married," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), 207-213, <http://jstor.org> (accessed October 24, 2009).

⁸ Nicole Eustace, "'The Cornerstone of a Copious Work': Love and Power in Eighteenth-Century Courtship," *Volume of Social History* 34, no.3 (February 2003): 517-546, <http://jstor.org> (accessed September 29, 2009).

Women held the power of refusal, but oftentimes, they were ultimately dependent on men in the courtship experience.⁹

In a letter to Sally Fisher Corbit, for instance, Deborah Norris illustrated her passivity in the search for a male companion. She wrote, “Indeed my dear it seems to me that we shall neither of us marry; but for reasons rather differant, thee from not having an offer thee approves, I, from having no offers to disapprove [*sic*].”¹⁰ Unable to initiate a courtship without a male pursuer, Norris demonstrated her utter passivity in the process. Though Norris later asserted her willingness to take up the honorable existence of an “Old Maid,” she quickly abandoned the scheme when finally receiving a suitor’s attention, and married just a year later. By highlighting the honorable nature of a spinster’s lifestyle, Norris attempted to come to terms with the discomfiting prospect she faced: marriage was an unattainable ideal without a male pursuer or proposal.¹¹ Courtship was simply another arena in which men could illustrate their own autonomy, even as they cloaked it in deferential language.

Once male suitors achieved their goal to secure a wife, their expressions of deference disappeared and they took their place as dominant heads of household. As Lorri Glover illustrated in *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation*, many men actually viewed their courtship experiences as metaphors of conquest and mastery.¹² Men compared romantic pursuits to military sieges, framing them as obstacles to be overcome. A young man’s advice to his friend illustrated the tendency to equate romance with conquest. “Commence a severe cannonade of compliments, flatteries, sweet and loving glances,” he insisted, “Do not accept any conditions. The Capitulation

⁹ McCurdy, 136. See also Eustace, 531-532

¹⁰ Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, May 6, 1780, in *The Norris-Fisher Correspondence: A Circle of Friends, 1779-1782*, North American Women's Letters and Diaries, <http://ezproxy.ithaca.edu:2472/nwld.search.advanced.html> (accessed September 24, 2009), (hereafter cited as NAWLD).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Lorri Glover, 139.

you must insist to be unconditional.”¹³ In his work on the Sedgwick family in New York and Massachusetts, Timothy Kenslea illustrates a similar trend in the correspondence of young men in the North. Kenslea includes a letter in which Harry Sedgwick lambasts his brother for failing to actively pursue a romantic interest. Sedgwick wrote, “When adversity comes like a ploughshare, you will be cut down like a solitary reed.”¹⁴ Reminding him, “You are desirous of acquisition,” Harry encouraged his brother to aggressively persist in his romantic endeavors.¹⁵ A man’s passivity signified his failure to adhere to ideals of masculinity. Thus, a successful “siege” during courtship was merely part of male mastery, and for many young boys, a victorious pursuit affirmed their identity as men.

Yet, young women occupied a position of power during the courtship, and through their rebuffs, could have seriously detrimental effects on a man’s reputation. Women were often acutely aware of their temporary influence, and in stark contrast to the marital deference they would later show their husbands, some openly criticized their potential suitors.¹⁶ In a letter to her friend Elizabeth Bordley, for example, Eleanor Parke Custis, the granddaughter of George and Martha Washington, derided the dogged persistence of one of Elizabeth’s suitors. Calling him a “mad Beau,” Custis mocked the suitor’s inability to secure either Elizabeth’s attention or affection. Custis asserted, “They say every person is like some animal. If so he resembles a Spaniel -- for the more ill treatment he receives the more attentive & ridiculously troublesome he is.”¹⁷ She later belittled another suitor, calling him a “conceited, disagreeable fop.” As a young woman enmeshed in the courtship process, Custis unhesitatingly criticized those men who vied for her attention.

¹³ Alfred Beckley to George Washington Love, 2 April 1820, James Young Love and Thomas Love Papers, FHS, quoted in: Glover, *Southern Sons*, 139. See also: Eustace, 527.

¹⁴ Harry Dwight Sedgwick to Theodore Sedgwick II, 12/2/1806, Sedgwick V Papers, quoted in: Kenslea, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-99.

¹⁷ Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley, April 24, 1797, in George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, NAWLD.

Similarly, in a letter to her sister, Rachel Huntington criticized a young man who had “indeed play’d the coquette at a high rate for five or six months,” engaging the affections of her cousin as well as another young woman.¹⁸ In her letter, Huntington asserted that her cousin should “pay him in his own coin for jilting her” as it was “amply in her power” to do so. In advocating that this young woman directly confront her dishonest lover, Huntington’s claims illustrate that women were, in fact, willing to challenge ideals of feminine passivity in the period of courtship.¹⁹ Far from being submissive recipients of male attention, women actively judged and evaluated the men who vied for their attention, consciously wielding immense influence in forming the masculine identity of their suitors.

