husband compliance and labor; in return, husbands owed wives economic support and protection. Each owed the other sexual fidelity: Legal monogamy seamlessly bound the couple to Christian doctrine.

But in any social order there are cracks that thoughtful people notice and probe, widening the distance between what is supposed to be and what is. Isolated and unaware of each other, investigators and skeptics over the centuries wondered about women's place. Challenges to prevailing notions of female incapacities began to appear with some regularity in seventeenth-century France and England, from learned ladies who were well connected—Marie le Jars de Gournay, Mary Astell—but also from open-minded men: François Poullain de la Barre, influenced by the principles of Descartes, proposed in the 1670s that the mind had no sex. Although isolated from one another by time and geography, these writers made similar defenses of women's education and criticisms of their position in marriage. Mary Astell, writing in an era when the transatlantic trade in human beings boomed, compared marriage to slavery. "If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?" she inquired.[5]

Beginning with the North American colonies in 1776 and culminating in the Latin American wars of independence in the 1820s, revolution reshaped the Atlantic world. The intellectual origins lay with political philosophers of the British and French Enlightenments who, harking back to the idealized republics of Greece and Rome, proposed that reason and not obedience to God was the basis for proper human relations; that the origins of just government lay in the consent of the governed; and that people possessed certain immutable rights by virtue of being human.

Through the eighteenth century, republican ideas moved growing numbers of critics of monarchy in France, Britain, and British North America, firing their indignity at the way things were and setting in motion plans for what might yet be. The abstract ideas of treatises took on heat as they passed through arguments and conversations in coffeehouses and taverns, newspapers and pamphlets, drawing rooms and kitchens. Revolution fed on revolution. The establishment of the United States of America in 1789 emboldened the French, and the outbreak of the French Revolution inspired the uprising in the West Indian French sugar colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791, which resulted in the world's first republic of emancipated slaves.

These were revolutions made by men who saw themselves as brothers overthrowing tyrannical fathers—as the Americans and later the French labeled their kings.[6] In the crisis that led up to the American Revolution, hot-blooded patriots lambasted George III's abnegation of the role of just patriarch; Tom Paine's sensational *Common Sense* of January 1776 railed against the king as the "wretch . . . with the pretended title of FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE." The colonists in rebellion came to believe that the overthrow of the unnatural father and the triumph of a virtuous people would effect a great change in hearts and minds, "a renovation of the natural order of things." In France, the king's bond with a much maligned queen intensified the sense of ill usage by bad parents. As Lynn Hunt writes, the French "imagined replacing them—the king and the queen—with a different kind of family, one in which the parents were effaced and the children, especially the brothers, acted autonomously."[7]

No one mentioned the analogue, sorority, because sorority was the void at the other end of the ubiquitous idea of fraternity. To be sure, women were not the only people whom the revolutions left in a liminal position. Only in Saint-Domingue did constitution makers recognize the total denial of natural rights that chattel slavery represented. But free women's exclusion is a bit more difficult to grasp because they were not seen as so far outside the polity that they lacked rights altogether, as were slaves, but neither were they seen as full members of the political community.[8]

In the American Revolution, women's subordination was so deeply ingrained that questions about their place in the postrevolutionary order were barely raised. Writers of the British Enlightenment had little to say about women's relationship to liberty and equality, and what they did say tended toward the negative: Women were the agents of foolishness and social retrogression.[9] Their absence in the political theory that legitimated the revolution does not mean, however, that they were marginal to the actual war. Their contributions were crucial: They worked as nurses, spies, couriers, and prison wardens, housed troops, and ran farms, shops, and businesses. A few disguised themselves as men and fought in the army.[10] Here and there one catches a fleeting sense of entitlement, without the words to articulate protest: "I have Don as much to Carrey on the Warr as maney that Sett now at ye healm of government," objected the widow Rachel Wells, a patriot supporter, in 1786 (she had purchased New Jersey war bonds that the state subsequently refused to

everyone knew that ordinary men, too, had a disposition to be tyrants when it came to their wives: "a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute." The new laws should restrain such power by preventing "the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity."[17]

Abigail probably had in mind the beatings, or "chastisement," that husbands, as masters of their household, could legally inflict on wives, so long as they did not injure them.[18] She did not challenge this system: She opposed men's abuse of their power, not the power itself. Such objections were not out of line for a well-behaved woman, since neighbors and female kin did their best to manage the social order of their communities by bringing the force of disapproval to bear on cruel husbands and intervening when they could. Goodwives, too, had a stake in well-administered family government.

It would not have been the description of men's behavior, then, but rather the suggestion that the Congress take action that riled the delegate from Massachusetts. It was a preposterous thought, and in such testy times it could not be entertained. In asking that the new government protect women by restraining men, Abigail Adams raised disturbing possibilities. In this light, the whole edifice of male governance in the family might be considered an anomaly in a republic. If it was not right to leave women subject to husbands' whims, then should they not exist in a more direct relation to the body politic?[19]

Those mental openings are what John Adams spotted, and why he hauled out the heavy artillery. He blustered, feigning disdain even as his intensity showed how seriously he judged the threat. The tone is heavy-handed mockery, a tactic used against smart argumentative women long before and ever since. "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh." Really, he bantered, it was men who were in the power of women, although it might look the other way around, men who were subject to "the Despotism of the Peticoat." He mused with a patronizing rhetorical chuckle that her proposal seemed to prove their enemies were right when they predicted that the rebellion would create chaos, stirring up children and apprentices, Negroes and Indians. But no one in his wildest dreams thought that women would get riled up, too. "Your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented."[20]

