

Bożenna Chylińska

The Colonial American Working Wife and Her Dear and Loving Husband Absent upon Some Public Employment: Deborah and Benjamin Franklin's Married Life

Abstract: Although historians recognize Deborah Franklin's abilities and accomplishments, she invariably suffers in comparison with her famous husband. She seems to have shared the fate of Anne Bradstreet a century earlier, whose worldly spouse, Simon, for years remained object of his wife's tender affection and dutiful supervision of his affairs. The article attempts to examine and evaluate Mrs. Franklin's immeasurable contribution to the Franklin household and business, which enabled Benjamin to act on the international arena and indulge in the frivolities of the contemporary high life, against his egalitarian declarations.

Keywords: Franklin, Bradstreet, marriage, Puritanism, ethic, work

More than anyone else in his time, Benjamin Franklin expounded, interpreted, and defined the cultural reality of eighteenth-century British Colonial America. Franklin, the Enlightenment sage, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, a leading author, printer, politician, scientist and noted inventor, statesman, diplomat, and a friend of mankind, in many ways brought forward Cotton Mather's Puritanism into the much more secular Age of Reason in philosophy, and the Age of the Democratic Revolution in politics.

Benjamin Franklin was born in 1706 in Boston which, although no longer a Puritan outpost, was a prospering commercial center sheltering preachers and ministers on the one hand, and merchants and seamen on the other. Benjamin's father, Josiah Franklin, burdened with a large family of 17 children, was unable to pay for a college education of his youngest son. Consequently, at the age of ten, after only two years of education, Benjamin Franklin left Boston Latin School which was to prepare him for Harvard to study ministry. Thus Benjamin's "Harvard" were the training and experience of a printer, publisher, and newspaperman, which were enlightening enough to make him one of the most practical

business strategists and entrepreneurs of Boston and Philadelphia, and—through such virtues as diligence, frugality, and honesty, achieved by self-improvement practice and civic-improvement schemes—a beneficent member of his community. In 1718, at the age of twelve, Benjamin started serving as an apprentice to his elder brother James at his print shop. At the time, James printed the *Boston Gazette*, a paper established by Boston Postmaster William Booker. Significantly, throughout his life, Benjamin would always refer to himself as “B. Franklin, printer.”

Unquestionably, the complexity of Benjamin Franklin’s character and achievement resulted from his unorthodox Puritan upbringing. By assuming the Protestant ethic considerably separated from dogma Franklin developed his own pragmatic self-awareness reflected in his religiosity approached from a practical, rather than theological angle. In his philosophy, as well as in his personal life, a sense of values was instrumental; he valued wealth not as an end in itself but as a necessary means to enjoy his personal aims and the real ends of society. In his writings he frequently used the terms denoting money, wealth, and business because he was addressing those who commonly thought in the same way. It has to be remembered that Franklin was not a single-handed creator of New England’ novel moral standards; his glorification of commercialism followed the decline, or the change, rather, of the Puritan morals, revealed particularly in the growing tolerance for wealth. Logically, however, wealth could not be achieved without work. Therefore, it was not that the Puritan standards deteriorated; they became more universal and more enlightened, and Franklin attempted to usefully accommodate them for the common benefit. Consequently, much of what he demonstrated was an expression of a unique combination of the eighteenth-century philosophies, a typical background of colonial Boston and Philadelphia, as well as the emerging American character whose qualities Franklin himself represented.

Admittedly, making money and acquiring wealth appear today to be the ultimate goals of human life. Economic acquisition is no longer confined to the necessity to provide oneself with the necessities of life or to satisfy one’s material needs. This change has become instrumental for the development of capitalism. At the same time, the reversal in attitude to economic motives was strictly directed by a certain religious outlook. According to Benjamin Franklin’s personal economic ethic, known virtually from all his works, earning money, if done legally and honestly, was the clear expression of virtue and the result of proficiency in a calling. Unquestionably, Franklin’s economic ethic, based on the Protestant theology of one’s duty in a calling, is the most characteristic precept of the social ethic of capitalist culture, and can be viewed as one of its fundamentals. “It is an obligation,” claims Max Weber, “which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity, no matter in what it consists, in particular no

matter whether it appears on the surface as a utilization of his personal powers, or only of his material possessions (as capital)" (19).

It is very probable that Benjamin Franklin would not have been afforded the time or freedom to pursue his passions for politics and science or his social and reformist inclinations, which led him to prominence, if not for his wife, Deborah Read. After running away from Boston to Philadelphia in 1723, he found his first Philadelphia lodging in the house of Mrs. Read, his future mother-in-law.