Writers of conduct literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century likewise recognized the immense influence of young women in courtship and actively sought to curb it. In the widely printed and influential publication, *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters*, Dr. Gregory castigates the young women who willfully exploited their temporary power, using it to keep their suitors in a state of miserable suspense. It is “the deepest and most artful coquetry,” he said, for women “to engage and fix the heart of a man whom the world, and whom they themselves esteem, although they are firmly determined never to marry him.”²⁰ Similarly, numerous authors assert the importance of female passivity and timorousness in the courtship process. Author Thomas Gisborne sharply reproaches those women who deviated from “feminine diffidence” and “Christian humility,” illustrating a desire to curb female impudence and reinforce prevailing standards of femininity.²¹

¹⁸ Rachel Huntington Tracy to Anne Huntington, May 15, 1797, in *The Huntington Letters in the Possession of Julia Chester Wells*, NAWLD.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ John Gregory, “Friendship, Love, and Marriage,” in *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (London: H.D. Symonds, Pater noster Row, 1793), 103, 107-109, *The Gerritsen Collection of Aletta H. Jacobs* Cornell University Library, 7 Nov. 2007. <<http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com>> (hereafter cited as *The Gerritsen Collection*).

²¹ Thomas Gisborne, *An enquiry into the duties of the female sex* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1797), 103, *The Gerritsen Collection*. Similarly, in a published letter to his sister, a young man attempted to speak for all men, saying if women only knew “how much we prefer your amiable diffidence, your blushing timidity, they would endeavor to be

Many women absorbed the messages of these advice booklets, empathizing with men in the angst-ridden courtship period. Both Deborah Norris and Eliza Southgate assumed the culpability of girls who willfully strung their suitors along, showing sympathy for the men who were forced to anxiously contemplate the affections of their female suitors and recognizing the powerful position of women in the courtship process. At the end of one letter, for instance, Deborah Norris inquired, “how is poor Michael? (Oh what transitions I make!) really I pity him, how unfortunate it is to fix the affections on an object if it cannot make a return.”²² Similarly, in referencing a scorned lover, a young Eliza Southgate complained that her cousin had “lugged off his heart and left the remainder here.”²³ Calling the young woman a “selfish creature,” she reproached the girl’s self-indulgence. In denouncing those who utilized this unique period of female power to their advantage, both Deborah Norris and Eliza Southgate illustrate an adherence to the notion of feminine passivity advanced by the conduct literature of the time.²⁴ The women consciously adhere to feminine ideals, asserting the proper nature of female dependence, even when these assertions belied reality.

Men, too, recognized that their position within the sphere of masculine autonomy rested heavily on their ability to secure a successful match and effectively navigate the realm of courtship.²⁵ As a result, men yielded to their female suitors, but only in an effort to establish their own mastery. Through lengthy and verbose declarations of their love, devotion, and

like you.” See Anonymous. “A from a young gentleman to his sister,” in *Letters on courtship and marriage* (Trenton: Daniel Fenton and James Wilson, 1813), 202, *The Gerritsen Collection*.

²² Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, 1780[?], NAWLD.

²³ Eliza Southgate Bowne, “Diary of Eliza Southgate Bowne,” June 12, 1800, in *A Girl's Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections from the Letter of Eliza Southgate Bowne*, NAWLD.

²⁴ Young women often illustrated their view that women should assume diffidence in modesty in courtship. When describing a friend in a letter to Sarah Fisher, for example, Deborah Norris stated, “She has thousand good qualities, with the most becoming diffidence and modesty.” Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, 1780? NAWLD; Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, December, 1779, NAWLD. Similarly, Patty Rogers agonizes over her forwardness and breach of feminine modesty by taking a lover’s arm without being asked. She later fretted over a suitor whose feelings she had hurt. Though she did not love him, she asserted, “bobbing about my follish heart all day—I was afraid I had offended him [*sic*].” Patty Rogers, “Diary of Patty Rogers,” 1785, Mss. Dept., Octavo vols. “R” Misc. mss. boxes “R” Rogers Family Papers, 1731-1804, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester (hereafter cited as AAS).

²⁵ Glover, *Southern Sons*, 139. Similarly, Kathleen Brown illustrates that in the colonial period, courtship was an intense period in which a man’s personality, family, fortune, and reputation endured close scrutiny. Like in the early republican period, the process could be a trying one. Brown, 249.

powerlessness, men attempted to gain the affections of their romantic counterparts. In the process, however, suitors merely illustrated their own capabilities for romantic conquest. In contrast to the guarded and reticent replies of their female counterparts, male suitors made public and grandiose claims intended to win the affections of their sweethearts.²⁶ Even advice literature acknowledged that young men were often “indiscriminate flatterers” who praised their female suitors “without inward approbation.”²⁷ Although superficially deferential, masculine efforts to secure a wife actually asserted male autonomy, illustrating men’s ability to emerge victorious in the quest to successfully woo a suitor.

