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# Women in the *Boston Gazette*, 1755-1775

Susan Dion

In the *Boston Gazette* of August 3, 1761, information was provided on Mrs. Hearn, an unfortunate woman who was standing near her chimney making punch for some reapers, when a flash of lightning came down the chimney and "strick her instantaneously dead!"<sup>1</sup> Unlike Mrs. Hearn, whose dramatic death was considered newsworthy, most colonial women remain historically silent, private, anonymous and irretrievable. Recent historical research has attempted to uncover the experience of women in colonial America. Thus far however, research and debate has focused on the limits or options defining colonial womanhood. As with many topics of historical debate, the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved.

The traditional historiographical view supports the contention that colonial women enjoyed a higher status than their British counterparts, and that female sex roles in colonial America were relatively fluid. Such "golden age" assertions have concomitantly supported the thesis that in the nineteenth century women's role became extremely restrictive, if not repressive, and that status declined with the "cult of true womanhood." Proponents of this analysis argue that factors such as the scarcity of women and their significant economic contributions in an agrarian society, as well as the perceived fluidity of sex roles on the frontier, contributed to high status and the availability of choices for women.<sup>2</sup> More recently, revisionist interpretations attack the "golden age" as a myth and tentatively assert that—at least in the eighteenth century—there were significant and understood definitions of role by gender. Women were considered private individuals ensconced within domestic duties and, as such, were awarded a relatively low status in colonial life despite their economic contributions. Revisionists further argue that the nineteenth century promoted a positive collective and personal self-esteem and awarded a higher status through the promulgation of doctrines such as enshrined motherhood, female moral superiority, and the doctrine of two spheres. Such beliefs also eventually contributed to the transcendence of the strict domestic sphere with the entrance of women into educational and reform circles—both public spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Colonial newspapers reflected the societal view of women as private individuals, secondary to men and defined by gender-specific roles, duties, and virtues. Gender, however, like class, does not and can not denote a monolith of a specific

typology. Colonial women were a varied group by race, class, region, skills, age, intellect, religion, character, marital status, health and life circumstance. The newspapers reflect, then, a varied image of womanhood, albeit one in which the exceptional, independent, spirited woman proves only the occasional antithesis to the commonly-accepted views and images of women.

It is the intent of this paper to present findings from the study of the *Boston Gazette* from 1755 to 1775. Images of colonial women have been categorized, quantified, and analyzed in both the "news" sections, including articles and announcements, and the advertisement sections.<sup>4</sup> Although a chronologically limited study covering a bustling, urban New England community, it utilizes a source rarely consulted in colonial women's history—the "public" newspaper. As such, another perspective can be added to the current historiographical debate, one which ultimately supports the revisionist interpretation but also points to the multiplicity of female images. It is important to remember that colonial newspapers were primarily concerned with the affairs of the public sphere and of men. Thus, the inclusion of news of women was not common and was distinctive as compared to the news of men.

Positive, complimentary images of women were most infrequent. Approximately nine articles per year, ranging from three in 1757 to twenty-one in 1771, were decidedly laudatory in their descriptions of particular women.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, praise was generally reserved for dead women. However, these verbose eulogies provide much information on male attitudes toward women by defining the male view of female perfection. Unlike the printed eulogies for men, which stressed public service, careers, and accomplishments, the eulogies for women stressed private virtues, religion, and family. It was the rare woman who was commended for public activities, as was Mrs. Hannah Dyer upon her death in 1760 at the age of seventy-six. She was praised for her "usefulness in private life" as well as her long service to the town as overseer of the public Alms House.<sup>6</sup> The predominant image of women portrayed upon their deaths was one which epitomized feminine virtue in relation to duties and obligations as wife, mother, daughter, and Christian.

As wives, deceased women were often identified as agreeable and dutiful spouses. Mrs. Margaret Mackay "discharged incessantly the parts of a dutiful wife . . . as became a good woman."<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Earl, who died at the age of ninety-three, lived "seventy-five years in the married state."<sup>8</sup> The early death of Margaret Moncriffe, at age twenty-three, brought belated words of praise—"she loved her husband sincerely while her health permitted."<sup>9</sup> Deceased wives were complimented for their affection, their prudence and economy, and their companionship. Deceased women were also praised for their role as mothers. It was common for women to be described as tender, affectionate, and careful of their children. Hannah Fayrweather, who raised six children by herself, was commended for refusing to remarry "for the sake of her children."<sup>10</sup> Hannah Moulton was a "loving and tender" mother, and Olive Smith "a tender parent."<sup>11</sup>