Franklin became practical about what he expected from a wife. After leaving the lodging he was frequently invited to Mrs. Read, to whose daughter, Deborah, he then had made "some Courtship" and had "a great Respect & Affection for her, and had some Reason to believe she had the same for me" (Franklin, *Autobiography* 40). However, a long voyage to England that Franklin then planned made Deborah's mother postpone their marriage until his return. Yet his long silence when in London was understood as a break of promises on his part and made Miss Read decide to marry, on August 5, 1725, apparently at the insistence of her mother, someone named John Rogers, a potter, who deserted her soon after their marriage, leaving for Barbados and taking Deborah's dowry with him. There were uncertified reports that Rogers had abandoned a wife in England. Rumors of his death, though for long not confirmed, later opened the way for her and Benjamin to get married. After his return in 1726, Franklin resumed courtship to Deborah: "I pity'd poor Miss Read's unfortunate Situation, who was generally dejected, seldom cheerful, and avoided Company... Our mutual Affection was revived, but there were now great Objections to our Union... And tho' there was a Report of his Death, it was not certain" (76). They managed to overcome all the difficulties and got married on 1 September, 1730. However, there was no official ceremony; they entered into a common-law marriage, that is without formal approval by religious or civil authorities as there still was a chance that John Rogers might unexpectedly reappear. Such a marriage arrangement protected them from charges of bigamy.

Not much is known of Deborah's earlier life; her biographical details come from indirect sources and are mostly of secondary importance. Even the year of her birth, 1705 or 1707, is not certain. Although her life is hardly mentioned in her husband's *Autobiography*, he recorded there their first meeting on a Sunday morning in October 1723 "when she standing at the Door saw me, & thought I made as I certainly did a most awkward ridiculous Appearance" (28). Deborah was rather plain, but she offered the prospect of comfort and domesticity, and, indeed, through their forty-four years of marriage, she would prove herself a woman of extraordinary ambition and character, with a natural gift for business and a deep commitment to her family. Franklin would

later recall: “None of the Inconveniences happened that we had apprehended, she prov’d a good & faithful Helpmate, assisted me much by attending the Shop, we throve together, and have ever mutually endeavor’d to make Each other happy” (*Autobiography* 76).

Benjamin Franklin is often described as (or rather accused of) being far more practical than romantic, a “man of the head, rather than heart” (Isaacson 75). A narrative of his common-law marriage to Deborah Read justifies this view. Benjamin was not a poetic lover; his emotional attachments turned to be the more prosaic bonds of affection developed out of partnership, self-interest, cooperation as well as mutual benevolence, respect, and good-humored affinity. His strong conviction was that a wife who brought with her a dowry would most probably have also brought expensive social aspirations and costly material expectations. Therefore, instead, Franklin found “a good and faithful helpmate,” frugal, practical, and devoid of worldly pretensions—the grand Puritan virtues which for a rising tradesman proved to be of a fundamental value. Deborah and Benjamin’s practical marriage, if not romantic and poetical, had remained mutually useful until Mrs. Franklin’s death in 1774.

Franklin disclosed his opinions about marriage and family in numerous pieces of his writing. A deserved importance has always been attached to his abundant correspondence, for hereby are unfolded his motives and the values he advocated, as well as his extraordinary abilities to expound and explain his stance and ideas, acknowledged both by his friends and enemies. The unpretentious, unambiguous, at times prophetic tone of his letters, and the style of Puritan simplicity by which they are regarded and recommended as models of epistolary composition—although certainly not written with a view to publication—unveil the philosopher, the man of business, reformer, and legislator, yet, most of all, the moralist and the familiar friend, though, occasionally lacking humility and modesty, which he himself vainly fought to restrain. Therefore, in his letters he would open his mind and provide his ingenuous opinions on matters of science and policy, yet also, no less effectively, on the conduct of private life. Thus his correspondence offers practical wisdom on subjects of private and social life, as well as the best instruction and guidance both to the political leaders and to his “leather-apron” class. He would frequently respond to the demands of his friends and colleagues who asked him for opinion and advice on a variety of aspects of everyday life. In his 9 August, 1768 letter to John Alleyne, Esq. (1740–1777), a London attorney and a friend, author of a small volume entitled *Legal Degrees of Matrimony, Stated and Considered in a Series of Letters to a Friend with an Appendix, Containing Letters from Several Divines and Others*, published in 1774, Franklin shared his views on early marriages, displaying different aspects of the issue, moral, personal, and social:

Craven Street [London], August 9, 1768

Dear Jack,

You desire, you say, my impartial thoughts on the subject of an early marriage, by way of answer to the numberless objections that have been made by numerous persons to your own. You may remember, when you consulted me on the occasion, that I thought youth on both sides to be no objection. Indeed, from the marriages that have fallen under my observation, I am rather inclined to think, that early ones stand the best chance for happiness. The tempers and habits of young people are not yet become so stiff and uncomplying, as when more advanced in life; they form more easily to each other, and hence many occasions of disgust are removed. And if youth has less of that prudence that is necessary to manage a family, yet the parents and elder friends of young married persons are generally at hand to afford their advice, which amply supplies that defect; and by early marriage, youth is sooner formed to regular and useful life; and possibly some of those accidents, habits or connections, that might have injured either the constitution, or the reputation, or both, are thereby happily prevented....

Late marriages are often attended, too, with this further inconvenience, that there is not the same chance the parents shall live to see their offspring educated....

With us in America, marriages are generally in the morning of life; our children are therefore educated and settled in the world by noon; and thus, our business being done, we have an afternoon and evening of cheerful leisure to ourselves....

By these early marriages we are blessed with more children; and from the mode among us, founded in nature, if every mother suckling and nursing her own child, more of them are raised. Thence the swift progress of population among us, unparalleled in Europe. (Franklin to Alleyne)

In the conclusion of his letter to Alleyne, Franklin disclosed his clearly Puritan morality, as the promoter of the marriage and family values which reflected his childhood and early youth Puritan upbringing, and the seventeenth-century New England preaching of the family ethic:

In fine, I am glad you are married, and congratulate you most cordially upon it. You are now in the way of becoming a useful citizen; and you have escaped the unnatural state of celibacy for life—the fate of many here, who never intended it, but who having too long postponed the change of their condition, find, at length, that it is too late to think of it, and so live all their lives in a situation that greatly lessens a man's virtue.... [W]hat think you of the odd half of a pair of scissors? [I]t can't well cut any thing....

Pray make my compliments and best wishes acceptable to your bride [...]. I shall make but small use of the old man's privilege, that of giving advice to younger friends. Treat you wife always with respect; it will procure respect to you, not only from her, but from all that observe it. Never use a slighting expression to her, even in jest, for slights in jest [...] are apt to end in angry earnest. Be studious in your profession, and you will be learned. Be industrious and frugal, and you will be rich. Be sober and temperate, and you will be healthy. Be in

general virtuous, and you will be happy. At least, you will, by such conduct, stand the best chance for such consequences.

I pray God to bless you both; being ever your affectionate friend,
Franklin. (Franklin to Alleyne)

The contribution of Mrs. Franklin to the stability of their marriage and to her husband's personal comfort cannot be overestimated. Very luckily for Benjamin, Deborah tended, or well pretended, to share her husband's practical views on marriage and the role of a female in a domestic settlement. She displayed plain tastes; neither did she participate in her husband's social life nor shared his intellectual, scientific and political interests. Her fear of ocean voyages prevented her from accompanying Benjamin in his overseas travels; on the other hand, she could have been afraid that her plain appearance and lack of worldly manners would embarrass her husband in his elegant European society. However, she had a willingness to live cheaply and economically, and she enjoyed the work both in her household and outside, as she also managed the family's book and stationary shop, and a general store. It is noteworthy that the Franklins, at least in the early years of their marriage, did not keep servants. She thus was not merely a submissive or meek partner but a smart businesswoman and a witty manager, handling most of her husband's business accounts and expanding their general shop's inventory to include ointments made by her mother, who sold her "well-known Ointment for the ITCH," crown soap made by Franklin's Boston relatives, also coffee, tea, chocolate, saffron, cheese, fish, and various other sundries, from medicine to feathers and lottery tickets (Isaacson 80–81). The zealous Puritan Bathsheba—Deborah Read Rogers Franklin—tirelessly strained her eyes stitching pamphlets and binding books as well as sewing clothes by candlelight. Franklin's affection for his wife grew from his pride at her industry. Many years into their marriage, when in London he was addressing the House of Commons, claiming that unfair taxes would cause the boycotts of British manufacturers, he proudly boasted that as a young tradesman he had only worn clothes made by the spinning wheel of his wife. Amazingly, in Deborah's fierce temper and fiery character Franklin saw not a scolding wife but an assertive woman, smart enough to manage both the household and the family business. Shortly after their marriage, he wrote a little pamphlet, amusing yet certainly well meant, entitled "A Scolding Wife," for the July 5, 1733 issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, in which he defended such assertive women:

Sir,

'Tis an old saying and true one, that *there is no Conveniency without an Inconveniency*: For aught I know, there might be a saying not less true, though more new, that *there is no Inconveniency without a Conveniency*. However, there is

the inconveniency (as 'tis commonly thought) of a Scolding Wife, which was conveniencies enough in it, to make it (when rightly considered) esteemed a happiness. For I speak from experience, (as well as a long course of observation) women of that character have generally sound and healthy constitutions, produce a vigorous offspring, are active in the business of the family, special good housewives, and very careful of their husband's interest. As to the noise attending all this, 'tis but a trifle when a man is used to it, and observes that 'tis only a mere habit, an exercise, in which all is well meant, and ought to be well taken.... 'Tis my opinion, in short, that their freedom of speech springs from a sense they have, that they do their duty in every part towards their husbands [...] (57; italics original)

Strikingly, such convictions, and so openly articulated, far exceeded seventeenth-century traditional Calvinist Puritan stance; they clearly not only honored female frugality, industry, and meekness but also respected some of her freedoms, abilities and, in a sense, her integrity, all of them unaccepted before. His Puritanism, therefore, must have been tainted by the ideas of liberalism and tolerance, formulated by the Enlightenment.

As was frequently noted here, the Franklins' marital relations were not romantic, nor did they inspire great poetry. Though the couple shared the practical values of their union, Mrs. Franklin did not participate in her husband's social life and was not part of his worldly aspirations. However, after twelve years of their marriage, Benjamin did compose some lovable verses in which he honored his "Plain Country Joan" and praised the day of their wedding. In the mode of the early Boston Puritan preachers, and in an unsophisticated manner, he enumerated the most required virtues of the eighteenth-century good wife:

Of their Chloes and Phyllises poets may prate,
 I sing my plain country Joan,
 These twelve years my wife, still the joy of my life,
 Blest day that I made her my own.

Not a word of her face, of her shape or her air,
 Or of flames, or of darts, you shall hear;
 I beauty admire, but virtue I prize,
 That fades not in seventy year.

Am I loaded with care, she takes off a large share,
 That the burden ne'er makes me to reel;
 Does good fortune arrive, the joy of my life
 Quite doubles the pleasure I feel.

She defends my good name, even when I'm to blame,
 Firm friend as to ma e'er was given'

Her compassionate breast feels for all the distressed,

....

In health a companion delightful and dear,
 Still easy, engaging, and free;
 In sickness no less than the carefulest nurse,
 As tender as tender can be.

In peace and good order my household she guides,
 Right careful to save what I gain;
 Yet cheerfully spends, and smiles on the friends
 I've the pleasure to entertain.

....

Were the finest young princess, with millions in purse,
 To be had in exchange for my Joan,
 I could not get better wife, might get a worse
 So I'll stick to my dearest old Jane. (92–93)

It is hard to speculate how sincere was Franklin's confession about millions wasted for Deborah; it could have been merely the figurative style of the romantic exultation. The Franklins' marriage for forty-four years was a happy one, which was revealed in their abundant correspondence, a great source of information about their thoughts, feelings, and everyday conduct. Benjamin and Deborah exchanged a few hundred letters which clearly show that a very deep affection developed between them. As already noted, by Deborah's constant devotion to her husband's interests, Benjamin had the luxury of retiring from business in 1748 at the age of forty-two, and of devoting energies to science and to public service. Franklin's retirement, however, also had a negative side; it allowed him to spend many years in Europe without his wife. Whereas she seems never to have spent a night away from Philadelphia, he spent long periods of time overseas, serving as a representative of the colonial government. For fifteen of the last seventeen years of their separation, although the efforts at economy were mainly directed at Deborah, their mutual affection, respect, loyalty, and a sense of partnership, endured. Deborah's letters to her husband, awkward and revealing the lack of education, conveyed, like Anne Bradstreet's poems to Simon, both her strength and loneliness. Deborah coped with Benjamin's absence, as she herself admitted in her letters, by cleaning her house, and she tried hard not to bother him with her worries. Franklin's letters were kind and chatty, more paternalistic than conveying romantic feelings, perhaps too courteous and gallant at times, and not intellectually engaging as compared to Franklin's correspondence with other female addressees. They, however, disclose Benjamin's devotion to his sensible and practical wife, and his genuine fondness of her accommodating nature. The letters mostly focused

on personal matters and they opened with tender terms. Only in the later years did the letters become brief and more business-oriented, reflecting their growing sense of separation. In 1774, Deborah received the last letter from her husband, in which he unusually referred to her as "My Dear Love." However, after a stroke which resulted in paralysis, she was too ill to respond or even to acknowledge it. She died on 19th December of that year, a few month before Benjamin's return.