By examining the letters and diaries of young men, it becomes clear that they were very aware of their own power and influence in the courtship process, despite the anxiety it could incur. In a proposal from an unidentified suitor to Grace Goddard in 1800, a young man illustrated his position of superiority, while simultaneously proclaiming his deference and dedication. In the letter, he uses grammatical terms and Latin verb tenses to convey his meaning. This, in itself, is an illustration of his superior education; most women were not afforded the opportunity to learn Latin. In his letter, Goddard’s suitor asserts that he was “too Masculine” to remain single and illustrates his wish that Grace would not be “impeditive” in his pursuit, pointing out that she had refused at least three men before him.²⁸ Like advice literature of the time, he asserts that she would attain happiness through passivity. “Be you but supine & I will be Deponent,” Goddard’s suitor stated, illustrating a clever manipulation of grammatical terms. A deponent verb is one that appears passive, but in reality, has an active meaning. Similarly, he uses the word “genitive,” a Latin grammar expression used to indicate possession. Goddard’s suitor clearly recognized his powerful

²⁶ Eustace, 519. See also Glover, *Southern Sons*, 145; and Kenslea, 49.

²⁷ Gisborne, 104. See also *Letters on Courtship and Marriage*, 39-40.

²⁸ Anonymous, "From a Schoolmaster to A Lady of His Affections," 1800?, Mss. Dept., Misc. mss. boxes "G," folder 2, Goddard Family Papers, AAS.

position and expected to establish his mastery in marriage. While ending the letter, “your most obsequious Adorer,” this young man illustrates that he expects his suitor to submit to his will.²⁹

Courtship did provide power and influence for young women as well, and many female “belles” reveled in the social opportunities and exhilarating freedom it engendered. In the early stages of courtship, young women engaged in casual flirtation with numerous suitors. As they began formulating lasting attachments and meaningful relationships, however, a decidedly more serious tone developed. It is crucial to make the distinction between the ways in which women came to grips with their powerful role in courtship, while also accepting their future subordination in marriage. Specifically in the South, elite young women’s societal roles as “belles” allowed them to attend balls, dance with numerous suitors, and interact with men in an arena that lacked the seriousness of conventional courtship. For example, the correspondence of Eleanor Parke Custis illustrates the informal nature that characterizes the romantic experiences of single women in the South. In 1796, she announced “I am now Miss Custis, & as you may suppose not a little proud of the title,” a proclamation that indicated her coming out as a “belle” in society.³⁰ In her new societal position, Custis began entertaining male admirers, though she did not seriously commit herself until formulating an attachment to a young man named Lawrence Lewis, in 1798.³¹

Before choosing a suitor, Custis engaged in the rituals of flirtation and interacted with numerous young men. In one letter, she claims that although she danced the entire evening with the same partner, it by no means indicated a meaningful or lasting companionship. Instead, Custis states, “it is, & always has been the custom in Maryland and Virginia to dance all the evening at the *Assemblies* with the same partner.”³² Commenting openly on his appearance and charm, Custis nevertheless admitted, “I can give you very little information with respect to the *intrinsic merit* of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, May 30, 1797, NAWLD.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

the *happy youth*, as I was only introduced to him the morning of the Ball.” Custis then assured her friend Elizabeth Bordley, that secrecy was not necessary as her attachment with him was merely a casual one. Still, Custis insists, “When I *have* any thing to impart I shall rely upon your secrecy,” making a crucial distinction: flirtation allowed women to explore their options and engage the affections of several suitors without making a commitment.³³ Once women pledged themselves to a suitor, however, they recognized the seriousness of the matter as well as its implications for their futures.

Unlike men, who made public declarations of their love and affection during courtship, women typically valued secrecy, in an attempt to protect their brief and passing independence. Flirtation was exhilarating and carefree, yet serious courtship led to marriage, and marriage entailed responsibilities that effectively ended the excitement and independence of youthful romance.³⁴ As a result, women often sought secrecy, because when a courtship came into the open, community members expected a proposal would soon follow. This prospect limited women’s ability to exercise agency in choosing a suitor, because a rumored engagement infringed upon a young woman’s right to utilize her most powerful weapon: the right of refusal. If courting girls rejected too many suitors or demonstrated their power too brazenly, they ran the risk of being condemned as “coquettes.” Courtship was thus a dangerous time for young women, one in which they sought to maintain their own reputations as diffident, humble, and obliging women, while simultaneously utilizing their power to explore their options and find a worthy suitor. As a result,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ As Anya Jabour illustrates in her discussion of the marriage between Elizabeth and William Wirt, marriage engendered domesticity and domesticity meant *work*. Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 36-45. Similarly, Cynthia Kierner states, “Men, not women, sentimentalized domesticity because men alone identified the domestic sphere with leisure and seclusion from the trials of life.” Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 170. See also Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 52-53.

