

“The Coquette” and “The Diary of Daniel Mulford”: Fiction vs. The Reality of 19th Century Social Life

Compared to other public records, diaries written by the youth of early America present a much more intimate and unfiltered portrait of what life was like during the 1800s in New England. Through these writings, it's evident that other written records of history do not present a full image of some aspects of life, including the role of women within society. The Diary of Daniel Mulford presents a much more vibrant and somewhat progressive image of the role of women in 19th century American culture than what is understood of history or shown in the novels of the time, such as Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*. This illustration of 19th century America is supported by other diaries kept by women from the time.

Throughout Daniel Mulford's diary, he openly discusses frequent social gatherings, dates, parties, and an overall vibrant social scene that includes an equal mix of men and women – this portrait of America is not frequently shown elsewhere. When studying other diaries written by young women in New England during the early 1800s, Mulford's image of New England life is shown to be the norm for society. Within the diary of Sarah Connell Ayer, a teenager from Massachusetts documenting her life in the early 1800s, Sarah is described to be “often in the company of young men,”¹ which supports Mulford's accounts of frequently being in the company of other young women.

The trend of men and women interacting more in mixed-gender social groups can further be seen within the diary of Martha Ballard, a midwife who kept a diary from 1785 to 1812. While Ballard, unlike Mulford, was married when writing her diary, her record of social

¹ Roberts, Catherine E. *Telling 'Truth Truly': The Startling Self of Adolescent Girls in Nineteenth-Century New England Diaries*, Harvard University, United States -- Massachusetts, 1999, p. 70

encounters matched the area's ratio of men and women.² Although Ballard was older than Mulford while writing her diary, she made notes about the lives of her two live-in household helpers, Dolly and Sally, who were 18 and 21 respectively, which provides some further insight into the social lives of teenagers/young adults.³ Both women are reported to be at mixed-gender gatherings and attending events alone. Beyond his personal, smaller social group, Mulford also notes these mixed-gender gatherings from an objective standpoint, noting how there were 14 women and 19 men attending a ball he went to.⁴

While Daniel Mulford's diary presents these gatherings from a male perspective, it becomes clear from studying the writings of women that these mixed-gender gatherings were essential in allowing women to have an active role in courtships and choice of marriage, since it allowed them to meet potential suitors in a more casual setting. Within middle-class New England, it was common for women to choose who they married based on their personal choices, not in marriages arranged by their parents, economic circumstances, or other factors. In Mulford's diary, he is rarely preoccupied with thoughts of marriage – however diaries by other New England women suggest that this was a larger concern for them. Mulford seldom notes if he thinks the women he dates, stays the night with, or interacts with would be suitable for marriage – he only makes generalized remarks such as that Sally would “make a better wife than mistress,” but this does not seem to imply much if she'd be a better wife for him or in general.⁵

² Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale : the Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. Knopf, 1991, p. 92

³ Ulrich, 144

⁴ Mulford, Daniel, *Diary of Daniel Mulford*, ed. Tim Cassedy. 2023, p. 291

⁵ Mulford notes that one sister, Eliza “would make a better mistress than wife,” while Sally “would make a better wife than mistress,” which can suggest further that he's using this as a general descriptor rather than an actual reflection of his feelings. (Mulford, 208)

Mulford's thoughts on marriage contrasts documents such as the diary of upper-middle class New York woman Mary Guion, who kept a diary from 1800-52, with the first several years primarily focused on her courtship. Guion frequently participated in mixed-gender gatherings at "balls, frolics, singing schools, and going to meeting," rather than always meetings one-on-one with men, which typically signaled interest.⁶ Guion's diary supports the idea shown in Mulford's diary that young women (rather than their parents or men) were in control of who they allowed to court them, and who visited them. While it's noted that single women were "not expected" to control who visited, it's clear that Guion valued one-on-one meetings more since she became "outraged" if someone failed to show up.⁷ These initial larger social gatherings facilitated this selection of a future husband by women. Martha Ballard's diary also provides further evidence for agency of women during courtship through her observations about her children and the young women that lived with her.⁸ Within Ballard's diary, there is "no evidence of parental negotiation and little hints of parental supervision" during courtships.

Women's relative independence in courtship can be seen in the social norms of the time, such as arranging visits at the women's house, something that Mulford writes about. When going to "Dido's" house, Mulford writes that it was the woman's preference to go to her house rather than his house.⁹ He also frequently stays overnight at other women's houses, especially in his

⁶ Blauvelt, Martha Tomhave. "Making a Match in Nineteenth-Century New York: The Courtship Diary of Mary Guion." *New York History*, vol. 76, no. 2, 1995, pp. 153-72.

