

George J. Benton

The Sherman-Thackara Family Papers

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*Epistolary Art of Ellie Sherman:
Gender Distinctions in Addressing her Parents*

U.S. Women's History

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Preface

Villanova University is the proud holder of the Sherman-Thackara Family Papers. The 2200 items (4 linear feet) and (8 microfilm reels), are available for research or viewing by appointment only at the Villanova University Falvey Library Reserve Room for Special Collections. Within the collection are volumes of original correspondence between the renowned Civil War General, William Tecumseh Sherman, his family, and their associates. These documents not only impart information but have the immediacy to allow average readers and historians to closely experience the Sherman family. These letters reveal how their private thoughts and feelings affected their relationships with one another as well as their public lives. Through them we can assess how one young woman related to her parents in Victorian America

The following quote inspired my work towards exploring issues of gender, family, religion and social freedom from a woman's perspective.

While inferior status and oppressive restraints were no doubt aspects of women's historical experience...

The limitation of this approach is that it makes it appear either that women were largely passive or that, at the most, they reacted to male pressures or to the restraints of patriarchal society. Such inquiry fails to elicit the positive and essential way in which women have functioned in history.

—Gerda Lerner
The Majority Finds Its Past

This original study examines the epistolary art of Eleanor Ewing Sherman, (Ellie) the daughter of the renowned Civil War General William T. Sherman and his wife Ellen Ewing Sherman. The General's daughter serves as the focus of this analysis to offer a unique examination of the gendered manner in which she addressed each of her parents. In the letters to her mother, Ellie retained "feminine" virtues; but in those to her father, she went beyond the submissiveness of the traditional nineteenth-century girl and felt the freedom to be fully honest, open, and independently minded. This work does not simply seek to test Ellie's early life against nineteenth-century theories of femininity and the concepts of what constituted "true womanhood," but also will illustrate how Ellie grew into a woman and maintained her relationship of openness and trust with her father until his death in 1891. Directly juxtaposed to the Victorian ideal that a warm, trusting, and openly expressive relationship was reserved for a mother and daughter is the case of Ellie's relationship with her father. Ellie felt a special connection to her father, a mutuality which essentially transcended notions of true womanhood. Despite his prescribing domesticity for all women in a broad sense, as in his keynote address at the Normal College graduation, "You have a mission in life aside from educating the young—motherhood. Don't make the mistake of trying to do a man's work in the world. God made us different and we shouldn't try to have it otherwise."¹ the same General Sherman who burned the South into submission to preserve the Union, raised a daughter independent in values and thought from the traditional nineteenth-century social ideologies of gendered behavior.

¹ S-TC. Villanova University. 1.2 Newspaper Clipping: June 26 William Tecumseh Sherman

Barbara Welter's "The Art of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," (*American Quarterly*, 1966) presents an argument that defines true womanhood as a set of complex virtues that women should uphold to avoid being damned as an enemy of God. She also notes both the necessity for women to have passive virtues, and the reasons why women need to see themselves as weak and timid. "A real sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore grateful for support."² Welter quotes Grace Greenwood (Sara Jane Clark) saying "True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful and clingingly dependent: a perpetual childhood."³ Basically, she says that the measure to which a woman was judged during the latter half of the nineteenth century, by her family, community, and husband were divided into the four categories of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

The confines surrounding what exactly was expected of, or appropriate for, white middle-class Victorian women in the second half of the nineteenth century, in terms of acceptable topics for discussion, are maintained through what historians call the "cult of domesticity" or "the cult of true womanhood." Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women in the Family From the Revolution to the Present*, provides what he sees as a glimpse of what it feels like to live within the internal dynamics of a nineteenth-century family. Degler explains the doctrine of "the cult of true womanhood" as "an ideological construction" and not a description of how real people behaved. He states that it is a myth that the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity were at a woman's core and with them a woman could have happiness, and without them, she would be miserable and desperate is a myth.

² Welter, Barbara. "The Art of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, 1966, p.159

³ *Ibid.*, 160

Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* notes, "the lady on a pedestal exalted by the 'cult of domesticity' exemplified a cultural myth of the model woman and bared little resemblance to any woman's daily experience."⁴ The cult, in sum, concerns an image, not necessarily the behavior of people.⁵

Degler's work provides a great deal of interpretation concerning nineteenth-century women as moral guardians of the family, paying particular attention to the divisions between the "roles" of the husband and the wife. Degler quotes Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, contending that the nineteenth-century husband and wife considered each other's roles in the home as equal in value and that a woman's subordination was simply her putting the needs of the family before her own. These separate roles, so to speak, for men and women, with women subordinate to men, have come under attack as repressive and limiting to a woman's true nature. Ellie Sherman's experiences serve to bolster that view. Largely through her upbringing Ellie clearly understood the "cult." However, she also understood the tact, savvy and grace required of a woman wishing to test the limits of her confinement.

