

Gender, Celebration, and Politics:
American Women Celebrating the French Revolution

Introduction

The solidification of political factions into fledgling political parties in the 1790s was part of a wider struggle to shape the political culture of the young United States. The legacy of the American Revolution was still close enough to be malleable, and now-stable American values—such as liberty, equality, and democracy—were still being debated and defined. The eruption of the French Revolution in Europe swept American political culture up into a larger debate over *democracy*, hardening party lines and at the same time redefining political allegiances.

Democratic-Republican identity became synonymous with support for the French Revolution, and in doing so, brought democracy to the forefront of their ideology. This is especially noticeable in the lively civil celebrations of the time which sought to symbolically act out the triumph of democracy. This enthroning of democracy necessarily (but perhaps unintentionally) brought previously marginalized groups into an important place in the public political sphere. Most striking is the central involvement of women as spectators, participants, and even initiators of these civic festivals. Women's participation in these events blurred the lines between accepted feminine behavior and radical political participation.

The Feast of Liberty and Equality On the morning of Thursday, January 24, 1793, the streets of Boston rang with the sounds of bells and artillery fire-- not in danger, but in celebration. The noise was a call for the citizens of Boston to assemble in "Liberty-Square" for the commencement of a day-long public celebration. At eleven o'clock, a procession formed of

citizens, a “full band, with drums and fifes,” horses, carts, a roasted ox and hogshead of liquor, a carriage flying the French and American flags, and a placard reading “PEACE OFFERING TO LIBERTY AND EQUALITY” in gold lettering. This parade proceeded through the streets of Boston past government buildings and the private houses of government officials to “Liberty-Square”—formally known, apparently, as “Oliver’s-Dock”—where the ox was dubbed “ARISTOCRACY” and symbolically re-slaughtered upon “the Altar of DEMOCRACY.” The rest of the afternoon was spent in feasting and toasts to liberty and equality. Newspaper accounts note, “A brilliant collection of Ladies embellished this festive picture, and the walls of the adjacent mansions *smiled* with unusual benignity. The Fair Sex, on this occasion, did honor to the ‘RIGHTS OF WOMEN,’ by rejoicing in the vindication [of] the ‘RIGHTS OF MAN.’” To complete this “general display of joy, harmony, and conviviality,” musicians played “the National Carol” and French revolutionary tune “*Ça Ira*” from the balcony of the State House.¹

Many forces are at work here in this festival, at the intersection of culture and politics. Here, political values are being created, enacted, and reinforced. Furthermore, these values are being shaped in a public setting which includes not only the elite of society, but in fact is sustained by those segments of society which were not part of the formal, elected governmental system. Here, it is possible to honor the rights of women, even without women’s political suffrage. But how were the rights of women honored? Was it merely in relation to the rights of men, as the account in Boston’s *Independent Chronicle* claims? Or did this “brilliant collection of Ladies” have a role of their own to play in these self-avowed republican—and more importantly, *democratic*—festivals? Certainly, for a group of Americans celebrating the triumphs of the French Revolution, there were strong—although hardly uncontroversial—models of

¹ “Boston, Thursday, January 31, Celebration, of the Feast of Liberty and Equality,” *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, January 31, 1793, Vol XXV, Issue 1266, page 2.

French women participating in the Revolution to an unprecedented degree. American women too, despite continuing limitations, seized the opportunity for greater influence on the shaping of political culture in America.

Definitions of Terms

Discussion of women's history and social spheres requires finding a working balance of history, feminist theory, and sociology. While history will clearly take primacy here, it is helpful to employ a number of terms and concepts borrowed from feminist social theory to illuminate women's role in these public celebrations. Some of the most central ideas to this paper are the concepts of "public" and "private" spheres. The idea of a private sphere belonging to women and a public sphere belonging to men is not a new one, although it has never been as clear-cut and separate in practice as in theory. The "private sphere" refers to the world inside the home, domestic activities and concerns, and the teaching and safeguarding of morality. The "public sphere," then, refers to the world outside of the home, of politics, intellectual pursuits, and vocations. Cynthia Kierner offers a broader, less gender-defined definition of the public sphere as, "the site of actual or figurative exchanges on extradomestic ideas or issues," with the activities of the public sphere including "not only formal political participation but also informal civic and social life."² Susan Branson also identifies "a multiplicity of public arenas that existed simultaneously" beginning to be recognized by historians.³ For the purposes of this paper, references to the public sphere will be primarily concerned with the arena of public politics, both

² Cynthia Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700 – 1835* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998); 2.

³ Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); 4.

formal and informal, although its connotations extend more broadly to these numerous and overlapping “public arenas.”

This paper works off of the assumption that politics includes more than the formal system of voting and administration. Instead, it embraces a more openly defined political culture that includes the formal political structures, but also the world of informal politics which, in the 1790s, included the wearing of political ribbons, singing of political songs, and attendance at political festivals and rallies. For the average citizen, it would have been this informal sphere of politics that was most relevant to his life (here “his” is appropriate since women were not yet the legal political equals of men).⁴ It is only with this expanded definition of politics that it becomes possible to look at the participation of women and other disenfranchised groups in the political sphere which had for so long been overlooked by historians.

It is also necessary to establish the difference between the terms republican and democratic in the 18th century. Both republican and democratic were somewhat radical terms in 18th century Europe, but democratic was by far the worse. In Plato’s classic categorization of governments, a “democracy” refers to rule by the mob, one of the three “evil” forms of government. Democracy’s positive counter-form is a republic, rule by representation.⁵ This traditional definition of democracy remained popular with many in the 18th century, particularly with those who disapproved of the French Revolution and its aims (in particular in America the Federalists). However, other views were also emerging. Democratic-Republicans instead chose

⁴ Susan Branson and Simon P. Newman, “American Women and the French Revolution: Gender and Partisan Festive Culture in the Early Republic,” in *Riot and Revelry in early America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) 229.

⁵ Plato’s *The Republic*, Book VIII.

to champion the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity associated with the French Revolution, radically breaking with the old views of democracy.⁶

American Women and Party Politics

The demographics of the women involved in early American celebrations of the French Revolution are neither entirely surprising nor entirely predictable. While free African-Americans also began to participate in party politics in the North, the vast majority of the women involved were white. In the South, this was even more pronounced. Democratization of public festivals held special dangers in states where slavery was prominent, and this limited women's participation as well as the participation of African Americans.⁷ Part of what makes women's participation so striking is that many of these women came from the middle and working classes. Sailors and sailors' wives were the first to popularize French fashions, such as the tricolor cockade, which became integral parts of Democratic-Republican identity and celebration. Both middle and working class women were involved as participants and observers in celebrations.⁸ Upper class women also participated, particularly in civic balls, but public celebrations, as popular political culture, were open to and dependent on the participation of both men and women of the other classes.

While women lacked a voice in the former political structure, women and women's support—whether actual or claimed—became increasingly important to men's political debates. Male politicians regularly used women symbolically in their speeches and arguments, employing

⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); 231-233.

⁷ Kierner 111.

⁸ Branson 75.

woman's dual incarnations as moral paragon and sinful temptress.⁹ Women also featured prominently in political cartoons and as personifications of abstract concepts such as liberty and justice.¹⁰ Furthermore, as apolitical moral guardians, women supposedly legitimized the positions of political parties.¹¹ As democracy rose in political centrality, women's approval of political parties became even more of a necessity.

French Women, French Celebrations, and the French Revolution

French women of all classes were visible, active participants in nearly every aspect of the French Revolution, although their involvement was by no means uncontroversial. Women were present at the storming of the Bastille; and, during what came to be known as the October Days, French women marched on Versailles and were successful in not only gaining audience with the king, but also in returning the royal family to Paris. Women participated in revolutionary clubs and salons, petitioned the Assembly, and became famous in their own right, like the well-known Olympe de Gouges, Théroigne de Méricourt, and Charlotte Corday. In 1794, women marched on the revolutionary government itself, taking over the halls of Convention. Women beat up soldiers, led violent mobs, carried weapons, manned cannons, and made up the infamous *tricoteuses*, the blood-thirsty crowd at the guillotine who knit while heads rolled.¹² Women like Olympe de Gouges also wrote stirring and highly sophisticated political treatises and

⁹ Rosemary Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 86.