Often deceased women were identified and praised as daughters, but daughters only to men. Mothers remained anonymous in their daughter's obituaries! Thus, when twenty-seven year old Esther Burr died, she was identified

in relation to her husband and as the daughter of the late President Edwards.<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Grissel Waldo was an "affectionate and obliging" wife and "respectful and peculiarly punctual in filial duty."<sup>13</sup> Paeans of Christian virtue and religiosity abounded in positive images of womanhood. With a touch of irony (embedded in hindsight), the eulogies of men and women provide strength to the assumption that women were considered more virtuous and Christian in their private sphere than were men in the public sphere. When Elizabeth Hendley died in 1762, she was eulogized, as were many other women, for "her exemplary virtues, and economy . . . she lived under the power and influence of religion, and died with great calmness and serenity of mind."<sup>14</sup> Olive Smith's virtuous life, "her love for religion, and reverence for God's sanctuary, plainly discovered the true Christian."<sup>15</sup> Mary Minot had led "a life exemplary not only for moral virtues but Christian graces . . . . She greatly delighted in reading God's Word."<sup>16</sup> Mercy Smith's death brought words of praise for her virtues and faith: "She was a gentlewoman religiously educated and who early inherited the piety and virtues of her ancestors, became an ornament to religion. She was . . . a cheerful Christian; and a faithful friend . . . devout both at home and church."<sup>17</sup>

It is significant to note that good women, virtuous and deceased, were agreeable and sweet-tempered women whose virtues were inextricably linked to their roles as wife, mother, and daughter. Occasionally, however, deceased women were praised for intellectual accomplishments. Thus, Esther Burr, of the prominent Edwards family, was given homage not only for her "patience, humility, prudence and submission" but as "a lady of superior genius . . . and fine accomplishments." She was also considered "an ornament to her sex."<sup>18</sup> Mary Parsons' virtuous and agreeable conduct had very much endeared her to the Reverend Mr. Parsons, her father-in-law. She was also admired for her grace and "superior natural endowment, which were much improved by a good education."<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Willis was commended because "her natural genius was above the common size; her taste for reading was almost singular; and she excelled most of her sex in a relish for works of genius."<sup>20</sup> The approbation given to Mrs. Elizabeth Brown at her death in 1763 indicates that intellectual acumen was not necessarily antithetical to feminine virtues and perfection. Mrs. Brown was noted "for the embellishments of her mind, the brilliancy of her conversation, and the sanctity of her manners."<sup>21</sup>

Unlike men, most women had to be dead before their perceived positive accomplishments, and their lives in general, were considered worthy of print. Even then, those who were eulogized in the *Boston Gazette* represented a small percentage of all women. Most women whose lives became news at their death were newsworthy because of the status and prominence of their husbands or fathers rather than because of their own accomplishments. Similarly, a few women were positively described upon their marriages to prominent men. Hannah Tolman, of Boston, was described as "a lady of great virtue and merit" when she married John Winthrop, a professor of mathematics and philosophy at Harvard.<sup>22</sup> Dr. Jonathan Mayhew married "the agreeable and virtuous Miss Elizabeth Clarke, a young lady possessed of those amiable qualifications which make the marriage state happy."<sup>23</sup> Miss Allen's "handsome fortune" and "strict virtue and great merit" were praised upon her marriage to Jonathan Belcher.<sup>24</sup>

Another genre of news articles approved womanhood from the perspective of their reproductive organs. Women who were exceptionally prolific, but from the lower and middling classes, might find themselves mentioned. Typically, a woman was not represented as an individual, but as “the wife of” a particular man. Thus, “the wife of Mr. Samuel Choate, of Charlestown, was safely delivered of three children at a birth” and a “woman at Hobeau (who has never had a child before, though she has been married seventeen years, and has now a third husband) was lately delivered of three children at a birth.”<sup>25</sup> The wife of Mr. Plimpton was newsworthy when she delivered triplet daughters, all of whom died.<sup>26</sup> The wife of William Waugh gave birth to “ten legitimate children, five sons and five daughters, four double and two single births, eight alive and alike to live” within the first ten years of marriage!<sup>27</sup> Not a few tongues must have wagged after reading the multiple birth story of June 5, 1758:

We here inform the public, that the wife of one Mr. William Gould, who has been out in the war for six years past (in a proper time after his first coming home) was safely delivered of two likely boys; about two years after with two more; and that he was out last summer, came home early in the fall, and went out again last week; the day after which she was safely delivered of a son and daughter.<sup>28</sup>

