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Margaretta, Trojan Horse: Judith Sargent Murray and Early American Sexual Equality

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I am not an advocate for undue gentleness, or submissive acquiescence; such conduct may border upon meanness; a woman should be just too, she should reverence herself: I am far from conceding that the female world, considered in the aggregate, is inferior to the male.

The Gleaner

The two and a half centuries since the American founding have not afforded permanent solutions to the problem of sexual inequality in the United States. 2022's *Dobbs v. Jackson* reignited debates over reproductive rights. Recent cultural and social shifts have increasingly scrutinized women, with the "woke" congregating on the left and the "trad" on the right. The #repealthe19th hashtag, advocating for the removal of women's right to vote, trended during both the 2016 and 2020 election cycles. Despite any progress of the past few centuries, the political and social statuses of women are still debated and negotiated far more than those of men. Sexual inequality has persisted throughout American history from its very origins. The founding, and the Constitution it begot, is often considered the final and ultimate authority on

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American politics, and among the great founders, few recognized women as citizens.[1] Women of the founding era could not vote or run for office. At the time of the founding, most states maintained coverture laws that prevented women from exercising economic, political, or social independence apart from their husbands, even in cases of abuse.[2] As the country now approaches its semiquincentennial, the right of female suffrage has just passed its one-hundredth anniversary. While modern American women can now lay claim to the full privileges of citizenship, this results only from generations' worth of struggles by earlier American women, constituting a complicated and well-documented thread in the annals of American history.[3] The history of political thought discourse on the American founding and its documents has, subsequently, offered little recourse for the persistent problem of sexual inequality.[4] Literature on American history and politics rarely centers on female equality as a theme of the American founding.[5] However, this dismisses and undervalues the work of certain founding era women who, at the outset of the young nation, fought for the place of women within the American political order. If the founding, as many have argued, cannot be captured only in its documents or confined to the four walls of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, then it might include these women as well.[6] Their work intimates that the fight for sexual equality *is* a story embedded in the American founding and that the plight of American women takes wing not sometime after the birth of the nation but at its origin. These thinkers provide evidence that the idea of sexual equality is original, perhaps not to the US Constitution itself, but to the era of the American founding.[7]

Judith Sargent Murray, a Gloucester, Massachusetts, native and wife of the controversial Universalist minster John Murray, modeled this line of thinking during the founding. By the time Murray published her most popular treatise on sexual equality in 1790 (two years before Mary Wollstonecraft published *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*), she had already spent years ruminating and writing on the subject. Resentful of the social and political world that had denied her a much-desired education and, in many ways,

a meaningful voice, Murray chafed under the limitations imposed on her by her sex.[8] She was a prolific essayist and author, publishing hundreds of essays, as well as poems and plays, during the founding era. Although never as famous as she hoped to become, Murray was a moderately successful thinker and writer for her time, a writer whose subscribers included the likes of George Washington and John Adams and who sparred with literary kingmaker Robert Treat Paine. Perhaps Murray's magnum opus was her collection of over one hundred essays entitled *The Gleaner*.[9] Named for the pseudonym she adopted to write the essays, the collection spans myriad topics and genres, from politics to moral considerations to social commentary to episodic novellas. Within this collection, Murray set forth a careful and rhetorically sophisticated argument for sexual equality.

Murray's argumentation is powerful in its subtlety. While she held sexual equality—a highly controversial position—as the golden apple of her political advocacy, she attempted to inculcate sympathy for her position among her *Gleaner* readership in uncontroversial ways. It is not until the final decade of the essay series (88–91) that Murray finally reveals her bold argument for sexual equality, after carefully setting the scene for the validity of her logic in the preceding essays. Throughout *The Gleaner*, for example, Murray explores the qualities of the great (and uniformly male) citizens of history. Then, in essays 88–91, she argues that women have, from antiquity, always possessed the same qualities. To make this point, Murray presents historical examples of women with strength of mind and will equal to that of men, and she preemptively prepares her readers for this argument in her famous *Story of Margaretta*. In installments and interspersed between essays of other genres and topics, Murray, cloaked in two layers of male perspective, unfolds a story of female virtue in the life story of Margaretta Melworth. *The Story of Margaretta* subtly advances ideas of sexual equality cogent with later, more explicit essays. Murray, as "The Gleaner," primes her audience by first encouraging them to empathize with Margaretta as she grows from child to woman to wife and mother. There is little to spark controversy in

