Your Obedient and Humble Servant: The Tones of Supplicant Letters to Dolley Madison During Her Husband’s Presidency

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Abstract
Through the scope of tone, this project observes how people addressed Dolley Madison while asking for help and how that reflects mindsets of women’s interaction between the public and private spheres. By using a thirty-three letters, from 1809 to 1817, the view of women’s position between the public and private spheres is compared. The letters were divided by their tone: self-pitying, apologetic, favor asking, demeaning, and professional. These letters reveal that women are viewed in three ways. The first is that they can only move between the spheres if they were appealed to under the pretense of charity. Second, if women were motivated by favors, they extended themselves into the public sphere. Lastly, women moved between the spheres through their own volition. This tone was less evident in letters written by southerners. Ultimately, these findings reveal that people believed women were able to extend themselves into the public sphere.

Research Question
How did the language of supplicant letters written to Dolley Madison reflect peoples’ views of her political influence during her husband’s presidency?

Methodology
Thirty-three letters were selected that were written to Dolley Madison from 1809-1817. Only letters asking Dolley Madison for something were considered on the basis of whether they fell under the realm of the private or public sphere. Letters requesting assistance for anything specifically within the private sphere were excluded. Databases The Dolley Madison Digital Edition and American Memory along with the book The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison provided the selection of letters. The samples were sorted into five categories: self-pitying, apologetic, favor asking, demeaning, and professional. By grouping, the letters were analyzed to form hypotheses of how people viewed women’s extension of the private sphere into the public.

Results
The letters formed three major sentiments on women’s interaction between the public and private spheres.
1) The pity and apologetic letters use their wording to pave a way for Dolley Madison to extend the private sphere to the public in the name of charity.
2) Letters calling on favors and flattery attempt to cajole Mrs. Madison into extending herself into the public sphere to aid them.
3) Demanding and professional toned letters suggest that some people respected Dolley Madison and her ability to make a decision and move between the spheres of her own volition and without need of incentives.

When compared numerically, the first grouping makes up just over a third of the letters, the second just under a third, and the third a quarter. People’s opinions, as evidenced by the numbers of these letters, varied greatly between the three views of a woman’s place in the public and private spheres.

Impact
Dolley Madison was not only the publicly active woman. Dozens of women were asked for their help with various needs, which these women were able to address by extending their private sphere abilities into the public one. When people wrote these women, they enabled them to have the power to make a public difference and therefore involve themselves in their political surroundings. Modern ideals often stereotype women as strictly keepers of the home to raise children, but they were obviously much more active outside the home. Women having such a great influence on the public sphere was incredibly important because it allowed them to have a public voice during a time when they could not even vote. Thanks to women like Dolley Madison, the public and private spheres were able to overlap and women could extend their reach when they felt they had something that truly mattered.

References

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