⁷ Blauvelt, 164

⁸ Ulrich, 138

⁹ "I did not stay there a long time, but, per my little girl's preference, I went to her house, determined to find out (if possible) whether this woman was virtuous or not." Saturday, 21 August 1802

1801 diary entries, but never mentions a woman staying over at his house.¹⁰ While Mary Guion's diary does not detail men staying the night, Mary is the one that invited men over, which suggests that women have a greater choice in who they marry, or who they spend their time with. While women are shown to have choice in who they marry, Mary Guion's diary highlights the lack of freedom within marriage, which is seen in the abusive marriage that Mary's sister suffered through. Mary wrote about this frequently, and her sister's marriage "seriously grieved" the family. Within the 19th century, divorce was rare and only granted for adultery, highlighting the importance of the initial decision of *who* to marry.¹¹ This resulted in Guion having a long period of courtship, and could reflect why Mulford dated so many women, because they, like Guion, realized the difficulty of leaving a potentially bad marriage.

Women's control of their social lives and marriage prospects – as reflected in both Mary Guion's diary and Mulford's diary – is not fully what's reflected in *The Coquette*. While she ultimately has some choices, Eliza Wharton is constantly told what to do by others in her life. Eliza's other suitors, family, and friends all give her unsolicited advice on what to do with her marriage choices, and her choices are not respected.¹² However, this is shown to happen at times in real life. Mulford writes about a woman he kissed, Phebe, who shared that she was going to

¹⁰ During the summer of 1801, Mulford somewhat vaguely describes that he "slept with Susan and the rest of them" (Mulford, 19) and on a separate night that he "Slept with Maryann & Phebe a good part of the Night" (Mulford, 7).

¹¹ Blauvelt, 161

¹² Eliza Wharton is directly told by John Boyer to, "Fly Major Sanford." (Foster, 66), and Eliza's friend Julia says she "shall therefore discourage Eliza from associating with him [Sanford] under any pretext whatever." Foster, Hannah Webster, et al. *The Coquette : and, The Boarding School : Authoritative Texts Sources and Contexts, Criticism*. 1st ed., W. W. Norton & Co., 2013., p. 91

marry someone else she did not “esteem” to “please her parents.”¹³ Despite this arranged marriage, she is still spending one-on-one time with Mulford illustrating her own (albeit limited) freedom. Mary Guion experienced this too, but ultimately, she was not forced to marry someone she did not want to.¹⁴ Her parents wanted her to marry their neighbor Benjamin Smith, whose advances irritated Guion – however this marriage never happened, which illustrates how ultimately women can have choice in their lives and marriages.¹⁵ This mirrors John Boyer’s attempts at courting Eliza Wharton in *the Coquette*, which like Benjamin Smith’s attempts at courting, did not result in marriage. In this way, *The Coquette* is accurately reflected 19th-century women’s role in courtship and marriage – however, it does not fully reflect the social norms that 19th century diaries detail.

Beyond having greater social autonomy, women in the 19th century are shown to have a greater equality in education to men in some instances shown in Mulford’s diary and other documents. Daniel Mulford shares much in common with upper middle-class women/teenagers in what his education looks like, despite women and men having separate schools.¹⁶ Female academies also had a great focus on speech and writing, and in some cases a similar curriculum

¹³ Mulford, 142

¹⁴ Blauvelt, 159

¹⁵ Unlike Boyer, Smith did not give up in his pursuit of Mary Guion – Blauvelt describes how until Guion’s wedding, “he regularly visited her and pleaded his case with an abject devotion that Guion found extremely irritating.” He died unmarried at ninety years old. (Blauvelt, 159)

¹⁶ Eastman, Carolyn. “The Female Cicero: Young Women’s Oratory and Gendered Public Participation in the Early American Republic.” *Gender & History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2007, pp. 260–

to the male schools at the time.¹⁷ Beyond school, some women's personal reading and education mirrored Mulford's own reading. Within Sarah Connell Ayer's diary, she frequently reads novels and poetry and logs those readings like Mulford does. However, Ayer tends to read more sentimental literature and novels than Mulford ever records reading, which highlights a disconnect between men and women's reading habits in some cases. It's also notable that Mulford and Ayer share class differences with Ayer being notably wealthier than Mulford.¹⁸ This class difference highlights how despite men and women seemed to have similar educational opportunities at times, these opportunities were reserved for the upper-middle class and wealthy Americans.