Margaretta: the heroine is a perfectly respectable and feminine figure, acceptable to even the most patriarchal readers. However, through Margaretta, Murray unveils the ordinary everydayness with which even the least daring of women exercises intellect and strength on par with men. Murray illustrates, with Margaretta, a woman who, by no great or exceptional action—merely by her ordinary behavior—should be seen as equal to her male peers. Specifically, *Margaretta* sets the scene for essays 88–91 in the *Gleaner* series by endearing to readers a palatable heroine who exercises prudence, fortitude, and public influence in the same measure as men.

Murray's attempt to gradually baptize her readership into sympathizing with the plight of sexual equality never came to fruition in the way she planned. The first release of *The Gleaner*, originally planned as a series of essays with *Massachusetts Magazine*, was cut short by the magazine's collapse, and only a third of the planned series went to print. Having written much of the series before the collapse of the magazine, Murray later published all one hundred essays of *The Gleaner* together in three volumes. The original medium for this work, however, contextualizes Murray's rhetorical choices. Murray intended to camouflage her female identity until the end, presenting her male-dictated story of the heroine Margaretta as a Trojan horse in which her real object, advocacy for sexual equality, might ride unnoticed into the minds of her readers. This examination of the *Gleaner* essays showcases Murray's novel arguments for sexual equality and provides evidence that these ideas were alive and well during the American founding. Inasmuch, it adds texture to our modern understanding of American political thought by focusing on the rhetorical strategies and ideas presented by a woman, in defense of sexual equality, at the time of the founding.

A Brief History of *The Gleaner*

Most of Murray's non-*Gleaner* writings were published under the name Constantia. Pseudonymous writing was not uncommon during Murray's lifetime, and writers' rationales for using

pseudonyms varied. Female writers especially tended to adopt pseudonyms to engage in conversations that may otherwise have been closed to them.[10] Even so, Murray's Constantia was a distinctly female voice, concerned with distinctly female issues. It was under this name that Murray published her first treatise on sexual equality, "Desultory Thoughts upon the Utility of Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms," in 1784, and her most famous treatise on the same topic, "On the Equality of the Sexes," in 1790. Despite her persistence in using the pseudonym, Murray's identity as Constantia was an open secret.[11] When writing for the monthly *Massachusetts Magazine* between 1792 and 1794, however, Murray abandoned her identity as Constantia completely for a time. She took up a new identity for these essays: "The Gleaner." In contrast to Constantia, The Gleaner presents as a definitively male voice. In the first essay of the series, The Gleaner describes himself as "a *rather* plain man" and addresses his readers as "gentlemen," as though they were his equals in society.[12] Throughout the course of the collection, The Gleaner tells *The Story of Margaretta*—a story in which he is himself a character, a Mr. Vigillus, who along with his wife, Mary, strives to educate his young charge for a happy life. The Gleaner, postured as a gentleman and father, represented a break in narrative strategy for Murray.

This narrative break seems to have been a purposeful choice, a part of Murray's unfulfilled original plan for *The Gleaner*'s publication. The first third of the Gleaner essays published in installments in *Massachusetts Magazine* from 1792 to 1794 did not explicitly connect The Gleaner to Constantia. However, the three-volume collected edition of *The Gleaner*, published after the folding of the magazine, did. Murray signed the introduction to the three-volume set "Constantia," for the first time revealing the identity of The Gleaner to be female, and even outing herself as the author to those who knew Constantia's identity.[13] This introductory claiming of The Gleaner's work for Constantia is a byproduct of reality's interference with intention. Murray exercised great control over her own writing and narrative voice, but she could not control the folding of *Massachusetts Magazine*. In her concluding entry in