girls often concealed their courtships, telling only those whom they could securely trust, while fervently denying rumors of their attachments to others.³⁵

In an effort to assuage the anxiety of her friend, Eleanor Parke Custis assured her, “I have, as you requested, contradicted positively the report of your engagement with Mr. Holker wherever I have heard it mentioned.”³⁶ Custis then attempted to dispel a circulating rumor of her *own* romantic involvement with a man named Mr. Carrol.³⁷ Similarly, in describing her relationship with a new suitor, Sally Fisher writes, “let me beg no eye but thy own may peruse this—as it is a matter I wish to remain in a state of secrecy, as no good effect can arise from a knowledge of it, to any person.”³⁸ As she did not expect the relationship to result in marriage, Fisher asserts, “there is nothing material [*sic*] in the matter.” Later, she reiterates, “believe me there is nothing in it.”³⁹ By seeking to ensure the privacy of their romantic affairs, young women sought to continue their explorations in courtship, extending their own autonomy and influence, even if only temporarily. As long as they entertained numerous admirers, courting girls could prolong their influence. Ultimately, however, most young women accepted that they would occupy a subordinate position in marriage and used courtship to come to terms with that reality.

Advice literature only further reminded women of the ephemeral nature of their power, typically assuming that once a woman made her choice, her dependence in marriage precluded any opportunity to shape her future happiness. Thomas Gisborne encouraged women to choose a husband wisely for “if she marries a person without having sufficient reason to be satisfied. . . the fault surely is her own.”⁴⁰ The power women wielded in courtship contrasted immensely with the

³⁵ Eustace, 529. See also Kenslea, 114. Anya Jabour also illustrates the pressure that young women faced once society assumed their engagement. There was no “honorably escape” for a young woman that encouraged a suitor, only to reject him. These women were viewed as “coquettes” and disparaged by society. See Jabour, “It Will Never Do For Me to Be Married,” 225-226.

³⁶ Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley, May 14, 1798, NAWLD.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Sarah Fisher Dawes to Sally Fisher Corbit, December 16, 1781, NAWLD.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Gisborne, 232-237.

dependence to which they would soon submit.⁴¹ Whereas men's experience in courtship affirmed their mastery and logically resulted in an assumption of patriarchal power, women had to negotiate between two distinct and conflicting periods: courtship and marriage.

In *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States*, John McCurdy asserts that the "bachelor" held a distinctly unique identity, clearly distinguishable from other stages of manhood.⁴² McCurdy claims that in the late eighteenth century, bachelorhood "changed from an undefined and uncomfortable transitional period to a purposefully liminal time of self-definition and autonomy."⁴³ Stating that single women never experienced the autonomy and active self-examination that bachelorhood incurred, McCurdy illustrates the distinctive experience of single men and the potency of "bachelorhood" as an identity.⁴⁴ In doing so, however, he highlights the passivity of women and portrays courtship as a transforming period for men, but merely a transitory stage for women.⁴⁵ In this, McCurdy ignores that both women and society viewed a woman's courtship experience as a distinct and transformative period in which she actively shaped her future.

As women grappled with issues of dependence and power, most experienced a significant period between adolescent dependence on and marital submission to male masters.⁴⁶ Though many women ultimately failed to assert total independence from male patriarchs during courtship, they were forced to contemplate their future happiness and make decisions to ensure it. Accordingly, most women recognized that their choice of a husband was the most important decision they would make in their lives. This was especially true with the rise of the companionate ideal in the latter

⁴¹ Theophilus Moore, *Marriage customs, modes of courtship, and singular propensities of the various nations of the universe : with remarks on the condition of women* (London: printed for John Bumpus, Holburn, near Middle Row, 1814), 360, *The Gerritsen Collection*.

⁴² McCurdy 199-202.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 162

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 136, 139.

⁴⁶ Not all women expected to marry; several did choose to become spinsters. This paper, however, is primarily concerned with young women who experienced the transforming period between childhood dependence and marriage. For a discussion of how women viewed spinsterhood in colonial Philadelphia, see Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 28-42.

part of the eighteenth century. Rather than a social institution that upheld the patriarchal order in society, marriage became a loving match that promoted the shared felicity of both sexes.⁴⁷ Advice authors generally assent that marriage should resemble “a mutual contract between the sexes; the end or design of which is, or should be, their joint happiness.”⁴⁸ But authors also tied a woman’s happiness inextricably to marriage, while simultaneously asserting that once married, a woman could not, in any way, shape her own existence. Thus, it was the reality of female dependence in marriage that, ironically, made female power in courtship so significant.