Insofar as his wife was concerned, he seems to have considered the subject closed. But to fellow Bostonian James Sullivan, Adams confided his worries. The only proper foundation of government was consent. But then, who had to consent? "Shall we say that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly, to every act of legislation? No, you will say, this is impossible." But here was the sticking point: "How, then, does the right arise in the majority to govern the minority, against their will? Whence arises the right of the men to govern the women?" Finally, he asked the real question: "Why exclude women?"[21]

Why, indeed? The sparks struck between husband and wife momentarily illuminated a vexing problem. Adams understood that women's uneasy place signified a greater irresolution; it was the contradiction that led to all other contradictions. Natural rights, taken this far, would destroy all distinctions and ranks. "It is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy," he fretted. "There will be no end of it." "New claims will arise." Women would demand the vote; so would young boys, and "every man who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other." The question opened the door to democracy, at the time associated with the rule of the rabble—a possibility no one at the Continental Congress would entertain.[22]

As for Abigail, she backed down, writing back with a coy couplet about women charming and submitting. She took a different tone, though, when she wrote her friend Mercy Otis Warren. "He is very sausy to me," she complained irritably. Warren was the closest the colonies had to a woman of letters, a counterpart to the literary ladies of Paris and London. The daughter of one prominent patriot and the wife of another, Mercy Otis Warren was at the time publishing (under a pseudonym) anti-British satirical plays, and she would go on to write a major history of the American Revolution. "So I have help'd the Sex abundantly," Abigail concluded, as if knowledge of "the Sex" and its need for help was something she and Warren talked about often. She toyed with the possibility that the two of them might pursue the matter. "I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress"—petitions being the one political right women had.[23] But they never did.

Thirteen years later, the first words of the United States Constitution majestically invoked the voice of an entire people agreeing to form a government. The document begins, "We the People of the United States." It did not say "We the Founding Fathers" or "We the politically active minority of white men who have been sent to Philadelphia by our colleagues in the states," historian Linda Kerber wryly observes. In

other words, "We the People" was a fiction, an imaginative projection, not a sociological reality.[24] Yet despite their contributions to the revolution, patriot women lacked the means to enter that fiction and reap its benefits.

The revolutionary settlement left the British law of domestic relations untouched. Coverture was retained; if anything, some features actually worsened, although judicial and legislative applications varied by state, in part because the publication of Blackstone's *Commentaries* in the 1760s codified what had been informal legal precedents and the system tightened up. The one exception was divorce. Here the states broke with the harsh British law, which required an act of Parliament to dissolve a marriage (and granted only 325 complete divorces between 1670 and 1857). Laws and courts varied state by state, but overall, looser divorces emerged by 1799, with women as well as men taking full advantage. Still, no one could enter and exit marriage at will. States retained control and a marriage could only end because a judge found that one person had failed to fulfill his or her duties. Typically, only the "wronged" spouse could remarry. The basics remained in place until after 1965, when laws for no-fault divorce began to appear.[25]

The relative liberality of divorce reflected the value Americans placed on marriage as a freely chosen state. Marriages in the New World, after all, were not arranged or coerced. As a model of consenting relations whereby individuals joined together out of love and common interest, marriage took on added ideological freight as a metaphor for the nation. The conjugal ideal recast female subordination as a chosen state, softening the hierarchical connotations of family government, although it did little to change the reality.[26]

The Constitution was mute on the subject of sex: There was nothing in it that spelled out the masculine basis of the political community. Indeed the word "male" was not mentioned until the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. Yet except for the customary right to petition, women had no political rights, and their civil rights were also constrained. With a few exceptions they couldn't vote, make contracts or recover debts owed them, or buy, own, or sell property.[27] They also lacked the obligations to government that were the corollary of rights and defined the citizen: paying taxes (since they were not householders), working on the public roads, and serving on juries and in the militia. The last was more important than it seems: The exemption from the duty to bear arms in defense of the republic devolved from the facts of female irresolution, fickleness, and weakness. Thus John Adams thought

the most obvious answer to Abigail's challenge was that women's delicacy made them unfit for "the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state."[28]

In sum, the nation as yet had no use for women. The enfranchised citizenry was a minority legislating for a majority, an archipelago of white male property holders surrounded by a sea of the voteless.

Later in the 1790s, a cultural reevaluation came into play, a way to confer on women an ideological part to play, as mothers. Ideas about republican motherhood assured Americans that women too could add to the sum of citizenly virtue. As mothers and helpmates exercising reason, they could pass on the capacities for civic engagement to their sons. Thus the mother could be a silent partner to the active male citizen. Republican motherhood was a small gain that did not address women's enforced absence from the affairs of the nation, but it did have important consequences. In the short run, the enthusiasm of prominent gentlemen and a few ladies for enhancing female reason through education—the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence; Judith Sargent Murray, a Massachusetts patriot and essayist; the popular novelist Susanna Rowson—promoted the establishment of girls' schools. And in the long run, the image of the virtuous mother implanting civic benevolence in her sons (only secondarily her daughters) undercut the older misogynistic disdain for the sex who bore the guilt of Eve. In the emerging middle class, women began to radiate natural virtue, a cultural acquisition that would over the next century work to enhance their access to broader participation in public affairs. Stereotypes of lustful, depraved, unruly women began to gravitate toward poor laboring women and slaves.[29]

In contrast to American women's acquiescence to their marginal place, women in the French Revolution forcefully engaged in the Revolution's tumult, surprising and shocking onlookers with their patriotic fervor and militant demands. Not all, but some called for rights for women, and their claims played an important role in both the brightest hopes of the Revolution and its dark outcome. To the political right, they were harpies, and in time republican men also drew from the old playbook of misogyny to condemn them as dangerous and out of control. Countering the animosity, revolutionary women trumpeted their