The Gleaner, which also serves to "unmask" The Gleaner as Constantia, Murray writes that "my original design was to continue [my essays] in [*Massachusetts Magazine*]" and that she had much of the series written by the time the magazine went under.[14] She even mentions that she would be glad to resume the series should the magazine ever regain fiscal solvency. *The Gleaner* essays were conceptualized, planned, and written as a series of installments, with the author's identity hidden until the end. It is with that context that one must examine Murray's purposes in writing and ordering the essays as she did, and why she adopted the male identity of The Gleaner. Murray always sought to unmask the gentlemanly Gleaner as a woman; she just hoped to do it at the end of an episodic journey. The closing of the magazine disrupted her vision for these essays, and as such, in the published volume, she instead claimed the female authorship of the series at its outset.

Murray herself explains in detail why she chose to write for this series as The Gleaner as opposed to Constantia. She hoped to avoid the "indifference" and "contempt" often leveled against female authors during her lifetime.[15] She desired "the unbiassed sentiments of my associates" and wanted to be "considered *independent as a writer*."[16] She wanted her ideas to be taken seriously and knew that they may not be taken seriously if it were known that they came from a woman's pen. While *The Gleaner* covers a plethora of different topics, there is little doubt that Murray's ideas regarding women would have been some of those that captured the indifference, contempt, and bias of her readership had they been attributed to a woman. Murray's careful planning for *The Gleaner* shows that she sought to win her readership over. Adopting a male pseudonym was the first step in this process. The next would be to slowly ingratiate her readership to the idea of sexual equality, using the voice and authority of her male narration. Murray hoped to do this in installments, feeding her readers the breadcrumbs of sexual equality month by month until, by the publication of essays 88–91, she had conditioned her readers to consider her strong declarations of women's abilities and subsequent claim to equality. *Margaretta* was meant to play an important role in this process, paving the way

for these later essays with a sympathetic heroine. Specifically, *Margaretta* subtly reveals its titular character to be capable of prudence, fortitude, and public mindedness on par with any man.

In essays 88–91, which she describes as a continuation of her famous essay "On the Equality of the Sexes," Murray presents her case for sexual equality as if to a courtroom, writing,

> The highly respectable and truly honourable court is, we presume, convened; the jury are empaneled, and we proceed to the examination of the witnesses, leaving the pleadings to those silent suggestions and interferences, which, we are assured, will voluntarily enlist themselves as advocates in every ingenuous bosom. The pending cause, as we have before observed, involved the establishment of the female intellect, or the maintain the justice and propriety considering women, as far as relates to their understanding, in *every respect*, equal to men. Our evidences tend to prove them:
>
> *First,* Alike capable of enduring hardships.
> *Secondly,* Equally ingenious, and fruitful in resources.
> *Thirdly*, Their fortitude and heroism cannot be surpassed.
> *Fourthly*, They are equally brave.
> *Fifthly,* They are as patriotic.
> *Sixthly*, As influential.
> *Seventhly*, As energetic, and as eloquent.
> *Eighthly*, As faithful, and as persevering in their attachments.
> *Ninthly*, As capable of supporting, with honor, the toils of the government.
> And
> *Tenthly*, and *Lastly*, They are equally susceptible of every literary acquirement.[17]

Not coincidentally, these ten claims fit comfortably under the umbrellas of public influence, fortitude, and prudence. Points five,

six, and nine point toward public influence. Points one, three, four, and eight gesture toward fortitude. And, finally, points two, seven, and ten gesture toward prudence. For each point, Murray provides historical evidence of women who exhibited these qualities in force, on par with the men of their day. In doing so, she makes the claim that women have always possessed the capacity for, and sometimes even exercised in action, the qualities that make men eligible for political participation and elevated social status. Further, the enduringly palatable story of Margaretta, offensive to few and enjoyed by many, sets the stage for these claims by detailing Margaretta's own possession of prudence, fortitude, and public influence, showing her to be an average, everyday example of the intellectual and spiritual equality of the sexes.

