

LINDA K. KERBER

Women of the Republic

INTELLECT AND IDEOLOGY

IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA



PUBLISHED FOR THE INSTITUTE OF

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Justin Seth Kerber and

Ross Jeremy Kerber

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Preface

Women of the Republic began as an essay to honor the memory of Richard Hofstadter. I intended to write a brief account of Americans' response to Mary Wollstonecraft's explosive *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a simple report on the passage of political ideas across the Atlantic. But it quickly became apparent to me that some American women and men had begun to wrestle with Wollstonecraft's major issues—the place of women in the political system, and the extent to which women's independence and intelligence ought to be encouraged—long before the *Vindication* arrived in America. When the Philadelphian Elizabeth Drinker, a conservative Quaker, read the radical *Vindication*, she observed calmly, "In very many of her sentiments, she . . . *speaks my mind.*"

The Revolutionary era is one of the most exciting periods in the American past, a time of innovation and risk taking in political theory and practice, a period of spiritual revival and social change. American women shared in the turmoil of their times, and many thought hard about their place in the new republic. Their testimony endures in letters and diaries, court records, petitions to legislatures, pamphlets, and books. With the notable exception of Mary Sumner Benson, historians have not read these records with sufficient care. Libraries have often cataloged women's papers as "family miscellany" or "Letters from Ladies"; writers have been content to draw upon them as a source of local color or charming anecdote. The "real" story of the Revolutionary years has been thought to lie in accounts of battles or constitutional conventions—events from which women were necessarily absent—and women's work has been treated as service to men, women's words treated as trivial.

This book assumes that women's work and women's words did make a difference, and that our understanding of the general contours of the American past will be more accurate if we assess women's experience as carefully as we do men's experience. The early Republic does look different when seen through women's eyes. The Revolutionary army turns out to have been dependent on women for nursing, cooking, and cleanliness. Both patriot and tory forces could recruit men not because cheerful women waved them off to war, but because those same women bravely

stayed on alone, keeping family farms and mills in operation, fending off squatters, and protecting the family property by their heavy labor, often at grave physical risk. Political theory appears less radical and more conservative when measured against the conscious refusal of constitution makers to recognize women's presence in the Republic and to change women's status. And the catalog of significant American literature is enriched by the addition of essays, memoirs, and fiction written by women that have awaited careful evaluation.

When in 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton came to write the Declaration of Sentiments for the New York Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, she shaped it as a direct echo in form and substance of the Declaration of Independence. This did not represent a failure of imagination—Stanton would show in the course of a long career that she could write forcefully in her own voice. Rather, it was a conscious effort to make a political point. There had been a blind spot in the Revolutionary vision. The promises of the Revolution had not been explored for what they might mean to women. The obvious way to make this point was to write a parallel declaration; to ask what the Declaration of Independence might have been like had women's private and public demands been included.

The paired female images of so many engravings of the Revolutionary era that show both Minerva, emblem of force and intelligence, and Columbia, surrounded by emblems of domestic work and prosperity, suggest the difficulty of merging the two themes. A synthesis was needed that would facilitate women's entry into politics without denying women's commitment to domesticity. The search for this synthesis has permeated women's history in America from the time of the Revolution to our own; this book explores the early stages of that search. I hope it will be clear that I have treated women's history both as a subject to be studied for its own intrinsic interest, and as a strategy by which we can test long-accepted generalizations about the past.

It is a pleasure, at last, to thank the archivists, librarians, and curators of manuscripts and prints who welcomed me to their institutions and introduced me to the rare materials under their care. I am especially grateful to Peter Parker, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; William Joyce and Georgia Baumgardner, American Antiquarian Society; Eunice Gillman DiBella, Connecticut State Library; Tom Dunning, New-York Historical Society; Carolyn Sung, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Kenneth Harris and George Chalou, National Archives; Winifred Collins,

Massachusetts Historical Society; George Stevenson and Ellen McGrew, North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Allan Stokes, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; Charles Lessor, South Carolina Department of Archives and History; George C. Rogers, The Papers of Henry Laurens, University of South Carolina; Kenneth Lohf and Ene Sirvet, Columbia University; Mrs. Granville T. Prior, South Carolina Historical Society; Suzanne Boorsch, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Roberta Wadell, Prints and Drawings, New York Public Library; Susan Burrows Swan and McSherry Fowble, Winterthur Museum. Keith Rageth has been an indefatigable director of the interlibrary loan division of the University of Iowa libraries. Mary-Jo Kline of The Papers of Aaron Burr, New-York Historical Society, generously shared her extensive knowledge of the period and pointed me to collections I would have missed.

