
Opposition to the Women's Rights Movement 1852

John L. O'Sullivan (1813–1895) founded the United States Magazine and Democratic Review in 1837 to serve as a mouthpiece for radical Democrats. As an editor and frequent contributor to the magazine, O'Sullivan may have written this piece. (O'Sullivan, however, had earlier supported women's rights while serving in the New York State Assembly in 1840.) Despite O'Sullivan's personal emphasis on experimental democracy, the excerpts below echoed the assumptions of white male democracy that typical subscribers to The Democratic Review would have held. The editorial is a rebuttal of a lecture by a Dr. Dewey, who in supporting women's rights denied any Biblical justification for the subjugation of women to their husbands. The piece thus begins with a biblical defense of patriarchy. —Benjamin Reiss

Bibliography: Robert D. Sampson, *John O'Sullivan and His Times* (Kent State Univ. Press, 2003).

[1] The whole order of Christianity, its constitution, we may say, is based on the relations of the conjugal ordinance. When we level up the woman, we mean, take her out of the established order of God's arrangement, we level down man; and we level down Christ. For the gospel affirms and reiterates the regular sequence, in various modes. As a dogma: in the declaration "that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God;" . . . As a command: "Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands." . . . As a mystery: the beauty of the allegorical marriage in the Revelation, is wholly in the understood moral relation between bride and bridegroom. "The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready." Again: "The holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." The church of God is in these verses declared to be in the same relation to Christ, as the wife to the husband. Destroy the integrity of the Christian marriage,—and the symbols employed to represent to us the dependence of the church and the providence of Christ, lose their whole significance.

[2] We have spoken of the Woman's Rights agitation: where society bears hardly in its laws or want of laws upon helpless woman, let the old law be changed, or the new law be made. The Bible nowhere countenances tyranny in man. Even at the fall, it is woman only who is addressed in the declaration: "He shall rule over thee;" the man is not told to exercise his authority as a punishment. . . .

[3] Is it necessary . . . that woman should start madly from the graceful orbit of duty[?]*—duty*, we are afraid the word is like to become obsolete in some circles . . . Must we have women brazening the stare of the mob, in Bloomer costumes? meeting in public rooms to declare their contempt of Christian obligations, and their fitness for masculine avocations?

[4] And if the men of the present generation are so unmindful of what is due to her as a sex, that woman must leave the cradle side and the nursery primer, and all the sacred household altars, to go forth into a gladiatorial arena, to wrestle in defiant combat with her ordained guardian and guide, to subdue him to her will, to an acknowledgment of her rights, based not upon gospel

authority, for that is to be thrown away, but upon her weak, human declaration—we ask if the next generation of men growing up under this willful abandonment, are likely to be any more just, any more deferential to the sex, which leaves them in infancy and boyhood to the neglect of ignorant nurses, or to graduate through street companionship to vicious manhood?

[5] There is a time when man, as a race, is in the guardianship of woman, wholly, imperatively. Let her hold invaluable those diamond hours. Let her set them in the fine gold of pure precept and elevated example, and their brightness shall be a coronet of glory to her, which would in vain be sought elsewhere.

[6] Into the tender soul of the boy let the mother breathe the sentiments of high honor, and brave unselfishness; of justice, of truth and kindness. . . .

[7] Such a mother will not need to send her daughter forth to do battle for her rights against the other sex; nor will she fear to see her son take charge of the happiness of another woman, nor feel it necessary to instruct her daughter-in-law in the religion of disobedience to her natural head.

Discussion Questions:

1. According to the author, what is the biblical position on women?
2. How does the editorial reflect the values of “Republican Motherhood”?
3. According to the author, why was the women’s rights movement counter-productive?

SOURCE: Anonymous, “Dr. Dewey on Woman’s Rights,” *The Democratic Review* 30 (Feb. 1852), 180–182. Paragraph numbers have been added.

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