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Abstract

From the appallingly small number of classes that versify their students on the historical overview of women's subjection, the impact of discourse remains routinely overlooked. Yet, within most societies, discourse remains the catalyst for all pivotal historical events, as well as the creator of the causes and effects that preceded or followed. This paper examines the intricate ties between post-American Revolution, male-centered discourse and its oppressive effects on women's literature. It draws contrasts between the writings of four women writers between the years 1780-1820 and each woman's utilization and comprehension of male-centered discourse within their writing, Mary Wollstonecraft, Judith Sargent Murray, Abigail Adams and Martha Laurens Ramsay. It reveals the subjected images women created for themselves through their literature, which would ultimately add to their subjection in the future. More importantly, it reveals women's obliviousness to male-centered discourse, and its creation of the repetitious cycle of subjection.

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For many, the discourse used in women's literature played an insufficient role during the fight for women's equality. Nevertheless, as discourse is the medium through which societies created their identity, it is insufficient to completely ignore the study of discourses' impact on women's literature. The following study provides a thorough analysis of post-American Revolution male-centered discourse and its oppressive effects on women's literature. To answer this question, I split my study into three different sub-arguments: the identification of male-centered discourse, the imagery this language invoked, and its overall effects on women's personal literature.

Documentation and Analysis

The following analysis drew heavily upon a collection of primary sources from four notable women writers between the years 1780-1820: Abigail Adams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Martha Laurens Ramsay, and Judith Sargent Murray. Marking women's oblivion to male-centered discourse, Martha Laurens Ramsay's memoirs and letters became a prime example. Documentation included extracts from her diary, entries dating between 1791 and 1808, as well as a selection of personal letters ranging from 1792 to 1811. To maintain the argument concerning women's support of male-centered discourse, research relied heavily upon in-depth examinations of the letters produced by Abigail Adams, especially those in correspondence to her husband John Adams. Discordantly, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*—as well as *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*—emphasized a rejection of this male-centered discourse, calling into question the vague interpretations of words such as 'natural' and 'virtuous.' Lastly, inquiry into Murray's *On the Equality of the Sexes*, revealed clear parallels to Marilyn Frye's support of the subjective birdcage. Additional analysis of the principles of journalism and gender studies were also included.

Shortly after America's strife for separation from Britain, an air of individualistic rhetoric arose. Women's critical role in the American Revolution changed their interpretation of the old laws governing the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. If men owned the right to free themselves, it remained illogical

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to deny women the same rights. However, such liberating eloquence failed to extend to both genders of the American populous (Kerber, 2011, p. 148-151).

Based off of the literature produced by Wollstonecraft, Murray, Adams and Ramsay, it became notable that language served as the medium society manipulated to create its shared beliefs regarding the rights and obligations, of female citizens (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 17). Resultantly, redefining the structural basis of a society often directly affected the ideologies surrounding gender equality. Observed by Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, impacting words such as 'natural' and 'virtue' were generally vague words, making them more liable to be shaped by an oppressive society's desire (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

By identifying the actual existence of an oppressive, male-centered discourse, the types of imagery invoked could be brought under analysis. Following the thought pattern of conceptual semantics, specific words often invoked specific images. The images portrayed women as either silent guides of morality or created a fantasy of power, portraying illusionary images of women and men in positions of sexual equality (Douglas, 2010, p. 4-5). Notable in the personal documentation of Abigail Adams and Martha Laurens Ramsay, assertive male discourse concatenated the imagery determining women's societal role: the Republican Motherhood. Portrayed as an ideology of womanhood, the Republican Motherhood embraced rationalism, independence, literacy, benevolence and self-reliance (Kerber, 2011, p. 148-151). Despite this misleading, independent image, the ideology rested upon discourse defined by subjective definitions; this male-centered discourse became the basis through which women articulated their personal imagery within their literature. As a direct effect, many women unconsciously supported, and dispersed their own subjection.

CONCLUSION

Subsequently, it became difficult to ascertain whether women's literature leaned more towards pro-feminist feminist or anti-feminist. To Gerda Lerner, a lot of modern literary critics continued to debate whether women employed a separate literary language, and if so, which side it most supported. Lerner strongly contended that this question remained unanswerable as women remained mostly unaware of the oppressively male discourse they used (Lerner, 1993, p. 167-168). Additionally, as the oppressive desires differed regionally, women's experiences and associations with male-centered discourse varied. Varied contact to male-centered discourse caused differing biased responses towards women's own subjection (Frye, 1983, p. 4-9). Some women chose modest approaches—such as Martha Laurens Ramsay—while others, like Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft, preferred to explicitly discuss their rights as women (Lerner, 1993, p. 167-168). Regardless of the position women took, all four women lived in a gendered society whose entire social institution remained embedded into every situation, including the language through which they communicated.

Future Plans

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This spring's Made in Millersville Conference serves as the springboard to future research regarding post-American Revolution, male-centered discourse and its direct effects on women's literature. Being an Academic, I am extremely interested in furthering my research by continuing to attend both internal—and external—conferences, before committing myself to a senior thesis regarding the aforementioned area of study. After graduation, I plan to continue my research at graduate school.

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