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Book Review:

Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women 1750 – 1800*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.

For years, scholarly efforts that addressed the role of women in the eighteenth-century embraced a central theme “that the preindustrial American woman’s economic contribution to the household gave her a social status higher than that of her European contemporaries and her nineteenth-century descendants” (Norton xviii). Historians contended that colonial women “were relatively equal partners within the home, that they often engaged in business activities outside the household, that gender roles were not sharply defined, and that women consequently developed high self esteem” (Norton xviii). This idea was thoroughly challenged by Mary Beth Norton in her book, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women*. Norton’s extensive research into eighteenth-century women’s private and public lives reveals defined separate spheres with clear gender roles in which women were excluded from the public realm and confined to a narrow domestic sphere. This unfavorable situation of women, Norton argues, would have continued had it not been for the demands of the Revolutionary movement that required them to be independent and take on roles that had traditionally been assigned to men. Although the Revolution brought “no widespread reform of legal codes, no universal enfranchisement of women, no public feminist movement” Norton concludes the changes in women’s private lives were significant (Norton xiv). Norton relies on diaries, letters, and government records to illustrate the

lives of a diverse group of women before the Revolutionary War and the improvements that were a result of their actions.

Norton's book is divided into two parts. Part one, *The Constant Patterns of Women's Lives* focuses on colonial women's domestic life including observations about work both in and out of the home, marriage, fertility, feminine identity, and legal independence. Part two, *The Changing Patterns of Women's Lives* examines the way in which "the boundaries of the feminine sphere itself began to change" due to the events leading up to and during the Revolutionary War (Norton 156). Norton examines the impact the war had on women's daily lives. "With the menfolk away serving in the armies for varying lengths of time, white female Americans had to venture into new fields of endeavor" (Norton 195). Out of necessity, Norton argues women took on new roles that accelerated changes in their lives during the postwar period. These changes were most profound in women's education and led to the first generation of educated female Americans. This education in turn created a "new era of female history" and a changing notion of womanhood that would dominate the 19th century with a new idea known as Republican womanhood (Norton 298).

Norton's vast scope of research included women from all ranks of the colonies. She attempts to examine rural and urban, black and white, northern and southern, and middle and upper class women. Using diaries, letters and printed literature, Norton's research is successful in that it set a standard for future research. Rather than research writings about women in the colonial period, Norton focused on women's writings about themselves. Inequality between the sexes went unquestioned and was reflected in a woman's domestic role. Colonial women were largely left out of financial matters and

often to the detriment of the entire family, including the male head of household. Colonial men “failed to recognize the potential benefits- to their children and their estates, if not to themselves- of keeping their wives informed about family finances (Norton 7). However, Norton recognizes that many women were rarely interested in the public sphere and, accepted the prescribed private domain as natural. Norton includes women’s statements that reinforce these separate spheres. “Nature & Custom seems to have desired us for the more endearing & private & the Man for the more active & busy Walks of Life, remarked Elizabeth Willing Powel, a leader of Philadelphia society, in 1784 (Norton 7). This acceptance is evident in the many domestic tasks assigned to the female. From cleaning, cooking and child rearing to cloth making, women were isolated in their homes and expected to carry out specific duties that shaped the feminine identity. Norton recognizes some differences in the tasks depending on whether the woman lived in the country or city or the woman’s economic status and marital status. However, the common theme is that women were subjugated to male dominance and defined by their domestic responsibilities.

Although most women were unhappy with the boredom, isolation and drudgery of their work, domestic education was recognized as necessary to becoming a “notable” wife. “Abigail Adams believed it an indispensable requisite, that every American wife, should herself know, how to order, and regulate her family” (Norton 25). Women were left with little time or privacy and it was in certain circumstances where women experienced any independence. The examples Norton provides are in religious piety and widowhood. Women experienced religious leadership in various denominations and gradual financial independence upon a husband’s death. Yet situations were few and far

between. Norton argues it would take a war to transform the prescribed gender roles to which women had grown accustomed.

The demands of the Revolutionary War required women to re-examine their roles. Norton argues the “decade of turbulence that preceded the Revolution touched the lives of colonial women” in ways that changed female behavior (Norton 155). Economic boycotts of British goods led to an appreciation of traditional domestic work such a cloth making. Norton argues that women (primarily of the middling and wealthy sort) had control over household purchases which politicized many women and gave their domestic work public significance and value. Norton refers to the women who supported the colonial boycotts as patriotic activists (Norton 157). Much of her evidence here is from newspaper essays urging women to support the non-consumption movement. Although women’s work such as producing homespun cloth was not beyond their traditional domestic sphere, colonial leaders emphasized its importance and with that the context of their daily tasks changed (Norton 163). Norton cites community efforts that supported women’s activities. This change “must have been exceedingly attractive to any eighteenth- century American woman raised in an environment that had previously devalued both her and her domestic sphere (Norton 167). Out of necessity and wartime disruptions, many women found themselves having to make “crucial decisions involving not only household and family but also the “outdoor affairs” from which they had formerly been excluded” (Norton 195). Although women’s lives remained in the home, Norton argues the Revolution enhanced independence, social recognition and self-respect.

Norton describes a developing ideology of republicanism that both changes society's view of women and their own self-conceptions (Norton 228). She refers to this ideology as Republican Womanhood in which a woman's private world intersected with the public domain. The public importance that was attached to women's activities formed the cornerstone of a virtuous postwar American society. The role of women became one that would be expected to not only possess domestic skills, but also have awareness and knowledge of public affairs and a duty to nurture future citizens. An emphasis on virtue led to a turning point in women's education. "With the new stress on the household as the source of virtue and stability in government, attention necessarily focused on women, the traditional directors of household activities....By the 1780s and 1790s, numerous authors proclaimed the importance of America's female citizens" (Norton 243). Norton argues it "seemed as though republican theorists believed that the fate of the republic rested squarely, perhaps solely, upon the shoulders of womenfolk" (Norton 243). Creating a virtuous society in turn led to greater emphasis for women's education providing more opportunity for schooling. This Norton argues, brought about the most significant social change for women.

Norton's book was published simultaneously with another important study on women, Linda Kerber's book *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Kerber coined the phrase "Republican Motherhood", but Norton agrees the era brought about challenges to the patriarchal society in the elevated the status of the role of women from that of an isolated task master to a keeper of the values or a new virtuous nation. Upon reading some reviews of Norton's book, her work is not without criticism. Robert Gross, in a review for the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1982,

explains “Norton perceives no signs of restiveness among women until the dramatic forces of revolution and war swept into their homes and carried them forward into a new era of independence (Gross 236). He asserts the patriarchal society was already under “severe strain in the late colonial period and that the Revolution served to accelerate and, even more, to legitimate the pent-up strivings for liberty felt by a new generation of women” (Gross 236). Gross is correct in pointing out that women had many reasons to rebel against the men who dominated their lives. Gross explains “wartime challenges of maintaining the home front do not inexorably encourage a taste for independence” (Gross 236). His argument is supported with the example of the importance of middle-class women taking on domesticated roles at the conclusion of World War II. He also cites early education efforts for girls in New England and the dramatic increase in literacy rates as well as widespread bridal pregnancies that indicate there was already a breakdown in some of the conventional behavior prior to the war. Considering no significant change in legal status or civil rights for women resulted from the Revolutionary effort, the emphasis on the important role the war had on the status of women in the new republic may be exaggerated. Also, not all women benefitted from the new opportunities education brought. However, Norton’s study was a pioneering effort into a newer social history that forced scholars to rethink the major issues of women’s history.