Deborah Franklin was a poor writer and a bad speller. Her autograph letters are extremely rare. One of them, dated July 14, 1757, probably addressed to the family's friend, clearly testifies to Mrs. Franklin's bad orthography:

This day I reseived yours and it was the more exceptabell as I have been verey ill. I have had a bad cold and fever it did not leve me for 48 owers and gave me much pain inthead, but it gon of agin thank god for his mersey to me. I have bin in much pain for sum day on a Counts of my Husband for by this time he is as I suppose near the lands-end of England and of Corse in danger by being taken which I pray god prevented.... Sally Franklin shall write to you and I shall a steem it a verey graite faver if you will write to her agin . Shee is a larning French I had no desire of her larning that Language, but shee desired it herself and her master ses shee is a good gurle. Shee has bin a week to-day at it. Shee will give you an a Count of it herself. (D. Franklin. Letter)

The salutation on her letters to Benjamin usually was like his on the letters to herself: "My Dear Child," and her valediction would be: "I am your afeckshenit wife." However, despite her frequent misspelling and choice of words, which reflected her meager education, her abundant, virtually inexhaustible entries in their shop book she scrupulously kept, provide a great source of knowledge of the Franklin family's as well as their "leather-aproned" class' lives and habits, and they altogether constitute a splendid record of the times.

Significantly, as Sheila Skemp notes in her essay entitled "Family Partnerships: The Working Wife, Honoring Deborah Franklin," Mrs. Franklin's contributions to the family business, even her fiery character and frequent "aggressive" behavior, were not unique in eighteenth-century Colonial America. Contemporary middle-class women who claimed to be industrious and frugal "businessmen" "did not pretend to be protected flowers; they did not sit demurely upon a pedestal that both elevated and confined them" (19). However, precisely like in seventeenth-century New England, their contributions to the economic and domestic welfare of the family did not give them power, authority, or independence in the household; much less so in the wider world. The gender-based power in the social relations and in consequent role divisions, both within the family and in the public sphere, was measured by a clear line of importance between males and females. Even though in the eighteenth century, the division between home and work, male and female responsibilities, remained flexible and fluid, men were the unquestioned

authorities in political affairs. They were also the heads of their households; the patriarchs who reared children, dispensed discipline, taught morals, manners, and educational skills, and enjoyed ultimate authority in domestic matters. Women were responsible for certain gender-defined tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and care of small children. But their help was also needed and expected in the shop or on the farm. So long as a woman acted with her husband's permission, and for the family benefit, she could perform many duties later reserved for men. Performing those duties, however, could not threaten her husband's dominance or her own "femininity."

Although historians unalterably recognize Deborah Franklin's abilities and skills, listing her many accomplishments, they rather pity her than they praise her. Her case is relatively a rarity; she invariably suffers in comparison with her famous spouse. In a common perception, Benjamin Franklin's work was significant, Deborah's was not; his letters home were witty and courteous, reflecting joy and optimism, intellect and worldly interests; hers were poorly written, at times almost incomprehensible, filled with melancholy, complaints, minute descriptions of seemingly insignificant particulars about the family and neighbors. She seems to have shared the fate of Anne Bradstreet a century before her, whose worldly husband Simon, a man of considerable political importance and social prominence on both sides of the Atlantic, for years remained a remote object of his wife's tender affection, passion, and care. Fragile as she was, and suffering from a long-lasting, incurable illness, Anne would run the household, raise the children, keep the accounts and the household inventory, manage the servants, receive her husband's distinguished guests and, in the rare moments of solitude, she would devote her resting time to writing the poem letters to her "Dear and Loving Husband" frequently absent "Upon Some Public Employment." Most significantly, those women should greatly be acknowledged for their ability to write at all. In seventeenth-century Colonial America, female education was a matter of fortune and of the social class; writing poetry by women authors was additionally a matter of uncommon talent and self-discipline in the hostile social surroundings of the gender-based role divisions. Most of the mid-eighteenth century American women did write and read, and Deborah could probably do it better than many of them. That she was bad at orthography and punctuation did not correspond to her intelligence or personal charm. Admittedly, neither Simon Bradstreet nor Benjamin Franklin seemed to ever have been supportive, giving particular encouragement, or offering tender care to their wives in their daily hardships.

