Podcast Script:

Expectations of Women and Womanhood in Colonial Society

The expectations of women and womanhood in the colonial period between 1780 and 1800 are hard to imagine being a modern woman because they were completely different then than they are now. Nowadays, women can be independent, educated and have families and still be respected by society. In the eighteenth century however, independence was looked down upon, education was barely available and wifehood and motherhood were supposed to be the two most important aspects in a woman’s life. The expectations of women and womanhood in colonial society are American paradoxes within themselves because women were not allowed to have their own lives and live freely in this primarily white, elitist society that was ruling over the United States of America; the supposed home of freedom, liberty and justice for all.

The first expectation of women was to be married. In this time period, it was not uncommon for women to marry between the ages of thirteen to twenty-five. Marriage was a social pressure for both men and women. Nevertheless, it was still far easier for a man to have independent, economic stability without marriage than it was for women. Marriage was often a thing of convenience rather than love, especially for the upper class. Upper-class citizens generally had to take into account the social status of the partner they were interested in as it would affect the couples’ social status in society. For everyone else, including the upper class, race and ethnicity were very important factors as well. Once women were married, they lost all control of their property rights, which became their husbands or returned to families. If a woman chose not to marry, she was not well looked upon and would often be ostracized social
gatherings because she was single. Some women tried moving away from their families into big cities in order to find work and live their own lives, but even then, they were not always accepted by society. Unfortunately, there was no way out of marriage except in cases of death or adultery committed by the husband. If a woman ran away, she was considered a thief as she was stealing the clothes her husband had bought for her and stealing herself away as well. Although marriage was expected, it is easy to see why many were fed up with being treated as subservient objects.

The second expectation for women was accepting motherhood and fulfilling duties as mothers. The four virtues of womanhood still applied thus women were expected to be primarily domestic, then submissive to their husbands, then pious and, of course, pure. All the husband’s needs also always had to be fulfilled. In a letter to George Tucker from Anne Randolph speaking about her female children, she states: “a woman’s happiness depends entirely on the husband she is united to”, proving even further that woman literally had nothing to call their own, not even their happiness and well-being. Childhood education was also a responsibility of a woman as mothers were expected to teach their children primary education depending on the gender of the child. Boys and girls were raised and taught somewhat differently as boys were immediately taught to read and write in order to be better prepared for school whereas girls were taught the same but also had to learn housewifery skills and household management. Women did not receive recognition for their hard work and it is ironic because many women today still work inside and outside the home and have to be wives, mothers and housekeepers. The responsibilities that women took on were often larger than the duties of the colonial men and yet they were still considered inferior and unequal to men. It is difficult to imagine such disrespect happen in a modern family today.
By the middle of the 18th century, literary influences became stronger therefore education itself became more wide-spread. If a woman did decide to carry out her education, it was pretty typical that marriage and motherhood would have to take a back seat. Before that, women were taught very little except domestic duties and religion. Education, however, was the main form of action that subverted women to be able to break the domestic sphere. Women still behaved the way society wanted them to in most cases whether or not they were educated. Many were worried that having more educated women would change their social lives, but it did not. Of course, the more educated women were more opinionated and fought for their rights and even educated, married women were often prohibited by their husbands to rebel. Virginia was the only state that seemed the most liberal about educating women as it was required to have children (both boys and girls) get as much of an education as their parents could afford, ensuring that they would have a well-rounded and smart generation once their schooling was finished.

The American Paradox is relevant to this issue of women being expected to be proper citizens of society because marriage and motherhood took over their lives and made them unable to do anything if it would put their family to shame or go against what their husband’s told them to do. Every person was supposed to be free and make his/her own decisions in this new world. This, unfortunately, did not apply to women as they have familial and societal codes to follow. American society was fiercely patriarchal and women were considered second class citizens at best. The only people allowed to vote in this wonderful new land were white, for example, and even then, half of the population could not vote because they were females. Nowadays, women can be educated, have jobs, are good wives and good mothers and not be looked down upon in society. As hard as their lives were, it is not shocking to find out that these American women in the 1800s were ready for a change from total male superiority.
Bibliography