The American Bar Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities provided funds that supported both research and writing. I am deeply grateful, not least for the confidence that these foundations offered in the early stages of the project. I am indebted to the University of Iowa for an environment conducive to writing and for a research leave in 1976. My colleagues in the history department have encouraged this work from the beginning. Michel Dahlin of Stanford University and Robert Humphrey, Steven Krumpe, and Jill Harsin of the University of Iowa have been helpful research assistants. Eunice Prosser and Elaine Melcher of the University of Iowa typed the manuscript with precision and understanding.

I have been a beneficiary of the heightened interest in early American history that accompanied the Bicentennial. Audiences at the Columbia University Early American History Seminar, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California—Irvine, Indiana University, Temple University, Brigham Young University, Baruch College—City University of New York, Marquette University, and at annual meetings of the American Historical Association, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Southern Historical Association, and the Organization of American Historians have asked questions that helped me refine my ideas. Portions of this work have been published in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York, 1974); *American Quarterly*, XXVIII (1976), 187–205; and Jaroslaw Pelenski, ed., *The American and European Revolutions, 1776–1848: Sociopolitical and Ideological Ramifications* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1980).

Friends and colleagues have shown that a community of scholars really

PREFACE

exists. Sydney V. James of the University of Iowa read the entire manuscript in a rough and early stage and his thoughtful reactions helped me to reshape and reform it. Donald Sutherland, another colleague, shared his immense knowledge of legal history. John S. Rosenberg of Arlington, Virginia, took time from his own work to read the entire draft with a fine editorial eye; he refined the prose and asked incisive questions. Anne Firor Scott of Duke University read the entire manuscript and helped me place it in perspective. Eric McKittrick, Stanley Elkins, John Diggins, and Joseph Ellis offered good counsel on early versions of chapters 1 and 7; Gerda Lerner, Blanche Wiesen Cook, and Dorothy Ross read the completed manuscript. Norman Fiering of the Institute of Early American History and Culture decided early that this book ought to be published; I appreciate the combination of patience and criticism that he, Clare Novak, and Cynthia Carter have displayed as they edited the manuscript.

My parents, Dorothy Haber Kaufman and Harry Hagman Kaufman, have made their belief in this book clear, and I appreciate their love and support. My greatest debt is to my husband, Richard Kerber, whose confidence has sustained me from the beginning. He has made many sacrifices in his own work so that mine could proceed unhindered, and his wise advice has sharpened my argument and clarified every page of my prose. This book is offered to our sons Ross and Justin, with gratitude for their patience, thanks for their love, and the resolve that my next book will have some boys in it.

Women of the Republic

Introduction

THE WOMEN'S WORLD OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The word "idiot" comes from a Greek root meaning private person. Idiocy is the female defect; intent on their private lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is not worse than the male defect, which is lunacy: they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.

—Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*



Benjamin Tanner after John J. Barralet, *America Guided by Wisdom* (1820). In Barralet's allegorical vision of the Republic, the major characters are female. The goddess of liberty, accompanied by Minerva, presides over a rich land. Nearby, Ceres sits with implements of agriculture and another woman spins. Washington, on a charger, is relegated to a niche in the background.
Courtesy The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY colonial world antedated both the political and industrial revolutions. Circumscribed by the lack of roads, bounded by the strength of local traditions, limited by the constraints of the preindustrial family economy, most people in pre-Revolutionary America lived out their lives in a rural culture and an agricultural economy. Like most women in preindustrial societies, eighteenth-century American women lived in what might be called a woman's domain. Their daily activities took place within a feminine, domestic circle: infants were delivered by midwives, the sick were cared for by nurses, women who traveled stayed overnight at boardinghouses owned or run by females. We may think of women as forming a tradition-bound, underdeveloped nation within a larger, more politically sophisticated one; the early Revolutionary crisis found most women and a substantial minority of men living lives shaped by local isolation, political apathy, and rudimentary literacy.

In the late eighteenth century, this traditional world was battered by the storms of political and technological change. Industrial technology reshaped the contours of domestic labor and thus began to erode the stability of households. The war of the Revolution and the constitutional experiments that followed composed one of the great ages of political innovation in Western history; in these years the terms were set by which future Americans would understand their relationship to the social order. A restrained, deferential democracy characteristic of American colonial localities gradually gave way to an aggressive, egalitarian, modern participatory democracy. A republican ideology redefined the political order and challenged fundamental assumptions: What does it mean to be a citizen? Who has a right to rule? Who ought to be content with being ruled?