¹² *Tricoteuses* translates as "knitters," and designates the women of the French Revolution who sat in on sessions of government and gathered at the guillotine with their knitting needles. Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); xviii.

campaigned (unsuccessfully) for an unprecedented degree of legal rights and political involvement. While the full power of women's role in the French Revolution was never fully acknowledged by accounts of the time, it was also impossible to completely ignore the degree of their involvement.¹³

French women also played a more visible role in civic celebrations of the republican period. In *Festivals and the French Revolution*, Mona Ozouf identifies the participation of women as a significant symbol of change from royal festivals to republican ones. Along with the elevation of the lower class, the participation of women and children in public rituals was seen as a sign of progress and republican values.¹⁴ Women and girls portrayed values such as Liberty, Reason, and Equality in elaborately simplistic festivals designed to replace royal and Catholic rituals and values with republican ones.¹⁵ Although women supposedly required male permission to march in civic parades, increasingly French women took the initiative to participate in public festivals without male approval.¹⁶ However, women's role in public celebrations remained as controversial as their broader political participation and—interestingly—more limited.

Political Factions, Political Parties, and the French Revolution

In the 1790s, political factions were still in the process of cementing into modern political parties. Political factions, rather than being viewed as inevitable, were still seen as something negative, to be avoided as much as possible. It was in 1796 that George Washington warned,

¹³ This paragraph draws primarily on two accounts of women in the French Revolution: Shirley Elson Roessler, *Out of the Shadows: Women and Politics in the French Revolution, 1789-95*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) and Godineau.

¹⁴ Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988) 19.

¹⁵ Ibid. 101 – 102, 212.

¹⁶ Ibid. 51-52, 87.

“The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.”¹⁷ Still, however “frightful,” the lines between political factions were solidifying. The French Revolution quickly became a symbol for faction loyalties. The Democratic-Republicans championed the democratic ideals of the French Revolution and led the public celebrations honoring it. The Federalists, in contrast, remained skeptical of the French Revolution, its goals, and its effectiveness, even more so when the events of the Reign of Terror became known. Not only did the French Revolution define party lines, but it also often defined personal party allegiance. Those who supported the Revolution became Democratic-Republicans, and those who did not became Federalists—sometimes even when previously dedicated to the opposite party/faction.

The Democratic-Republicans became the faction of support for the French Revolution and its ideals and consequently was the faction most open to women’s participation in the public sphere. Democratic-Republicans, in championing liberty, equality, and fraternity, encouraged greater inclusion of the middle and lower classes in the political process than Federalists. This democratization extended to the limited inclusion of even further politically marginalized groups—most prominently, women. Susan Branson argues, “If Democratic Republicans approved of women taking political action, they did so only by highlighting their domestic role as good Democratic Republican wives or unnamed participants in public ceremonies.”¹⁸ However, women’s participation in Democratic-Republican civic celebrations was wide-spread and—despite protest from both sides—seems to have been generally accepted at the time or at

¹⁷ “Washington’s Farewell Address 1796,” from The Avalon Project, Yale website.
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp

¹⁸ Branson 96.

least not significantly impeded. Since women's participation remained controversial, it is more helpful not to attempt to speak to a single Democratic-Republican view of women's participation. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that a variety of opinions existed, but none ultimately barred women's participation and overall opinion actually facilitated it.

