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### **Etiquette and the Rights of American Women**

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the role of women in the United States monumentally shifted in terms of spheres of influence. During this time period, there was an emphasis placed on the importance of homemaking and proper etiquette, particularly its correlation to the success of a family. At the same time, outside the home, there was a strong movement for women's rights that was directing the attention of many homemakers outside of the domestic sphere. The presence of women opposed to suffrage was visible, as well, and these organizations emphasized the importance of women maintaining their pre-established roles. Many etiquette manuals found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasize the strength of the influence women had through their role in the home, which parallels many of the defenses most anti-suffragists used. The increase in momentum of the women's suffrage movement compared to the rise of etiquette books in the late 1800s reveals many similarities. Some of the arguments anti-suffragists used in opposition of granting women the vote can be traced to ideas found in many etiquette books of the era. Similarly, many of these manuals subtly reveal an awareness of the controversial campaigns occurring outside the home, apparent in suggestions of topics of taboo for women to discuss.

Throughout the time periods commonly known as the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, the United States experienced both growth and reform. During the late 1800's, an increase in industry combined with technological advances, such as railroads and factories, led in economic growth in certain areas of the country and a rising middle class. This "burgeoning middle class, with its hunger for signs of upward mobility, gave birth to an entire genre of books

on manners,” including etiquette handbooks and manuals entirely devoted to housekeeping (PBS). Most of these books, primarily written by women, had an intended audience of those confined to the domestic sphere, the wife or mother who ran the home, and focused on directing her to create a household filled with “virtue.” As the role of the family in the middle class shifted with rising economic conditions, women no longer needed to work and were able to focus on their “domestic sphere.” Views about the “cult of domesticity and true womanhood” emerged, emphasizing the importance of the role of women to uphold family values through homemaking (“True Womanhood”). These ideals were later used as arguments for criticizing new social reforms.

Evident during this time period, as well, was a rise in social reforms. Certain populations of the United States experienced new waves of thought, including the right for women to vote. Starting in the 1850’s and inspired by many abolitionist activists, the movement towards women’s suffrage influenced many women who had previously been confined to the home. Despite the strong influence over many American women of suffrage campaigns, such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association, anti-suffrage movements composed primarily of white, upper class women emerged in the 1890’s and early 1900’s. These organizations emphasized female virtue and claimed that many women would lose their true, behind the scenes influence if forced into the public world of corrupt politics (“One Woman, One Vote”). Many of the arguments anti-suffragists used, however, parallel the suggestions of female etiquette found in the manuals and pamphlets characteristic of the time, suggesting a relation between the arguments anti-suffragists cited and traditional white, upper class, American etiquette.

The importance of maintaining virtue in the home, an aspect of the “cult of true womanhood” often cited by many anti-suffragists, is found in many etiquette books published in

the late nineteenth century. Many of these books could not emphasize enough the degree of influence a woman who runs a home actually has. In *The Young Housekeeper's Friend* by Mrs. Cornelius (1859), it states:

Every woman is invested with a great degree of power over the happiness and virtue of others. She cannot escape using it, and she cannot innocently pervert it. There is no avenue or channel of society through which it may not send a salutary influence; and when rightly directed, it is unsurpassed by any human instrumentality in its purifying and restoring efficacy. (9)

As Mrs. Cornelius suggests, the importance of female etiquette and homemaking was not only essential with regards to providing for others, but also reveals the high level of influence women had through their role in the home. By remaining in the domestic sphere, women were immediately placed in a role of subtle authority, these books argue, for their actions had a direct impact on those around them. According to these etiquette books of the nineteenth century, one of primary examples of the fact that women had such influence through their position in the home was through the necessity to provide and host adequate meals. A proper hostess had a greater positive effect on those around her than she often realized, and for those who failed to run a proper home, their influence could be shattered. Mrs. Cornelius continues to reveal this by explaining the impact of neglecting domestic duties:

How often do we see the happiness of a husband abridged by the absence of skill, neatness, and economy in the wife...[H]owever improbable it may seem, the health of many a professional man is undermined, and his usefulness curtailed, if not sacrificed, because he habitually eats bad bread.” (8)

This passage suggests the view many had at the time of the profound effect a proper housewife could have. Neglecting to prepare a sufficient meal or running a home could apparently be very harmful to her husband, and ultimately others.

Beyond Mrs. Cornelius's initial explanation, the majority of *The Young Housekeeper's Friend* is a collection of recipes. She uses this introduction to explain the importance of the roles

of food by indicating that books containing information on etiquette and recipes are essential, for the food itself plays as large of a role as manners do. It appears, through this book, that there was association between a woman's ability to excel in her domestic duties and the level of influence she had in the home. Whether her influence was through her ability to host dinner parties on a whim, as explained by Mrs. Mary Randolph in *The Virginia House-wife, or Methodical Cook* (1828): "The husband, who can ask a friend to partake of his dinner in full confidence of finding his wife unruffled..." (12), or through her ability to please her husband, the power of most upper or middle class American women was subtly revealed in these etiquette books.

The idea of separate spheres of influence parallels some of the arguments anti-suffragists emphasized. Many women who opposed women's suffrage were white and upper class, accustomed to the power they possessed behind the scenes, an influence explained in *The Young Housekeeper's Friend*. Many of them believed that their influence was more powerful because it was primarily in the home. Women campaigning against suffrage commonly cited this argument, claiming that placing women into the corrupt and male world of politics would decrease their power and ability to influence (One Woman, One Vote). The anti suffrage movement gained momentum years after many nineteenth century etiquette books, and it is apparent that their value placed on domesticity parallels many of the suggestions emphasized in these books on manners.

In addition to the similarities between commonly cited anti-suffrage arguments and etiquette books, the historical context of these manuals is evident by their commentary on the role women were to play in conversation. In many nineteenth century etiquette books, an emphasis was placed on the importance of avoiding the discussion of certain topics, such as politics. In the popular etiquette handbook entitled *Polite Society at Home and Abroad* (1891),

Annie Randall White states, “Politics should be tabooed, for it is almost impossible to avoid arousing someone’s prejudice, or touching some sensitive point” (128). The intended female audience of this book suggests that, in context, there was a reason to emphasize the importance of restricting political conversation at a dinner party. Many etiquette books were published during the rise of women’s suffrage, a time when the movement was still very controversial. Handbooks stressing the necessity to avoid mentioning politics reveal an awareness of the historical change occurring outside the home. Stating that politics were taboo suggests that a controversial topic, such as women’s rights, had the potential to ruin a dinner party, something that just wasn’t proper etiquette. It also hints that this rule had been broken before, or it wouldn’t have to have been printed. Additionally, banning politics reveals the idea that in order for a woman to excel in her domestic realm, she shouldn’t be focused on distractions such as politics.

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw many changes in traditional American society. From a rising middle class to securing female suffrage, the place for women in this rapidly growing country was constantly being redefined. There were many parallels between the suggestions found in etiquette books and the suffrage campaigns occurring outside the home, ultimately revealing a connection between traditional upper class manners and the value they placed on women in the domestic sphere. Although etiquette certainly did not dictate whether or not a woman was a suffragist, when compared, there are parallels between the historical context of these books and the content they dictate, suggesting a theme of contrasting ideologies of gender during this era.

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