But republican ideology primarily concerned a single sex rather than an American community of both sexes. Americans had inherited their political vocabulary from Aristotle, who believed that the good life could be realized only in the context of the public sector, a strictly male arena. Women were thought to make their moral choices in the context of the household, a woman's domain that Aristotle understood to be a non-public, lesser institution that served the polis. Having learned from Aristotle that politics was the affair of men, Americans continued to discuss political affairs in terms that largely excluded women, and that reflected the assumption that women were, as the political scientist Jean Elshtain

writes, "*idiots* in the Greek sense of the word, that is, persons who do not participate in the polis."¹

The assumption that women were not a central part of the political community continued to be made by the political theorists of the Enlightenment and of the British Whig Opposition. For at least a generation before 1776, American activists and pamphleteers had used the occasion of each imperial crisis to challenge American men to change their habitual obedience to elites and to England, to emerge from a world of custom and tradition, to behave as a serious political opposition. These pre-Revolutionary agitators addressed themselves to men. It was men who passed resolutions in town meetings, men who refused to try legal cases with stamped writs. The pre-Revolutionary crises were their political education.

Since the days of Anne Hutchinson, however, no secular group or institution had consistently sought to articulate the impact of imperial policy on women. There were many isolated exceptions: the crowds of women who fought the establishment of smallpox inoculation centers too close to their homes, the women who accompanied Maj. Gen. Edward Braddock's troops as cooks and nurses during the French and Indian War, the women merchants and traders who signed the famous "petition" of New York's "she-Merchants." Not until economic boycott became a major mode of resistance to England did it become obvious that women would also have to be pulled out of the privacy of their traditional domain and propelled into the public world of political decisions. A set of political arguments, explored in some detail in chapter 2, emerged to persuade—and to pressure—women to adhere to consumption codes. These arguments may be read as an effort to define the obligations women owed to the state, of which they were at last conceded to comprise a part.

How did the Revolution affect women? This is a difficult question to answer. The men who made the Revolution assumed that the war was theirs to make. There was no formal political context in which women might be consulted or might develop their collective judgment. But the war itself did speed the integration of women into the civil polity. Whether a woman was whig or tory, her services in a largely guerrilla war were much sought after—as a provider of essential services for troops, as a civilian source of food and shelter, as a contributor of funds

and supplies, as a spy. Women were challenged to commit themselves politically and then to justify their allegiance. The war raised once again the old question of whether a woman could be a patriot—that is, an essentially political person—and it also raised the question of what form female patriotism might take.

These questions were not resolved by the war's end. For example, one well-known element in British common law, which few Americans questioned, was coverture, the absorption of a married woman's property into her husband's control during the life of their marriage. Since only the citizen with independent control of property was thought to be able to exercise free will, it seemed to follow that the married woman had no independent political capacity. State legislatures in the new republic took care to show they understood that male and female political behavior required judgment by different standards. On the one hand women—married or unmarried—were responsible for acts of espionage or treason and were subject to the full penalties of the law. But except for overt acts of treason, the assumption still prevailed that married women could make no political choices of their own; for example, the wife of a tory was judged to be under such clear control of her husband that she perforce became a tory herself.

During wartime this assumption caught women in a double bind: women left at home while their husbands fought for the loyalists were often ostracized by their communities and forced into exile without being asked their own political opinions. But women with property may have been somewhat less vulnerable to patriot pressure. Confiscation acts normally excluded dower portions from seizure. Once the war was over, Americans permitted themselves to be even more sympathetic to the awkward position of the married woman and assumed she had been apolitical unless proven otherwise. Courts did not try to catch the loyalist's wife between the reality of dependence on her husband for support and the radical claim that she should have established her own individual commitment to the Republic; the woman who had gone into exile with her husband was generally able to reclaim her own property.

This sympathetic treatment was commendable and fair—judges did not change rules midstream—but it also suggests the conservatism of the legal revolution. Even the most radical American men had not intended to make a revolution in the status of their wives and sisters. Coverture continued into the early Republic and continued to shape the relations of women to the state. Separate equity jurisdiction, which had always been somewhat more accessible to women, declined as postwar court systems

1. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Moral Woman and Immoral Man: A Consideration of the Public-Private Split and Its Political Ramifications," *Politics and Society*, IV (1974), 455.

were rationalized, but such safeguards of women's control of property as married women's property acts, which were designed to replace equity jurisdiction, were more than a generation away. (The first was not passed until 1839.) Less and less care was taken in the postwar years to preserve dower thirds as commerce and speculation made land an even more liquid commodity than it had ever been—how was a man whose holdings changed annually and fluctuated wildly in value to tell what portion his wife ultimately ought to claim as one-third of all real property he had ever held?