The fascination with multiple births provided much newspaper fare as did sheer numbers of progeny. Both reproductive feats were seen as a positive accomplishment of the female sex, as large families were a necessity on the frontier and infant mortality rates were high. When Deborah Richmond died at age ninety-seven, her “uncommon diligence” was coupled with a balance sheet of eight children, forty-two grandchildren and sixty-two great grandchildren.<sup>29</sup> Sarah Pratt of Hingham, who died at the age of 101, left 182 offspring to the fifth generation.<sup>30</sup> And a Newport, Rhode Island woman was safely delivered of her twenty-third child in 1762 at forty-one years of age.<sup>31</sup>

Positive images of women as wife, mother, daughter, Christian, bride, and breeder were joined by occasional commendable references to women in other realms. Most noticeable were the women considered newsworthy because of their patriotic actions during the colonial crises of the late 1760s and early 1770s. However, even though their actions were often motivated by political decisions and were significant in consequence, they were reported in images relevant to domestic duties. The Daughters of Liberty in Providence, Rhode Island were applauded for the industry and spirit they exhibited as they worked their spinning wheels from sunrise to sunset. The young women “unanimously resolved that the Stamp Act was unconstitutional, and that they would purchase no more British manufactures unless it be repealed.” The women also boldly agreed not to accept the attention of gentlemen who did not support their stand.<sup>32</sup> Often women were praised for boycotting shopkeepers selling tea and for making and wearing homespun articles of clothing.<sup>33</sup> The women of Dorchester were cited for spinning flax all day and for exhibiting “decent behavior, pleasantry and industry.”<sup>34</sup>

A small number of general news articles, more difficult to categorize, gave occasional positive words to womankind. However, the *Boston Gazette*, reflect-

ing societal norms and mores, overwhelmingly depicted women's positive features and accomplishments as those which she fulfilled in her roles as wife, mother, and daughter. Moreover, these positive images of women were infrequent and women, even when featured, were always identified in their relationship to men. One might argue that the embellished attributes evident in the rare paeans to women proved their importance and placed them on the pedestal, but one might argue as well that "the good woman" was nearly invisible in the public life which the newspaper represented and which, certainly, reflected attitudes of eighteenth century colonial life in Boston.

Distinctly negative stories and announcements denigrating female conduct were more evident in the *Boston Gazette*. Negative images of womanhood averaged approximately fifteen per year, from two in 1774 to thirty-eight in 1770. The portrayal of both the "good" and "bad" woman form diametrically opposed images of womanhood. Articles which discredited women fell into three categories: announcements of runaway wives, accounts of criminal and "naughty" female conduct, and editorials admonishing female behavior and attitudes.

In a community where one's role as wife and mother was considered inherently appropriate, a denial of that role was not to be applauded. Although divorce was possible, obtainable through a petition instituted by either marriage partner, many women chose a less complicated method of ending an unhappy marriage—they simply absconded.<sup>35</sup> Announcements notifying the community of the actions of an errant wife were similar to the notices placed for runaway slaves, apprentices, and indentured servants. Susannah Chambers was accused by her husband William of running him into debt. He also declared that she "by all accounts keeps other men to frequent my house and cohabits with them, and has used me very ill."<sup>36</sup> Adam Walker offered a reward to anyone who provided information on the whereabouts of his wife.<sup>37</sup> Ann Yeamans, like other wives, was denounced for behaving indiscretely, and her husband Joseph warned against trusting her.<sup>38</sup>

The descriptions of women as runaway wives also provide an antidote to the perfectionist visions of womanhood which marked the obituaries. Rather than virtue and complacency, one finds trouble and discontent. Martha Mallett was neglectful of her family and persisted in destroying her husband's "substance."<sup>39</sup> Patience Harvey "behaved herself in a disorderly manner."<sup>40</sup> Abigail Williams not only ran husband Jacob into considerable debt but had "greatly misbehaved herself."<sup>41</sup> Many women were accused of forsaking "bed and board."

Perhaps the antithesis of the female virtues embodied in wife and mother was the single woman who flaunted societal mores by bearing children and then destroying them. Frequent articles dealt with this phenomenon. In 1775, "a young woman about 20 years of age, was delivered by herself of a child, which she killed, and then threw it into a well."<sup>42</sup> Sarah Goldthwaite of Lynn was reported as the mother of an infant found in a pond with stones tied around its body.<sup>43</sup> In Newport, the body of an infant found in a field led to a search upon which "a young woman was found to be sick, in a house near by, who is supposed to be the mother."<sup>44</sup>

