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Reason: Embracing Empiricism and Feeling

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the United States slowly developed into a sovereign nation, several debates occurred concerning women's issues and the colonies' relationship with England. The literary world was also in the midst of a transition between the Enlightenment, which focused on reason and the acquisition of knowledge, and the Age of Sensibility, which emphasized the combination of thoughts and feelings with reason. The two literary approaches allowed for the presentation of arguments of the issues arising within the colonies in different styles, but both offered a rational appeal to humanity about the issue in debate. Reason was a principal aspect of both types of literature, and Thomas Paine and Judith Sargent Murray are two authors whose writings use reason to promote opinions on issues of their concern. Both authors use deductive reasoning in their arguments, Paine in his objections of England's tyrannical rule over the colonies, and Murray in her argument on equality of the sexes. However, Murray employs an emotional aspect to her empiricist and reasonable argument, while Paine focuses merely on conditionals and common sense in his appeal.

As an avid advocate of a colonial revolution against England, Paine sought to obtain support for a war with his piece, "Common Sense." Paine utilizes reason to establish a theory that appeals to a universal audience with common sense about the benefits of freedom and the consequences of continued British domination of the colonies. He theorizes that all humans have a natural right to freedom and will be impacted by the result of the colonies' fight for

independence: “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind” (Paine 706). Appealing with logical reasoning and a universal point of view allows for the inclusion of common people as an audience, which was important to the cause of the revolution as many colonial supporters were of the common classes. Paine’s approach from a universal point of view also allows him to hypothesize about the fight that is coming to a head as the antagonism between Great Britain and the colonies increases. He reveals his opinion on the two aspects of Britain’s rule over the colonies, “the one proposing force, the other friendship; but it hath so far happened that the first hath failed, and the second hath withdrawn her influence” (707) and continues on to discuss specific observations of England’s treatment of the colonies as reasonable grounds for the colonies asserting their independence.

In his observations, Paine uses assertions of reconciliation and counter-affirmations to calmly and reasonably counter all potential and actual arguments against the colonies’ independence from England. For instance, one potential argument is “Britain is the parent country, say some” (Paine 708). Paine analogizes the parent-child relationship to England’s treatment of the colonies and establishes a justifiable claim about the horrific inadequacies England has bestowed upon the colonies, “devouring their young” and making “war upon their families” (708). Along with this claim, Paine metaphorically asserts that America is the child of all of Europe, and not just England, because people from many European countries have fled to America searching freedom from religious persecution. Most colonists were parents or had some kinship to children, and as such, were able to relate to the analogies and metaphors Paine uses.

Making such an inclusive statement that involves many countries of Europe, if not all, is a preliminary to yet another rational appeal of Paine, once again to a universal audience. Paine next stresses, “it is in the interest of all Europe to have America a free port” (709). This petition

subtly implies that the support of other European countries should lie with the colonies, because if the colonies become free, trade will become less limited and more easily accessible to countries besides Great Britain.

Paine also discusses that since the British assume the title of countryman for any man whom might be met outside of a county line, the association of all men in America should be referred to as “countrymen,” regardless of their country of origin (709). He further deduces that if it is because many colonists are of English descent that the colonies remain under British control, then England, having possessed a king of French descent, should be under the French government. This deduction is simple, yet reasonably asserts a counterargument to one of Britain’s rationales for controlling the colonies, “But Britain is the parent country” (708).

The concept of natural rights is employed within Paine’s argument for the colonies’ independence from Britain, and is full of reason because the issue of a man’s right to freedom and independent rule is logically valid. Within this notion, Paine emphasizes that even the most reasonable men in England recognize that “’Tis repugnant to reason, to the universal order of things, to all examples from former ages, to suppose that this continent can long remain subject to any external power” (711). He also stresses the need for men to take control as soon as they realize “a government of our own is our natural right” (711). He maintains the reasonable affect in his argument, mentioning the formation of an independent constitution while the power belongs to the colonies to do so, rather than waiting for a time full of heated conflict and pressure to develop such a document (Paine 711).

Following his discussion on natural rights, Paine confirms his argument for war. Natural rights and man’s reason make it impossible to expect a return to friendship and hope for an improved relationship between Great Britain and the colonies when “everyday wears out the

little remains of kindred between us and them” and “the last cord is now broken” (Paine 712). Though the Enlightenment focused little on feeling, Paine ends his argument with an emotional appeal to his audience, utilizing strong expressive language to encourage colonists to stand up against the tyrannical rule of Britain. This is particularly surprising, as his entire argument is structured around common sense, though this use of emotion is not entirely illogical, since it is passion for independence, combined with reasons to work for that independence, which will inspire a revolution.