Although the Revolution diluted the laws of coverture only slightly, it did have a clear impact on the law of divorce. The principles of the Revolution, after all, had laid great stress on the right to be free of burdensome masters, and the rhetoric of the Revolution had drawn heavily on the imagery of the happy and the unhappy family. After the war, a number of states passed laws that the British had disallowed in the colonial era, making divorce more accessible. In states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut more people seem to have taken advantage of existing laws, and the divorce history of these states suggests that some women became increasingly assertive and autonomous in their private behavior.

The new republic leaned on the law for structure. In turn, an educated citizenry was expected to maintain the spirit of the law; righteous mothers were asked to raise the virtuous male citizens on whom the health of the Republic depended. This assumption added political and ideological overtones even to technical discussions of education. A revolution in women's education had been underway in England and America when the Revolution began; in postwar America the ideology of female education came to be tied to ideas about the sort of woman who would be of greatest service to the Republic. Discussions of female education were apt to be highly ambivalent. On one hand, republican political theory called for a sensibly educated female citizenry to educate future generations of sensible republicans; on the other, domestic tradition condemned highly educated women as perverse threats to family stability. Consequently, when American educators discussed the uses of the female intellect, much of their discussion was explicitly anti-intellectual.

Caught between the rationalists of the Enlightenment and the romantics, ignoring ideologues who tried to tell them what to read, middle-class women of the early Republic persisted in choosing to write and to read fiction that with few exceptions acknowledged, even celebrated, female weakness and emotionalism. Excluded from the world of politics, women were understandably cool to Montesquieu, Gibbon, Rousseau. Female

readers sought accounts of women grappling with reality; in epistolary fiction and in religious memoirs they found detailed accounts of women who overcame evil by purity, who overcame force by apparent concession. They learned that the seduced were likely to be abandoned; they were taught not to trust their own passions. Ambition, energy, originality—laudable in men—were to be distrusted in women.

The new nation also witnessed the development of an ambivalent ideology concerning the political role of women. Charles Brockden Brown, Benjamin Rush, and a few other men thought seriously about the implications of the new republic for women's lives. But the central architects of the new female ideology were women: not only Judith Sargent Murray and Susannah Rowson, but also the anonymous "Female Advocate" of Hartford, Connecticut, novelists like Hannah Webster Foster and her daughters, and playwrights like Mercy Otis Warren. Equally important were the throngs of anonymous women who read these female writers, wrote letters to each other, kept personal diaries, tested the responsiveness of the government to their needs by petitions to legislatures and lawsuits in courts, and began to organize themselves in benevolent and charitable societies.

For many women the Revolution had been a strongly politicizing experience, but the newly created republic made little room for them as political beings. The female experience of both the Revolution and the Republic was different from that of men, and not only because women did not fight in the army. Long before the famous New York Women's Rights Convention in 1848, American women had begun to explore the implications of the republican revolution for their lives. Searching for a political context in which private female virtues might comfortably co-exist with the civic virtue that was widely regarded as the cement of the Republic, they found what they were seeking in the notion of what might be called "Republican Motherhood." The Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life. Dedicated as she was to the nurture of public-spirited male citizens, she guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic. Political "virtue," a revolutionary concept that has troubled writers from Edmund Burke to Hannah Arendt, could be safely domesticated in eighteenth-century America; the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality.²

The language of Republican Motherhood provided the justification of

2. For a discussion of the dangers of absolute concepts of political virtue, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), 74–83.

INTRODUCTION

women's political behavior; it bridged the gap between idiocy and the polis. The woman now claimed a significant political role, though she played it in the home. This new identity had the advantage of appearing to reconcile politics and domesticity; it justified continued political education and political sensibility. But the role remained a severely limited one; it had no collective definition, provided no outlet for women to affect a real political decision. If women were no longer prepolitical, they certainly were not fully political. The image of the Republican Mother could be used to mask women's true place in the polis: they were still on its edges.