Descriptions of intoxicated women were invariably painted in derogatory terms. In reporting on two women who met their deaths in separate alcohol-related instances, the printer warned, "May the above striking instances, prove alarming, to all such as make too free use of strong drink."<sup>45</sup> Yet similar protests were not raised when men met their deaths in alcohol-related instances nor were such incidents as vividly described. Reflecting the reality of crime in society, the *Boston Gazette* faithfully described women counterfeiterers, cheats, bigamists, thieves, murderers and batterers. Indentured female servants were reported as runaways. Miriam Fitch was convicted with Samuel Bacon "of being notorious cheats and having by fraud, craft and deceit, possessed themselves of . . . the property of a third person." Fitch was required to wear a paper sign on her breast which stated "CHEAT."<sup>46</sup>

General negative commentary admonishing the female sex took the form of letters to the editor and short articles. By pointing to female deficiencies, the writers directly set standards for feminine perfection while noting where and how women fell woefully short. For example, a letter ostensibly written by a woman postulated that many bachelors "were afraid to enter upon matrimony . . . lest bankruptcy should be the consequence, from the present extravagance of the fair sex."<sup>47</sup> Rebeckah Housewife not only encouraged women to use economy and avoid needless expenses, but chastized the nurses of lying-in women for charging fees to visitors.<sup>48</sup> Another individual cautioned women to "lay aside their fondness for dress and fashions, for trinkets and diversions."<sup>49</sup> Women were accused of losing their feminine modesty, causing one writer to state that "If one may judge by appearances, the little modesty that is left in the polite world seems to be among the men; and one is tempted to look for the rakes and persons of intrigue in the other sex."<sup>50</sup>

From parables to poems, women were not only seen as imperfect human beings, but as seriously flawed specimens of womanhood, failing to live up to a pedestal image of virtue incarnate. Occasionally women were also presented as the source of evil and negative influence—an Eve image rather than a Mary. A letter to the editor included a parable about a woman named Witt who "proved a mere jilt, turned common whore, and her numerous, tho spurious race, has filled the world with fops and beggars, who like the drones in the hive, starve and help to undo mankind."<sup>51</sup> Boston women who had ignored the Sabbath by riding carriages about town were blamed for the earthquake of 1755 and were urged to "deny themselves" such a luxury on the Lord's Day.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, when a gentleman committed suicide after a young lady refused his addresses, the editors commented to men on "the folly of centering our affections in those transitory objects which are inadequate to our capacious desires."<sup>53</sup> It was obvious that wives, mothers, and daughters were not inevitably endowed with prudence, humility, honesty, kindness, economy, industry, and modesty, among other virtues. Women were considered more newsworthy when they were "unnatural," an adjective endowed with value-laden connotations. This antithesis of natural womanhood demonstrates the diversity of women in the population as well as societal proscriptions for female behavior. It also gives credence to the belief that good women remained anonymous and private.

Citations describing women as the extension of men were frequent. Approximately twenty-eight articles per year treated women *solely* in their relationship to men, in short, as an adjunct and often unnamed auxiliary. Most articles which included any mention of women defined her in some way by her affiliation to men. There was no parallel for this in descriptions of men; indeed, the opposite was true. Men were rarely defined by their relationships to women. Even in obituaries, their widows and mothers usually remained nameless. When a woman in Chester County, Pennsylvania was brutally murdered by her husband, she was only identified as "the wife of John Myrack." Though her husband was her murderer, she was not accorded an individual identity even in death.<sup>54</sup> At Elizabeth Rand's death in 1756, her obituary mentioned nothing about her virtues or life, but described her only as "Wife of Mr. Isaac Rand of this town, physician, and second daughter to the Rev. Nathaniel Appleton of Cambridge."<sup>55</sup> A similar pattern was present in many notices of deaths—women were solely identified as "the wife of" and "the daughter of" particular men. This type of death notice far outnumbered the more florid homages which, as discussed, provided a semblance of individuality ensconced within female virtues.

Only one instance was found when the full name of the mother, as well as the father, was included in a daughter's obituary.<sup>56</sup> If a woman were married, it was typical to give her husband's and father's names; if she were single, whether child or adult, to give her father's name and occasionally that of a well-known male relative. Hannah Smith was the "youngest daughter to Mr. John Smith of this town, merchant."<sup>57</sup> Dead at thirty-two was "the wife of the Rev. Mr. Little of Welles . . . and daughter of the Rev. Mr. Joseph Emerson of Malden."<sup>58</sup> Articles and obituaries discussing the death of married men rarely gave the name of their spouses or their mothers. Matthew Cox left "a sorrowful widow and eight children, and she in daily expectations of increasing the number of fatherless."<sup>59</sup> Captain Blount, of Boston, died at sea and left "a sorrowful widow with several children."<sup>60</sup>

