"The Contagion of Liberty": Mercy Otis Warren and the Beginnings of Feminist Sensibility

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"THE CONTAGION OF LIBERTY": MERCY OTIS WARREN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF FEMINIST SENSIBILITY

by

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B.S. May 1997, Norfolk State University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

"THE CONTAGION OF LIBERTY": MERCY OTIS WARREN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF FEMINIST SENSIBILITY

DonnaMaria Gerych
Old Dominion University, 2000
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This thesis will examine the life and writings of Mercy Otis Warren. The first section of the essay will examine the current historiography concerning Warren. Historically, her place has been somewhat ambiguous, particularly in view of what constituted feminism for early American women. By focusing on "republican motherhood," modern historical interpretations have overlooked Warren’s contribution to feminist ideology. In effect, these interpretations have confined Warren to this one identity, diluting and disregarding the impact of a published female writer, not just of poetry and plays, but of a bona fide history of the Revolutionary War and the early Republic.

In the second section, I will examine the Revolution and its impact on colonial society, particularly the roles of women and the use of public and private discourses. The patriotic and idealistic rhetoric, which developed during the tumult of the revolutionary period and gave birth to the idea of participatory government based on ancient Rome and Lockean philosophy, excited the imaginations of many, including women. Warren seized this opportunity to
participate by writing and publishing satirical plays and poems. Extending her written influence, she joined the federalist debates with her essay on the proposed Constitution, confident that her opinion was worthy of consideration. That the ultimate document of democracy denied political and legal recognition to almost half of the United States population did not deter Warren and others from continuing to “foment a rebellion” on behalf of their sex. Publicly and privately, Warren voiced the need for education for women and equality between the sexes.

The final section will be a comparative look at Warren’s correspondents, particularly with regard to feminist ideals. A discussion of eighteenth century femininity as compared to twentieth century feminism will highlight the fallacy that separate spheres denoted a lack of power for women. In actuality, Mercy Otis Warren empowered herself and set an example by her publications and private exhortations to family, friends and acquaintances that would inspire the later women’s movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Dedicated to my mother,
Anne Marie Rehm,
a woman of true
feminist sensibilities.

I have bid adieu and have consigned to the tomb
a mother in whom was concentrated every excellent quality
that could endear her to her family and her friends . . .
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION:
"THE CONTAGION OF LIBERTY"

The eighteenth century produced unprecedented levels of social and intellectual energy that encompassed even the far-flung provincials of colonial America. Reverberating throughout the colonies were newly adapted ideas from Europe regarding religion, science, and politics. The religious zeal of the Great Awakening focused attention on religious sentiment and spurred membership in Protestant churches across the colonial landscape. Enlightenment philosophies regarding science and the nature of man inspired new discoveries and discourses that challenged societal norms. The democratic principles stimulated by the Glorious Revolution, when combined with the existing autonomy of the colonies, produced an unusually perceptive and active polity. Transforming the patterns of colonial living, these ideas contributed to an identity that was uniquely American. Many colonials embraced Locke’s new ideals such as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and articulated new ways of understanding the relationship of government to society. In the crucible of the Revolution, the leaders of

The format for this thesis follows current style requirements of Kate Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations, 6th edition.
American independence, both male and female, forged not only a country but a set of ideals that had far-reaching implications for its new citizens.

These visionary men and women created a new society based on ideals from the ancient Roman Republic and the republican city-states of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy: representative government; responsible government; and civic virtue. Indeed, Americans understood these ideals in a unique way, for American republicanism demanded the extension of private, spiritual virtue to the public arena and that public officials "subordinate individual interest to the greater good of the whole."¹ The radicalism of the American Revolution and the resultant republic was striking for its heterogeneous appeal. It released a "contagion of liberty" that would infect many in America, regardless of class, race or gender.² In effect, the American experiment in government challenged monarchical patriarchy and introduced the idea of individuals as citizens (a relatively more inclusive group with an active role) rather than subjects.

A woman of her time, Mercy Otis Warren exemplified the


possibilities exposed by the social and political upheaval that threatened to sever the colonies from the mother country. The daughter of a leading Massachusetts politician, James Otis, Sr., Mercy learned the intricate workings of colonial politics in her youth. As the wife of a prominent Whig politician, James Warren, and the sister of "the Patriot," James Otis, Jr., she perfected her political ideology at her own hearth side, where the Committee of Correspondence, organized to unify colonial support for the growing rebellion, was born. While still raising her children, she wrote plays that were published as pamphlets and widely disseminated in Whig circles throughout the colonies. These plays, which initially were published anonymously, served as propaganda against the perceived tyranny of Britain. Eventually, she published a small collection of her poems and verse plays. Warren also wrote a three volume history of the Revolution. A women writing in this era was not in and of itself remarkable; what was noteworthy was that Warren wrote about politics and dared Loyalists and Patriots alike to find fault with her analysis.

Warren's place in history has been ambiguous however, particularly her role in the development of American feminism. If, indeed, feminism implies equality between the sexes, then Warren's place in history is greatly
misunderstood.\textsuperscript{3} Recent historical interpretations have tended to overlook Mercy and her contribution to feminist ideology. These interpretations reduce Warren to personifying “republican motherhood,” diluting and disregarding the impact of a published writer, who, as an outspoken critic and supporter of the patriot cause, stepped boldly onto the political (and public) stage of the intellectual revolution.

First introduced by Linda Kerber, the concept of “republican motherhood” addressed the legacy of the Revolution with regards to the civil rights and political recognition of women. Kerber believed that the early patriots “avoided the full implications of their own Revolutionary radicalism” by “restricting women’s politicization.”\textsuperscript{4} By restricting women’s public political role to a domestic political one, colonial men (more than women) justified the general expansion of women’s roles that occurred during the Revolution. The idea of republican mothers raising republican sons legitimized the women’s ongoing demands for better education. As Benjamin Rush, founder of the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia, wrote in 1787,

\textsuperscript{3}Though no consensus on a definition for feminism exists, and the definition stated may seem conservative, for the purpose of this thesis equality between the sexes is appropriate to the eighteenth century.

The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.⁵

By conflating the role of mother with the ideals of civic activism, men felt less anxious about the possibility of women assuming male prerogatives, such as voting, public office and other unfeminine activities.⁶ According to Kerber, republican motherhood represented a compromise between colonial men and women.

Kerber also used Mercy Otis Warren as an example of republican motherhood. She correctly saw in Warren’s play, “The Ladies of Castile,” Warren’s own sense of the political options that war made possible for women. The contrast between the play’s two sisters, Louisa and Maria, represented the contrast between colonial women and their republican counterparts. Louisa characterized those colonial women unaware of the possibilities that republicanism afforded its citizens. Maria (who represents Mercy herself), is a women in control, determined to survive


⁶By unfeminine activities, I’m referring to the beliefs men had about the education of women. Many felt it would threaten the sanctity of marriage and/or lead to other forms of aggressive sexuality.
the exigencies of war. According to Kerber, the Marias of the American Revolution, "take political positions, make their own judgement of the contending sides, and risk their lives - emerg[ing] stronger and in control." This characterization exemplifies Kerber's republican mother.

Discussing the need for female intellectual role models, Kerber also used Warren as an example of a woman who could be both domestic and intellectual. To Kerber, Warren was virtually the only prominent American example who could be trotted out against the complaint that intellect necessarily meant rejection of domesticity and of domestic work.

Indeed, Warren showed as much zeal and devotion to her domestic chores as she did to her public writings. She cautioned other women to do likewise. In 1776, she wrote to her niece, Rebecca, that

an acquired habit of continual industry will enable you to discharge the duties of prudence, decency, and elegance in family affairs, yet leave you leisure to improve your taste to cultivate your mind, and enlarge your understanding by reading.

It should be noted, however, that the general reluctance by historians to use Warren as an intellectual icon was related to her vocal political stance. Warren was a Jeffersonian

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8Ibid., 227.
Republican during a time when Federalists held sway. The bitter enmity between the two factions kept both from writing unbiased versions of the events of the revolutionary period. Later generations also failed to include many women in historical texts, an omission that has yet to be fully rectified.

Republican motherhood then, "conferred unprecedented political significance on the domestic sphere." Yet, one glaring weakness in Kerber's idea is her unsupported statement that "women had the major role in developing this formulation [of republican mother]." No doubt, the demand for education voiced by Warren, Abigail Adams, Judith Sargent Murray, and others, indicated that American society was in transition and that unforeseen possibilities existed. However, this demand did not indicate a position of authority for women. Additionally, Kerber's notion of republican motherhood failed to address the paradox republicanism created for women. Politically conscious women now struggled with the contradictions between the demands of motherhood and the desire to extend their patriotism into participation in the republic.

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Kerber's trope of republican motherhood, in effect, diminished the complex nature of women's roles in Revolutionary America. Republican motherhood ignored women who functioned in areas not wholly domestic such as shopkeepers, school teachers and writers. Nor did it address those women who successfully ran the family farms and businesses while still keeping the nuclear family intact. The real actions of women, who stood in for their husbands and fathers and brothers during the war, more compellingly argued for increased education for women.

Supporting Kerber's idea of republican motherhood, Rosemarie Zagarri's "Morals, Manners and the Republican Mother," traced the possible connection between Scottish Enlightenment theorists of the eighteenth century and the elevation of women (particularly mothers) as educators and arbiters of manners and morals.\(^\text{12}\) The importance of this connection, according to Zagarri, was that the new conceptualization of women's role in the United States seems to have been part of a much broader Anglo-American reevaluation of attitudes toward women that was occurring in the last half of the eighteenth century - even before the American Revolution took place.\(^\text{13}\)

While this interpretation might have opened new avenues for

\(^{12}\) Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," \textit{American Quarterly} 44 (June 1992), 195, 207.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 210.
examination, Zagarri instead reiterated Kerber's assertion that these Scottish Enlightenment theories only straddled the boundary of tradition and innovation and ultimately served to justify the status quo. Women did not organize or force a political movement to recognize the disparities between the assertion of "rights" and "equality" in dealing with Great Britain and the second-class status of women in America. The politicization of their roles as mothers "represented an intellectual compromise between the insights of the European Enlightenment and the rhetoric of the Revolution," but ultimately afforded few, if any, fundamental changes in women's lives.\textsuperscript{14}

Although she did not address Mercy Otis Warren specifically in the article, Zagarri did write a biographical account wherein she pictured Warren as a conundrum, a woman in a dilemma. Praising her record of personal and literary achievements, Zagarri nonetheless pointed to Warren's lack of a "feminist ideology" and her failure to offer justification for her ambition (whether personal or public), as the reasons why historians have neglected Warren. For Zagarri, Warren's accomplishments are diminished because she failed to initiate a radical feminist movement and/or serve as a role model for other women.\textsuperscript{15}  

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 211.

\textsuperscript{15}Rosemarie Zagarri, \textit{A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution} (Wheeling, Illinois:
the one hand, Zagarri intimated that women's roles were being reevaluated and reconstructed even before the Revolution both in America and in Europe. On the other, she negates these changes by insisting that traditional gender roles were not significantly erased.

Both Kerber and Zagarri base their interpretations on the assumption that eighteenth century women could not function effectively outside their restrictively defined gender roles. Zagarri goes so far as to imply that, "Warren's struggle, then, represented not just a battle against Great Britain, but a struggle against the limits of womanhood itself."16 No doubt tension existed between the old standards of female conduct and the new ideals of liberty and citizenship being espoused. Republicanism was rewriting the private and public roles for both men and women. For Warren, the role women would occupy had not been completed for she said, "every domestic virtue [should] adorn the female character . . . though this may be only in the line of private life, none may tell how far . . . it may be operative on the infant republic."17 Yet, historian Mary Beth Norton offered this truism: "But to recognize that women had a role to fulfill in the wider society was not to

Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1995), 163.

16Ibid., xviii.

17Mercy Otis Warren to A Young Lady, n.d. MOW Papers.
declare that male and female roles were, or should be, the same.” 18 The dearth of a formal, radical ideology that corresponds to, or parallels, more modern conceptions of feminism should not denigrate the accomplishments of Warren specifically nor her contemporaries in general.