Daniel Mulford's diary also exemplifies moments where women at times, participated equally in educational opportunities as men. During a chemistry lecture at Yale, Mulford described "several ladies" attending amongst a crowd of people from the town.¹⁹ While women could not formally attend Yale at the time, having women attend lectures like the one Mulford referenced suggests that women had greater informal educational opportunities, sometimes in the same venues as men. This is further supported by Mulford making note of how five ladies studied geography at the school he taught at.²⁰

¹⁷ Eastman describes how the ability to have "polished and confident speech" was viewed as important for both genders because it was "benefiting the nation as a whole." (Eastman, 261)

¹⁸ Mulford's position as middle/working class is best seen in his initial struggles to afford college, despite desiring to go and otherwise being able to. He writes how "considering my incomes and expenses, I conclude that the meanness of my circumstances will not allow me to go thro' College." (Mulford, 28)

¹⁹ Mulford, 256

²⁰ Mulford 296

Beyond education and social life, middle-class men and women shared similar economic roles at times, in ways not documented thoroughly in public records. This is best illustrated by Martha Ballard's diary entries, which include notes about economic transactions like Mulford kept. Martha actively participated in textile trade of linen and made accounts of trade.²¹ This economy of trade, led by women, proved essential for life in early America.²² While most of Mulford's economic transactions are with men, he does occasionally buy textiles from women.²³ Mulford's accounts may reflect how economic transactions with women seemed to primarily be with other women, as suggested by Martha Ballard's diary. While not a complete image of the economy of 19th century New England, the economic transactions recorded by Ballard and Mulford show that women were just as active in trade as men, but in separate areas.

Despite the ample private sources (such as diaries) that illustrate the greater role that women held in early American society, this is not reflected in other historical records or in literature, both of which shape understandings of American history. While Mulford's life can be seen in public documentation (such as his obituary, records from Yale, and other public places), little would be known about women like Martha Ballard without her own personal writings.²⁴ This reveals how women's role in early American history has been diminished through time, since these diaries are not pieces of public record, and have only been recently examined by scholars. Similarly, while Mulford is represented in public documents, his diary shows a side of American society that isn't typically shown in more public documents, novels, or public records.

²¹ Ulrich, 77

²² Ulrich, 84

²³ Mulford, 102

²⁴ Ulrich, 100

The disconnect between the reality of history and what's recorded is further shown in the disconnect between the real-life Elizabeth Whitman and Eliza Wharton's character in *The Coquette*. Within her private letters, Elizabeth Whitman approaches Joel Barlow at the level of an equal, critiquing his writing and sharing it without his permission.²⁵ This contrasts the fictionalized Eliza Wharton, who, while asserting her independence in some areas (such as choosing to marry or not to marry anyone), does not have the same type of relationship with either Sanford or Boyer in the novel. This type of independence shown by women can also be seen in Mulford's diary, when Betsy Meeker not only reads his diary, but writes in it herself playfully noting, "What a story you do tell, Danie,"²⁶ which gives her own commentary on the events of Mulford's life. This equal and almost playful relationship between young men and women can further be seen in Mulford's diary when he writes how he "cut a Yankee dido with a couple of girls"²⁷ and within the admiration game that he describes.²⁸ In *The Coquette's* there's no commentary or talk about games like this, or a more light-hearted social life between young men and women.

However, while Mulford's diary details many moments of pranks and games between young men and women, along with casual sex and sleeping over at women's homes, this isn't fully corroborated by other diaries kept by women at the time. This lack of evidence in other women's diaries does not suggest that Mulford is lying or exaggerating these encounters but is likely due to how there are still only a few diaries kept by young women from this time that have

²⁵ *The Coquette*, 281

²⁶ Mulford, 18

²⁷ Mulford, 220

²⁸ Mulford, 135

been archived and later studied and could be women's own fear of even writing about these events. Within her dissertation studying diaries kept by 19th century women, Catherine Roberts notes how multiple girls keeping diaries would "withhold information from their diaries and intentionally bury sensitive information"²⁹ out of fear of someone else reading it. Betsy Meeker's note in Mulford's diary proves that it was common for others to occasionally read or have access to a private diary. Roberts describes how some women admitted to events being "too intimate to report" and openly worrying "what will I do if someone reads this?"³⁰ These concerns, and the proof of the validity of them, further complicate finding truth even within a private document like a diary.

Within the *Diary of Daniel Mulford*, he presents a real and authentic picture of youth culture and the role played within that culture, as supported by their own writing. While the novels of the period present a more conservative image of cultural attitudes of the time, Daniel Mulford's unfiltered diary suggests that these novels are not accurate to the actions of youth at this period.

²⁹ Roberts, 103

³⁰ Roberts, 103

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