Under the dictates of the cult of domesticity, submissiveness may have been the most feminine virtue expected of women. Yet, it is within the framework assigned to the importance of submissiveness that we find Ellie Sherman to be independently minded. She tested the limits of socially prescribed femininity and took risks. Although as an

⁴ Clinton, Catherine. *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Hill and Wang: New York, 1984. p40

⁵ Degler, Carl. *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. Oxford University Press: USA, 1980. pp.28-29

adolescent, nearing young adulthood, she was very much socially and publicly obedient towards the virtues of true womanhood, privately she was surprisingly different. One of the more interesting discoveries in the Sherman-Thackara family papers evolves around Ellie Sherman and the absence of submissive traits. One of the main reasons she is not the traditional nineteenth-century girl is because neither of her parents were passive. Therefore, almost expectedly of the daughter of William T. Sherman, Ellie was much more than what Barbara Welter defines as a nineteenth-century "true" woman.

Ellie Sherman wrote letters to her father that contained humor, sarcasm and criticism of him as well as other family members. The letters to her mother, however, reflect more of an ordered, simple tone, making a refreshing case that her relationship with her father was not bound to the prerequisite gendered restrictions that limited her personality to the virtues of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. Ellie worked those same characteristics into the rightful larger personality of a woman of wit, sensitivity and intellect.

June 3, 1872 "Dear Papa

It is a very long time since you felt us and we miss you very much. The old year of 71' has past and a new year has come to take its place. I hope you had a merry Christmas as we had". "I wish you a happy new year. We did not receive but we looked from Mama[s] office window at the dashing carriages. Maria Paterson made us a visit during the holidays. You do not know what beautiful presents Mama received from Minnie, Lizzie & Tommie. It was a frie-dieu. On the lower cushion is worked a wreath of white lilies and it is beautifully worked. Mama gave Rachel and me a set of books. Mama also gave me a pair of cuff buttons. Minnie gave me a book. Lizzie gave me some jewelry and Tommie a vase. Miss (Decostigano) gave me a writing desk. They had a play at Aunt Sues it was the best they have ever had it was the naval engagement. We are progressing very nicely in our studies and I am going to ask you a favor. That is to buy a nice French book for who ever speaks the language when you return after commenced this letter I had the happiness of receiving your letter thank you a hundred times for it and also the pretty picture. Indeed it was the best present you could have given me. Mama is going to get us a scrapbook and we will fix the pictures as you have said. Rachel and Minnie and Lizzie say they will not be jealous as your leers are to all of us under our names. We had real good snow but then it melted and all the time Marie Paterson was here we had bad weather. You told me about the sled, you went down the mountain and it went nearly as fast as the railroad it must be wonderful.

All send love Goodbye From your loving child Ellie Sherman"⁶

This letter is a good indication of Ellie's early writing because she exhibits signs of obedience to the family patriarch reminding her father that they would fix the pictures as he had said in their scrapbook. Ellie's mention of the weather and that "all the time Marie Paterson was here we had bad weather"⁷ might seem coincidental. However, after a close reading of several hundred letters, this is a humor that is repetitious. In a May 21, 1872 letter she used a "smiley face" symbol ((: to show humor in way she had never done in letters to her mother. On June 7, 1872, while giving a somewhat normal account of family activity to her father, Ellie again interjects her sarcastic humor saying that her Aunt Sue, who had been visiting, "has been starting back to Lancaster everyday for two-weeks, but has not gone yet."⁸ clearly giving her opinion that her Aunt had overstayed her welcome.

