

America, the “Rebellious Slut”: Gender & Political Cartoons in the American Revolution

THE FEMALE COMBATANTS



OR WHO SHALL

Published According to Act Jan^y 26. 1776. Price 6.^d



"The Female Combatants, or Who Shall," etching and engraving, hand-colored. Unknown artist (January 27, 1776). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale, New Haven, Connecticut.

"I'll force you to Obedience you Rebelious Slut"! If you want to grab attention from your audience, saucy language and a female brawl featuring a right hook to the breast is a fairly successful route. For me, teaching early American texts is about engaging students with new historical materials in an accessible way, cultivating critical thinking, and giving them a splash of fun. "The Female Combatants" (1776) is a favorite text to introduce students into the early American world. Combining Revolutionary politics with the social and cultural valences of gender, race, class, nation, and power, this political cartoon serves as a multidimensional cipher which people at every knowledge level can participate in analyzing. Once students have a cursory understanding of the symbolism of the image, a debate over tone, audience, and intention can prove fruitful.

While the titillating image captures the audience's attention, it simultaneously allows even the newest student of history to speculate analytically about its meaning. What can we know upon initial glance? First, that it is a physical brawl labeled with "1776." Great Britain, embodied as an opulent woman adorned in expensive, high regal fashion, is standing off against her bare-chested foe, a woman decorated in tattoos, feathered skirt and headdress, representing the popular anthropomorphic image of the North American colonies as a beautiful but vulnerable, hostile but virgin Native American princess in a "state of nature." Native Americans were a people fraught with the dialectics of exoticism—both alluringly interesting and unnervingly different. In masculine artists' hands, women's bodies were often displayed for diverse rhetorical and metaphorical meanings, representing more the creative intentions of the artist and the consumptive desires of the male literate public than a lived womanly reality. Womanhood was metaphorical.

The verbal exchange between the combatants demonstrates the differing

ideological premises of the colonists and the English. The popular Filmerian system, articulated by political theorist Sir Robert Filmer, characterized the family and the state as parallel and symbiotic institutions, fixed the king as both ruler and father, the British Empire as mother to dependent colonies, and embedded that relationship in a rhetoric of natural power dynamics. The brawl between Mother England and Daughter America points toward the cleavage of the colonies from the metropole and helps us understand the ideological fracturing between English systems of natural authority and submission and the new American conceptualization of government as, unlike a parent-child relationship, based upon free choice and consent.

Foregrounding the image are metaphors both accessible to the young scholar and interesting to the experienced one. Some may recognize the ancient Phrygian cap of liberty perched atop a flourishing tree, holding a banner "FOR LIBERTY," and a shield marked with the Gallic rooster of France. These symbols mark the allegiance of the American colonists with the enlightened French and the right to freedom from an oppressive government. On the side of Britannia lies a withering stump upholding a banner "FOR OBEDIENCE" and a German-style shield with a northern-facing compass rose—nodding toward both Lord North, the Revolutionary-era prime minister of Great Britain, and the authoritarian German government.

Little is known regarding the artist, but we can do some detective work to develop an argument about where the creator's loyalties lay. It is a debate among scholars as to who is "winning" or "right" in the engraving. If America is indeed sluttish, her licentious and irresponsible behavior would undermine the authority to her claims for liberty—a mother must discipline her wayward daughter; a daughter must be obedient to her mother. Control over women's sexuality was considered a male right in the seventeenth century, and if we assume the artist is likely male, the "liberty" cries of a libertine daughter would inflame many moral consciences. If, however, we read Britannia's dress as a display of the conspicuous consumption of excess as a critique of the tyranny of English aristocrats, this paired with the British Empire's withering tree, Britannia's unvirtuous speech and unladylike attack creates a portrait of cruelty and unfairness. One could provoke debate about the sexualized imagery throughout the cartoon, the purpose of a racialized America, the ways in which imagery of class, race, and gender intersect, and the place of the "civilized" European versus the "natural" American in the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Does the artist believe Britain holds the moral right; does the cartoon display America's winning ideology? Which should win, or who shall?

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jonathan Beecher Field for inviting me to write this post, to Kathleen Brown for helping me interpret the source, and to Rachel MacKinnon, Matthew Reid Krell, Daniel Brunson, Samuel McLean, and Taylor Spence for reading earlier drafts.

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This article originally appeared in issue 17.3 (Spring, 2017).

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