The Federalists took a less favorable view of the French Revolution and democracy. More conservative than the Democratic-Republicans, they saw the French Revolution as chaotic and dangerous, a view only reinforced by the events of the Reign of Terror that ultimately swung American sympathy away from the French. Federalists supported a more traditional class and political structure, representative but with power ultimately resting in the hands of a pre-established, educated elite. They often laid heavy criticism on the role of women in pro-French civic festivals, but Federalists as well played a role in the expansion of the public political sphere. Federalist women also took active part in the criticism of the French Revolution and republican celebration, and Branson even attributes more freedom of thought and agency to Federalist women than Democratic-Republicans.¹⁹ Despite Federalists' opposition to a radically democratized political culture, effective criticism still had to include women's support.

Politics and Public Festivals

What was at risk for America's early political parties was the very shape that political participation would take in the fledgling country. Branson refers to the competing parties' ideologies as "national vision," which would define "the meaning of the nation's political symbols, ceremonies, and celebrations."²⁰ Women had experienced broader political

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Branson 3-4.

participation already in the American Revolution and the movement leading up to it, but were subsequently shut out of the formal political structure of the new nation that resulted. Now, as the country's political factions solidified into two distinct political parties, their efforts to garner support and power would shape the informal political sphere and women's role there. Because of the forms which political culture took—fashion, private and public musical entertainment, and especially civic festivals—the role of women moved to a more central and active role than previously, at least for a time. Women's role as moral and cultural guardians defined at the same time the expansion of and limits to their political power.

Democratic-Republican Celebrations and the French Revolution

Americans with pro-Gallic sympathies found a number of excuses for public celebrations and added toasts to the French Revolution to pre-existing civic festivals such as the Fourth of July and celebrations of Washington's Birthday. One typical toast, published in the *Columbian Gazetteer* in 1794, reads "The Republic of France one and individual—May her triumphs multiply every day in the year be rendered a festival in the calender [sic] of Liberty, and a fast in the calender [sic] of courts." Another toast from the same celebration salutes "The Alliance between the sister Republics of the United Sates and France."²¹ Typical descriptions of the festivities include parades through the town lead by carts carrying roasted ox and wine, followed by feasting and numerous political toasts and speeches.²² Other common elements were fireworks, cannon salutes, the singing of political songs—especially "*Ça Ira*"—and the presence

²¹ "Civic Festival," *Columbian Gazetteer*, May 8, 1794, Vol. 1, Issue LXXV, pages 2-3.

²² Ibid.; "Boston, Thursday, January 31, Celebration, of the Feast of Liberty and Equality,"; "Civic Festival," *The North-Carolina Journal*, February 27, 1793, Issue 33, page 2.

of women or girls symbolizing abstract ideas such as Liberty and Equality.²³ Civic festivals fused celebration and politics in the public sphere.

American celebrations developed in direct and conscious relation to French celebrations, although for distinctly American purposes. Democratic-Republicans adopted French models of parade, costume, and song. Perhaps the most popular song, both publicly and privately, was “*Ça Ira*.”²⁴ The title translates as “It’ll Be Okay,” although the lyrics would hardly be found soothing by Federalists:

Oh. It’ll be okay, be okay, be okay,
 Hang the aristocrats from on high!
 Oh. It’ll be okay, be okay, be okay,
 The aristocrats, we’ll hang ‘em all.

Despotism will breathe its last,
 Liberty will take the day,
 Oh. It’ll be okay, be okay, be okay....²⁵

Turbans and “national cockades” in red, white, and blue were popular political statements in fashion. Some chose to address their acquaintances by “citizen” rather than “Mr.,” and the terms “cittess” and “citizeness” were proposed as English equivalents of the French feminine

²³ “Civic Ball—At Portsmouth,” *Massachusetts Mercury*, January 5, 1793, Vol 1, Issue XVI, page 3; “Civic Festival,” *North-Carolina Journal*; “Boston, Thursday, January 31, Celebration, of the Feast of Liberty and Equality.”

²⁴ One specific reference to the song in regards to a civic celebration can be found in “Civic Ball – At Portsmouth,” in *Massachusetts Mercury*, Vol 1, Issue XVI, Feb. 5, 1793 (pg 3).