The impact of Kerber’s construct of republican motherhood cannot be overstated, although, in all fairness, as Jan Lewis pointedly wrote, “her term has taken on a life of its own and is often assumed to say more about motherhood than Kerber herself ever claimed.” 19 Nevertheless, recent scholarly works addressing Mercy Otis Warren continue to promote this one-dimensional view that her significance lay only in her advocacy of female education. In her master’s thesis “Hypocrisy of Independence,” for example, Tina Lynn Weiss, overlooked Warren’s contribution as a pamphleteer, a role which was integral to the formation of a united colonial front, and instead focused on a few lines from correspondence with friends and family addressing the need for further female education. Certainly extending education for females was a primary concern of politically active women, but not to the exclusion of other matters. 20


20Tina Lynn Weiss, “Hypocrisy of Independence: The American Women’s Reaction to the Creation of the Republic
Another recent thesis examined Warren's life in the context of "separate spheres," in which a public, masculine sphere countered a private, domestic, feminine sphere. Elizabeth A. Grundy conceded that Warren contributed publicly to the Revolution and the formation of the Republic, but like Kerber, used Warren as one of the architects of the paradigm of republican mother.21 This rendition of Warren is problematic in that it asserts a knowledgeable acquiescence on Warren's part to republican motherhood that is not supported by the evidence. Historical figures and events are indeed open to interpretation and re-interpretation, which is why history will never be definitively written. Perhaps Kerber and the others intended only to refocus attention on the space of revolutionary women with the "republican mother" concept, a task in which they succeeded. It remains however, to continue to tease out other perspectives, so that these figures and events reflect a multi-dimensional complexity that more closely mirrors reality.

To that end, Mary Beth Norton's Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, stressed the ambiguous effect of the Revolution for women. While Kerber

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looked at women in roles defined in relation to men (i.e. wife and mother), Norton widened the perspective to include women in all stages of life. Norton emphasized the importance of the war on women's personal lives writing, "the Revolution's impact is more accurately revealed in an analysis of women's private writings than in an examination of formal actions implemented by men."²² Dividing her book into two sections, she looked at what women did before and after the Revolution and described the constant and changing patterns of women's lives. Norton rejected Kerber's notion that real change in the public role and status of women occurred as a result of the Revolution.

The enormous amount of material Norton consulted, including 450 families' private papers, as well as government documents here and abroad, attests to the validity of some of her claims. For instance, Norton looked at the troika of roles women played as wives, mothers, and mistresses and how those roles differed between black and white women. In a society based on patriarchal hierarchy, women faced conflicting states of subjection and autonomy, and were usually not given the privilege of choice. In many ways the Revolution was a class war that the poor (or those in subjection, including women) fought and the rich won.

Norton also pointed out that, as a provincial colonial

²²Norton, Liberty's Daughters, xv.
world transformed into the United States of America, women and their domestic contributions were re-evaluated. Domesticity began to have a negative connotation as men rode off to nobler causes and women chafed under the handicap of their men’s absences. The sheer physical burden of housework, coupled with the unrelenting monotony of the routines, when contrasted with men’s work variations and social connections, reduced women’s work and place to mindless drudgery.²³

These points notwithstanding, Norton expanded the historical perspective of women, suggesting that the Revolution produced “American womanhood” as opposed to simply glorifying motherhood. However, Norton’s view of colonial women still lacked a sense of public consciousness exemplified by some of her subjects. Specifically, Norton relegated Mercy Warren to the domestic sphere, mentioning her briefly as an example of the constant pattern of women’s lives. While it is true that Warren never traveled farther than Boston and enjoyed wifedom and motherhood, she contributed more to the changing patterns of colonial women’s lives than Norton gives her credit for. Norton does refer to Warren as a poet and historian, but does not analyze the public nature of those functions.²⁴

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²³Ibid., 38.
²⁴Ibid., 99.
ways, Norton's construct of "womanhood" is similar to Kerber's "motherhood"; each delimited colonial women at a time when political, social and economic forces actually enlarged their scope.

Most historians agree that the confluence of events in the eighteenth century left an indelible mark on American society. Women in colonial America, particularly in New England, experienced greater freedoms than their counterparts elsewhere. Gordon S. Wood describes pre-Revolution colonists (implicitly including women) as "freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the eighteenth century." Similarly, in "Rethinking Republican Motherhood," Margaret Nash asserts,

> We know that there were self-sufficient teachers and businesswomen, as well as daughters, wives, and sisters who played significant roles in the business and political ventures of the men in their lives.

As a result of this freedom, American women were not only cognizant of the revolutionary currents within their midst, they were active participants.

The problem arises when a concept is sought to define

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their participation. "Republican motherhood" and "American womanhood" are two such concepts that fall short of encompassing the complexity of issues facing American women. The eighteenth century unleashed "a contagion of liberty" that affected colonial Americans in various ways.\(^{27}\) Jan Lewis in her essay "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," points out that natural rights talk, regardless of the gender implied, was genderless.\(^{28}\) Even Norton contends that women were active participants in the discourse on public affairs and participated in public events imbued with political significance.\(^{29}\) More accurate is a concept that reflects the intellectual awakening that women were experiencing, a growing sensibility of feminist rights.

Women coming of age in pre-Revolutionary America were doing, saying and thinking things far differently from their parents and grandparents. Where once marrying, administering a home, and raising children were the goals of colonial girls, the turmoil of the intellectual revolt thrust women into areas not defined by home and patriarchy. Having now tasted the forbidden fruit, some women began to analyze their situation and take small, albeit tentative,

\(^{27}\) Bailyn, \textit{Pamphlets}, 139.

\(^{28}\) Lewis, "Republican Wife," 206.

\(^{29}\) Norton, \textit{Liberty's Daughters}, 177.
steps toward rectifying the inequality that persisted after the formation of the republic. Certainly, the culmination of this burgeoning "feminist sensibility" was reflected in the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and the "Declaration of Sentiments." But before Elizabeth Cady Stanton could exhort the equality of the sexes, Mercy Otis Warren and her contemporaries had to recognize and seize the opportunities the revolution of ideas afforded them.

What then, is "feminist sensibility?" It is women recognizing women as capable individuals with unlimited possibilities. While this phrase does not appear in any colonial writings of either men or women, the concept of feminist sensibility can be extrapolated from those writings. As Mercy herself put it,

let us by no means acknowledge such an inferiority as would check the valor of our endeavors to equal in all mortal accomplishments, the most masculine heights, that when these temporary distinctions subside we may be equally qualified to taste the full array of knowledge and happiness prepared for the upright of every nation and sex, when virtue alone will be the test of rank.\(^{30}\)

Mercy did not recognize an inferior status for women, believing that women were as capable as men in all endeavors. Obviously, the literal interpretation of this statement refers to the Christian view of the afterlife

where "God is not partial." But indeed, Warren's unflagging faith in republicanism can lead to a secular interpretation of this passage. In fact, she believed that any gender distinctions were only temporary and true merit would be measured within the republican state by virtue alone, a characteristic possessed by both men and women.

The revolution of ideas, encompassing the religious fervor revived by the Great Awakening, the intellectual stimulation of Enlightenment theories, as well as the political precedence of democratic power exemplified in the Glorious Revolution, all served to elevate the role of the subordinate, a role intimately understood by women. These powerful currents swept across the colonial cultural landscape, carving out new paradigms for women that would represent the first wave of feminism. Though not of tidal wave proportions, this awakening of feminist sensibility would begin a irrevocable trend for American women which continues as we enter the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER II

MERCY OTIS WARREN AND COLONIAL MASSACHUSETTS

By the time of Mercy Otis' birth in 1728, the Massachusetts colony had endured more than one hundred years of adaptation and change. Beginning as a spiritual haven for Puritans, the colony emerged in the forefront of the religious conflicts, economic tumults, and political upheavals that marked the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Massachusetts was initially an experiment in civil policy unlike its sister colony Virginia, which was founded predominantly for profit. The settlers of Massachusetts considered themselves in a covenant relationship that put God before profits. Warren described it as "a mixture of Jewish theocracy, monarchic government, and the growing principles of republicanism."¹ The Puritans stressed competency, civic responsibility, and literacy. Competency required that men provide adequately for their households so that they did not become a burden to the community; civic responsibility recognized the obligation that all members of the community had to one another to maintain order; and literacy enhanced the members' knowledge

of the Scriptures.²

Settled mainly by families, the colony blossomed under the mercantile policies of the British crown, yet maintained the independent spirit born of the *Mayflower Compact*. Being insulated physically from Britain by the Atlantic Ocean helped foster this independence. But, according to Warren, what truly distinguished the northern and southern colonies was this: "Both knowledge and property were more equally divided in the colder regions of the north; consequently a spirit of more equal liberty was diffused."³ This "spirit of liberty" produced a dynamic society with more permeable class boundaries. This may have been an idealistic remembrance on Warren's part but some truth in it remained. Land ownership in New England, as in England, ensured wealth and indicated status. Most settlers obtained land and thus improved their status, resulting in fewer poor people than in England or in the Chesapeake colonies. Relying on their own labor and that of their families, New Englanders developed a large class of yeoman farmers and middle class merchants.⁴


Women, too, benefitted from the "spirit of liberty" in the New England colonies because Puritans in particular acknowledged the special place a wife and mother held within the family both spiritually and socially. Women came closest to an equality with men within the bonds of marriage, particularly in their roles as deputy husband and parent, although marriage obscured their legal identity. The focal point of all colonial activity, whether defined as domestic or public, was the home. A woman's life was not defined by a self-contained woman's sphere, but was a series of duties within the hierarchal dependencies where children depended on both parents, families depended on communities, and communities depended on the colony as a whole. The proximity of these families in these relatively more urban areas created networks for information and support. New England women, then, had more opportunities for public and private interaction within their communities than plantation women in the South. For Warren, this "spirit of liberty" (longingly remembered) and the opportunities available to women in New England produced an equalitarian society that shaped her personally.


While the foregoing description of New England colonial life may seem somewhat cursory and superficial, it is the perception of New England that Mercy inherited. The forefathers of Mercy Otis Warren took advantage of the opportunities afforded colonists in Plymouth Colony which Massachusetts Bay Colony later incorporated. The region evolved into a vibrant mercantile center with shipbuilding, fishing, furs, and wood products the mainstays of the trade. The Otis family's fortunes paralleled Massachusetts' rise as a leader among the English colonies of North America.  

Mercy Otis Warren could have claimed an ancestral pedigree that would have classified her as blue-blooded as any of Europe's royalty, had she accepted the notion of an American aristocracy. Yet, Warren claimed only the familial relationships that bound her to her hometown of Barnstable, nearby Plymouth, and of course, to the political locus of Boston. Disdaining to trade on her connections to the founders of the colony, she simply labeled herself an American patriot.  

The sobriquet of "patriot" itself was a product of evolution, for the first inhabitants of New England were proud to be British subjects endowed with the purported

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8Ibid., viii-x.
rights boasted of by all Englishmen. This congenial and voluntary relationship existed between Britain and the colonies until the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, when economic and political exigencies strained the relationship to the breaking point, at least for some. According to Warren, the dispute between the colonial assembly in Massachusetts and Parliament in England centered on the choice between consensual rule or tyranny. For the Otises of Massachusetts the choice was obvious, freedom over tyranny. As the history of the Otis family reveals, Mercy Otis Warren continued her family's legacy of defending liberty.