Women were linguistically treated as ciphers and appendages to men. Articles which dealt with women solely as extensions of men reflected a pervasive cultural assumption. The frequency of these articles and the inclusion of such descriptions in all other articles points to the larger reality of a society in which the *Boston Gazette* served as but a mirror. Women in the eighteenth century were rarely definable as persons unless defined in reference to men. No incident better illustrated this than a long account of an unfortunate boating accident that listed the drowned as, "Mr. William Ward and wife, Mr. Diggacton and wife, Mr. John Kimball and wife, the widow of Mr. Eleazer Giles, a daughter to Dr. Fairfield's, one other woman, and the wife of Mr. John Becket, Boat-builder."<sup>61</sup>

Women were often represented in news articles that were neither derogatory nor laudatory. Approximately eighty-two articles per year ranging from 36 in 1774 to 121 in 1760 contained "neutral" accounts of women. Often the inclusion of women in news accounts was merely incidental to a large topic such as bear attacks on the frontier, fires in the city, and armed conflicts between Indians and colonials. Occasionally, women were the primary subject



of a neutral article, such as when she met an untimely death or was involved in a bizarre accident. The large number of accounts which included activities and actions of women certainly contradicts any stereotype of the historical invisibility of woman, although, it is true, she frequently remained anonymous and of secondary importance. Ultimately, however, another image emerges from the more than 1,600 neutral articles—woman as victim.

Many of the “victim” stories concerned Indian-white conflict. Although white males as well as white women were described as “victims of savagery,” it was the female victims who were chillingly described for the horrified reader. An assumption was made that native brutalities and murders of colonial women were an indicator of the utter degradation of the “uncivilized and pagan” Indians, a perception common among Europeans and colonials. Numerous articles recounted scalplings, tortures, captures, and murders of colonial women. A woman was tomahawked and scalped and mangled “in a cruel manner and left . . . in a condition which a regard to decency forbids to mention.”<sup>62</sup> From Albany, it was reported that, “The throats of most if not all the women were cut, their bellies ript open, their bowels turn out and thrown upon the faces of their dead and dying bodies; and tis said, that all the women were murdered in one way or another . . . .”<sup>63</sup> From Cumberland County in Pennsylvania, a “woman’s head was cut off, and her body mangled in a most cruel manner.”<sup>64</sup> Echoing a frequently reported drama, “a woman big with child was found dead and scalped near the fort, mangled in a most shocking manner.”<sup>65</sup> Most articles recounting Indian-white conflict showed colonial white women as passive victims.

A peculiar genre of victim tale popular in the *Boston Gazette* was the “fit”—a phenomenon recounted only when it involved women. The uncontrollable fit was perhaps the supreme form of victimization as it appeared to derive from unknown forces within the victim herself. Unexplained catastrophies which preyed upon women were readily explained by the “fit” whereas the frequent disasters which befell men were never reputed to be caused by fits. Fits explained all types of female disorders: catching colds, falling in the fire, death, illness, and madness. The fit emerged in a variety of forms. Many women fell into the fire because of a fit and suffered terrible burns, often resulting in death. Mrs. Lee of Hartford, “was seized with some fit as she was rising from her seat to go to bed, and fell forward, upon a quantity of coals.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the fourteen year-old daughter, and only child, of Benjamin Eustice was “taken in a fit while alone” and fell into the fire, sustaining burns to such a degree “that her life is despaired of.”<sup>67</sup> Abigail Francis drowned in a well as she fetched a pail of water. “Tis thought she was seized with a fit, (which occasioned her falling in), by the position she was in when taken out.”<sup>68</sup>

Women were the acknowledged sufferers and victims in sundry other incidents as well. Rapes, falls, violence, murder, robberies, and fraud, all found prey in the female sex. These powerful, detailed images both reinforced and reflected the cultural presumption that women were the weaker sex. An unusual account in 1762 outlined the sad tale of Mrs. Allen of Marlborough and illustrated the type of bizarre fascination often found in stories regarding women as victims—a fascination unmatched in tales of men. Mrs. Allen was “very much

burnt, her ear and tongue almost to a coal, and her ribs so that they appeared quite plain, and in this condition she lived a day or two and then expired raving mad."<sup>69</sup>

Despite the frequency of victim stories, there were some neutral accounts which portrayed women as active, feisty participants in colonial society. As one would suspect, these were infrequent and included the rare articles purportedly written by women. The juxtaposition of such images provides an integrated panorama of newspaper views of colonial womanhood. In 1759, two women wrote denouncing an ad which they considered demeaning to women.<sup>70</sup> Sarah Dane, a runaway wife, refused to quietly accept her husband's printed denunciations and boldly retorted, "I do hereby inform the public that I would not have left him were as it not as I apprehended it was very much for my safety and comfort:—I am sensible that the marriage covenant is large and binding; but when health and life itself, even laid at stake, I tho't it was my duty to regard to my own safety . . ."<sup>71</sup> Abigail Thompson not only denigrated her husband for his scandalous behavior and ill-treatment of her, but she castigated the entire male sex for not caring about women.<sup>72</sup>