²⁵ “It’ll Be Okay,” from *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, GMU website.

citoyenne.²⁶ Everywhere, elements of French culture became public political statement, in a form immediately and easily accessible to American women.

American Women, French Women, and the French Revolution

American newspapers were filled with accounts of the French Revolution, and while coverage of women's activities was inconsistent, it was not absent.²⁷ Women's literacy was on the rise in America, making this information available to the majority of white women in the north and nearly half of white women in the south.²⁸ Portrayals of French women in American newspapers and periodicals in cartoon and caricature could often be more about men's political ideals and biases than women themselves.²⁹ Despite this, real news of women's political and revolutionary activities in France did make it to American women, and private correspondence also played a role in connecting French and American women.³⁰ Branson, for example, attributes an account of American women forming a militaristic "Corps-de-Reserve" to the influence of reports from France of women petitioning for the right to bear arms.³¹ Whether the influence was this direct, or more of a general awareness that women could stand in the political spotlight,

²⁶ More details on French modes of fashion and address can be found in Branson, Zagarri, and Branson and Newman.

²⁷ Branson 60.

²⁸ Zagarri 51.

²⁹ See "Chapter Two: The Early Republic's Periodical Campaign for Virtue and Its Influence on Women," of Patricia Leigh Riley Dunlap, *Constructing the Republican Woman: American Periodical Response to the Women of the French Revolution, 1789-1844*, Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University, 1999.

³⁰ Branson 60.

³¹ Ibid. 61-62.

women were too intimately involved in the happenings of the French Revolution to be entirely absent from American accounts and American women were widely exposed to their actions.

American Women Celebrating the French Revolution

Women's importance to civic celebrations started with—but far exceeded—women's role as mass spectators. An account of one civic feast in the *Connecticut Gazette* remarks, "A brilliant collection of Ladies embellished this festive picture."³² Another article, in the *Massachusetts Mercury* attributes the holding of the civic ball to the patriotic desire of the women of Portsmouth.³³ Women's participation as spectators for partisan celebrations took on more significant political connotations than their participation in nationalistic festivals like those celebrating Washington's inauguration. By giving their support to the celebration of a particular party—rather than simply the nation as a whole—women were able to express a specific political stance.

Women were also visible in festivals and parades as symbols or personifications of civic virtues such as Liberty and Equality. This practice had precedent in a number of French celebrations which were imitated in the United States. For example, in the elaborate Feast of Reason ceremonies, where Reason and Liberty were portrayed by young women, surrounded by girls dressed in white.³⁴ These female, personified ideals could be merely figurative—represented perhaps simply by a flame as in one celebration in France³⁵—represented by real, living women,

³² "Boston, January 28. Civic Feast," *Connecticut Gazette*, February 7, 1793, Vol XXX, Issue 1526, page 2-3.

³³ "Civic Ball—At Portsmouth"

³⁴ Ozouf 98-99.

³⁵ Ibid. 98.

or represented by statues, like the adorned form of Liberty that decorated one feast in Boston.³⁶ Branson and Newman refer to these imitative activities on the part of the Democratic-Republicans as French symbolism taken American form.³⁷ The effects, in terms of women's political agency, were mixed. On the one hand, using women as symbols relegated women once more to the realm of moral purity and the pedestal. Zagarri refers to this—and the invoking of real women's support—as women being used “to think with” by men, hardly an example of active involvement on the part of women.³⁸ However, women's participation in festivals as symbols of Liberty, Equality, and purity also indicated a real rise in the visibility of women in the public sphere, attested to by the great controversy it sparked in both France and America.

More importantly, women also participated in public celebrations under more active, self-motivated fashions. Girls wearing white and tricolor ribbons were a standard part of nearly every Republican parade. Toasts were drunk—if not always, then on a significant number of occasions—by both men and women together. Furthermore, women were known to propose toasts themselves and even to give public speeches. One foreign traveler attests, “In some places... the banquet has been shared by both sexes.... The females have even been harangued, in one instance, by one of their own sex; and a speech of this female orator has been published in the news-papers.”³⁹ Women also initiated the singing of political songs, as in the account of one civic ball where, “one female, to indicate her patriotic disposition, concluded the festive scene,

³⁶ “Civic Festival,” *North-Carolina Journal*.