Prudence

Essays 88–91 of *The Gleaner* show Murray extolling the capabilities of women, which show them to be equal to men. The first of these capabilities is prudence.[18] This is an intellectual virtue, akin to common sense. Associated with it are the capacities, equally attributed by Murray to men and women, to be "ingenious, and fruitful in resources," to be "energetic . . . and eloquent," and to acquire literary accomplishments.[19] Women and men are equal, Murray argues, because they are *intellectually equal*. Their capacities of reason are the same. For Murray, this fact, among others, constitutes sound reasoning for the recognition of sexual equality in America—an argument that bears out in *The Story of Margaretta*.

Margaretta exhibits the use of prudence throughout her narrative. She is superficially intellectual—her writing style shows to be pretty and precise, she pens verses, and she is accomplished in the ways expected of young ladies. But beyond this, she is shown to be a person capable of making independent, competent, and correct decisions when given adequate information. Her prudence is best seen in her rejection of the cad Sinisterus Courtland, with whom at one point she believed herself deeply in love. Key to the story of Margaretta's refusal of the scheming suitor is the remove of her parents. The Gleaner, Mr. Vigillus himself, reveals to the reader

previous knowledge of a scandal in which Courtland had been embroiled, but also a reticence to reveal this knowledge to his adopted daughter, Margaretta. Rather, Mr. and Mrs. Vigillus offer only one point of contention to Courtland's suit: that they had hoped Margaretta would wed the son of their family friend, Edward Hamilton, but would not force her to do so against her will. The Vigilluses' explicit withdrawal of control over Margaretta's choice of Hamilton underscores a second, implicit withdrawal of control: she may choose Courtland if she wishes. The Vigilluses do not prohibit Margaretta from engaging Courtland or curb her ability to make an independent choice. Rather, they place full faith in Margaretta's capacity to exercise prudent judgment.

Courtland is a man of many faults; later in the narrative, readers learn that he has deceived, ruined, and abandoned a young lady from a neighboring town, leaving her with three of his illegitimate children. A final scene between Courtland and Mr. Vigillus reveals that his true intentions with Margaretta center on her fortune. But none of these egregious offenses marked the end of Margaretta's affections for Courtland. Rather, her judgment of Courtland comes earlier, in response to a far less severe sin. Courtland claims ownership of an anonymous poem published in the town encyclical, written in honor of the fair Margaretta, which is revealed to be penned instead by the spurned Edward Hamilton.[20] Upon her knowledge of this situation, Margaretta immediately sours on Courtland, unwilling to even remain in the same room as the man for whom she had professed deep love. "I am convinced that he is poorly mean," Margaretta declares, "that he is capable of the most deliberate baseness; and never shall my soul bind itself in alliance with an unworthy pretender, who and thus pitifully stoop to purloin the fame, with which undoubted merit had invested his superior."[21] While her parents quiet her concern in anticipation of the full flower of Courtland's downfall, Margaretta's decision, left to her alone, is made. Her understanding of propriety, and the prudent caution with which she approaches the idea of marriage, even while besotted with her suitor, reveals her capability as an independent person of wise judgment.

Margaretta is exactly the kind of person that Murray's society (and our own) would have deemed most silly and illogical: a teenage girl crossed in love. And yet, Murray shows Margaretta to be capable of prudence, an honored intellectual virtue. She does not need to know of Courtland's catastrophic sins to calculate that he would be a poor choice of husband; she knows this by merit of his dishonesty alone, even about something so small as a few very bad lines of verse. While Murray's audience cheers the emancipation of Margaretta's affections from the clutches of a villain, Murray works in a subtle point: Margaretta possesses the virtue of prudence. She is evidence of Murray's larger argument for sexual equality. During Murray's lifetime, the intellectual inferiority of women was assumed and entrenched. *Margaretta* reveals a woman with good sense, self-discipline, and intellectual skill on par with her male peers.

