The Boundary Line: A Comparison on the Feminist Efforts of Deborah Sampson & Abigail Adams

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DEBORAH SAMPSON enlisted into the Revolutionary Army under the name Robert Shurtliff in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1782, taking the name of her brother who had died young. She saw little to no action because she joined towards the end of the war. She was discovered after contracting a severe fever and her fellow troops, assuming her for dead, left her with a local doctor. She was later granted an honorable discharge.

ABIGAIL ADAMS discovered early in her marriage that separation would be a common characteristic of her marriage. These separations became even more frequent with the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. This began the constant use of letter writing to communicate with her husband. It was through these letters that Adams advocated for the protections and liberties for women.

While Sampson took on a bold approach by disguising herself as a male soldier for nearly two years thus breaking numerous cultural boundaries for women of the time, Adams acted within the accepted role as a woman while constantly testing her boundaries.

HOW THEY WERE SIMILAR:

1. UNUSUAL WOMEN: Sampson was tall and strong and was skilled in farming, crafts and household. This was unusual in that at this time the typical woman was mainly skilled in domestic affairs such as sewing, cleaning and cooking. Adams was often noted to have an unusual amount of self-confidence and considered herself equal to her husband while marriage equality generally was not accepted.

2. THEIR DESIRE FOR KNOWLEDGE: In a time when many women received little to no education. Adams even went as far as to educate herself by studying Shakespeare, Pope, Cowper, some French, political history and science. Adams main concern when it came to the rights of women was for the bettering of education for women.

HOW THEY WERE DIFFERENT:

1: THE BOUNDARY LINE: While Adams stayed within the expected roles of a woman to further her cause for women’s rights, Sampson broke nearly every boundary put before women. It is important to note that although Adams was a proponent for women’s rights, she specifically avoided the phrase “the rights of women” to separate herself from the women who pushed their boundaries as women further than was socially acceptable.

2. RELIGION: Sampson did not allow religion to be a determining factor in her decision to enlist. She was even was scandalized by her church for dressing like a male which violated Deuteronomy 22:5. Adams on the other hand allowed her Puritan upbringing to shape her values and goals.