³⁷ Branson and Newman 240-241.

³⁸ Zagarri 103.

³⁹ “The Festival of Independence in Connecticut. By a Traveller; In a Letter to his Friend,” *the Monthly Magazine, and American Review (1799-1800)*, Jul 1799, pg 1- 4.

by calling the democratic dance *Ca Ira* [sic].”⁴⁰ While men might only officially sanction women in politics in a symbolic or moral role, women tested the boundaries of their access to public political participation. As a result, female political participation went far beyond the lip service which men paid to them politically.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of this kind of participation was the widow’s marriage in 1793. The *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* describes the ceremony where a French widow and an American widow were symbolically married:

On Monday last, two celebrated widows, ladies of America and France... conceived the design of living together in the strictest union and friendship; the said amiable ladies in order to give a pledge of their fidelity, requested that their striped gowns should be pinned together, that their children should be looked upon as one family, while their mothers shewed [sic] them an equal affection.⁴¹

The vow was followed by a cannon salute, the singing of ““*Ça Ira*,” and French dances.⁴²

Branson describes the event as a celebration “explicitly conducted by women, for women, with the express purpose of honoring the women of France.”⁴³ Although officiated by men, the ceremony clearly places women in the most central role. Their public pledge makes them representatives of their respective countries; their personal vows also symbolic of Democratic-Republicans desire to bring America and France closer together politically. Here, women are not only participants; they are the entire show.

Backlash

⁴⁰ “Civic Ball – At Portsmouth.”

⁴¹ “Married,” *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, July 20, 1793.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Branson 79.

The significance of women's participation is attested to as well by how seriously their opponents took their actions. Federalists targeted politically active women as group and individually.⁴⁴ William Cobbett, author of *Porcupine's Gazette*, was one of the most well-known and out-spoken critics of Democratic-Republicans, the French Revolution, and particularly women's increasingly visible role in informal politics. In one issue, Cobbett wrote of

these bold, dare-devil, turban-headed females, whom we sometimes meet with in this city.... For my part, I would almost as soon have a host of infernals in my house as these fiery frenchified [sic] dames.—Of all the monsters in human shape, *a bully in petticoats* is the most completely odious and detestable.⁴⁵

Active Democratic-Republican women were also called prostitutes (or “a woman of the town”) and subjected to similar attempts to discredit their actions.⁴⁶ Such a vehement outcry demonstrates that these women were seen as a considerable threat by Federalists and others.

Conclusions

It is important to remember that women participated in a variety of ways, on a variety of scales, for a variety of reasons. While some were content to play their limited role, others saw women's increased inclusion in public celebrations of politics as an opportunity to take on a larger political role. This is evident just in the range of women's activities—from merely symbolic, embodying men's ideas, to actively organizing events around women or taking the initiative to publicly address crowds of both genders. The celebration of democracy opened the

⁴⁴ Ibid. 87-90.

⁴⁵ William Cobbett, “To which the captain in the name of the Company replied;,” *Porcupine's Gazette*, July 27, 1798, vol. 2, issue 433, pg 2.

⁴⁶ “Citess,” *Colombian Centinel*, March 16, 1793, qtd. in Branson and Newman.

space for women's participation—in fact necessitated it to some degree to truly be democratic in spirit—but women themselves helped to determine the shape of their own role. The move towards a greater political voice occurred to varying degrees for different women and groups of women.

Women's greater participation in public political celebrations did not lead to political suffrage or even formal changes in their political rights. What it did do, however, was give women a voice—even a limited one—in the shaping of American political culture and values. On a more practical, personal level, it gave the women participating a public intellectual, political, and emotional outlet. Women's participation blurred the lines between accepted feminine behavior and radical political participation—far enough on one side that respectable middle class women could take part, and far enough on the other that it remained controversial.

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