Fortitude

Murray also argues that women and men are equal in fortitude. This was perhaps an even bolder claim than her first, regarding intellect, as fortitude is a cousin of courage, and courage was and to this day is often considered the territory of men. Murray even challenges this generalization of courage, writing, "[P]roofs abound; and numerous actions might be produce to evince, that courage is by no means *exclusively* a masculine virtue."[22] But this did not change the fact that more typically "feminine" displays of bravery were in Murray's time (as they are in our own) less likely to be considered "courage" and more likely to be perceived as "endurance" or "perseverance," or the like. As such, Murray draws a link between traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine forms of bravery, encompassing them both in what the keen-eyed reader might deem "fortitude."[23] Female fortitude, Murray argues, has been as important in dictating the course of history as male courage. She tracks the history of female bravery back to Sparta, through Europe and Asia, into Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and across wars of conquest, politics, and religion. In these examples, Murray shows not only that women have stood and fought for king and country but also that they have exhibited quieter forms

bravery, enduring struggles and even facing death with strength equal to, if not exceeding, that of men. Murray insists that women are not inferior to men in fortitude and offers this as further evidence that men and women should be seen as equals.

Murray sets the tone for this claim in *The Story of Margaretta*. Margaretta's fortitude does not take place on the battlefield, and it does not require her to sacrifice life and limb, but it is still unmistakable as bravery. After rejecting Courtland, Margaretta realizes her long-dormant affections for Edward Hamilton, the friend of her family whom she had previously scorned. The two marry and live happily as a well-matched couple for several years. This is suddenly upended when Margaretta falls pregnant with their first child, and Edward cools toward her, becoming distracted and distressed. The readers are led to believe that Edward may be having an affair with his adopted sister. However, it is revealed instead that following Margaretta's first rejection years earlier, Edward fled south and lost most of his fortune gambling. He became and remained deeply in debt, and Margaretta's pregnancy has forced him to confront his inability to provide for his family.

Margaretta's response to this revelation of her financial situation is not anger or indignation but relief. "*Tranquility!*" She exclaims. "Creator, and Almighty Preserver of my life, how have I deserved this fullness of felicity, which, like a mighty torrent, now bursts upon me? O Edward! My *faultless, my injured husband*! But instantly, on my knees, I will supplicate the benign tenderness of that manly bosom, to intercede in my favor."[24] At first, she does not dwell on the severity of her financial situation; she feels only relief that her husband's morality remains unimpeached and his affections are fixed on her. This peace does not fade when the reality of her newfound poverty sets in. Rather, Mr. Vigillus describes the following months thus: "Peace, with every accompaniment, which ever clusters in the train of tranquility, was reinstated in her bosom. . . . Margaretta seemed to regard poverty as the angel of serenity. Indeed a true knowledge of her circumstances had relieved her from a mighty pressure."[25] Margaretta, as has already been noted, is an inoffensive, traditional heroine. She is not self-sufficient; she

relies wholly on her husband for the provision of her life and livelihood, as well as that of her unborn child. The news of Edward's ruin is also the news of her ruin—indeed, only slightly less of a ruin than his leaving her for another woman. In this moment, Margaretta faces the loss of her way of life, which had been comfortable since her placement with the Vigilluses, and an existence of scarcity theretofore unknown to her. It is a crisis indeed—the most significant crisis of Margaretta's life. And yet, in the face of crisis, Margaretta exhibits no petulance, denial, or weakness, but fortitude. She remains a devoted wife and mother and faces with determination (though deep sadness) the fact that her husband must go abroad to provide for her family, leaving her alone in life and in a precarious state for women of her station. In fact, Margaretta may in this vignette be even more fortitudinous and brave than Edward, who cannot summon the strength to face his economic reality or be forthcoming with his own wife. Not all bravery is exhibited on or adjacent to battlefields; in fact, a good amount of it occurs in the facing of familial and domestic challenges. If such an exhibition is not to be called courage, then it might be called fortitude. Margaretta's strength in the face of adversity is evidence for Murray's larger point—namely, that women can and do exhibit fortitude in the same measure as men and that this, in part, suggests a claim to equality.