The first John Otis (Mercy's great-great-great grandfather) was a member of the "Hobards," a religious group under the direction of the Reverend Peter Hobard, "a stout non-conformist and Puritan."3 They settled north of Plymouth in Hingham, Massachusetts in 1636. This connection to nonconformism is noteworthy, for these Puritans were not only religiously independent but brooked no interference from any secular authority. Indeed, in 1645, a fascinating court case arose out of a dispute between the Hinghamites and the local magistrates regarding the latter's misuse of power. The men of Hingham charged Lieutenant-Governor John

Winthrop with violating their civil rights. That the lieutenant-governor was eventually acquitted does not dismiss the incident, for Winthrop himself magnanimously congratulated the citizenry for defending their rights and overseeing the conduct of the magistrates.¹⁰

By the third generation, the family farm had been established in Barnstable in 1678, a town referred to by the inhabitants of venerable Plymouth as "a wilderness."¹¹ Located about twenty-five miles south of Plymouth on Cape Cod, Barnstable's humble beginnings belie the rich resources that attracted the yeoman farmers and shipbuilders who helped the small community thrive. The third John Otis solidified the family's participation in politics. Known as Colonel John, Otis held every important position in the county, including representative to the Provincial Council, head of the militia and judge in the Court of Common Pleas and Probate.¹² Although politically allied with the Whigs, in 1683 he married Mercy Bacon, the daughter of a prominent Barnstable family with Tory sympathies. The political differences of the two families were representative of contending political ideologies that pitted the House of Commons (Whigs) against the House of Lords and Privy Council.


¹²Ibid., 21.
(Tories). Yet both supported the absolute authority of Parliament and the king.\textsuperscript{13}

Mercy's father, James, was born in 1702, the fourth son of John and Mercy Bacon Otis. Despite not being formally educated, he inherited his father's title in the local militia and the leadership of the Otis clan.\textsuperscript{14} James Otis proved an enterprising individual, expanding the family's holdings from farming into merchandising, even building a warehouse on his property. While in Connecticut on business in 1724, he met, courted and married Mary Allyne, a woman possessing "every excellent quality,"\textsuperscript{15} Mary Allyne Otis had ties to Massachusetts as a descendant of one of the founding families that arrived on the Mayflower. James Otis returned to Barnstable with his new bride and ambitiously set his political sights even higher than his father's. Cajoled into representing a friend in a legal dispute, Otis began studying law on his own and was sworn in as an attorney in 1731.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{14}His two older brothers were educated at Harvard, a luxury his father could not or would not afford to the remaining sons. Nonetheless, it was James who proved himself the heir to the Otis legacy of public service.

\textsuperscript{15}Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, n.d. 1767, \textit{MOW Papers}.

\textsuperscript{16}Jean Fritz, \textit{Cast For A Revolution: Some American Friends and Enemies 1728-1814} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin
Representing mostly poor and minority classes, Otis built a very successful practice. Already a leader on the local scene, his future looked bright with regards to higher colonial offices. Otis consciously cultivated the royal governors, aspiring to an appointment at the Superior Court.17 Staunchly Whig in his politics, Otis supported England’s overlordship of the colonies. But a series of events that began in 1760 concerning Otis and his eldest son, James Jr., united the Otises behind the banner of the patriots and plunged the family into the American rebellion.

Mercy Otis, for her part, began life normally enough on September 25, 1728, the third child of James and Mary Allyne Otis and their first daughter. In accordance with the Otises’ status, their well-ordered household included servants. This afforded the parents an opportunity to focus on their children’s education. James Otis Sr. felt the lack of a formal education and determined that his children would not suffer the same embarrassment. Foregoing the public education provided by Massachusetts law, Colonel Otis had his children tutored.18 Barnstable’s pastor, Jonathan Company, 1972), 8.

17Ibid., 21.

18George Leroy Jackson, The Development of School Support in Colonial Massachusetts (New York: Columbia Teachers College, 1909; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 15. The early communities in Massachusetts had recognized the importance of educating the young, especially the poor. In 1642, the first of a series of laws were passed
Russell, who happened to be Otis's brother-in-law, was entrusted with the two older boys' preparatory education, and their younger sister, Mercy, tagged along. Warren thus received a more extensive education than most girls in New England, earning the reputation of a learned and intellectual woman.

The Puritans held education in such high esteem that the literacy rates in New England far exceeded those of the rest of the colonies. Education in the colonial period began in the home, where children learned to read well before they learned to write. While many children could read from the Bible by age four, most did not learn to write their names until age seven or eight. To qualify for public school, children had to master these rudimentary skills. In addition to basic reading and writing, children learned practical skills from their parents. Fathers taught boys to hunt, fish, farm, keep livestock, and master artisan skills. Mothers taught girls to cook, sew, spin and weave, requiring a levy to provide education to the children of the towns.

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19 Anthony, First Lady, 29.

20 There is evidence to suggest that at this time New Englanders enjoyed a 70% literacy rate for men and 40% literacy rate for women. See Kenneth Lockridge, Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 38.

21 Norton, Liberty's Daughters, 258.
raise children, manage a home, milk cows and keep poultry.\textsuperscript{22}

Mercy learned domestic chores but she also proved adept at more scholarly lessons. As the eldest daughter, Warren was expected to help her mother with child rearing and household chores. Despite the lessons with her uncle, Mercy’s domestic training never lagged, and she became an accomplished house manager.\textsuperscript{23} Warren exhibited a quick and eager mind, along with a winning personality that pleased her father. Colonel Otis indulged his daughter and took pride in her educational accomplishments. In her Uncle Russell’s parlor, she studied Greek and Roman literature in translation, read ancient and modern history (particularly Sir Walter Raleigh’s \textit{History of the World}) and perfected a subtle and refined prose style.\textsuperscript{24} She continued her studies alongside her brothers until the oldest, James, left for Harvard.

Warren’s predilection for studying bound her to her oldest brother. When he entered Harvard in 1739, James Jr., assiduously passed his books on to Mercy. Under her brother’s tutelage, Mercy’s keen intellect tackled the writings of John Locke, John Milton, David Hume, William

\textsuperscript{22}Goldberg, \textit{American Journey}, 35-37.

\textsuperscript{23}Anthony, \textit{First Lady}, 33.

\textsuperscript{24}Zaggarri, \textit{Woman’s Dilemma}, 13.
Shakespeare, Thomas Hobbes, and others.\textsuperscript{25} Inspired and challenged by the brilliance of her brother’s grasp of political philosophy, Warren confidently developed her own view of government and citizenship in a republic. She persisted in this love affair with knowledge until her death, continuing to read and write about politics, history and religion by amanuensis when her own eyesight failed.

Another reason for the closeness between James and Mercy Otis had to do with the heart. While at Harvard, Otis met and developed a close friendship with James Warren of Plymouth. Most of Mercy’s biographers agree that it was James who introduced Mercy to the “best friend of [her] heart,” whom she married in 1754.\textsuperscript{26} The friendship between the two men continued unabated as did the affection between Mercy and her beloved brother.

Mercy, as well as her siblings, witnessed much political activity in their home. As her educational horizons widened, so too did her interest in the politics of the colony. As James Otis, Sr.’s influence in local and colonial matters increased, it was not unusual to find the Otis home filled with visitors, neighbors, and friends and

\textsuperscript{25}Anthony, First Lady, 32.

\textsuperscript{26}Mercy Otis Warren to James Warren, 21 September 1775, MOW Papers.
for the talk to turn to politics. Warren often found
herself immersed in the politics of the colony without ever
leaving her home. Her everyday activities were interspersed
with political discussions, a practice she continued in her
own home. One can only assume the effect of this
immersion in politics on Mercy. A politically active
household, combined with an inquiring mind trained in logic,
likely produced a political sensibility. Certainly, her
family encouraged Mercy to excel.

In 1748, James Otis, Jr. opened his law practice in
Plymouth. Mercy Otis visited her brother often, continuing
to hone her political philosophy while James Warren, also a
frequent visitor, began courting her in earnest. Otis, Jr.
returned to Boston in 1750, and his political career moved
forward with an appointment to the Vice-Admiralty Court as
deputy advocate-general. Mercy married James Warren and
moved to the Eel River farm near Plymouth. The following
year, her brother married Ruth Cunningham, a Boston heiress.
Upon the death of Mercy's father-in-law in 1757, her husband
inherited the farm and assumed the position of High Sheriff.

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27 Anthony, First Lady, 27. Colonel Otis kept open house
on a regular basis as a way of strengthening his ties within
his community and with those ruling the colony.


29 The Vice-Admiralty Court was instituted to enforce
the Navigation Acts, a series of parliamentary acts to
reduce the amount of smuggling in colonies and increase
revenue from the taxes collected.
With both families settled and prospering, the final years of this middle decade proved to be the proverbial calm before the storm.

1760 was pivotal not only for the private aspirations of the Otises and Warrens, but for the future of the American colonies. On the private front, the long awaited vacancy on the Supreme Court of Massachusetts occurred. Promised the position by three succeeding governors, Mercy’s father felt sure of his appointment. Having been bitterly disappointed in a bid for election to the Provincial Council the previous year, the senior Otis and his family anticipated validation of their public stature by the royal appointment to the bench.\(^{30}\) When Governor Francis Bernard appointed lieutenant-governor Thomas Hutchinson instead, the Otises and Warrens felt utterly betrayed. Hutchinson’s numerous titles elicited charges of conflict of interest from those supporters of Colonel Otis.\(^{31}\) Mercy’s brother James, in his outlandish fashion, heaped vituperative condemnation on Hutchinson, vowing to "set the Province in


\(^{31}\)At the time, Thomas Hutchinson was a member of the Provincial Council, judge probate of Suffolk, commander of Castle William and lieutenant-governor, and it was not unusual in Massachusetts, or any colony for that matter, to have officials with numerous offices. In fact, the Otises themselves were guilty of plural office-holding (see page 22). But the charge appealed to the Bostonians who were suspicious of Hutchinson’s loyalty and motives, and were resisting Bernard’s attempts to enforce the Molasses Act of 1733.
flames, if he [himself] perished by the fire!" Hutchinson later recalled that, "from so small a spark a great fire seems to have been kindled." From this point on, the Otises and Warrens led the opposition to the Bernard-Hutchinson coterie.

The first volley in the battle between the royal provincial government and the disaffected Otises came in 1761 during the Writs of Assistance case. The writs, issued by the Chancery Court in London, allowed customs officials to search for contraband anywhere they deemed necessary, including the private residences of merchants and ship captains. The writs had recently expired and new ones were issued by the Massachusetts Supreme Court, under the direction of Hutchinson. The merchants of Boston denounced the writs as violations of private property that granted customs officials unlimited authority. Many of the merchants signed a petition and determined to go to court.


34The contraband items were part of the enumerated goods which were required by law to be channeled through English ports for appropriate taxation. Many New England shippers had become particularly adept at avoiding these taxes through a complex web of smuggling.
As the King's advocate, James Otis Jr. was expected to defend the issuance of the writs. Instead, he resigned his commission and joined the merchants as a defense attorney. Otis, Jr. took the unprecedented step of arguing not that the Massachusetts Supreme Court illegally assumed the authority of the English Chancery Court in issuing the writs, but that the writs were in violation of fundamental British liberties, tantamount to their being unconstitutional.

Otis permanently changed the way colonists thought about their relationship with England. He eloquently articulated the Lockean tenet of natural rights and outlined the principles that would guide the colonists from resistance to revolution. John Adams, a witness in the courtroom, succinctly recorded at the time, "Then and there, the child Independence was born." Thomas Hutchinson presided over the hearing as Chief Justice and in the minds of many became the enemy, while Otis became the "Patriot," the protector of British rights.

Otis joined his father in the Massachusetts House of


36Zagarri, A Woman's Dilemma, 35.

Representatives later that year, his election propelled by the writs case. By 1765, Mercy’s husband, James Warren, was also elected to the House and together they battled this perceived tyranny. Through speeches, newspaper articles, and pamphlets, Otis inspired, incited, and organized colonial resistance to Parliament’s persistent efforts to tax the colonies. It was he who coined the phrase “taxation without representation is tyranny.”

For Mercy Otis Warren, these were exciting and dangerous times. She and her husband had moved to Plymouth proper and their home was the meeting place of the radical elements who no longer felt that Parliament or the provincial legislature could be trusted. Visitors included Samuel Adams and his younger cousin John Adams, John Hancock, Elbridge Gerry, and of course, both James Otises, Sr. and Jr. During this period Warren also bore five sons: James, Jr. in 1757; Winslow in 1759; Charles in 1762; Henry in 1764; and George in 1766. Occupied as she may have been with child-rearing, Warren’s intellectual abilities were not curtailed. She avidly followed the progress of her husband, brother, and father as they refined the ideas of the Revolution and organized these ideas into political

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39Anthony, First Lady, 56.
action. While most of Mercy’s correspondence of this time is irretrievably lost, the few letters that remain indicate a wider political dialogue in which she played a large part.  