Deborah's material contributions to the Franklin household were considerable. She may not have brought a dowry to her marriage, however, in 1729, her mother, Sarah White Read, had obtained clear ownership of her late husband, John Read's former property on Market Street in Philadelphia and, in 1734, she divided the

eastern half of that lot, as well as a dwelling house, between her two sons-in-law: Francis Cooke and Benjamin Franklin. This may abolish a quite common theory that Deborah throughout her married life was humbly and pitifully grateful to Benjamin for marrying her. Clearly, Benjamin, no less than Deborah, should have been grateful to have won such an attractive partner, the more so that he had no family connections in Philadelphia, was still in debt, and his prospects at that time remained doubtful (Riley 239–40).

As already noted, after getting married, Deborah Franklin was wife, cook, seamstress, shop keeper, and accountant. She kept track of the purchases and sales that she made, and she also assisted her husband in his printing establishment. Not infrequently, did she carry out complex transactions. Furthermore, after 1737, when Franklin became the Postmaster of Philadelphia, running yet another business from the family dwelling, Deborah instantly assumed partial responsibility for postal affairs. Therefore, Deborah's contribution to the prosperity of the Franklin family in those years was immeasurable. As discussed before, strikingly yet typically, Deborah Franklin's involvement in the family business gave her neither power nor independence. Like Anne Bradstreet, Deborah was proud of her accomplishments, and like Anne, she may have enjoyed her work in her husband's printing establishment or in the post office. However, like her famous predecessor, she performed her services in the name of the family, not as a means of advancing her individual pursuits. If they both made the history of American culture, it is because their identities as well as their sense of purpose, importance, and security were all measured by their roles as wives and mothers; as the Founding Wives and Mothers.

Indeed, no less significantly, Deborah was a mother as well. She gave birth to two children, a boy named Francis "Franky" Folger Franklin ("Folger" was Benjamin's mother, Mrs. Abiah Franklin's maiden name), born in 1732, and a daughter, Sarah, born in 1743. Sarah, familiarly called "Sally," thanks to her father's special personal care, may have been the broadest educated woman in the colonies. Deborah also raised as her own her husband's illegitimate son, William, born shortly after their wedding, and whom Benjamin publicly acknowledged. Franky died at the age of four of smallpox.

As mentioned earlier, Franklin publicly acknowledged an illegitimate son, named William, born between 12 April, 1730, and 12 April, 1731, later the last Loyalist governor of New Jersey. While William's mother remains unidentified, it is possible that the sole custody of an infant child gave Benjamin Franklin an immediate reason to take up residence with Deborah Read, despite all the formal difficulties. Thus William was raised in the Franklin household, and treated by Deborah like her own child. On April 12, 1750, in the letter to his "Honoured Mather," Benjamin proudly wrote of his son: "As to your Grandchildren, Will is

now nineteen years of age, a tall proper Youth, and much of a Beau. He acquired a Habit of Idleness on the Expedition [Franklin refers here to 1746 when William was an officer in the Pennsylvania forces raised for an expedition against Canada in that year] but begins of late to apply himself to Business and I hope will become an industrious Man. He imagin'd his Father had got enough for him, but I have assured him that I intend to spend what little I have myself, if it please God that I live long enough; and, as he by no means wants Sense, he can see by my going on, that I am like to be as good as my Word" (B. Franklin to A. Franklin). In about 1760, William followed in his father's footsteps by acknowledging his own illegitimate son, William Temple Franklin, known as Temple. He soon became a beloved grandchild to Benjamin who took special care to educate him.

William had good relations with his stepmother; his attachment to her was demonstrated in a letter to his father, sent to London on Christmas Eve of 1774, in which he informed Benjamin of the death of Deborah on 19 December, reproaching his father in painful words for his not being at home:

Philadelphia, Dec. 24, 1774

Hon'd Father:

I came here on Thursday last to attend the funeral of my poor old mother, who died the Monday noon preceding. Mr. Bache [Richard Bache, Sara's husband] sent his clerk express to me on the occasion, who reached Amboy on Tuesday evening.... I was not able to reach here till about 4 o'clock on Thursday afternoon, about half an hour before the corpse was to be moved from interment. Mr. Bache and I followed as chief mourners... and a very respectable number of the inhabitants were at the funeral.... She told me when I took leave of her on my removal to Amboy, that she never expected to see you unless you returned this winter, for that she was sure she should not live till next summer. I heartily wish you had happened to have come over in the fall, as I think her disappointment in that respect prayed a good deal on her spirit. (W. Franklin to B. Franklin 59)

And further William mocks at his "Honoured Father," assuring him that "It gives me great pleasure to find that you have so perfect an enjoyment of that greatest of blessings, health. But I cannot help being concerned to find that notwithstanding you are so sensible that you... postpone your return to your family.... Hon'd sir, your dutiful son, WM. Franklin" (62). Clearly, William wants his father to feel guilty for his dutiful wife's long suffering until she died "after the paralytick stroke she received some time ago, which greatly affected her memory and understanding" (60), while he was enjoying life in London, practicing frugality, as he claimed, but yet also indulgence.

