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| |  | | --- | | This traditional time of college commencements is a good opportunity to examine a brief paper **Theodore Roosevelt** wrote shortly before his own graduation from Harvard in 1880. In his essay, “Practicability of Equalizing Men and Women before the Law,” one of the issues he addressed was equality in marriage(1). The topic was not a new one for the country. Indeed, when Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John in 1776 to “Remember the Ladies” and not to “put unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands,” she was arguably referring to coverture in marriage. Under the common law at that time, when man and wife married, they became one, and that one was the husband who controlled both the person and property of his wife.  When Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote the "Declaration of Sentiments" for the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, one of the “repeated injuries” she included was, “He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.” During the next three decades, one of the main goals of the women’s rights movement was for married woman’s property laws, which is one form or another almost all the states enacted. So Roosevelt’s support in his essay for “the most absolute equality” regarding property in marriage laws was not a radical position in 1880. One of the reasons for legal equality was, as he put it, that there “would be less brutality among the lower classes.” He was probably alluding to what today we call domestic violence toward women, who were often victims of drunken husbands. TR also maintained that “a son should have no more right to any inheritance than a daughter should have.” He boldly asserted that regarding marriage laws, “there should be the most absolute equality preserved between the two sexes.”  Roosevelt also mentioned in his essay two practices in marriage. He went beyond conventional thinking when he wrote, “I do not think the woman should assume the man’s name.” This is the only sentence in his essay that he underlined for emphasis. In the nineteenth century, suffragist and abolitionist Lucy Stone was the best-known woman who retained her maiden name after she married Henry Blackwell in 1855. Those who followed her example were known as Lucy Stoners, although the number who followed her example were quite limited in the late 19th century and well into the 20th century. As we know, each of TR’s two wives and two daughters took their husband’s names after marriage. Equally radically, Roosevelt added, “I would have the word ‘obey’ used no more by the wife than by the husband.” As far as is known, however, the Roosevelt weddings used the traditional wedding vows, wherein the wife promises to obey her husband.  Roosevelt’s essay is dated June 30, 1880, which was the day of his Harvard Commencement, but he probably wrote it sometime earlier. During his final semester at Harvard he was basking in delight at having won the hand of Alice Hathaway Lee. After courting her for more than a year, in late January 1880, she had finally agreed to marry him. There is no evidence in Roosevelt’s writings that he ever expressed these views on equality in marriage either to Alice or Edith. Throughout his life, TR held traditional views that woman’s role was preeminently in the sphere of domesticity as wife and mother, however much he endorsed equality in marriage in this essay.  ~ ~ ~ ~ ~  (1) This wording is on his title page. On the first page, he had a slightly different wording in his heading, “Practicability of giving Men & Women Equal Rights.” The handwritten manuscript is in the Roosevelt Collection at Harvard University, HUC 6879 no. 62 1880, 6-30–HCL. Harvard’s TR Collection as well as biographer Kathleen Dalton each describes this essay as TR’s senior thesis (Dalton in *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*, 2002, p. 75). However, it is very brief (only 1,200 words), with no references or citations. It is more like an op ed article in today’s newspapers rather than a research paper or thesis. I believe it may have been written for Class Day, perhaps as a remnant of Harvard’s colonial curriculum when disputations (debates proving a thesis) were a feature of commencements. | |

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| **TR from the Harvard Senior Class Book of 1880** |