In what could possibly have been her most compelling action, far removed from the "cult," Ellie criticized her father's handwriting and stated it was difficult to read. In the same letter, dated, June 19, 1872 she told the General how her brother Tom was growing up, maturing, and becoming more sophisticated, she also said that he was now requiring that the family refer to him as Tom instead of Tommie because the name Tommie was so "queer."⁹ Ellie was direct with her father in terms of her descriptions of the day-to-day activities. She ventured far from the usual line of bland topics she shared with her mother. Her boldness shows the confidence and the self-esteem she maintained

⁶ S-TC, Villanova University, 2.1 June 1872, Eleanor Ewing Sherman to William Tecumseh Sherman
Ibid

⁸ S-TC, Villanova University, 2.1 June 7, 1872, Eleanor Ewing Sherman to William Tecumseh Sherman

⁹ S-TC, Villanova University, 2.1 June 19, 1872, Eleanor Ewing Sherman to William Tecumseh Sherman
[In the 19th century the "queer" had no sexual connotations, it simply meant odd]

with her father until he died, which allowed her to share all of her interests without fear of reprisal.

Based on the evidence provided through the close reading of the Sherman-Thackara collection, one sees that the General's relationship with his daughter lent pride and courage to Ellie that essentially allowed her to develop as an independent thinker far removed from stereotypical concepts of true womanhood.

On the other hand Ellie's letters to her mother displayed concerns of a womanly nature. In two separate letters dated April 4 & 29, 1877, Ellie writes her mother concerning how busy she is with her school work and also makes mention of the weather and how dreary the rain had been.

"Dear Mama. This is another rainy dreary Sunday and we expected Papa over to ride this afternoon. Yesterday Emily came over with Sr. Loretto's permission. It looked like rain when we started and when we got there it was sprinkling. We helped cook a very nice dinner at which we did not have strawberries. We came back to find Papa, dearest Ellie."¹⁰

As in this letter, Ellie frequently mentions the weather in others. Numerous letters of this nature extend merely to the topics of family illnesses or cooking. On May 11, 1877, in a very short letter to her mother Ellie showed compassion.

"Dearest Mama. Your letter was a surprise to us. It had been a long time since we had heard; but we thought no news was good news and so were very much astonished to hear that you had been so ill."¹¹

However on May 12, 1877, Ellie was again compassionate, this time concerning her father's health and she also included comments on the time she spent with President Hayes's wife.

¹⁰ S-TC, Villanova University, 3.1 April 1877. Eleanor Ewing Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman

¹¹ S-TC, Villanova University, 3.2 May 1877. Eleanor Ewing Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman

“Dear Mama,

I have fallen in love with Mrs. Hayes we divide our [time] before the music came between the billiard room and the drawing room with ladies and young gentlemen. Mrs. Hayes asked me to help her read her letters and so I did, there I sat breaking the seal of Mrs. President’s letters”. She says, “everyone spoke a great deal about Papa and they sent messages of love and respect. We went to say goodnight to Papa, he has not been very well and although he does not look weak or badly, he has not the fresh look he had last week, his is in good spirits, though Emily rode back with us, it was a delightful day in everyway”.

On May 20th, 1877, Ellie wrote a letter to her mother from the mansion of the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, which contained “lady-like” topics:

“Dearest Mama

Yesterday Rachel and I came out from the convent, dressed at Emily’s where we had a delicious lunch of berries, cream and some of Emily’s elegant biscuits, while we were there a letter came from Mrs. Sherman to Mrs. Quick.”¹²

May 27th, 1877 (written from Georgetown D.C)

“Dearest Mama,

Papa returned looking younger than ever. I have not seen him looking younger, happier or in better health for a long time. It is a beautiful day and the warm weather which had left us for a few days is returning. Ever your devoted daughter Ellie.”¹³

Although Ellie’s letters to her mother indicate that she chose her words very carefully and that she rarely gave her mother anything to criticize, her letters never addressed topics outside of those virtues prescribed to women, and were rather superficial. Her letters illustrate how a young passionate girl contained her emotions within respectable topics. Her mother had been an example of how to balance female emotions.

Mrs. Ellen Ewing Sherman (Mama) was a bold, courageous woman, fortified in her Catholic faith. It is Ellie’s mother who on two occasions provided the greatest model of influence towards balancing the prescribed virtues of a nineteenth-century woman with

¹² S-TC, Villanova University, 3.2 May 1877. Eleanor Ewing Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman

¹³ S-TC, Villanova University, 3.2 May 1877. Eleanor Ewing Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman

the behavior of a woman independent in character. For example, in 1870 the city of Rome had been taken over by the Italian government and Pope Pius IX was a prisoner in the Vatican. In response to these events Mrs. Sherman hung a Papal flag in front of their home. In turn the Italian minister notified General Sherman at the War Department that it is not fitting that the ranking General of the United States should show sympathy in such a manner. The General answered that though he lived there and maintained the house, "it was Mrs. Sherman's home"¹⁴ and he would not interfere. The flag continued to hang.