The radicals did not plan to dissolve the bonds with England at this juncture. They advocated true resistance not revolution. Popular resistance to government abuses was indispensable to the public good. In this way, the people protected individual rights from unlimited authority. No one wished to relinquish being British subjects. Even firebrand James Otis Jr. declared, “the power of Parliament is uncontrollable but by themselves and we must obey.” Yet, while writing the pamphlet that made him famous outside the Massachusetts province as the defender of individual liberties, Otis feared that the logic of resistance would mutate into rebellion and “America would be a mere shambles of blood and confusion.” Otis proved himself prophetic,

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40 These include letters from her brother James, her husband, and John Adams. Unfortunately, James Otis Jr., burned all of his correspondence and papers.

41 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 3.


for in less than ten years the situation deteriorated irreparably and the reverence that Mercy described "for the laws and government of England," dissipated.44

Twin calamities altered the tapestry of Mercy Otis Warren's personal life beginning in 1769. The first calamity concerned her beloved brother, James. After publishing a stinging diatribe against the American Board of Customs in 1769, James Otis Jr. was accosted in a Boston coffee house and received a serious head injury. Volatile and often unstable under the best conditions, Otis never fully recovered from this physical attack. The second calamity concerned her father. Age and ill-health prevented him from remaining in Boston, and he retired to Barnstable to care for his incapacitated son. While trying to act as a moderating force, the senior Otis often found himself opposing the more conservative elements of his hometown as the impending crisis forced communities to take sides. Mercy's concern for both of them is reflected in the letters written to her at Barnstable.

Although colonial society could not conceive of a woman holding public office, gender restrictions were more structural than psychological.45 Women often acted as "deputies" for their husbands and sons, and were at the

44Warren, History, 1:15.
45Ulrich, Good Wives, 38.
forefront of community discords.\textsuperscript{46} James Otis Jr., too, had persuasively argued that women were born with the same natural rights as men, and encouraged women's suffrage so that republicanism would be more effective.\textsuperscript{47} Warren and her brother had always been of like mind, and though taking a wait-and-see attitude with regard to whom the fledgling republic would empower, she never considered herself any less a candidate for citizenship. Politically astute and directly involved with the unfolding events in Massachusetts, she supported the radicals in spirit and, eventually, in action.

Warren's reaction to her brother's beating is recorded throughout her private correspondence. Fiercely loyal, she condemned the brutal attack calling it a "blood-thirsty deed" from a "dark assassin."\textsuperscript{48} Scholars have also attached critical importance to the event. Devoted to her flamboyant brother, his removal from public affairs may have sparked Warren's public career as many theorize. Consider, however, the poem entitled a "Political Reverie" where she wrote:

\begin{quote}
Has freedom's genius left Britannia's shore?
And must her sleeping patriots live no more?
Arise, ye venerable shades! Inspire,
Each languid soul with patriotic fire;
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{47}Otis, "Rights of British Colonies," 420.

\textsuperscript{48}Warren, History, 1:50.
‘Till every bosom feels a noble flame,  
And emulates a Locke, or Sydney’s name.”

It is just as possible that the turmoil between Britain and the colonies inspired her with “patriotic fire,” as these lines privately penned in 1775 attest. Warren’s determination to take a more public role in the events concerning her country was an extension of the work begun by her relatives. She was convinced of the rightness of the patriot’s position. Her sex, if considered at all, did not hinder her. Already an intimate of the circle of radicals from Boston and Plymouth, Warren moved from supporter to active participant.

In 1772, with civil war looming on the horizon, Mercy Warren did what she could: she wrote. She had already gained a reputation as “a scribler,” carrying on an extensive correspondence with family, friends and acquaintances.50 As her brother published his views in order to circulate his ideas, Warren too, determined to publish for public consumption. “The Adulator,” the first of a series of satirical plays, was published in Boston in the spring of 1772 and placed Mercy at the forefront of those moving towards revolution.

50MOW to JW, 22 April 1772, MOW Papers.
Ever the devoted wife and mother, the endorsement of her husband encouraged her further. According to James Warren, his wife's talents were considerable. "God has given you great abilities," he wrote to her in 1775,

you have improved them in great Acquirements. You are possessed of eminent Virtues and distinguished Piety. For all these I esteem I love you in a degree that I can't express. They are all now called into action for the good of Mankind, for the good of your friends, for the promotion of Virtue and Patriotism. 51

His natural bias notwithstanding, many others, including John Adams and John Winthrop, felt the same way. 52 Writing publicly was not a preemptive move on Mercy's part, but rather an acknowledgment of her abilities and a way for her to contribute to the patriot cause. Was her husband simply indulging the woman on whom he doted? Probably not. James Warren enjoyed significant influence within Massachusetts politics and the Patriot movement. John Adams held James Warren in high esteem and maintained constant communications with him, seeking advice, laying out plans, and sounding out new ideas. 53 Recognizing the need to gather more adherents,

51 JW to MOW, 6 & 7 April 1775, Warren-Adams Letters, 1:44.


53 Brown, Mercy Warren, 49.
the leaders of the patriot cause would not have capriciously delegated the task of writing propaganda to a favorite, whether wife or friend. Mr. Warren not only loved his wife, but respected her intellectual acumen as did others in their circle.

Inspired by the writings of her brother and supported by her husband and friends, Mercy Otis Warren became the first American female political satirist and playwright. In so doing, she demonstrated how the development of republican political theory during the American Revolution opened opportunities for women. Through her letters, plays and poems, and by participating in the constitutional debates, Mercy Otis Warren rallied many to the patriot cause. She also developed a sense of herself and her own power as a player on the political stage and, more importantly, as a female player. From her beginnings as a private correspondent to her role as a historian and pundit, Warren exemplified what women could accomplish in the new republic. A closer examination of her writings will reveal an emerging female sensibility.
CHAPTER III
THE FEMALE VOICE AND FEMINIST SENSIBILITY

Mercy Otis Warren’s debut as a public writer accomplished not only the infusion of a female voice into literary genres traditionally associated with men, but also underlined the genderless aspect of the rhetoric that inspired the Revolution. Warren’s literary works paralleled her own movement from supporter (voice) to participant (citizen). Words such as liberty and natural rights remained gender neutral and for Mercy Otis Warren, they applied to all people living under the umbrella of a “republic.” As a contributor to the formation of the new Republic, Warren felt obligated to perform publicly for its benefit. Enlightenment philosophy about citizenship in a republic, in this patriot’s view, required a public virtue that entailed more than moral behavior. Public virtue, as outlined in Plato’s Republic, converged with the Puritan belief in civic responsibility and required action from the republican citizen. Keeping informed about public issues, speaking out in public forums, and voting one’s conscience at elections constituted the activities which not only guarded the Republic from corruption, but also kept the government functioning smoothly.

Warren’s patriotic fervor and commitment to the
formation of a republican government were the reasons she wrote her first satirical play, "The Adulateur" in 1772. Although "The Adulateur" was Warren's first published piece, no complete, authenticated version of the play exists. The fragments published in the Massachusetts Spy in March and April of 1772 show a sharply satirical indictment of the government of Massachusetts under royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson. Hutchinson, the leader of the Loyalist faction in Massachusetts, epitomized for Warren those men bent on destroying the "peaceful asylum of freedom." Set in fictitious "Upper Servia," Warren used farcical names to delineate the personalities of the government characters: Rapatio was Governor Hutchinson; Hazelrod was Chief Justice Peter Oliver; Limpet represented his brother, Lieutenant-Governor Andrew Oliver; and Dupe was Provincial Secretary Thomas Flucker. In comparison, Warren chose classical Roman names for the patriots, indicating her perception of the Roman Republic as a model for Massachusetts. Not surprisingly, James Otis Jr. as Brutus and Samuel Adams as Cassius, were the models for the lead characters of the

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1Jeffrey H. Richards, Mercy Otis Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 86. Hutchinson had replaced former governor Bernard who had been recalled to England.

2Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Macaulay, 9 June 1773, MOW Papers.

3Zagarri, A Woman's Dilemma, 85.
patriots.

By all accounts, "The Adulateur" failed as a performance piece and was never intended for the stage. Raised in Puritan New England, Warren had never seen a play performed, and why she chose to write one remains unclear. Only a handful of American male playwrights preceded her and none of their works were produced in the eighteenth century.\(^4\) Perhaps the vehicle of a play allowed Warren the literary license to reconstruct the Roman Republic for her readers. Devoted to the cause of republic-building, Warren, with her witty dialogue, created a visionary republic. In this ideal republic, gender distinctions would be obliterated as women fully participated in areas previously considered masculine. Described by her husband as having the heart of a woman and the mind of a man, Warren considered herself equal to the task of writing effective satire which had heretofore been the prerogative of men.\(^5\)

As satire, "The Adulateur" succeeded magnificently. The stinging wit of the play enraged the Loyalists and delighted the Whigs as each recognized the personality beneath the parody.\(^6\) With her pen, Mercy Warren entered the political

\(^4\) Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 85.


fray, striking a blow for the patriot's cause and for women. As a female author, Mercy's female satirical voice expanded the literary boundaries.

Warren's follow-up piece, "The Defeat," published in 1773, continued the storyline of "The Adulterateur" wherein the evil doers of the first play receive their justifiable punishment. Vice-like Rapatio incriminates himself in the first soliloquy saying, "To prove the darling purpose of my soul,/ And fix the shackles on an injur'd land." The eventual clash between the Servians and Rapatio's supporters results in Rapatio's defeat. At the play's end Rapatio confesses his atrocities,

Ee'r since my native Land, I basely Sold,
For flattering Titles, and more sordid Gold.
The dreadful Curses of the Slaughter's Dead,
Full vengeance pour on my devoted Head. 8

"The Defeat" was Warren's response to the most recent machinations of Hutchinson and his Loyalist faction in 1773. Not only had Hutchinson eliminated a colonial check on his power by securing direct payment of his salary from the crown, he brought notable Whigs to his side. 9 For the radicals, these developments represented a threat to the

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9Ibid., 12.

9Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 89-90.
traditional liberties the colony always enjoyed. But Benjamin Franklin’s interception of a series of letters from Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver declaring that individual rights in the colonies must be curtailed if British authority was to prevail served to promote the radical’s cause and the success of Warren’s play.\(^\text{10}\)

The play received high praise from her contemporaries and Warren continued to refine her ability as a political pamphleteer and playwright. She expounded again the warning present in both plays, calling on every liberty loving individual to preserve their inherent rights. Warren astutely recognized the far-reaching implications of the local quarrel, sensing that violence involving the entire country would be the only solution to the problems promulgated by Britain.

Warren published both plays anonymously, not to hide her gender but for her own protection and that of the radical Whigs with whom she associated. Print was endemic to the success of the revolution and publishing anonymously

\(^{10}\)Benjamin Franklin served as a colonial agent in London at the time the letters were sent to certain British ministers. Franklin forwarded them to Thomas Cushing who gave them to James Warren. It was in Mercy’s parlor that the letters were publicly read. The decision to publish the letters and expose Hutchinson and Oliver as traitors resulted in their exile from the colony. See Katherine Anthony, First Lady of the Revolution, 86-87; Fritz, Cast for a Revolution, 106-107; Zagarri, A Woman’s Dilemma, 58-60; Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 90-91.
was the convention of the times. In effect these were treasonous and often scurrilous studies that were punishable by imprisonment or worse. Highlighting virtue as a prerequisite for survival of a free people, Warren depicted the dispute within the colonies in exaggerated dichotomies, using stark and oftentimes, unbelievable contrasts. In Warren's opinion all the Loyalists were completely evil with no redeeming quality and the Patriots were the virtuous, true sons of liberty and America.