Benjamin Franklin spent almost one-third of his life in Europe, “upon some public employment.” He served first in England, for seventeen years, as a diplomat for colonial America, and then, for nine years in France, as a diplomatic envoy of the United States. His worldly achievements gained him the reputation of a great genius, a sophisticated sage, an inventive scientist and a promoter of moral and political truths. His writings were extolled as the ones transmitting the humanistic values of the Enlightenment. He was well aware of, and at times amused by, his image of the world’s most famous American, a courtier, a tribune of liberty as well as a symbol of virtue and wisdom. In England he established a comfortable household with close friends serving him as the requisite family. As described by his biographer, Walter Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin’s life in London was “a middle-class mix of frugality and indulgence” and “his efforts at economy were mainly directed at his wife” (234).

In France Franklin, hallowed as a celebrity, lived in the grand style which, he thought, was expected of someone of his stature. Surrounded by a broad circle of his fellow politicians, female admirers, and other acquaintances, he was indulging himself in the frivolities of his courtly existence. Such an idyllic life detached him from Deborah, both by distance and by emotions; he continued to send to his long-suffering wife paternalistic in tone and business-oriented short notes (instead of actual letters), most of which contained enigmatic references to his own health and to his determined attempts at “preserving” it, as he would frequently admit. It is noteworthy, however, that in his testament, written in 1757, upon his departure to England, Benjamin Franklin highly regarded Deborah as a business partner. Although he equally divided his estate among his wife, son, and daughter, leaving each of them with a share of the income from his printing enterprise, his estate, and one thousand pounds, through an additional bequest to Deborah, by which she would inherit the right to two houses and lots on Market Street in Philadelphia as well as all his household goods, he recognized her special contribution to the family economic status. This bequest essentially exceeded his son William’s share, and was far more substantial than the traditional “widow’s third” of personal property (Reed Fry 190). Deborah did not live to enjoy the bequeathed fortune. It may be noteworthy here that shortly before Benjamin Franklin died (on 17 April, 1790), he ordered a simple epitaph to be placed over the grave site that he would share with his wife. The marble tombstone inscription was to read “Benjamin and Deborah Franklin.”

* * *

Defining Deborah Franklin in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s terms, she was, typically, a “deputy husband,” a woman who responsibly stood in her husband’s place during

his absence; who, however, considered her task a duty and obligation, rather, and frequently a burden, not an opportunity for advancement (35). As Thatcher Ulrich rightly argued, eighteenth-century American women had never been denied the ability to serve as their husbands' replacement. On the contrary, the refusal on the part of the woman to perform that task would estrange her from her family and friends alike. But, as suggested before, serving as a deputy husband gained her neither equality nor independence; she was allowed and encouraged to assume responsibility for her absent husband's duties as long as she did not challenge the family or community structure, based on patriarchal authority and gendered power, which still prevailed in America in the era of the American Revolution. A wife's assumption of her husband's tasks contributed to *his* independence, rather than to her own autonomy, as was clearly proved by Deborah and Benjamin's married life. Paradoxically, it could, instead, depreciate her traditional role. Deborah had served her spouse well as a deputy husband for over forty years. Her dutiful supervision of his affairs enabled him to sojourn for many years in England. Her determination to perform her work "frugally and diligently," using Benjamin Franklin's most favorite words, had given him opportunity to act politically and socially on the international arena, as well as to indulge in the frivolities of the contemporary high life—against his egalitarian and anti-elitist declarations. Strikingly, even from such a considerable distance, Benjamin evidently remained the head of his household. His long-lasting absence did not diminish his role as authoritative patriarch. Significantly, Deborah Franklin never expected her contribution to the family would give her power or independence. Like Anne Bradstreet, she saw her role as complimentary; her duty was to her husband and family, not to herself. She displayed no desire to have her "own" career or to attain acclaim; rather she hoped, like Anne Bradstreet, that her contributions would be appreciated.