Murray, similar to Paine, universalizes her argument, but her use of deductive reasoning injects more feeling into her argument on equality of the sexes than Paine’s argument for independence from England possesses. Her use of feeling was appropriate to the Age of Sensibility; the period did not advocate the negation of reason, merely an introduction of thought and feeling into reasoning. Murray fulfills this with her essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” by inserting concepts of religion and aspects of life as a woman that attempt to evoke thoughts and feelings within the audience.

In her essay, Murray begins with a poem, revealing her theory that all have a soul, “The soul unfettered to no sex confined,” and therefore, “nature with equality imparts” (784). This is the most basic aspect of reason in Murray’s essay, as she returns to biology and natural rights, as Paine did in his essay, “Common Sense.” Few can dissent Murray’s theory about the possession of equal souls. Her argument about souls summons both aspects of empiricism and sensibility. A soul appeals to the natural aspect of human creation, which is empirically valid. A man’s soul is identical to a women’s soul; there is no difference in the level, or amount, of soul that one is given based on his or her sex. However, a soul is also metaphysical and leaves room to discuss

religion as well, thus providing elements of reason for a universal audience, those who advocate empirical reasoning and those who promote religious reason.

Not only is reason used as an argumentative strategy, but Murray also presents reason as one of the faculties of intellectual power, along with judgment, imagination, and memory. With observations, Murray reasons the need for, at minimum, the opportunity for equal education for women. Education would increase reason for a woman and, consequently, remove some of the negative facets of imagination. Women possess a great deal of imagination, and education would potentially eradicate gossip and slander among women, for their intellect would be put to more compassionate and useful behaviors. Their judgment would also increase with education, imparting knowledge that would make them better wives and able to discern men who would be adequate husbands, resulting in successful marriages (Murray 786).

Following her observations of women's behaviors, Murray observes aspects of religiosity appropriate to the period to advocate the equality of souls and explore the need for education as related to the studies of God. Since women are in search of immortality that is identical to that which men are seeking, Murray asks, "is it reasonable that a candidate for immortality, for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of Deity, should at present be so degraded as to be allowed no other ideas than those which are suggested by the mechanism of a pudding, or sewing the seams of a garment?" (786). Inserting the word "reasonable" evokes calmness and allows for the intellectual consideration of the validity of Murray's argument.

Murray's incorporation of religious references into her essay provides a powerful element of reason. For many people, despite the Enlightenment's focus on empiricism and scientific reasoning, religion was still an important aspect of lives. Focusing on religion to support her

claim of equal souls and thus, the right to equal educational opportunities, Murray discusses how God does not discriminate against sexes, as “the same breath of God animates, enlivens and invigorates us” (786).

The argument Murray makes appeals to men as well as women, for she includes concessions, such as “Will it be urged that those acquirements would supersede our domestic duties? I answer that every requisite in female economy is easily attained...they require no further mental attention” (786). This rationale implies that men need not fear that women will forsake their wifely duties in caring for the house and children. The universal audience of men and women is reached with Murray’s appeal to explore thoughts on the use of reason and imagination for women. Men can ponder these aspects as well, for it is in their interest if they wish to have more productive wives, of whom they can be proud.

Finally, Murray discusses women and their ability to reason, which she feels is undeterminable, since women are not given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge necessary for reasoning. With a conditional argument, which are implicitly originated in logical reasoning, Murray asserts that women’s inferiority to men cannot be determined based on intellectual power, for “one is taught to aspire and the other is early confined and limited,” and “Grant that their minds are by nature equal, yet who shall wonder at the apparent superiority, if indeed custom becomes second nature” (785). Though Murray demonstrates her level of intellect by using heroic couplets and iambic pentameter in her opening poem to the essay, she asserts that if women have been continually limited in their opportunities to acquire knowledge, it cannot be concluded that men are superior to women. Thus, Murray argues that the only manner in which to empirically determine superiority or equality is to measure the souls of men and women, which are created equally, thereby making men and women equal. Indeed, Murray closes with a

reasonable confirmation: “his soul is formed in no sort superior, but every way equal to the mind of her who is the emblem of weakness and whom he hails the gentle companion of his better days” (791).

Paine and Murray both use reason to advocate opinions on issues that are controversial to a developing nation. Appropriate to literary styles of the time, arguments are made in Paine’s case with the use of reasonable counter-affirmations that utilize common sense, and in Murray’s essay, religion and empiricism with the inclusion of a bit of feeling. Without reason, both Paine’s and Murray’s arguments would have undoubtedly lacked support, potentially having an impact on the course of history with regard to colonial independence from Great Britain and women’s rights.

Works Cited

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