Moving from a woman simply writing satire to the creation of independent female characters, Warren's third play "The Group," published in 1774, won national acclaim. John Adams had it published in Philadelphia, the site of the first Continental Congress, and it received a wider circulation than the first two. Centered entirely on the Tory circle controlling Boston, Warren painted an unrelenting picture of the vulgar, grasping, avaricious tools of Britain ("blunderland") willing to sell out their homeland for personal gain. Warren conspicuously introduced a female character at the end of the play, who, in contrast to the male sycophants, bemoans the injudicious acts of the group saying,


12Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 92.
Till British troops to Columbia yield,
And freedom's sons are Masters of the field;
Then o'er the purpl'd plain the victors tread
Among the slain to seek each patriot dead,
(While Freedom weeps that merit could not save
But conq'ring Hero's must enrich the Grave)
An adamantine monument they rear
With this inscription - Virtue's sons lie here!\(^{13}\)

This female, although the wife of one of the government officials, does not wholeheartedly support the group.

Symbolically, Warren used this woman to not only rebuke the group for their evil ways, but as a model for other colonial women to emulate. For Mercy, women were not to parrot the men in their lives but take a personal stand based on virtue and morality. This independent female character resurfaces again and again in Warren's writings.

Continuing the use of female characters that taught moral and political lessons, Warren's literary repertoire extended to poetry. Two poems particularly stand out for their technical expertise and political enunciation:

"Squabble of the Sea Nymphs" and "To the Hon. J. Winthrop, Esq." Published in 1774 prior to the implementation of the Boston Port Act, Warren's poems mocked the effects of the Intolerable Acts by celebrating patriotic spirit and satirizing American foibles.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\)The Boston Tea Party took place in December 1773, in reaction to the Tea Act of 1773 which was a surreptitious
Written at the request of John Adams to celebrate the Boston Tea Party, the “Squabble of the Sea Nymphs” borrowed its characters from classical mythology and its structure from Alexander Pope’s satirical epic “The Rape of the Lock,” to show the necessity of sacrificing personal luxuries for the public good. The poem opens with the loss of ambrosia, the gods’ favorite drink. Neptune consults with the deities as to which substitute beverage they should choose. The Titans (the British) would “travel round Columbia’s coast,” and “rob and plunder every neigh’ring vine.” Here, Warren inserted her feminist sensibility by having Neptune defer to the goddesses for approval, saying, “For females have their influence o’er kings,/ Nor wives, nor mistresses, were useless things.” Warren utilized the poem to highlight the importance of women as advisors saying “none will neglect the sex’s sage advice.”

The rest of the poem concerns the struggle between attempt to force the colonists to pay the tea tax. Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty collectively thumbed their noses at Hutchinson’s attempt to force the British tea on Bostonians. Parliament’s reprisal however, was the passage of the Coercive Acts, known as the Intolerable Acts in the colonies, which closed Boston harbor until the duty on the lost tea was paid. Thus the need for boycott plans in the other colonies to support the beleaguered Bostonians.


16Ibid., 203.
Amphitrite, representing the Loyalists, who wants the tea for herself and "resolve[s] to set the western world on fire," using the tea to "feed the flames" and Salacia, the voice of Warren the Patriot, the wise wife of Neptune, who "bids defiance to the servile train,/ The pimps and sycophants of George's reign." If the patriot's cause is just and true then the sacrifice of the tea is virtuous. The Tuscararoes, representing the members of the Sons of Liberty who disguised themselves as Native Americans, reject a place in such a tyrannical world, and aid Salacia by dumping the tea into the sea. Despite the Syrens call to "taste the sweet inebriating stream," the patriots stand firm as they join the victory song and "spread confusion round N[epos]t hills."17

Warren continued to show support of boycotts in the poem "To the Honorable J. Winthrop," which came at the behest of John Winthrop, husband of Warren's good friend Hannah Winthrop. A mathematics professor at Harvard University, Winthrop also supported the Radical Whigs and the tactic of boycotting British goods. Winthrop asked Warren to compile a humorous list of those "necessaries" the ladies of Massachusetts could in good conscience continue to buy from Britain. Entitled "To the Hon. J. Winthrop, Esq.,"

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17Ibid., 204-205. Neposit Hills refers to Milton, Massachusetts where Governor Hutchinson resided.
Warren instead wrote a scintillating verse commenting on the vices of men and women. Warren felt that republican citizenship hinged on the practice of stoic self-sacrifice and she agreed wholeheartedly with John Adams, who in 1776 wrote,

Public virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics. There must be a positive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty, and this public Passion must be superior to all private Passions.  

This aspect of Stoicism became the hallmark of not only Warren's writings but the mantra by which she lived her life.

In the Winthrop poem, Warren used a dialogue between female characters to show the vanity of being concerned about one's outward appearance ("Tis true, we love the courtly mein and air") while the colonies neared the abyss of war ("On the best plan to save a sinking state"). Warren emphasized the need for solidarity as a people for the state to survive. She created caricatures of Massachusetts women in the roles of the spoiled, self-

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indulgent Clarissa, the noble-minded Lamira and Prudentia and the weak-willed Clara. Contrasting colonial women with virtuous Roman matrons, Portia, Cornelia and Pompey’s wife, Warren wrote:

   Let us resolve on a small sacrifice,
And in the pride of Roman matrons rise;
   Good as Cornelia, or a Pompey’s wife,
   We’ll quit the useless vanities of life.\(^2\)

Warren reiterated her belief in the powerful influence of women by their words and conduct when she wrote “Thanks to the sex, by heavenly hand design’d,/ Either to bless, or ruin mankind.”\(^3\)

Not content to rebuke her own sex alone, Warren’s poem castigated colonial men as well. Accusing them of ambition, avarice and vanity, Warren wondered, “if their lords are wiser than they [their women].” She believed that corruption and greed were rampant as many sought selfish gain or were distracted by frivolous pastimes. The poem continues:

   Few manly bosoms feel a nobler flame,
Some cog the dye, others win the game;
   Trace their meanders to their tainted source,
   What’s the grand pole star that directs their course?
   Perhaps revenge, or some less glaring vice,
   Their bold ambition, or their avarice,
   Or vanity unmeaning, throw the bowl;\(^4\)

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\(^2\)Ibid., 210.

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Ibid., 212.
Despite a general malaise afflicting both colonial men and women, Warren saw hope:

America has many a worthy name,
Who shall, hereafter, grace the rolls of fame,
Her good Cornelia's, and Arrias fair,
Who, death, in its most hideous forms, can dare,
With a long list of gen'rous, worthy men,
Who spurn the yoke, and servitude disdain;
Who nobly struggle in a vicious age,
To stem the torrent of despotic rage;
Who leagu'd, in solemn covenant unite,
And by the manes of good Hampden plight,
And Heaven looks down, and sanctifies the deed,
They'll fight for freedom, and for virtue bleed.23

Warren's faith in republicanism deemed death on a battlefield a proper sacrifice for the public virtue which ultimately protected individual freedom.

Warren's poems included criticism aimed at nations as well as individuals. One entitled "Political Reverie," written in 1774, reflected her frustrated reaction to the colonists' ambiguous position toward the rebellion prevailing in the colonies. Adhering to her predilection for the mock epic, Warren used visions to "dream of nations, empires yet unborn."24 Describing the dream nation that arises from severing ties with Britain, Warren wrote that "Freedom and virtue shall united reign,/ And stretch their empire o'er the wide domain."25 In opposition stands her description of Britain,

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 190.
I wept Britannia, once Europa’s pride,
To fame and virtue long she stood ally’d;
This glorious queen, the mistress of the isles,
Torn up by faction, and intestine broils,
Became the prey of each rapacious arm,
Strip’d and disrob’d of every native charm.26

Not only has Britain betrayed its colonies, but it has also
betrayed its heritage (“How, lost in luxury, her silken
sons,/ Forgot her Edwards claim’d the Bourbon crowns;”27).
The punishment for such hypocrisy and greed is oblivion as
Warren continued,

Yet heave a sigh, and drop the tender tear,
And weep Britannia’s punishment severe;
When they searching o’er some future chart,
Scarce find the feat of mighty Brunswick’s court;
For neighboring states may seize the venal isle,
And Gallic princes distribute the spoil.28

Warren vividly portrayed England as the perpetrator of the
events plaguing the colonies. By its own avaricious
actions, Britain proves the patriot’s cause just.

Warren’s use of the female voice in her writings
demonstrated an awareness of women’s strengths and the
opportunities republicanism might afford them. In the poem
the much vaunted “virtue” is female (“rear her long dejected
head,”) as is “liberty” (“a happy goddess”), a generally
accepted and pro forma depiction.29 This feminine presence

26Ibid.
27Ibid., 193.
28Ibid., 189, 190, 193.
29Ibid., 189.
symbolically reflected Warren's own sense of participation in the movement for independence. An unorthodox character is the seraph who prophesied Britain's downfall. Warren writes this character as a female. This undoubtedly represents a novel interpretation for one of Puritan stock. Typically, the Puritan's strict interpretation of Biblical figures rendered angels as male. As for Warren herself, her voice resonants as the dreamer ("the weeping matron"). By highlighting the feminine presence in the poem, Warren illustrated her belief that women should participate in public events.

Perhaps the best illustration for Warren's belief in women as citizens can be found in the verse drama "The Ladies of Castile." One of two verse dramas included in her volume of poetry, Warren intended for it to be produced, believing that the stage could be a vehicle of instruction if the subjects were morally grounded. Warren wrote this play shortly after the end of the Revolution in response to her son Winslow's request that she write a real drama about

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30 Angels in the strict Biblical sense were powerful, immortal messengers of God. It would not be until the Victorian period that a romanticized and feminized version of angels would become popular.


32 Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 107-08.
anything but America.\textsuperscript{33} Set in Spain during the unification period under Ferdinand and Isabella (1490-1540), Warren used a non-American scene to again depict the moral dilemma between liberty and tyranny and virtue and vice and showcase women’s inherent equality with men.

Though lacking the intensity and immediacy of the satirical plays, the verse dramas are more technically proficient with more tightly woven plots and believable characterizations. Indeed, Warren’s best drawn character was Donna Maria, wife of Don Juan and sister of Don Francis, leaders of the rebel cause. Here again, Warren portrayed a strong-minded female with moral integrity. When chastised by her brother for looting the church to pay the rebel troops, Maria responded:

\begin{quote}
Men rail at weaknesses themselves create,  
And boldly stigmatize the female mind,  
As though kind nature’s just impartial hand  
Had form’d its features in a baser mould:  
But nice distinctions in the human soul,  
 Adopted follies, or inherent vice,  
 May be discuss’d in calmer times than these:—  
 We’ll reason then - if possible regain  
 Whatever nature, or its author gave.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

The character of Maria demonstrated Warren’s firm belief that women equaled men in intellect and ability. Maria stands in contrast, not only to the weak, passion-infused Louisas who choose suicide, but to the equally weak-willed

\textsuperscript{33}Warren, "The Ladies of Castile," 99-100.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 114.
and tyrannical men in the play. Even De Haro, Maria's enemy and unrequited lover asks, "What lioness has nurs'd thy tender years?/ Or can'st thou feel for every pain but mine?" Ultimately, Maria's patriotism and virtue are rewarded, as De Haro helps her escape the victorious tyrant's vengeance. Maria's patriotic stand echoed Warren's own position that women in the new republic had both public and domestic responsibilities.

The Enlightenment's interpretation of republicanism convinced Warren of its suitability for governing a free society. The egalitarian nature of that society appealed to Warren, so much so that the women in her plays and poems reached beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother and became citizens, a role that had definitive public applications. Propelled by this burgeoning sense of female independence, Warren confidently wielded her pen to debate the new Constitution set before the states for ratification in 1787.

Publishing the pamphlet, "Observations On The New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions," in 1788, Warren entered the national debate along with other prominent Americans. Maintaining her radical Whig posture, Warren systematically pointed out the flaws in the proposed Constitution. Her main fears centered on the restriction of

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35Ibid., 169.
state's rights, unfettered executive and judicial branches, and the lack of guaranteed individual rights.\(^{36}\) For Warren, the federalism of the Constitution disguised a return to the despotism Americans had paid dearly to overcome. Warren, in fact, held the majority opinion in her home state. Nonetheless, the Massachusetts assembly, propelled by a highly organized Federalist juggernaut, ratified the document before Warren's pamphlet was printed.