Courtship was a unique period in which a woman was forced to evaluate her future, while anticipating and averting potential misery. As conduct literature asserts, a woman’s duty in courtship was to “prevent, while prevention is still in her power.”⁴⁹ In recognizing that female power ended abruptly on a young woman’s wedding day, advice booklets urged their female readers to utilize courtship wisely. Though a woman’s influence was ultimately fleeting, her assertion of it was vital in the formation of her future marital existence. Women would soon embrace dependence again, but the decisions they made within courtship played a critical role in shaping the nature of that dependence.

The latter half of the eighteenth century saw a rise in the ideals of male and female companionship, allowing women to actively consider their own happiness within marriage. During the early colonial period, Anglo-American theorists universally concurred that hierarchy was essential to social and political stability and that wifely subordination was “the foundation of the

⁴⁷ Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 9, 46. See also Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 127. On female role in marriage in the colonial period, see Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*, 288-335; Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Northern New England Women, 1650-1750*, 117-121, 179-185, 238.

⁴⁸ *Letters on Courtship and Marriage*, 59. See also Moore, 342. In this booklet, the author portrays marriage as a harmonious union and the seat of domestic bliss.

⁴⁹ Hester Chapone, *Letters on the improvement of the mind : addressed to a young lady* (London: H. Hughes, 1773), 190, *The Gerritsen Collection*.

family unit and thus of society itself.”⁵⁰ The rise of the companionate marriage ideal did not dismantle these conceptions of rightful feminine dependence. As Catherine Kerrison illustrates, increasing acceptance of the companionate marriage ideal did not engender a fundamental reassessment of gendered hierarchies.⁵¹ Even conduct literature of the period acknowledged the superficiality that pervaded claims of equal partnership and mutuality. In an advice pamphlet to young men, for example, a female author asserts, “That your own superiority should always be seen, but never felt, seems an excellent general rule.”⁵² In essence, the companionate ideal was merely a rhetorical device intended to shroud the true implications of gendered power in marriage.

Still, women internalized these messages and expected to fulfill their own objectives and achieve felicity through matrimony. When informing her friend that she made the decision to marry, for example, Eleanor Parke Custis illustrated the degree to which women truly intertwined their own happiness with marriage. She describes her wedding day as “the day which will fix my future destiny,” insisting that although previously resolved to become a spinster, she had since become “perfectly reconciled” to the notion of a married existence.⁵³ Yet, Custis’ language also illustrates that by voluntarily succumbing to the pursuits of her admirer, she tacitly acknowledged and accepted her future state of dependence. Though Custis did so willingly, she recognized that she would now be “obliged to submit and bind myself to become that old fashioned thing called a Wife.”⁵⁴ Though women could make a conscious decision to move from single to married, men ultimately held the reigns of gendered power in courtship. By using terms like “succumb” and “submit,” Custis illustrates her acknowledgement of her future dependence. In the end, it was she who was forced to yield and he who achieved mastery.

⁵⁰ Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 62. For a discussion of gender relations in colonial Virginia, particularly concerning marriage as the foundation for the patriarchal and societal order, see also: Brown, 86, 91-104.

⁵¹ Kerrison, 127-128. See also: Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 10.

⁵² Mrs. Piozzi, “A Letter to a Young Gentleman on His Marriage,” in *Letters on courtship and marriage* (Trenton: Daniel Fenton and James Wilson, 1813), 188, *The Gerritsen Collection*.

⁵³ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, February 3, 1799, NAWLD.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Recognizing that their future state would be dictated by the whims of the men they attached themselves to, women focused heavily on the intrinsic moral character and virtue of their male suitors during courtship, and actively evaluated the honor and virtue of the men who courted them. In describing her future husband, Eleanor Parke Custis optimistically insisted, “The Man I have chosen to watch over my future happiness is in every respect calculated to ensure it.”⁵⁵ She highlighted his virtue, rationality, and societal esteem, assuring her friend that she was “confident of his sincere and unalterable attachment.”⁵⁶ Clearly, women expected a marriage of mutual esteem and companionship. Many invariably linked their own satisfaction to that of their husband’s, thus, internalizing the prescriptions of advice literature.⁵⁷ While Custis cheerfully predicted her own marital bliss, she also consciously acknowledged her decision to devote her life to her new husband, and in doing so, made his happiness a paramount concern of her own life.⁵⁸

The pervading theme in conduct literature of the period was one that tied female happiness to marriage, while tying marital bliss to male, not female, contentment. In the late-eighteenth century, “happy, proper marriages rested upon the twin pillars of husbands’ exercising patriarchal power and wives’ internalizing the belief that they were the ones responsible for marital harmony.”⁵⁹ A woman’s paramount goal was to assure her husband’s felicity, thus, ensuring the viability of her marriage and, by extension, her own happiness. Marriage resulted in a mutual esteem and tenderness, but only if both men and women “attended to the duties of their station.”⁶⁰ A woman was expected to invest all of her faculties in obliging the interests of her husband. As author Theophilus Moore asserts, a good wife “makes it her business to serve, and her pleasure to oblige her husband: conscious that everything that promotes his happiness must in the end

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ For examples of advice literature that propagated these messages, see Chapone, 192. See also Gisborne. 237.