Although most accounts of Indian-colonial conflict portrayed women as victims, there were infrequent accounts in which women were characters of action and independence. Women who daringly fought back, who survived captures and returned, and who saved others were all represented in news stories. Neither praised nor condemned for their actions, their persistence and endurance gleamed through the writers' prose. Thus, when a woman ironing clothes was surrounded by three armed Indians, she hit one over the head with the hot iron and pushed aside the gun of another. She did sustain gunshot wounds in her side, but the three attackers left without her.<sup>73</sup> Incredible endurance was reported in the case of Mrs. Inglis, who escaping from a Shawnee town, lived on chestnuts for fourteen days in the woods and found her way home.<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Johnson, of New Haven, was also able to escape. She not only found her way through the wilderness but delivered a child "having no woman with her, but her sister of about 14 years old." All three returned alive and healthy.<sup>75</sup>

Women displayed an indomitable spirit in other types of reported incidents as well. Ostensibly these tales of endurance and fortitude, as well as the feisty independence exhibited in women's letters, disrupted the deeply held notions of women as weak, dependent, and innocent. Yet direct praise for female heroic actions and independence was absent—an absence most noticeable because of the custom of inserting opinion into news articles as well as editorials. A woman summarized such male attitudes in 1755, "We women are generally tho't to know nothing of state affairs, and when any of us presumes to lisp anything concerning them, your sex are so unkind as to turn it to our disadvantage, and say, Mrs. such a one acts out of her sphere and knows too much to make a good housewife."<sup>76</sup>

Women were a visible part of the *Boston Gazette* advertising section, averaging 244 direct citations per year. Most advertisements specifically addressed both men and women. Thus, a shopkeeper might advertise men's and women's shoes or men's and women's gloves. Such citations tell little more than that both men

and women needed shoes and gloves in Boston. However, images of women do emerge, in both subtle and direct ways, from a smaller group of the advertisements. As such, they draw an intriguing potpourri of colonial womanhood. Few images of black women appeared in the news section, yet in a ten year period from 1755 to 1765 as many as thirty-seven ads appeared in a given year dealing with the sale of black women. (See Appendix) Reflecting the image of black women as commodity, they provide a stark contrast to the positive images of white colonial womanhood. As one would expect, black women were generally advertised by describing qualities considered to be desirable in a female slave. Many were specifically marketed for their housekeeping and cooking skills. Prospective buyers were concerned that the women they purchased be amenable and submissive, and generally preferred slaves already seasoned to New England and to slavery. It was the rare individual who admitted in his sales pitch that she "is offered to sale, for no other reason, than her being a furious temper, and somewhat lazy, smart discipline would make her a very good servant."<sup>77</sup> The most somber female slave ads were those which announced the sale of young girls or the giving away of infants.

In clear contrast to the image of woman as commodity was the image of the independent businesswoman. Although there were infrequent images of active, spirited women in the news, a much more vivid and unexpected diversity arose from the advertisements.<sup>78</sup> The names of female proprietors made a common appearance and, indeed, there were pages of ads where women-owned businesses overwhelmed the men's. Women were identified as tavernkeepers, grocery sellers, innkeepers, dealers in seeds and spices, landlords, shopkeepers of all types, brewery-masters, soapmakers, milliners, schoolmistresses, bakers, and healers. There were female entrepreneurs who owned and managed shops specializing in saddlery, ironmongery, cutlery, and cheeses and bacon. Jane Savell promoted her pickled oysters and catsups sold near the docks.<sup>79</sup> Hannah Kitchine promised a smelling mixture that would cure the "itch."<sup>80</sup> The names abound: Elizabeth Simmons, Lydia Dyar, Ann Thomas, Elizabeth Murray, Jane Eustis, Hannah Foster, Susannah Renkins, Anne Ducray, Jane Lee, and Rebeckah Walker, to name just a few. In an unusual twist of the normal perception of woman as extension and subsidiary of man, a large business selling a variety of goods imported from London and Bristol was advertised: "MARY JACKSON AND SON!"<sup>81</sup>

