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# Gender on the Borders: The Journal of Madame Knight

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## Abstract

At a time in United States history when individual colonies were separate entities with their own identifying markers—currency, laws, food, clothing, language—Sarah Kemble Knight’s journey from Boston to New York was akin to international travel. As a result, her Journal is a detailed, frequently amusing, occasionally disturbing, record of one woman’s confrontation with otherness; but it also presents us with rare insights into the possibilities for gender fluidity in colonial America. In *Goodwives*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich described women such as Knight as “deputy husbands” because they took on male roles, usually in order to sustain a family or community. However, a close examination of Knight’s text reveals that she was able to adopt and reject a variety of gender roles as the need arose. In fact, it was by crossing geographical borders—leaving what was known and familiar, both personally and spatially—that Knight was able to explore other “borders” as well, including those related to gender expectations. The term “deputy husband” suggests that such the woman is a placeholder rather than truly occupying male space. However, Knight is clearly no “deputy;” she fully inhabits various gender roles as they suit her needs and circumstances. She is also keenly aware of and comments on gender-based distinctions in a variety of situations. By considering Knight as moving along a fluid continuum, transgressing gendered and geographical borders in the course of her travels, we can extend and deepen our understanding of gender in early America.

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