Public Influence

Finally, Murray argues for the recognition of sexual equality on the grounds that women and men possess the same ability to shape their communities. As Murray writes, men and women are equally influential and "capable of supporting, with honour, the toils of government."[26] This category of abilities is the one most closely associated with politics. In fact, Murray shows that throughout history women have wielded the influence within their power so deftly as to have successfully circumvented political attempts to stifle them. She proves that even without the benefit of specific political rights, women can and do enact positive change in their communities. Murray offers examples in the wife and mother of

Coriolanus, who together swayed Coriolanus's will and saved Rome, as well as great female leaders ranging from Artemisia of Caria to Queen Elizabeth I.

Even before she presents these bold historical examples, however, Murray has set the stage with Margaretta once again. Margaretta, by merit of her adoption into the comfortable Vigillus family, is shown to be a young woman with some degree of influence. While not quite an Austenian Emma, Margaretta is well regarded within her communities. She is well educated, well spoken, and outwardly virtuous. She is a young woman to whom other young women might turn with respect, and perhaps even imitate; she is the type of woman that men recognize as a suitable wife and life partner; she is a daughter that young parents might aspire to raise. In her marriage to Edward Hamilton, Margaretta also became one of the foremost ladies in her town's society, responsible for setting the tone for social practice. This is not an abundantly powerful position by any stretch of the imagination, for the eternally palatable Margaretta never dreams of engaging in politics or encroaching on any traditionally male spaces. But while occupying even this humble position as a leading lady in her limited society, Margaretta provides evidence for Murray's argument that women are equally as public minded as men and use their tools at their disposal for the benefit of their neighbors and communities. Consider Margaretta's treatment of the unfortunate Fanny Wellwood. Freed of her affection for Courtland, Margaretta learns from out-of-town friends of her former suitor's greatest sin. He wooed and carried away an orphaned heiress of a great fortune, the aforementioned Miss Wellwood. He kept her in a squalid apartment for years, refusing to marry her even as she bore him three children. And then, he abandoned her, leaving her to her fate as he courted Margaretta.

Already ruined by her choice to run away with Courland, Fanny, betrayed by his abandonment, sunk to the lowest levels of society. In the eyes of society it made her contemptible—a fallen woman, the mother of bastards and nothing more. Few knew of her true fate, however. Margaretta, by correspondence, became

one of the few acquainted with Fanny's fall. This newfound knowledge constitutes an inflection point for Margaretta. How will she perceive and treat Fanny, given the circumstances? Fanny might be considered either a romantic rival for Courtland's affections or the embodiment of the humiliation Margaretta experienced in being taken in by Courtland. Moreover, the virtuous Margaretta, who prudently judged Courtland to be an unsuitable match, would have been within her rights to scoff and sneer at Fanny or to consider her below notice. She might have made public news of Fanny's ruin. Social dictates of the time would have allowed, and even encouraged, such treatment. As Margaretta rose in the social ranks from gentleman's daughter to gentleman's wife with her marriage to Hamilton, those in her social circles likely would have followed her lead. If Margaretta chose to rebuke Fanny, others in her social circles, especially women, would too. However, knowing the scope of her own influence, Margaretta does not treat Fanny with disdain nor publicize her humiliation. She views Fanny for what she is: an unfortunate victim of circumstance worthy of her notice and assistance. Subsequently, she writes to Fanny: "I am authorized to offer you the extricating hands, and protecting arms of those matchless benefactors who, with unexampled condescension, have dignified the *orphan* Margaretta, by investing her with the titled of *their daughter*."[27] Even in taking pity on Fanny, Margaretta extends not charity but true compassion. Margaretta offers Fanny the full support of her own adoptive parents, whom she entreats to ensure that Courtland is made to marry the mother of his children. This generosity does not originate with the Vigilluses; they merely follow the lead of their daughter. Although her sphere of influence is small, Margaretta exercises the power she has for good. She paves the way in ensuring Fanny's acceptance back into the folds of society. Margaretta's kindness and her willingness to use her social influence to assist Fanny rather than dismiss her guarantee a happy ending to Fanny's unfortunate tale: Courtland does, in fact, marry her and raise her from ruin. Without the indulgence of Margaretta and, by proxy, the Vigilluses, Fanny likely would have sunk even lower than her abysmal condition. Instead,