Many other unnamed women advertised their services in order to sustain themselves. Ads requesting or offering the services of wet nurses were fairly common. In 1761, for example, twenty-five such ads appeared. Surprisingly enough, there were offers and requests which also included "putting out" the infant: "Any person that wants to put out a child to suckle in the country to a good breast of milk, may hear of a place. Inquire of the printer."<sup>82</sup> Occasionally, it was required that women be married or the nurse anonymously identified herself as a married woman. Breasts of milk to be sold or procured were continually identified as good, fine, or young. Occasionally the age of the milk was designated or the sobriety of the wet nurse pronounced. Women as wet nurses provided a mixed imagery of anonymity, commodity, and need. Demands and desires for household service were another avenue available to poor women through the ads. Requests were made for female housekeepers, cooks, needle-

workers, shop attendants, and spinners. Occasionally, masters advertised to sell the remaining time of their indentured female servants or to lease female slaves with reference to their skills to housewifery.

Through the newspaper ads of the *Boston Gazette* a broad composite of colonial women and life is apparent. From black slave women to successful businesswomen surviving on the fringes by selling their breast milk and their housewife's skills, one readily sees class differences. The ads make it clear that a few colonial women led active, vital, working lives that were often public as well as private. Their lives defied an understanding which declared the female gender weak, innocent, and ornamental and testified to the diversity of the female experience in eighteenth century colonial Boston.

The *Boston Gazette* thus provides additional evidence that women were not experiencing a "golden age" in the eighteenth century. Gender-defined roles for women were restrictive and explicit. Both positive and negative images of womanhood delineated a prescriptive course of acceptable behavior. Although evident, the spirited, independent woman was the exception in a consistent set of images that defined women as dependent and subservient to men and firmly bonded to domestic duties and virtues. It is also important to note, however, that the colonial newspapers reflect a diversity in the female experience. From black woman as commodity to dead woman as an ornament to her sex, the newspapers mirror heterogeneous patterns.

## APPENDIX

### *Sampling of Female Slave Ads Boston Gazette 1755 to 1775*

A likely Negro woman, about 25 years of age, has had the smallpox, and been in the country ten or twelve years, understands all household work, and will do either for town or country.

April 28, 1755, p. 2

To Be Given Away, two Negro children, one a boy, the other a girl, neither of them a fortnight old.

February 23, 1756, p. 3

To be Sold, a very likely and healthy Negro girl, about 10 years of age, and fit for a gentleman's family.

June 7, 1756, p. 2

To be sold a strong, hearty Negro girl; and her son about a week old.

July 11, 1757, p. 4

To be sold, a strong and healthy Negro girl, in her thirteenth year, and very handy; having been born and brought up in this town: she has had the smallpox, and is sold only for want of employment.

January 16, 1758, p. 3

Just imported from Africa, and to be sold on board the brig Jenney . . . A number of likely Negro boys and girls, from 12 to 24 years of age. . . Note the above slaves have all had the smallpox.

July 3, 1758, p. 3

To be sold together, or apart, a Negro woman about 24 years of age, fit for town or country business; and a negro girl about seven years of age, both healthy, and had the small-pox.

January 8, 1759, p. 2

To Be Sold, a Spanish Indian woman about 24 years of age, (and a Negro child also about 2 years) who can do any household work; is sold because she is a notable breeder.

March 26, 1759, p. 2

To be sold, . . . a likely, spry Negro woman 19 years of age, exceeding strong and healthy; She is very good for cookery or dairy: with a female child 8 months old: also a likely negro girl 8 years of age.

February 25, 1760, p. 3

To be sold, a likely Negro woman, about 35 years of age, a very good cook, understands household business, and can be recommended for her honesty.

June 13, 1761, p. 4

A Negro Female child to be given away, without the danger of smallpox, and is six weeks old.

July 2, 1764, p. 3

To be sold, a Negro woman, who can do any household work, and is a good cook. She does not choose to live in the country.

April 28, 1766, p. 2

A very fine female Negro Child of a good breed, very handsome and healthy, three months old, to be given away, or put out with a consideration to a good place. Enquire of Thomas Oliver, Esq. of Cambridge.

May 11, 1772, p. 3

#### NOTES

1. *Boston Gazette*, August 3, 1761, p. 3.
2. Historians writing in this tradition have included Elizabeth Dexter, Joan Hoff-Wilson, Mary Ryan and Roger Thompson. See Elizabeth Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions Before 1776* (Boston, 1942); Joan Hoff-Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution" in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* ed. by Alfred Young (DeKalb, Illinois, 1976); Mary Ryan, *Womanhood in America* (New York, 1975) and Roger Thompson, *Women in Stuart England and America* (Boston, 1974).
3. Revisionist historians have included Nancy Cott, Carl Degler, Ann Gordon and Mary Beth Norton. For a comprehensive historiographical summary see Barbara Sicherman, et al, *Recent United States Scholarship on the History of Women*, (Washington, D.C., 1980).
4. *Boston Gazette*, 1755-1775.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, December 29, 1760, p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1765, p. 2.