Although unable to influence the outcome of the vote in Massachusetts, Warren's essay contained considerable merit. Reflecting Warren's republican principles, the essay exposed the inherent weaknesses of the Constitution. Federalists charged Warren and the other Radical Whigs with promoting democracy, a concept which leaned too close to anarchy for many of the Founding Fathers.\(^{37}\) The Anti-federalists, Warren among them, insisted that the Revolution proved that the inherent natural rights of individuals superceded government authority. In fact, government of any kind existed only by the will of the people.\(^{38}\) Warren


\(^{37}\)Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 122.

\(^{38}\)Columbian Patriot [Mercy Otis Warren], "Observations on the New Constitution and the Federal and State Conventions." Boston, 1788, Early American Imprint Series. Microfiche, 4. "Columbian Patriot" was the pen name Warren used.
wholeheartedly agreed with these political axioms and the pamphlet solidified her position as a political pundit.

Warren used her most scathing language to criticize the "federal plot." Appalled by the effrontery of "a set of gentlemen, who disregarding the purposes of their appointment," assumed unauthorized powers and rejected the Articles of Confederation, Warren castigated those "sons of America" willing to sell their dearly purchased freedom for ambition.³⁹ Likening them to former Massachusetts royal governor Hutchinson, Warren exposed the selfish pursuit of power as the corrupting agent that "annihilated the sovereignty and independence of the individual governments."⁴⁰ She never doubted the accuracy of her insights into the political realities of the period, or her right to voice her opinion. As the new republic took shape, Warren eagerly awaited the fruition of the long struggle, confident of the justice inherent in republican ideology.

Intended for distribution in those states still debating the Constitution, Warren’s pamphlet failed to influence the ratification process. The Anti-Federalist Committee in Albany, New York critiqued the piece as written "in a style too sublime and florid for the common people in

³⁹Ibid., 13-14.
⁴⁰Ibid., 14.
Nonetheless, the acuity Warren exhibited in the essay on the Constitution found its reward in the passage of the Bill of Rights in December of 1791, which addressed the lapses Warren warned about. Amendments I, IV, VIII, and IX protected the basic rights of citizens. Amendments V and VII acknowledged the right of jury trials and protected citizens from self-incrimination. Amendments II and III circumscribed the authority of a standing army. Amendment VI helped define the powers of the Supreme Court. And lastly, Amendment X restored to the states those powers not specifically designated within the Constitution to the federal government.\(^4\) The amended Constitution earned Warren’s approval, although she remained on guard as indicated in her letter to John Adams, the recently elected Vice-President,

\[\text{I am persuaded the new Government will operate very quietly unless the reins are held too taught, . . . Freedom and independence . . . is by no means incompatible with the necessary subordination which must subsist to maintain a just and regular government.}\(^5\)

Aware of the political inequities still present in the new government, Warren nonetheless rejoiced in the republican successes and reveled in her own empowerment as a woman of

\(^4\)As quoted in Richards, \textit{Mercy Otis Warren}, 122.

letters.

For Warren the late 1780's represented the pinnacle of her public achievements and the evolution of a feminist sensibility through her political participation as a writer. The need for anonymity had disappeared with the defeat of the British at Yorktown and Warren determined to publish a volume of her poems and political plays in 1790. The successful reception of the volume, entitled Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous, testified to Warren’s reputation as a writer, as well as the burgeoning interest in indigenous literature. President George Washington, to whom the volume was dedicated, praised Warren’s efforts, as did other prominent Americans.

Lacking any real role models to emulate, Warren nonetheless perceived herself as a poet and trod boldly onto the public stage. The seriousness with which she approached poetry writing is clearly evident in the selection opening the volume’s poetry section. Entitled “To Mrs. Montague, Author of ‘Observations on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare,’” Warren threw down the proverbial gauntlet by requesting a critique from a notable British commentator.

44Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 81. See also Zaggari, A Woman’s Dilemma, 138.

45George Washington to MOW, 4 June 1790, Warren-Adams Letters, 2:318. See also James Winthrop to Mow, 13 July 1790, 320; JA to MOW, 26 December 1790, 324; Alexander Hamilton to MOW, 1 July 1791, 326; Judith Sargent Murray to MOW, 4 March 1796, 328; Ibid.
with decidedly anti-American tendencies. Warren suggested that a woman could succeed as well as Shakespeare, saying, "A sister's hand may wrest a female pen,/ From the bold outrage of imperious men."46

Yet Mercy entertained an even more ambitious literary plan. Having successfully navigated the male dominated genres of satire and political pamphleteering, she determined to write a history of the Revolution. Beginning with the first heated debates in the turbulent 1760's between the provincial government and the royal appointees, she intuitively recognized the epochal nature of the times and began collecting and saving information and letters to compile a history of the Revolutionary War. By 1775, a short note from Abigail Adams indicated that Warren was actively writing the history.47 That her friends aided and abetted her in this effort is apparent in letters written not only from Abigail Adams, but also from John Adams, Elbridge Gerry, Samuel Adams, Henry Knox, Henry Livingston, John and Hannah Winthrop, and of course, her husband. By 1791, Warren had completed the major portion of the history. The death of her second son, Winslow, and her own failing


eyesight caused her to temporarily abandon her "historick page." Despite grief and ill health she resumed writing, bringing her book through the end of John Adams' administration. Representing nearly forty years of work, the History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, interspersed with Biological, Political and Moral Observations became Warren's swan song to the public discourse.

Published in three volumes in 1805, Warren relied on her son James to rewrite the final drafts when her eyesight failed. Nevertheless, the opus reflects Warren's voice. The History in effect crystallized the major themes of Warren's life, including her Puritan spiritualism, her stoic philosophy of self-sacrifice, and her emphatic belief in republicanism. More than an eyewitness account of the war, Warren's History vividly recreated the personalities and the political intrigues which inexorably pushed the colonies and Britain apart.

The best written of her many works, Warren's History showed her scholarly bent. Footnotes and annotations are found throughout the volumes, a convention not often practiced by her contemporaries. The relative accuracy of Warren's accounts has withstood the scrutiny of modern day researchers.\(^{48}\) Most important, Warren celebrated her belief

\(^{48}\)Zagarri, A Woman's Dilemma, 148.
in the female intellect. In the preface of Volume I, she explains how she came to observe and write about the events of American independence saying that she "had not yielded to the assertion that all political attentions lay out of the road of female life." 49 Far from being an apologist, or using feminine wiles, Warren declared the right to express political opinion and to compose history based on the Enlightenment’s interpretation of universal reason as belonging to both sexes.

Warren’s coup de gras did not achieve the literary success for which she had hoped. Part of the blame rests with the release date of the volumes. By 1805, at least two other histories of the war had preceded Warren’s version. Additionally, a biography about George Washington was also in print. 50 But perhaps the more accurate reading of the book’s slow sales was revealed by Judith Sargent Murray who wrote,

The Life of Washington, it is said, forestals, if not wholly precludes, the utility of this history; and, very many urge the political principles attributed to the otherwise admired writer, as a

49 Warren, History, 1:xli.

50 William Gordon’s The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America (1788); David Ramsey’s The History of the American Revolution (1789); and John Marshall’s The Life of George Washington (1804-1807).
reason for withholding their signatures.\textsuperscript{51}

Controversial to the last, Warren's defense of republicanism against the rising tide of federalism proved a double-edged sword. Almost an anachronism, Warren epitomized the Old Republican, who, for the most part, had been reduced to myth. Now advanced in years, the original Patriots and their cause appeared quaint in the eyes of the inhabitants of the new "Commercial Country" of 1805. Still, Warren counted it a blessing and a privilege to teach the "rising youth of my country," not as a republican mother, but as a historian.\textsuperscript{52} Through her literary efforts, Warren had added an undeniable female voice to the political affairs of the new republic. This feminine stamp on the traditionally male genres of satire, political writing and history opened the doors for other American women to enter and reflected the "feminist sensibility" activated by the Revolution.


\textsuperscript{52}Warren, \textit{History}, 1:xlii.
CHAPTER IV
“TO LEAD THE ENVIED WAY”

Understanding the legacy of Mercy Otis Warren remains complicated. Evaluating that legacy is perhaps equally challenging. Despite attempts by modern historians such as Linda Kerber, Rosemarie Zagarri, and Mary Beth Norton to define the contribution of colonial females to modern American womanhood, their oversimplifications reduce Mercy Otis Warren specifically, and colonial women in general, to one-dimensional characters. The widespread acceptance and appeal of Linda Kerber’s “republican mother” only highlights its function as a convenient device that sums up the contributions of colonial women. In effect, by attempting to create a mold that fits all colonial women, Kerber and the others have diluted the real impact of these women. As a consequence, the modern historian often overlooks Warren or, at best, relegates her to a footnote, all the while bemoaning the lack of a twentieth-century feminist paradigm in eighteenth-century women.

Yet, so strict an interpretation as “republican mother” finds few, if any, real life models upon which to light. Hard as one might, Warren cannot be squeezed into so confining a space. Warren’s own perspective of herself as a poet, playwright, and historian must be taken into account
when analyzing this colonial female’s accomplishments. Warren entered a public space that women had previously acquiesced to men. But the “contagion of liberty” unleashed during the Revolutionary period opened a new dialogue for women. That dialogue underscored a profound sense of the power that possible citizenship in a republic gave to women. Mercy Otis Warren proved to be one of the first to dabble in what can be called feminist sensibility.

As previously articulated, feminist sensibility describes the enlargement of women’s roles as women themselves understood them. Warren and her contemporaries saw themselves not simply as biological units required to reproduce, but as individuals endowed with certain unalienable rights. This sensibility of feminism developed in conjunction with the expansion of natural rights philosophy, the ideology of citizenship and the republican form of government. While much can be made of Warren’s privileged status and unusual education, these facts do not overinflated nor devalue her place among her contemporaries on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. Warren was not an anomaly among women, but one among many developing a feminist sensibility and influencing younger women. At least three female correspondents of the late 18th century accumulated fame in their own right: Abigail Adams, Catherine Macaulay and Judith Sargent Murray. All
knew Warren personally and counted their relationship with her as significant in their lives. Overarching their friendships was an intellectual dialogue infused with feminist sensibility, as each, in her own way, contributed to a modern female identity.

Abigail Adams, as the wife of the second president of the United States and the mother of the sixth, would have gained historical notoriety had she accomplished nothing else but those two things. Thankfully, she did more than marry well and produce notable offspring, she wrote letters. Most of these letters were directed to her husband ("My much loved friend"), her children, and other relatives. But prominent among the outsiders were the epistles sent to Mrs. M. Warren of Plymouth. Their friendship spanned over forty years, beginning in the early 1770's and lasting until Warren's death in 1814. Their topics of discussion included the mundane as well as the sublime, ranging from discussions of various child-rearing techniques, to literature reviews, to religious discourses, and of course, politics, on both the colonial and international level. Conducive to the establishment of their friendship was the common background the two women shared. Both were raised on Massachusetts farms, armed with unconventional educations, and blessed with loving marriages to intellectually courageous men. Literate and literary, Abigail Adams found in Mercy Warren a
like spirit and loyal friend.

While some claim that Warren's relationship with John Adams was paramount to her relationship with his wife, an examination of Abigail Adams' correspondence belies that assertion. As the younger of the two, Adams looked to Warren for advice concerning motherhood and house management. Her first letter to Warren included a copy of Juliana Seymour's *On the Management and Education of Children*. Abigail wished Mercy's opinion of the book, prompting a philosophical response from Warren about child rearing. Warren asserted that mothers should instill "a sacred regard to veracity in the Bosom of Youth [as] the surest Gaurd [sic] to Virtue." Though keenly attuned to the domestic needs of their families, each woman recognized their own private need for intellectual stimulation. Neither woman lost an opportunity to expand their discussions to other areas of shared interest.