⁵⁸ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, February 3, 1799, NAWLD.

⁵⁹ Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2006), 171.

⁶⁰ Moore, 360.

contribute to her own.”⁶¹ By insisting that the only way a woman could achieve the ideals of femininity was through marriage, and by subsequently linking marital bliss to male felicity, authors skillfully enmeshed women’s happiness with their dependence.

Framing volitional compliance as a feminine virtue, society attempted to uphold the existing patriarchal order, while simultaneously asserting notions of companionship, marital harmony, and mutuality. Though wielding considerable power in courtship, women forfeited what influence they had when they solidified their marriage vows. From that point forward, society afforded women little sway in the shaping of their husbands; instead, demanding willful obedience and cheerful submission.⁶² Just as it was in the early colonial period, the reality of female dependence was palpable in the late eighteenth century and the early republican decades. The difference came in the ways in which society justified female subordination. As Clare Lyons illustrates in *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution*, the tumultuous period of the Enlightenment challenged established gender conventions.⁶³ Women’s subordination had previously been based on the “natural hierarchy” that governed all social relations. In this system, men were the natural leaders and protectors of their subordinates. The Enlightenment, however, challenged the foundations of the existing gender hierarchy by insisting that humans were rational agents, capable of shaping their own destiny.⁶⁴

In particular, the rise of the companionate ideal illustrated an adoption of Enlightenment views on human rationalism and agency. As Clare Lyons illustrated, by the 1760s, “almanac ditties” began making the crucial distinction between love and lust. While lust was rooted in the “fleeting effects of passion,” love was based on affection and esteem between partners. The

⁶¹ Moore, 360.

⁶² Eustace, 523. Though instructing young men in how to “cultivate” agreeable wives, advice literature directed at women stressed ways in which a woman might shape her own behavior in an effort to better please her husband. For a further illustration of how advice literature portrayed female dependence, see: *Gregory, A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* and Moore, *Marriage Customs, Modes of Courtship, and Singular Propensities of the Various Nations of the Universe: With Remarks on the Condition of Women*.

⁶³ Lyons, 1-5, 58, 183-185. For a further discussion of gendered power in colonial America, see Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Enlightenment philosophy stressed careful and rational deliberation for both men and women.⁶⁵ This ideology carried into the courtship process easily, encouraging women to actively deliberate their prospects in marriage and make a calculated decision to ensure their future happiness. Exhorting women to subordinate their passions to rationality, one author warns, “a blind, a sudden, and intoxicated passion has a natural tendency to occasion unhappy marriages.”⁶⁶ These prescriptions encouraged women to employ their own rationality in the courtship process and emphasized the significance their decisions would have on their future happiness.

In a letter to her future husband, John Symmes, Susan Livingston illustrated the simultaneous prevalence of the companionate marriage ideal and the continued expectation of female submission in courtship and marriage. While lauding matches founded on love and affection, her correspondence illustrated her deferential position in the courtship process. Insisting, “I never would give my hand where I was not attached upon any consideration,” Livingston highlighted the importance she placed on love and esteem in choosing a suitor.⁶⁷ Still, in attempting to allay her future husband’s concerns about her own devotion to him, she immediately took up a deferential tone. Livingston assumed responsibility for her suitor’s inability to discern the meaning of her previous letter, and made his approbation her paramount objective. Though admitting that his assumption of her distrust “wounded my feelings more than ever I expected they would have been by you,” she was primarily concerned that her own letter had offended him. Accordingly, she took full responsibility for his interpretation of its contents, despite her intentions. While insisting, “I am with esteem & affection Your friend,” Susan Livingston portrayed herself as John’s inferior, obliging his interests and assuring him of her devotion.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Lyons, 169-171. Catherine Kerrison also shows how women deliberated their marital prospects and attempted to build marriages based on rational love, virtue and esteem. See Kerrison, 131-133.

⁶⁶ *Letters on Courtship and Marriage*, 28. See also: Chapone, 190-191; Gisborne, 232.

