

CHAPTER 6

The Revolution Within

24. Abigail and John Adams on Women and the American Revolution (1776)

Source: Charles F. Adams, ed., Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams during the Revolution (New York, 1876), pp. 148–50, 155.

Abigail Adams was one of the revolutionary era's most important women. Between her marriage to John Adams in 1764 and her death in 1818, the two carried on a remarkable correspondence. Abigail Adams was a keen observer of public affairs. During the War of Independence, she peppered her husband with questions about the progress of the struggle, kept him informed of events in Massachusetts, and offered opinions on political matters. When Adams served as president during the 1790s, he relied on her for advice more than on members of his cabinet.

In March 1776, Abigail Adams wrote her best-known letter to her husband. She urged Congress, when it drew up a new "Code of Laws," to "remember the ladies." All men, she warned, "would be tyrants if they could." Women, she playfully suggested, "will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation." Abigail Adams did not believe in female equality in a modern sense. She accepted the idea that women's primary responsibility was to their families, but she resented the "absolute power" husbands exercised over their wives. "Put it out of the power of husbands," she wrote, "to use us as they will." She also wondered how slaveholders, "accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures" of liberty, could claim it so vocally for themselves.

At a time when many Americans—slaves, servants, women, Indians, apprentices, propertyless men—were denied full freedom, the struggle against Britain inspired challenges to all sorts of inequalities. As John Adams's reply demonstrates, not all American leaders welcomed this upheaval. To him, it was an affront to the natural order of things. To others, it formed the essence of the American Revolution.

Abigail Adams to John Adams

Braintree [Mass.], March 31, 1776

I wish you would ever write me a letter half as long as I write you, and tell me if you may where your fleet are gone? What sort of defense Virginia can make against our common enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able defense? Are not the gentry lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized natives Britain represents us to be? I hope their riflemen who have shown themselves very savage and even blood-thirsty, are not a specimen of the generality of the people.

...

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain, that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principle of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.

...

I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toiled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness. But now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land. . . . I think the sun looks brighter,

the birds sing more melodiously, and nature puts on a more cheerful countenance. We feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are returning to their deserted habitations.

Though we felicitate ourselves, we sympathize with those who are trembling lest the lot of Boston should be theirs. But they cannot be in similar circumstances unless... cowardice should take possession of them. They have time and warning given them to see the evil and shun it.

I long to hear that you have declared an independency, and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. Regard us then as beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John Adams to Abigail Adams

Philadelphia, April 14, 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient.... As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere.

That children and apprentices were disobedient, that schools and colleges were grown turbulent, that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.

Depend on it. We know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obligated to go fair, and softly, and in practice you know we are the subjects. We have only the names of Masters, and rather than give this up, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave heroes, would fight. I am sure every good politician would plot, as long as he would against despotism, empire, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, or ochlocracy [mob rule]. A fine story indeed.