For instance, in a number of letters written in 1773, Adams broached various aspects of the current political crisis in Boston. Subtly acknowledging Warren's publication of "The Adulator," Abigail informed "Her worthy friend" of

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the impending crisis of a shipload of English tea ("that bainfull [sic] weed"), continuing to supply the grist for the mill of Warren's satirical pen. The fears and tension of the times notwithstanding, Abigail also included a volume of Moliere's play "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme." After offering her own criticism she requests Warren's appraisal saying, "Your judgement will have great weight with your Sincere Friend." The two friends developed an intellectual bond that successfully weathered the trials and tribulations of their long lives.

As the wives of two men deeply involved with the growing conflict between the colonial legislatures and the royal governors, they often knew the intimate details of the many intrigues on both sides of the struggle. In 1775, Adams wrote to Warren inquiring about the interception of Governor Hutchinson's letters to England. Warren, at the colonial headquarters in Watertown, Massachusetts, with her husband, saw the letters firsthand and Adams anxiously awaited her friend's interpretation of them, saying, "Pray what did you think of them?" Recognizing the need for discretion, they carefully couched politically vulnerable


4See footnote 9 in Chapter II.

5AA to MOW, 27, August 1775, Warren-Adams Letters, 1:105.
material in ambiguous terms as in Abigail’s reference to Dr. Benjamin Church, who had been convicted of treason by the Massachusetts First Provincial Congress as “the State prisoner.” Indeed, the women feared their letters would go astray and thus tried to discuss many consequential items face-to-face.

One particularly notable silence in the correspondence between the two women continues to disturb present day historians. Abigail Adams wrote to Warren about her concerns for women’s rights shortly after writing to her husband about the issue in her famous letter of March 31, 1776. After admonishing her husband to “remember the Ladies,” Adams pursued the subject with Warren in a letter dated April 27, 1776, saying, “I think I will get you to join with me in a petition.” No extant reply to Abigail’s invitation exists. This “silence” has been construed by many historians to mean Warren did not favor a petition to address the concerns of women. In her defense, some have said she was pre-occupied with the sudden illness of her oldest son James; others have postulated that a personal visit provided the opportunity for the issue to be

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7AA to JA, 31 March 1776, Adams Family Correspondence, 1: 369, and AA to MOW, 27 April 1776, Warren-Adams Letters 1:234.
discussed. Both explanations have a high probability of being true, but neither addresses the complexity of the issue.

For Warren, republican government afforded the best opportunity for all colonists to participate as citizens. The establishment of the Republic took precedence for Mercy over any debates concerning the details of the republican structure. What would arise from that government remained to be seen. In any event, Adams garners praise from present-day feminist historians for having at least broached the subject, whereas Mercy remains suspect. In truth, Warren not only supported education for all, both male and female, but also considered the franchise as suitable for her sex. In a letter to Martha Washington, wife of President George Washington, Warren said

I know not one who by general consent, would be more likely to obtain the suffrages of the sex . . . than the lady who now holds the first rank in the United States.

The letter, written in 1788, attests to the fact that the

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9See MOW to A Young Lady, n.d., and MOW to Sally Sever, 20 July 1784, MOW Papers.

10See MOW to Rebecca Otis, n.d., 1776, and MOW to Winslow Warren, 28 September 1781, MOW Papers.

11MOW to Martha Washington, 16 December 1780, MOW Papers.
idea of women's right to vote had not disappeared completely, although little was accomplished towards that goal in the period immediately following the Revolutionary War, the New Jersey constitution, notwithstanding. The interpretation of Warren's "silence" should be reconsidered by referencing all her writings with regards to women. Taken as a whole, Mercy Otis Warren considered women equally capable of citizenship and of discharging the rights and privileges attendant to that status. That it remained for others, descendent daughters and grand daughters of the colonial rebels, to demand the right to vote should not necessarily reflect badly on Warren. The fact that Adams even discussed the issue reflected the inspiring nature of the times; and that she discussed it with Mercy, the obvious high esteem in which she held her. These first seeds, however uncertain, would reap results in subsequent generations.

The support and comfort Mercy and Abigail gave one another through the long, difficult years of the war provided the glue for their relationship. Even as John Adams quarreled bitterly with Mercy over her depiction of him in her History, no irreparable break came between the

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12 The New Jersey constitution of 1776, gave propertied women the right to vote. That right was rescinded in 1807.

13 MOW to Catherine Macaulay, 29 December 1774, MOW Papers.
two women. In only one letter did Abigail ever criticize her friend. Writing to her sister in 1789, Abigail referred to Mercy as "pretentious and ambitious." Ostensibly the missive concerned Warren's correspondence with John Adams, then Vice-President, requesting his influence for political appointments for her sons, Winslow and Henry. The underlying animosity however, involved the rumor that the Warrens' supported the Shaysites in the civil rebellion in Massachusetts. Abigail wrote

...I think they ought to [fail] if one quarter part is true which has been reported of them...I am most sincerely sorry for the cause. They were my old and dear friends for whom I once entertained the highest respect.

Quite out of character, Adams, without questioning Warren first, determined the rumors to be true. Politically the two families had undeniably diverged, with the Warrens supporting the Articles of Confederation and the Adamses

14In 1786, farmer's in western Massachusetts were hit particularly hard during the post-Revolution depression as merchants demanded payment of debts in scarce hard currency. Many of the farmers were sued and subsequently incarcerated because of non-payment. Daniel Shays, a former army captain, formed a rag-tag militia who then closed the county courts, determined to get the attention of the legislature who ignored their plight. It was at this point that many in the federal government believed it was time to "clip the wings of a mad democracy." Henry Knox, quoted in John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, ad Susan H. Armitage, eds., Out of Many: A History of the American People, (Upper Saddle river, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2000), 189.

becoming Federalists and endorsing the new Constitution. To combat the swirling intrigues of the "capital city," Adams put the interests of her husband before the bonds of friendship. As she wrote near the end of her life

No man ever prospered without the consent and cooperation of his wife... I consider it as an indispensable requisite, that every American wife should herself know how to order and regulate her family; how to govern her domestics, and train up her children.  

As the wife of a diplomat, vice-president, and president, Abigail used her abundant talents to free her husband to concentrate on his endeavors. Is this, then, the perfect "republican mother?" Hardly, for Adams acted more in the capacity of a "deputy-husband" than simply a house manager, even functioning as Adams's official secretary. Abigail Adams, as well as Mercy Warren, continued to agitate for the expanded education of children, particularly females. And education ultimately, became the legacy they bequeathed to their descendants.

Despite the rancorous disagreements, their friendship survived, a testament to the affectionate and tenacious union of mind and heart each woman had forged. As Adams perfected the very public role of spouse to an American politician, Warren chartered a space for female political writers. Each left a unique mark on society, a wrinkle of

16AA to Elisabeth Smith Shaw, 5 June 1809, Charles F. Adams, ed., Letters of Mrs. Adams, the Wife of John Adams (Boston: Freeman and Bolles, 1848), 401.
feminism that inspired later generations of women.

In a more professional vein, Mercy developed a correspondence and eventual friendship with Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham. Macaulay authored *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*, the first history of England to be penned by a woman, which was very well received on both sides of the Atlantic. Macaulay also defied British convention by marrying a much younger man and continuing to write publicly about political events. She initiated a correspondence with Mercy’s brother James Otis in support of a fellow Whig and “the great Guardian of American Liberty,” and requested “an account from your own hand of the present state of American affairs.” Due to Otis’s incapacitation after being assaulted in Boston, Mercy presumed to write the “celebrated Mrs. Macaulay” in June of 1773.

In her letter, Warren reached out to a fellow intellectual whom she perceived supported the interests of the British colonials. Though formal in tone and structure, Warren, nevertheless, proceeds quickly to the point: “Give

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me leave to ask what ideas arise in your mind when your imagination reaches this once peaceful asylum of freedom?" ¹⁹
As one writer noted, "Though Warren may have begun the correspondence out of admiration she quickly moved to a stance of intellectual equality." ²⁰ Macaulay became a role model for Warren and re-enforced her decision to become a writer.

Warren found a receptive ear in the independent and indomitable Macaulay. Indeed, Macaulay became the sounding board for many of the themes in Warren's writings, particularly her History. Both women shared the Whig philosophy and a strong belief in republican government. Both, too, believed in an expanded role for women beyond marriage and child-rearing. Warren wrote in 1774,

You see madam I disregard the opinion that women make but indifferent politicians... When the observations are just and honorary to the heart and character, I think it very immaterial whether they flow from a female lip in the soft whispers of private friendship or whether thundered in the Senate in the bolden language of the other sex. ²¹

Again, Warren awaited the results of the new republic and how it would benefit women in America. Macaulay, watched for reforms in England as indicated in a response to Warren dated 1787, about the French and British treaty,

¹⁹MOW to Catherine Macaulay, 7 June 1773, MOW Papers.
²⁰Richards, Mercy Otis Warren, 43.
²¹MOW to CM, 29 December 1774, MOW Papers.
We are now upon the Eve of a Treaty with France which is in a stile of politicks so new to this Country and so agreeable [sic] to the present views of our old enemy that it alarms many; yet the two houses of parliament seem only to have considered it as a party business, tho it might have been imagined that the spirit of reformation which has taken place in the counsels of that formidable power would have produced more serious and anxious debates and more deliberate conclusions.\textsuperscript{22}

Macaulay, as did Warren, saw no impropriety in discussing events currently before the legislatures nor in criticizing their respective governments for injudicious acts.

Warren never lost interest in the future subjects of Macaulay’s writings. In response to Mercy’s inquiry and possible invitation to write a history of the American Revolution, Macaulay responded,

You flatter me much, Dear Madam, in interesting yourself on the subject of my composition my present thoughts are employed on education for tho the History of your late glorious revolution is what I should certainly undertake were I again young, yet as things are I must for many reasons decline the task.\textsuperscript{23}

Perhaps Macaulay’s response validated Warren’s own efforts of compiling a history of the Revolution. Indeed, many of the lines composed to Macaulay during the American Revolution found their way (slightly reworded) into Mercy’s tome. For example, Warren wrote to Macaulay, “Every species of rapine and outrage has marked the footsteps of the British army in the Jerseys” and “It is well known that from

\textsuperscript{22}CM to MOW, 6 March 1787, \textit{Warren-Adams Letters}, 2:284.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 284.
the beginning of the present contest the lamp of liberty has not burnt so bright in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, as in other parts of America." These lines and others, indicated by a note in her son James's hand, were re-written for volume one of the History.

The ardent friendship between the two women continued, culminating in the much requested visit to America by the Grahams in 1784. Invited by the Warrens, Mercy also provided the letters of introduction for Catherine and her husband to meet with retired General George Washington and his wife at their home, Mount Vernon. Undoubtedly, Macaulay and Warren pioneered new paths for women in the late eighteenth century. Certainly, Macaulay's place in English history was bolstered by another notorious British author, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of The Vindication of the Rights of Women. Published in 1792, the year after Macaulay's death, Wollstonecraft, in the preface, gave credit to Macaulay as her inspiration. While Warren may have found some of Wollstonecraft's views unorthodox, in the area of women's education she could only agree since most of Wollstonecraft's sentiments paralleled her own thoughts.

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24 MOW to CM, 1 February 1777, and MOW to CM, 15 February 1777, MOW Papers. The note from James Warren, Jr, reads "Several paragraphs in the two preceding letters were afterward transcribed by the author into her annals of the American Revolution."

25 Anthony, First Lady, 187.
The inheritor of the Macaulay mantle, Wollstonecraft articulated feminist sensibility in new ways, paving an even broader path for women to follow.