Margaretta ensured that justice was done for the deserving within her sphere of influence. Fanny's fate hinged on Margaretta's treatment, and Margaretta chose her reprieve rather than condemnation. She influenced the lives of the people around her, even without the benefit of political rights. In doing so, the character provides ammunition for Murray's assertion that women and men are equally influential on issues concerning the public and therefore should be considered equal. Although women have not had the same opportunities to explicitly influence the public world in the form of legislation, the influence of women on society and behavior has always played an important role in shaping the public sphere.

The Upshot of *Margaretta*

The Story of Margaretta contains the seeds of Murray's reasoning for sexual equality and political independence. Piece by piece, Murray builds a protagonist who is at once recognizable and compelling but also worthy of sexual equality in politics and society. One can imagine how readers of *The Gleaner*, believing the essays to be written by a gentleman, might have begun to internalize Margaretta's evident virtue and worthiness. With each installment, one can imagine readers voraciously tearing into the magazine, hoping that good things would come to such an intelligent, courageous, and influential young woman. Margaretta was designed to capture the hearts of Murray's readers.

Imagine now how the conclusion of *The Gleaner* series might have played out if it had been published in installments as intended. Essays 88–91 arrive, bold in their assertions of sexual equality and listing as evidence the very characteristics that have made readers love Margaretta. Perhaps this rhetorical strategy would have ingratiated some who would not have otherwise embraced such ideas. Perhaps the concealment of the author's true gender would have allowed these ideas more room to breathe in the spheres of public debate. And then, perhaps the final revelation of The Gleaner as Constantia may have opened the eyes of some to the folly of treating the writing of women with contempt and bias. Of course,

Massachusetts Magazine folded, and Murray published *The Gleaner* in its entirety, with Constantia's signature in the introduction. We will never know how these essays might have influenced public debate if they had been released as intended, but we can track Murray's planning and rhetoric, and in doing so see that *Margaretta* lays the groundwork for her more controversial claims about sexual equality.

An important subtext to her story, however, is that Margaretta, good-natured as she is, does not come by the traits on her own. Margaretta is *taught* by Mr. and Mrs. Vigillus the importance of prudence, fortitude, and public mindedness. Murray sets forth to show that women are not naturally deficient or less capable than men. Instead, much like her contemporary Wollstonecraft, Murray avers that educations afforded to women have stunted them, making them unable to reach the same intellectual and spiritual heights as their male counterparts. Supposed evidence of female intellectual inferiority, like gossip, is instead for Murray evidence of mental atrophy. Female inferiority has been nurtured, Murray argues, and is not of nature. She describes women of her generation as "circumscribed in their education within very narrow limits, and constantly depressed by their occupations."[28] Afforded a meaningful education and access to the life of the mind, Murray asserts, women can develop their natural capabilities; their intellect, fortitude, and public influence will only grow. This is a good in and of itself and would also spill over into family and public life, perhaps eventually allowing for female citizenship and political participation, as well as stronger, better-educated, and more virtuous families. Like many advocates for sexual equality today, Murray identifies that the primary obstacle to the advancement of sexual equality lies not in the natural deficiencies of women but in the absence of opportunities for women to participate in politics and society on equal footing with men.

Murray's writings, in *The Gleaner* and elsewhere, provide evidence that the narrative of sexual equality in America began with the birth of the nation. They show that sexual equality was both imagined and discussed at the time of the founding. During

his sojourn in America, Alexis de Tocqueville described nations with this analogy: "[T]he whole man is there, if one may put it so, in the cradle."[29] If Tocqueville is correct, then it is incumbent on those who wish to understand American society and politics to know the cradle in which they were born. To do so requires looking past the traditionally accepted canon of early American political thought to glean a more holistic understanding of the ideas and debates present during this time. In this, we can appreciate Murray as an important, if understudied, voice of the American founding and as definitive evidence that the fight for sexual equality in American began at its origins. As such, Murray's argumentation and ideas provide fruit even today for those who seek to understand ongoing American politics and the role of women within the political sphere.