From this example, one can see that young Ellie Sherman was a product of two very strong parents and that she came from a home in which a woman's beliefs and thoughts were not oppressed because of public opinion or patriarchy. Therefore, the confines of "appropriate" behavior did not restrict Ellie. Her Protestant father, openly accepted his Catholic wife raising their children in her faith, and stood by his wife in the face of public criticism. Most likely the mutual respect of her parents affected Ellie by relieving her of the fear of judgment and possible rejection if she did not adhere to social perceptions of lady-like behavior. What allows for Ellie's independent development and her thinking for herself is, perhaps paradoxically, her private relationship with her father and the public model of her mother.

Ellie's mother's tutelage was insistent of domestic virtue. "Antebellum mothers taught their daughters, above all, to conform."¹⁵ However women could be bold in their defense of domesticity and motherhood. At the start of President Grant's new term in March of 1873, his inaugural day began with brilliant sunshine and military pageantry,

¹⁴ McAllister, Anna. Ellen Ewing: Wife of General Sherman. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1936. p.184

¹⁵ Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 51.

though later in the day it turned cold with near-freezing rain. After the ceremony the troops marched to General Sherman's house to pay tribute to the war hero, however, he was not home yet. The officers went inside and left the cadets in the freezing rain. When Mrs. Sherman became aware of this, she filled a huge tub with hot water, sugar and rum, gathered the cadets into her great hall and mothered them. The officers were horrified at her behavior because it was a serious offence to give a cadet alcohol. When the General came home, he made no fuss of the news, and Mrs. Sherman merely shrugged and declared that the boys were freezing and needed it. Later, Army doctors praised her, saying that she had probably saved them from pneumonia.¹⁶

Mrs. Sherman expected her girls, including Ellie, to adhere to certain standards of dress, behavior, and mannerisms relative to "true womanhood." However, Mrs. Ellen Sherman's behavior may have been Ellie's best teacher. Mrs. Sherman was not expected, by her husband, to be subservient or submissive. Therefore, when Ellie exhibited a political astuteness towards important events and issues of the time-period, it should be not so much a surprise as an expectation. In a letter written in April of 1872, Ellie mentioned to her father that "yesterday the colored people celebrated their emancipation"¹⁷ and she went on to further detail the accompanying festivities. This brief mention of African Americans shows Ellie's sensitive interest towards an important issue of the time period. She cared and invested sensitivity into a major public concern. Nineteenth-century women had limited opportunities to demonstrate their talents beyond virtuous womanhood. However, within the larger framework of nineteenth century ideals of femininity, Ellie's identity is an exception in part because of both her mother and the

¹⁶ Ibid., 381

¹⁷ S-TC, Villanova University, 2.1 April 1872, Eleanor Ewing Sherman to William Tecumseh Sherman

exceptional man in her life, General William T. Sherman.

Some schools of feminist thought might actually find that attributing Ellie Sherman's exceptional character directly to her father's influence as being sexist. However, the notion that Ellie Sherman may have been closer to her father than her mother is supported by the formality in which Ellie wrote letters to her mother verses the "non-traditional" tone she used in those to her father. Nevertheless, it seems that the Shermans were more concerned with parenting than gender roles. Perhaps Ellie simply tried to please both parents and possibly may have understood the nature of both their characters far better than we will be able to take stock from the privileged access to the family correspondence.

Domesticity was the mold that set women of the nineteenth century and however young Ellie Sherman she showed a passion that was politically astute, condescending at times and always passionate. Most of the nineteenth century ideologies surrounding "true womanhood" fit Ellie Sherman; however, submissiveness did not fit her character or expressions. She did not attempt to uphold socially constructed standards prescribed to women in private letters to her father. Ellie was confident enough, in what she saw in both her parents, to lead, rather than follow the prescriptions of what it was to be a lady.

Ellie was a "daddy's girl," but not a pretentious phony, and when she wrote to her father she was refreshingly open and candid. One could expect her to have been passive and subservient with her father and more open with her mother because of her middle-class status and formal education. Nevertheless, the gender mutuality among the Sherman family stemmed from their unity and support of one another. The fact that these

relationships took place during an era that predominantly followed gender prescriptions in all arenas is why the performance of the Sherman family is due an ovation.

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