As Wollstonecraft followed Macaulay in Great Britain, so too in America, Warren had a follower in Judith Sargent Murray. Born in Massachusetts in 1751, Murray's early life in Gloucester duplicated the life of Warren in Barnstable twenty years earlier. The oldest of eight children in a wealthy merchant home, Murray, too, received an unorthodox education by way of her younger brother's preparation for Harvard.26 Despite demonstrating exceptional intellectual aptitude, Murray nevertheless, acquiesced to traditional expectations and at eighteen years old married John Stevens. Though the marriage lasted for seventeen years, it was not a love-match, and Murray began writing poetry and later, essays, as a form of solace. Some of those poems were published in the Boston periodical, Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine in 1784.27 But it was as an essayist that Murray established her reputation. Publishing under the pen name of "Constantia," Murray's essay, entitled "Desultory Thoughts upon the Utility of Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms," argued


27Ibid., xviii.
that a lack of education caused girls to have lower self-esteem or self-complacency.\textsuperscript{28} Published in 1794, in the same periodical as her poems, Murray included these lines in the introductory poem:

\begin{quote}
Ne'er taught to 'rev'rence self,' or to aspire,
Our bosoms never caught ambition's fire . . .
We judg'd that nature, not us inclin'd,
In narrow bounds our progress had confin'd.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Though cognizant of the natural rights rhetoric of the times, Murray exhibited a particular desire to elevate females through advanced education. More concerned with education and religious freedom than politics, Murray continued the refrain for expanded education favored by Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren.

Certainly Murray's most influential work was "On the Equality of the Sexes," published in 1790. In this seminal piece, Murray specifically highlighted the ridiculousness of the arguments amassed against female education, even attacking the literalness of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. Murray insisted that "Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours," and that men should "grant that [our] minds are by nature equal" as well.\textsuperscript{30} Murray further argued that domestic duties did not require the full engagement of the female mind, leaving ample time

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}, 45-48.
\textsuperscript{29}\textit{Ibid.}, 45.
\textsuperscript{30}Harris, \textit{Selected Writings}, 7, 6.
for reflection. Her concluding comments pointed out the benefits of an educated woman in selecting a suitable mate and that together, the couple complete the domestic arrangement.

Murray's reputation as a writer of note continued to grow in her native Massachusetts. She became a frequent contributor to the *Massachusetts Magazine* and was the first woman to write a regular column.\(^{31}\) Undoubtedly Murray came to the attention of Warren through these magazine pieces, as Mercy was not only a voracious reader, she too contributed to the same magazine.\(^{32}\) Interestingly, Murray formally introduced herself to Warren in a letter accompanying the proposal for Murray's book *The Gleaner*. In 1796, she wrote,

> Although I cannot boast the honor of a personal acquaintance with you . . . [I] solicit your sanction . . . It is hence, Madam, that the inclosed proposals meet your eye, and if you will condescend to propitiate the wishes of the Gleaner . . . you will confer a very high obligation on one . . . your most obedient humble servant,

> J. Sargent Murray\(^{33}\)

As indicated in her letter, Murray admired Warren and considered Warren's evaluation of her work the highest accolade she could receive. Warren's reply is unknown,

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\(^{31}\) *Ibid.*, xxv.


however it must have been positive for the next
communication from Murray concerns the selling of
subscriptions for Mercy's own three volume history. It is
unlikely that a closer relationship developed due to the
nature of Murray's second husband John's livelihood, that of
a Universalist minister. As the leading proponents for the
sect, the Murrays traveled extensively establishing new
congregations. Nevertheless, the esteem in which Murray
held Warren was evident within her essays compiled for The
Gleaner. In the essay entitled "Observations on Female
Abilities," Murray wrote

We cannot ascertain the number of ingenious women, who at present adorn our country...-But when we
contemplate a Warren, a Philenia, an Antonia, a
Euphelia, &c. &c. we gratefully acknowledge, that
genius and application, even in the female line, already gild, with effulgent radiance, our blest Aurora.34

Indeed, Murray hoped to add her own name to the illustrious
list that Warren dignified.

Indicative of the new generation of women coming of age
in the fledgling republic, Murray frankly stated her
aspirations in the preface of The Gleaner. She revealed an
ambition and independence that could only be reflective of
the sense of power women were discovering in the public
discourse. She boldly stated in the book's preface,

34Harris, Selected Writings, 38. "Warren" refers to
Mercy Otis Warren and "Philenia" is the pen name used by
Sarah Wentworth Morton, a poet and prose writer. The
referees of the other two names are unknown.
My desires are, I am free to own, aspiring—perhaps presumptuously so. I would be distinguished and respected by my contemporaries; I would be continued in grateful remembrance when I make my exit; and I would descend with celebrity to posterity.\textsuperscript{35}

In comparison, Warren couched her ambition in the more modest terms found in the preface of her \textit{History}, saying

If the work should be so far useful or entertaining, as to obtain the sanction of the generous and virtuous part of the community, I cannot but be highly gratified and amply rewarded for the effort, soothed at the same time with the idea, that the motives were justifiable in the eye of Omniscience.\textsuperscript{36}

Certainly both women aspired to "celebrity" in their own stylistic manner. Yet, more important than their individual successes was their contributions to the "growing effort to redefine writing and publishing as socially acceptable activities for women."\textsuperscript{37} Both Warren and Murray anticipated more public roles for women that would directly connect women to the success of the Federal experiment in government.

With Warren as her inspiration, Murray developed a confident conviction of women's public role. While neither women would claim the title of "feminist" in its twentieth century interpretation, they would acknowledge the steps they took to enlarge women's scope. Warren admitted to

\textsuperscript{35}Murray, \textit{The Gleaner}, 13.

\textsuperscript{36}Warren, \textit{History}, 1:xliii.

\textsuperscript{37}Murray, \textit{The Gleaner}, iv.
writing to "the rising youth of my country" in the preface of her *History.* Murray wrote in 1796, that

> the literary Votaress, aspiring to distinction, will ambitiously seek to authorize her pretensions by the Celebrious name of Warren.  

The firmness of Murray’s belief in Warren as the inspiration and model for other women to emulate is obviously reflected in another line from the same letter: "Yes, honored Lady, It is most true ‘To Lead the envied way is thine.’" As published authors with reputations of distinction, both Warren and Murray, boldly and courageously, stepped outside of the traditional norms and beckoned others to follow them.

In the end, the notion of "republican motherhood" does not fully examine the complex nature of colonial women’s lives. According to modern historians, it is Abigail Adams’s failure to take a public stance regarding women’s rights that makes "republican motherhood" the more appropriate interpretation of her politicization. However, "republican motherhood" misrepresents the actual contribution of Adams to political diplomacy and the public role of First Lady. Though lacking legal standing, Abigail Adams’ influence in her husband’s administration can not be ignored. The ideal of "republican mother" is even

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more unsuitable for Catherine Macaulay. By publishing her history volumes and lambasting Parliament’s foolhardy policies towards the American colonies in essays, Macaulay operated as a very public agent outside the confines of marriage and motherhood. As for Judith Sargent Murray, despite conforming to certain traditional norms in her personal conduct and writings, she “implicitly look[ed] to a more egalitarian future society that benefit[ted] from the deployment of women’s talents beyond domestic obligations.” Murray confidently looked to a period when men and women stood equally independent and respectful of one another’s contribution to the society as a whole.

No doubt each of these women, given as examples of feminist sensibility, had certain class and educational benefits not available to all women. Still, the proliferation of female academies immediately following the Revolution helped rectify that inequity within one generation. The real distinction of their contributions lay in how each woman applied their understanding of virtue, knowledge and justice, rising above any considerations of gender, and successfully carved a place in history as models for other women to imitate.

"Murray, The Gleaner, xx."
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: "THE LIBERTY OF ONE"

The period of Mercy Otis Warren's life, 1728-1814, spanned a dynamic age that inspired not only the birth of a nation, but new philosophical and intellectual ideas about men and women. These ideas also held similar implications for the rich and poor, slave and free members of colonial society. At the center of that dynamism lay new interpretations of liberty, natural rights, and civic virtue. Although patriarchy continued unabated, the idea of hierarchy lost some of its impenetrable nature. In the new American society, class boundaries were more permeable (slavery notwithstanding) and gender roles, never clearly defined, were challenged. This is not to say that class or traditional roles had lost importance or acceptance. Pre-industrial America's values still centered on the home and community and, "for the sake of order," required mutual consent for leadership in both.¹ The new Republic, too, with its representative institutions and construct of citizen, further emboldened those with ambition to achieve more than the old structured societies allowed. It was in

¹Mercy Otis Warren to A Very Young Lady, n.d., MOW Papers.
this maelstrom of ideas and events that Mercy Otis Warren carved her place in history.

What then, should be made of this poet, playwright and historian? For many years, Warren and her works remained neglected, as historians and literary critics alike found little redeeming value in either. Recent scholars have re-examined her life and works more closely. However, most still obscure her value by insisting upon using modern feminist paradigms in their evaluation of her. In these paradigms, Warren's person and her contributions to the Early Republic have been trapped within the narrow construct of republican motherhood. Certainly, Warren's endeavors deserve the scrutiny, if not always the criticism, leveled at them. No doubt, she embraced marriage and motherhood with the same enthusiasm she brought to her education and writings. Yet, to highlight only her domestic success disparages the esteemed public figure she became. Among her contemporaries, Warren's skill as a writer earned her an exemplary reputation. While many disagreed with her politics, few could ignore her carefully constructed arguments.

Was Mercy Otis Warren a feminist? Many historians emphatically state no. In Remembering the Ladies, Vera Laska described Warren's use of submissive endearments as proof that she did not believe herself equal to her husband.
Laska also intimated the Warren needed masculine approval to write her satirical plays. Ultimately, Laska stated that Warren was a product of her times, unable to stray far from traditional societal conventions.2

Similarly, Rosemarie Zagarri argued that Warren found a way to live with the tension between domestic constraints and a more public role for women. Zagarri suggested that since Warren found an accommodation for herself she felt no urgency in demanding the same for all women. In effect, Warren became a "feminist without feminism" because "she failed to provide a viable role model" for other women to follow.3

These historians notwithstanding, contemporary notions of feminism obscure the complex lives colonial women lived. In Laska’s words, to view Warren in such a discourse was anachronistic, like comparing a candle to an electric light.4 The obvious fallacy underscored by the analogy is that both provide illumination, though of varying intensity. But it is that analogy that truly captures the essence of feminist sensibility. No, Mercy Otis Warren did not lead a march on the capital city, demanding equal rights for women. She, nonetheless, provided candle light for the succeeding

2 Laska, Outstanding Women, 57-58.
3 Zagarri, A Woman’s Dilemma, 163.
4 Laska, Outstanding Women, 57.
generation of women to agitate for female rights.

By infusing a female voice in the male-dominated genres of satire and history, Warren focused attention, not on gender differences, but on the ways in which women and men both served republican society. The body of her work reflected the firm conviction that women and men had more in common than not. For Warren, republican government represented an inclusive society where "virtue alone [should] be the test of rank."\(^5\) Though disappointed at the early turn of events in the country's history with the rise of party spirit and the increase in commercialism, Warren never lost her faith in America or the republican experiment. In the closing chapters of her *History* she wrote, "Though in her infantile state, the young republic of America exhibits the happiest prospects."\(^6\) Placing her hope in the future and confident that Americans would continue to appreciate the fruits of the Revolution, Mercy Otis Warren epitomized the diversity and complexity of women's lives in the colonial and early republic period. Undeniably gifted, Warren deserves more than just recognition as an advocate for female education. As a writer of poetry, plays and history, she used her pen with the "liberty of one" and

\(^5\)Mercy Otis Warren to A Very Young Lady, n.d. *MOW Papers*.

spoke to a posterity "very far remote."

\[\text{Ibid., 1:xlii.}\]
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VITA

DonnaMaria Gerych (nee Rehm) graduated from the now defunct Yonkers High School in Yonkers, New York, receiving a New York State Regents diploma. After moving to Virginia, she attended Norfolk State University as a non-traditional student, concentrating her studies in history and political science. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and graduated summa cum laude in May of 1997. DonnaMaria pursued her Master’s degree in American history at Old Dominion University, entering in the fall of 1997. The major idea for this thesis grew out of a paper presented at the Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society’s Regional Conference at James Madison University in March of 1999, entitled “American Womanhood.” The paper received an Honorable Mention award in the American history category and was subsequently published in the Old Dominion University’s journal *Historical Review*, vol 7, 2000. DonnaMaria currently resides in Norfolk and hopes to continue on for her Ph.D. at the College of William and Mary. She eventually plans to teach American History at the collegiate level.

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