⁶⁷ Susan Livingston Symmes to John Cleves Symmes, February 10, 1794, in *The Intimate Letters of John Cleves Symmes and His Family Including Those of His Daughter Mrs. William Henry Harrison, Wife of the Ninth President of the United States*, NAWLD.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Like the Enlightenment, the American Revolution challenged conceptions of a divinely sanctioned order based on “natural” hierarchies. Though it did not result in a drastic reevaluation of gender ideologies or feminine roles in society, it did provide opportunities for women to demand increased opportunities in marriage and education. The political framework of the fledgling republic was based on the notion of a “consensual union of equals,” and this new, political egalitarianism soon influenced the male-female power dynamic within marriage.⁶⁹ The Revolution explicitly challenged the patriarchal system with an emphasis on equality, mutuality, and friendship. Admonishing patriarchal domination within the home, as “the chief obstacle to a happy and virtuous marriage,” Americans extended republican ideology to marriage, lauding companionship and consent, rather than imperious male dominance.⁷⁰

Yet, conduct literature continued to assert the necessity of voluntary wifely subordination and encouraged women to oblige the interests of their husbands. “To preserve this union, and render the harmony of the married state more complete,” insists Moore, “a mutual esteem and tenderness, a mutual deference and forbearance, a mutual authority and assistance, must be kept up.”⁷¹ Immediately following this assertion of companionship, Moore made it clear that “mutual deference” truly meant willful female subordination. “There need be no disputes about power, nor will there be any,” he said. “They have no opposite or separate interests, therefore, there can be no opposition of conduct.”⁷² In essence, Moore defined mutual companionship by female submission.

⁶⁹ Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 13.

⁷⁰ In her article on women in the early republic, Jan Lewis has illustrated the connection between marital unions based on consensual agreement between husband and wife and the new republican political system. She states, “In the republic envisioned by American writers, citizens were to be bound together not by patriarchy's duty or liberalism's self-interest, but by affection, and it was, they believed, marriage, more than any other institution, that trained citizens in this virtue.” See Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 1987): 689, <http://jstor.org> (accessed September 2, 2009).

⁷¹ Moore, 342.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Only by domestic obedience could a woman ensure “mutual esteem and tenderness” in her marriage.⁷³

The revolutionary rhetoric allowed society to increasingly value the female role within marriage, while still expecting female deference and dependence. Heralding marriage and motherhood as every woman’s ultimate goal, society branded domesticity as the only way in which a woman could attain the ideals of femininity and ensure her own happiness.⁷⁴ Further, by inextricably linking female happiness and marital bliss, advice literature of the time asserted that women were ultimately responsible for the success of their marriages. Women were instructed to achieve lasting and loving companionships through their own deference, reticence, and amiability, characteristics that would garner respect from their husbands, but were ultimately unable to foster feminine achievement or self-esteem.

Nevertheless, this new appreciation of women’s domestic roles prompted men to become increasingly aware of female happiness within marriage. Women, too, increasingly valued their own self-improvement and personal fulfillment. As Mary Kelley has illustrated in her scholarship on female academies and seminaries in the early republic, historians have placed too much emphasis on societal prescriptions for female behavior, and in the process, have ignored that women exercised their personal autonomy to actively shape both their education and their futures.⁷⁵ Many young women also developed close female friendships at academies, allowing them to experience companionships truly rooted in affection and equality. Women modeled their

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ As Linda Kerber has illustrated in her path breaking work on women in the early national period, the new concept of the “republican mother” afforded women a politically significant *and* insignificant role. She claimed that society framed motherhood “almost as if it were a fourth branch of government, a device that ensured social control in the gentlest possible way.” See Kerber, 200. On sentimentalizing domesticity, see Wulf, 41; Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 34-35, 38, 155; Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 36-47; Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 167-170; and Jabour, “It will not do for me to be married,” 211. As Kierner points out in her study of elite women in the early republican South, however, it was men and not women who sentimentalized domesticity. While men conceptualized the home as a “separate sphere and seat of virtuous bliss,” women associated the home with mundane responsibilities and invariable nature that defined their existence.

⁷⁵ Mary Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (September 1996), 415.

future courtships after these female friendships, coming to expect true mutuality and fulfillment from their relationships with men. As a result, women became increasingly cognizant of the hierarchal nature of marital relationships, but also increasingly sought to fulfill their own felicity through matrimony.⁷⁶

In order to assure their personal happiness, numerous women emphasized the importance of finding a “worthy” husband, capable of achieving this goal. When speaking of a courtship experience of a friend, Deborah Norris asserts, “And I hope she will not dignify him with her Choice Without he is worthy.”⁷⁷ Similarly, when speaking of Deborah Norris’s courtship, Sarah Fisher illustrated her desire that Norris would find her new husband to be deserving of affection and esteem. She hopefully states, “I approve of it much, it will be a union of Worthies.”⁷⁸ These women fully expected their suitors to fulfill their expectations, and imbibing the proclamations of advice writers, they agreed that their happiness rested in their ability to find a worthy, virtuous man.

