“On the Equality of the Sexes”
by Judith Sargent Murray, 1790

Directions

Read the text by yourself. As you read, make annotations in the left margin to record your ideas and reactions to the text. Use these annotation symbols:

❤️ = Thought (when that line or sentence contains something that you like or that gives you an idea)
❓ = Question (when you don’t understand the line or sentence or you have a specific question about it)
❗️ = Epiphany (when you just learned something important from this line or sentence about yourself, people in general, or the world)

Do NOT answer the reflection questions in the dashed boxes. Do NOT complete the TQE Time! section or the connection questions.

The Status of Women During the Revolutionary Era

At the dawn of the American Revolution, as ideas about natural rights and equality circulated widely, the notion that women were as entitled to these rights as men was still a radical proposition. After American independence, women were denied the right to vote everywhere except New Jersey. The state temporarily permitted widowed white women to vote before taking that right away in 1807. Overall, women, no matter their class or racial background, had few legal or economic rights in the early republic, and very little access to formal education.

DEFINITIONS

natural rights: rights that should be guaranteed to everyone
circulated: passed from person to person
entitled: deserving
permitted: allowed
widowed: to lose one’s husband or wife through death
legal: related to the law
economic: related to wealth

Judith Sargent Murray was born in 1751 to a wealthy family in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Although she was not allowed to go to school because she was a girl, Murray was a self-taught intellectual who was very familiar with the philosophical arguments of the day. A student of the Enlightenment, Murray believed in the idea that both women and men are entitled to a set of “natural rights” that cannot be taken away by governments.

Murray first wrote her essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes,” in 1770, when she was just 19 years old. But it was not published until 1790, when she had already made a name for herself as a writer. In the essay, originally published in The Massachusetts Magazine, Murray asserted women’s natural equality with men, arguing against the widely held view that women were intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior. Murray was part of a broader movement in America and Europe that used Enlightenment thought to argue for expanded rights and opportunities for women.

In her essay, Murray wrote:

Is it upon mature consideration we adopt the idea, that nature is thus partial in her distributions? Is it indeed a fact, that she [nature] hath yielded to one half of the human species so unquestionable a mental superiority? I know that to both sexes elevated understandings, and the reverse, are common. But, suffer me to ask, in what the minds of females are so notoriously deficient, or unequal . . .
“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)

Are we deficient in **reason**? We can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of **acquiring** knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be **deduced** . . .

**DEFINITIONS**

**reason**: the power of the mind to make judgments based on logic

**acquiring**: getting

**deduced**: arrived at a conclusion

**REFLECTION QUESTION:**

Why does Murray argue that it is impossible to determine whether women are “deficient in reason” compared to men?
“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)

May we not trace its source in the difference of education, and continued advantages? How is the one [boys] exalted, and the other [girls] depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science . . .

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What is the true source of the perceived differences between men and women, according to Murray?

“On the Equality of the Sexes” (continued)

Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us . . . For equality only, we wish to contend

DEFINITIONS

trace: find
exalted: praised
contrary: opposite
adopted: choose to take up
aspire: to try to reach a goal
confined: limited
domesticated: stay in the home and cook and clean

ye: you
haughty: full of pride
animates: to give life or energy to
contend: to argue for
REFLECTION QUESTION:

What evidence does Murray use to support her central argument in this essay? Why might her evidence have been particularly persuasive to her audience at the time the essay was published?

Directions for Reading a Second Time with a Partner

1. Read the text again with a partner. Take turns reading out loud to one another.

2. If you have new thoughts, questions, or epiphanies, add these annotations to the ones you made during the first read.

3. Answer the questions in the gray boxes at the end of each section together.

4. Do not discuss your annotations; wait until you get to TQE Time! at the end of the text. Read the directions there for sharing your annotations with each other.

5. Answer the connection questions together after TQE Time!
**TQE Time!**

**Directions:** Look back at your annotations. Choose two thoughts, two questions, and two epiphanies to record in the table below. Use the sentence frames to write out your thoughts, questions, and epiphanies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>= Thoughts</th>
<th>= Questions</th>
<th>= Epiphanies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample sentence frames:</td>
<td>Sample sentence frames:</td>
<td>Sample sentence frames:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The sentence _____ made me think . . .</td>
<td>• I don't understand . . .</td>
<td>• I learned that . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I wonder about the line . . .</td>
<td>• I am confused by . . .</td>
<td>• I was surprised to find out that . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Directions:** Take turns sharing your annotations with your partner:

1. Start by sharing your thoughts with one another.
2. Then share your questions and try to help one another answer them.
3. Record answers to the questions in the space below.
4. Finally, share your epiphanies with one another.

**Answers to questions and other notes:**

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2 Adapted from Jennifer Gonzalez, “Deeper Class Discussions with the TQE Method,” Cult of Pedagogy, August 26, 2018.
Connection Questions

Directions:
Read the connection questions below and try to answer them together.
Be prepared to share your answers with the whole class.

1. What connections can you make between this source and the ideas of the Declaration of Independence?
   - Connection 1:
   - Connection 2:
   - Connection 3:

2. In what way can this source be seen as its own declaration? What is the source declaring?

3. You and your partner will write a tweet with no more than 280 characters (including hashtags and emojis). You have a choice of tweets to write:
   - Choose a quote from the text that affected you in some way. Maybe you found it surprising, interesting, or troubling. Explain why the quote was meaningful for you.
   - Tweet about your biggest “takeaway idea” (the most important idea that you will remember) from this text. What is the idea, and why is it important to remember?