Jennifer Reed Fry, in her essay "Extraordinary Freedom and Great Humility': A Reinterpretation of Deborah Franklin," offers an alternative interpretation of women during the colonial period: she adds to Deborah's portrait an examination of her political activity, which is frequently disregarded because of the scarcity of documentary evidence. According to Reed Fry's analysis, Mrs. Franklin's political experiences foreshadow the active role women played in the American Revolution and the early Republic period. That role moved far beyond the household and expanded the social space for women's active involvement in politics. The essay addresses this issue, focusing on the considerable political contribution of an elite woman, Deborah Franklin, in the context of the pre-Revolutionary colonial reality. Confident in her abilities, she surrounded herself with many influential acquaintances, among them Deborah Norris, sister of the first speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Isaac Norris; Joseph Galloway, a delegate to the First Continental

Congress; Dr. Thomas Bond, a founder of the University of Pennsylvania; Susanna Wright, a poet and a celebrity in the contemporary Philadelphia literary circles, and many others. They remained in close contacts, visiting and dining together, which testified to Deborah's growing political role in colonial Philadelphia. Without such a capable, competent, and independent wife, Benjamin's extended absence would not have been economically or politically feasible (168, 180, 184).

Gender, beside race, economic status, age, and religion, was one of the most important categories that determined the American colonial past. It identified and assessed the role and position of women especially in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Puritan America, and it essentially defined their place in a larger history of American females. Admittedly, the eighteenth century American Puritan woman's major contribution was skilled service to her family and the community. She silently recognized her inferior position which translated into her perpetually serving her husband and submitting to his authority. The female social skills, most significantly managing the household, clearly evidenced women's diligence and diverse ways in which they, distinguished by their gender and determined by the informal and unwritten codes, effectively confirmed the authority of men. Accordingly, Deborah Franklin is still approached by historiography mostly through the stereotypes of victimization and domestication. However, through her broad political activity Deborah made a significant contribution to the pre-Revolutionary colonial cause, thus offering an alternative image of an independently minded female with leadership skills, who was almost invisibly entering a male-dominated space of social life tied to the political issues of the day. Herself growing in significance and prestige, she was, at the same time, enabling her celebrated husband to pursue his own career upon his public employment.

Works Cited

- Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography and Other Writings*. Ed. and intr. Kenneth Silverman. New York: Penguin Books. 1981. Print.
- . Letter to Abiah Franklin. Philadelphia. 12 Apr 1750. *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin. Collected and Edited with a Life of the Author and Introduction by Albert Henry Smyth*. 10 vols. 1907. Repr. New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd. Publishers of Scarce Scholarly Books. N.d. Vol. 3: 1750–1759. 3–5. E-Book Google.
- . Letter to John Alleyne, Esq. 9 Aug 1768. "On early marriages." *The Private Correspondence of Benjamin Franklin. Comprising a Series of Letters on Miscellaneous, Literary, and Political Subjects written between the Years of 1753 and 1790. Published from the Originals by His Grandson William Temple Franklin*,

- in Two Volumes*. Second Edition with Additions. London. 1817. Vol. 1. Part I: "Letters on Miscellaneous Subjects." 7–9. E-Book Google.
- . "My Plain Country Joan; A song." 1742. *The Works of Benjamin Franklin; containing Several Political and Historical Tracts, not included in any former edition, and Many Letters Official and Private Not Hitherto Published; with Notes and A Life of the Author, by Jared Sparks*. Boston: Hillard, Gray, and Company, 1838. Vol. 7. 92–93. E-Book Google.
- . "A Scolding Wife." *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 Jul 1733. *A Benjamin Franklin Reader*. Edited and annotated by Walter Isaacson. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks. 2005. Print.
- Franklin, Deborah. Letter. 14 Jul. 1757. Addressee not specified. *The New York Times* (13 Apr 1913). 21 Jan 2014. Web.
- Franklin, William. Letter to Benjamin Franklin. Philadelphia. 24 Dec 1774. *Franklin Correspondence. Letters to Benjamin Franklin, from His Family and Friends, 1751–1790*. Ed. and intr. William Duane. New York: C. Benjamin Richardson. 1859. 59–62. E-Book Google.
- Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin. An American Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004. Print.
- Reed Fry, Jennifer. "Extraordinary Freedom and Great Humility': A Reinterpretation of Deborah Franklin." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXXVII (2003): 167–196. Print.
- Riley, Edward M. "The Deborah Franklin Correspondence." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 95.3 (June 12, 1951): 239–245. Print.
- Skemp, Sheila. "Family Partnerships: The Working Wife, Honoring Deborah Franklin." *Benjamin Franklin and Women*. Ed. Larry E. Tise. Part One: "Franklin's Women." New York: Yale University Press. 2000. 9–36. Print.
- Thatcher Ulrich, Laurel. *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750*. New York: Vintage Books. 1991. Print.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. 1905. Trans. Talcot Parsons. First English edition 1930. Intr. Anthony Giddens (2004). 1930. Repr. London and New York: Routledge Classics. 2004. Print.