Notes

1. Even John Adams, who so famously loved and respected his wife, Abigail, waved away her concerns that American politics had forgotten the plight of women. Important exceptions may be found in James Wilson, who spoke to women specifically in his *Lectures on Law*, and Benjamin Rush, one of the first male proponents of female public education in America.
2. Brandon Dabling, *A New Birth of Marriage* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 79–83.
3. Linda K. Kerber, "The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of Martin vs. Massachusetts, 1805," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 349–78.
4. This refers to analyses of the founding era, excluding later amendments to the Constitution.
5. Carl N Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*, vol. 645 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Mark E. Kann, *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 1998); Mark E. Kann, *The Gendering of American Politics: Founding Mothers, Founding Fathers, and Political Patriarchy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—an American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 187–205; Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers:*

Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society (New York: Vintage, 2011); Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land* (New York: Little, Brown, 1970); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

6. Bernard Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Daniel L Dreisbach et al., eds., *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); Victoria Smith Ekstrand and Cassandra Imfeld Jeyaram, "Our Founding Anonymity: Anonymous Speech during the Constitutional Debate," *American Journalism* 28, no. 3 (2011): 35–60; Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2008); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2011); Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," *William and Mary Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1988): 3–32; Cokie Roberts, *Founding Mothers* (New York: HarperColins, 2004).
7. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792 and thus might constitute its inclusion in the broadly construed "founding era" of political thought. However, very few would consider Wollstonecraft part of the American founding—she was English. This work seeks to locate *American* voices for sexual equality during the American founding.
8. In her adulthood, Murray also joined John Murray's burgeoning Universalist Church, whose doctrine maintained that all minds and souls were created equal, and that the only true differences between men and women were temporal—the physical. Some of her insistence on the intellectual and spiritual equality of the sexes likely stemmed from these religious beliefs.
9. For the sake of clarity, *The Gleaner* or *Gleaner* refers to the essay collection as it was published in 1798 and The Gleaner refers to the pseudonym used by Murray.
10. Gay Gibson Cima, "Black and Unmarked: Phillis Wheatley, Mercy Otis Warren, and the Limits of Strategic Anonymity," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 4 (2000): 465–95; Ekstrand and Jeyaram, "Our Founding Anonymity: Anonymous Speech during the Constitutional Debate"; Kathrynn Seidler Engberg, *The Right to Write: The Literary Politics of Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009);

Philip Hicks, "Portia and Marcia: Female Political Identity and the Historical Imagination, 1770–1800," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2005): 265–94; Paul Lewis, "'Lines Written by a Lady': Judith Sargent Murray and a Mystery of Feminist Authorship," *New England Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2019): 615–32.

11. Nina Baym, "Introduction " in *The Gleaner* (Schenectady, NY: Union College Press, 1992).
12. Judith Sargent Murray, *The Gleaner* (Schenectady, NY: Union College Press, 1992), 15–16.
13. Murray also personally sold subscriptions to the collected edition of *The Gleaner* before its printing, so there was little opportunity to mistake the identity of The Gleaner.
14. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 806.
15. Ibid., 804.
16. Ibid., 805.
17. Ibid., 711.
18. Ibid., 704.
19. Ibid., 711.
20. The irony that this is Courtland's undoing, given Murray's layers of narration, must not be lost on the reader.
21. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 86.
22. Ibid., 706.
23. While Murray does use the word *fortitude* throughout *The Gleaner*, this categorization belongs to this analysis of Murray's work more than Murray's own explicit categorization.
24. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 173–74.
25. Ibid., 224.
26. Ibid., 711.
27. Ibid., 100.
28. Ibid., 705.
29. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 31.