It is a measure of the conservatism of the Revolution that women remained on the periphery of the political community; it is possible to read the subsequent political history of women in America as the story of women's efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution had failed to do. From the time of the Revolution until our own day, the language of Republican Motherhood remains the most readily accepted—though certainly not the most radical—justification for women's political behavior. This book is an account of its origins.

Chapter 1

“EMPIRE OF COMPLACENCY”: THE INHERITANCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Are not women born as free as men?

—James Otis

Chapter 8

“WE OWN THAT
LADIES SOMETIMES READ’’:
WOMEN’S READING IN
THE EARLY REPUBLIC

After my Funeral Charges and just Debts are paid, I recommend, give & Bequeath to my Beloved Daughter Idea Strong, my Bibles and inferior, orthodox Treatises on Religion and Morality, or relative or appertaining to vital Piety or practical Godliness, & all other Books, Pamphlets or Manuscripts, except Romances (if any left extant) which I have long since (though not early enough) intentionally consigned or destined to deserved Oblivion in native Shades of Chaos.

—Will of Jedidiah Strong,
Litchfield, Connecticut,
March 31, 1801



Frontispiece from *Columbian Magazine, or Monthly Miscellany* (1787). Columbia presents two children to the goddess of wisdom, who leans on a pedestal inscribed, "Independence the reward of Wisdom, Fortitude and Perseverance."

Courtesy The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

THE VISION OF the Republican Mother owed a debt to the Enlightenment and to the Revolution. To the mother's traditional responsibility for maintenance of the household economy, and to the expectation that she be a person of religious faith, were added the obligation that she also be an informed and virtuous citizen. She was to observe the political world with a rational eye, and she was to guide her husband and children in making their way through it. She was to be a teacher as well as a mother.

All agreed that this Republican Mother should be alert and reasonably well acquainted with public affairs. But advice to women on what they should read was accompanied by insistent warnings—of which Jedidiah Strong's is the most extreme—of what not to read.¹ The literary culture of republican America was bifurcated. Men were said to read newspapers and history; women were thought to exercise their weaker intellects on the less demanding fare of fiction and devotional literature. A vigorous proscriptive literature warned of dangers women risked if they persisted in what was said to be their taste for frivolous and romantic fiction. Occasionally we even come upon condemnation of reading itself, on the grounds that the new generation of women was being diverted from their proper household tasks. Women made their own responses to this campaign—quietly persisting in their choice of fiction and religious biography, writing romantic fiction that counseled against the loss of self-control, and revising their understanding of housekeeping to make room for their own participation in the world of the imagination.

"Sent the amiable Woodbridge his shirt and with it a letter—What the Consequence will be I know not," confided Polly Rogers to her diary.

Read in a *sweet novel* the D—r brought me. It affected me so, I could *hardly* read it, and was often obliged to drop the Book to suppress my grief! Went to bed, Lay, and *thot* of the Lovely Woodbridge—shed a *torrent* of tears, at the *Recollection* of past interviews with him! . . . he (Woodbridge) press'd me to his *Bosom* with a *fondness* I thought expressive of approbation *never never* P—y hesitate a *moment* to Let me know if 'tis in my power to make you happy! would you would you no Sir! said I, at the same time

1. Jedidiah Strong's will is on file in the Conn. State Lib., Hartford. Strong was famous for his headstrong temper and his irascibility. His divorce case, which took much of the time of the Connecticut legislature, appears in *Conn. State Recs.*, VII, 206, 282.

kissing his Hand with *trembling* Lips! . . . I flew to my Chamber, & with the *avidity* of a *Lover* opened the Seal and read! shedding tears as I read.

By May, "the amiable Woodbridge" had apparently transferred his affections to someone else, and Polly wrote, "O had I *less* sensibility I should not *feel* so much, nor so *severely* my present situation."²

As this diary of a young woman in a small western Massachusetts town suggests, reading fiction could play a very important part in a woman's private life and imagination. In the eighteenth century the novel first came into its own as a genre, and the best fiction—*Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*—won a large audience. In their substitution of individualized, realistic plots for the traditional plots taken from history and mythology, novels were different from earlier prose fiction. Their abandonment of traditional structure, accompanied by widespread and easy use of quasi-autobiographical detail, resulted, as Ian Watt has put it, in a genre marked by its "defiant . . . assertion of the primacy of individual experience." It was this assertiveness that made the new fiction startling and appealing. The classical unities of place and time were broken by time sequences imitative of human experience. Characters became real people with real names who led lives much like those of their readers.³