The choice of a husband was a significant one, for women knew that marriage could either mean perpetual bliss or inescapable misery. Just as women internalized ideals of mutual companionship and marital equality, many recognized the potentiality of a miserable and inescapable union. In a letter highlighting the merits of spinsterhood, Grace Goddard insists that an unmarried existence was preferable because a single woman cannot be “wounded by the

⁷⁶ Steven Stowe, “‘The Thing Not Its Vision’: A Woman’s Courtship and Her Sphere in the Southern Planter Class,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1983), 115-118. See also Jabour, “It Will Never Do For Me to Be Married,” 193-196, 206-210; Kerrison, 127; and Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 34, 206-210. For primary sources that illustrate women’s increasing focus on their own contentment, see Letter from Grace Goddard to Anonymous Friend, 1800, Goddard Family Papers, AAS; Letter from Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, May 6, 1780, NAWLD; and Letter from Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, February 3, 1799, NAWLD.

⁷⁷ Deborah Norris Logan to Sally Fisher Corbit, December 1780[?], NAWLD.

⁷⁸ Sarah Fisher Dawes to Sally Fisher Corbit, March 30, 1782, NAWLD. Similarly, Charity White Goddard similarly expressed her desire that marriage would bring her sister-in-law contentment. In a letter to Grace Goddard Drury, she stated, “You have chosen a partner for life since I saw you and one I hope that adds greatly to your happiness.” Charity White Goddard to Grace Goddard Drury, April 20, 1802, Goddard Family Papers, AAS.

reproaches of an imperious husband.”⁷⁹ Similarly, when speaking of her friend Mrs. Thurston, Patty Rogers says, “She told me that Mr. T had grieved her and treated her with *indignity*.”⁸⁰ Later, in a diary entry on March 6, 1785, Rogers states that she entered Mrs. Thurston’s house to find her in tears.⁸¹ On another instance, Rogers noted how men often abandoned their deferential entreaties after courtship, soon becoming unbearable husbands. “How differently persons will appear when we first see them from what they do after we get acquainted,” she lamented.⁸² Like Patty Rogers, young women must have been surrounded by examples of unhappy marriages, recognizing that if they made a poor choice in courtship, their futures could also be miserable.

Some women were actually forced to confront the despondence of marital dependence. In her unhappy state as a married woman, Nancy Shippen agonized over her choice in courtship. In despair, she writes, “Why did I believe him when he swore so often he loved me, & that he wou'd make me eternally happy?”⁸³ In this, Shippen illustrated her failure to accurately judge the character of her future husband. For women in the late-eighteenth century, choosing a husband could be an angst-ridden process in which a woman was forced to weigh the advice of her parents against her own experiences and feelings, while simultaneously attempting to determine the sincerity of her suitor. Essentially, in choosing a husband, a young woman was making an active choice, one that directly shaped her future, even if it merely defined the nature of her future dependence. As women became increasingly aware of their own desires and expectations in matrimony, courtship became an important period of deliberation. The companionate ideal had legitimized women’s concerns for their own happiness, and through marriage, they sought to fulfill their own goals and ambitions. The companionate ideal, however, was just that: an ideal. During

⁷⁹ Grace Goddard to Anonymous Friend, 1800, Mss. Dept., Misc. mss. boxes "G," folder 2, Goddard Family Papers, AAS. For a discussion of how women viewed spinsterhood in colonial Philadelphia, see Wulf, 28-42.

⁸⁰ Diary of Patty Rogers, January 7, 1785, AAS.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, March 6, 1785, AAS.

⁸² *Ibid.*, August 4, 1785, AAS.

⁸³ Diary of Anne Hume Shippen Livingston, April 1782, NAWLD.

courtship, women were forced to address the reality of female dependence and attempt, as best as they could, to cope with their position.

Though female dependence in marriage changed very little in the early republican decades, women began to expect more from marriage. As they expanded their educational possibilities, young women learned to value their own self-improvement and actualization, often finding models for mutual companionship in their relationships with other young women. Just as bachelors were forced to develop autonomy, establish mastery, and successfully navigate their way through courtship, women were forced to deliberate rationally about their futures, make important decisions, and consciously contemplate the limits and contradictions inherent in a female identity. In a peculiar process that temporarily overturned the established gender hierarchy, women were forced to find the balance between asserting their newfound power and coming to terms with their future dependence. Accordingly, courtship became much more than a transitory state between childhood and marital submission to male patriarchs. Courtship was a significant and transformative period in which women confronted the realities of gendered power. Though they may not have been able to change their future dependence, women made choices that would alter its character and in doing so, they actively shaped their lives.

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