8. Ibid., October 24, 1757, p. 2.
9. Ibid., August 29, 1763, p. 2.
10. Ibid., February 4, 1755, p. 3.
11. Ibid., November 10, 1760, p. 1 and February 21, 1763, p. 3.
12. Ibid., May 1, 1758, p. 2.
13. Ibid., March 2, 1761, p. 3.
14. Ibid., March 1, 1762, p. 3.
15. Ibid., February 21, 1763, p. 3.
16. Ibid., March 17, 1760, p. 3.
17. Ibid., November 20, 1772, p. 3.
18. Ibid., May 1, 1758, p. 2.
19. Ibid., August 10, 1761, p. 3.
20. Ibid., February 2, 1767, p. 3.
21. Ibid., Supplement, June 13, 1763, p. 2.
22. Ibid., April 12, 1756, p. 1.
23. Ibid., November 15, 1756, p. 2.
24. Ibid., April 12, 1756, p. 1.
25. Ibid., August 15, 1763, p. 3 and August 30, 1756, p. 1.
26. Ibid., August 4, 1755, p. 2.
27. Ibid., December 3, 1759, p. 2.
28. Ibid., June 5, 1758, p. 3.
29. Ibid., November 12, 1770, p. 3.
30. Ibid., December 7, 1761, p. 3.
31. Ibid., November 8, 1762, p. 2.
32. Ibid., Supplement, April 7, 1766, p. 1.
33. Ibid., November 21, 1768, p. 3; May 9, 1768, p. 2 and January 4, 1768, p. 3.
34. Ibid., June 12, 1769, p. 3.

35. Nancy Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976): 586-614.
36. *Boston Gazette*, April 24, 1769, p. 3.
37. *Ibid.*, Supplement, June 2, 1766, p. 3.
38. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1763, p. 3.
39. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1761, p. 4.
40. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1760, p. 2.
41. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1760, p. 2.
42. *Ibid.*, April 14, 1755, p. 2.
43. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1772, p. 3.
44. *Ibid.*, June 24, 1771, p. 2.
45. *Ibid.*, November 20, 1769, p. 3.
46. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1763, p. 3.
47. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1761, p. 3.
48. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1765, p. 1.
49. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1764, p. 2.
50. *Ibid.*, June 2, 1755, pp. 1-2.
51. *Ibid.*, February 13, 1764, p. 1.
52. *Ibid.*, December 8, 1755, p. 1.
53. *Ibid.*, October 11, 1758, p. 2.
54. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1755, p. 2.
55. *Ibid.*, November 22, 1756, p. 2.
56. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1761, p. 3.
57. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1763, p. 3.
58. *Ibid.*, June 19, 1758, p. 3.
59. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1756, p. 3.
60. *Ibid.*, December 27, 1756, p. 1.
61. *Ibid.*, June 21, 1773, p. 3.



62. *Ibid.*, November 28, 1763, p. 2.
63. *Ibid.*, August 29, 1757, p. 2.
64. *Ibid.*, September 20, 1756, p. 1.
65. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1756, p. 1.
66. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1771, p. 2.
67. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1756, p. 2.
68. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1765, p. 3.
69. *Ibid.*, January 25, 1762, p. 3.
70. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1759, p. 2.
71. *Ibid.*, June 20, 1760, p. 1.
72. *Ibid.*, April 30, 1759, p. 2.
73. *Ibid.*, July 28, 1755, p. 2.
74. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1756, p. 1.
75. *Ibid.*, January 30, 1758, p. 2.
76. *Ibid.*, September 8, 1755, p. 3.
77. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1760, p. 2.
78. For further information on colonial businesswomen, see Elizabeth Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions Before 1776* (Boston, 1924) and Mary Beth Norton "A Cherished Spirit of Independence: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Boston Business Woman," in *Women of America: A History*, ed., by Carol Berkin and Mary Beth Norton (Boston, 1979), pp. 48-67.
79. *Boston Gazette*, 1759-1765, passim.
80. *Ibid.*, 1762, passim.
81. For an example, see *Boston Gazette*, June 26, 1758, p. 2.
82. *Boston Gazette*, March 11, 1755, p. 3. Most historians have characterized "putting out" as a non-existent practice and wet nursing as rare in the eighteenth century. For this opinion see Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1780* (Boston, 1980), pp. 90-91.