But women did not always confine their reading to fiction. Surviving lists from booksellers, lending libraries, and diarists indicate clearly that it is impossible to make absolute gender distinctions about the reading audience of any book. Women read *Cato's Letters* and Paley's *Natural Theology*; men read fiction.⁴

Lists alone, however, cannot suggest much about what might be called the psychodynamics of reading. What did novels *mean* to the people who

2. Journal of Polly Rogers, Jan. 10–11, May 14, 1785, Am. Antq. Soc., Worcester, Mass.

3. Ian B. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley, Calif., 1957), 15. This paragraph relies heavily on chap. 2. See also Joseph J. Ellis's shrewd observations in *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York, 1979), 94–97.

4. See, for example, Mary Thomas's Book Catalogue, Isaiah Thomas Papers, Am. Antq. Soc., and the inventory of Mary Ann Woodrow Archbald's library, Archbald Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library, Northampton, Mass. Library loan lists appear in Chester T. Hallenbeck, "A Colonial Reading List from the Union Library of Hatboro, Pennsylvania," *PMHB*, LVI (1932), 289–340; the Salem (Mass.) Social Library, Tapley, *Salem Imprints*, 247; the Brentwood (New Hampshire) social library, 1823, Am. Antq. Soc., Worcester, Mass.; Thomas Bradford's bookstore and library, 1772, Hist. Soc. Pa.

bought or borrowed them? What role did reading play in their imaginative lives? Books were cheaper, and more widely available, for the post-Revolutionary generation than they had been for their parents (although not nearly as easily available as they would be after the invention of better methods of type founding in the 1830s).⁵

For an understanding of the role of reading in one woman's life, we can turn to the revealing diary of Elizabeth Drinker. "It looks as if I spent most of my time reading, which is by no means the case," she wrote in 1795. "A book is soon run over. . . . I believe I may say, without vanity, that I was never an indolent person, or remarkably Bookish, the more so for 5 or 6 years past, than at any other period since I was married, having more leisure [now as a grandmother]—when my Children were young, I seldom read a volume."⁶

Elizabeth Drinker's memory was accurate. Her diary entries are very scanty in the years before the Revolution, and she rarely mentioned a book. During the excitement of the war years, especially during the time her husband was exiled, she kept a careful account of events in which she participated or which she observed, but once Henry Drinker returned she drifted out of the habit of regular entries. When she reached her fifties, the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 sent her back to her diary as a chronicler of the course of the disease, and thereafter book titles appear with great regularity in her journal.

Although she never failed to feel guilty about it, she did read fiction. "Read a romance or novel, which I have not done for a long time before," she remarked on March 30, 1795. "It was a business I followed in my younger days, not so much as many others, 'tho more than some others." Even Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, widely honored as the first native American play, made her uncomfortable. She called it "a small ridiculous novel" (meaning, one supposes, that it was fiction) and felt it necessary to account for her weakness in reading it: "S. Kidd's brother brings them to her, he lives, I believe at a book shop tho I have read some

5. Women could be very conscious of the increased availability of books in their own lifetime. In 1836, Margaret Browne wrote to her friend Eliza Quincy, wife of the president of Harvard, that she thought the "increase and circulation of new books" a mixed blessing. "Do you think that either you or I, if we were fourteen years of age, would now become as conversant as we then were with the English classics and poets, which are now reposing in sullen dignity on her bookshelves, while every table is littered with annuals and monthly and weekly journals?" (Eliza Susan Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Eliza S. M. Quincy* [Boston, 1861], 299).

6. Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, May 22, 1795, Hist. Soc. Pa.

of them myself, I have been talking to her against the practice."⁷ She thought Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* "trash" and could justify Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* only because she did needlework while her married daughter read the book aloud: "Molly has been for some days past, at times reading while we work'd, three romantic vol. intitled The Misteries of Udolphia—a tremendous tale—but not quite like the old fashion Gothick stories that I was fond of when young. 'tis seldom I listen to a romance, nor would I encourage my Children doing much of that business."⁸ But Mrs. Drinker found it hard to stay away. When she finished reading "a foolish Romance entitled The Haunted priory," she made a point of reporting that she had also "finished knitting a pair large cotton stockings, bound a petticoat and made a batch of Gingerbread—this I mention to shew that I have not spent the day reading."⁹

"I read a little of most things." Because she was a serious and committed Quaker, a member of an old and prominent Quaker family, instructive Quaker tracts and histories appear and reappear in her diary entries. Although her politics were unambivalently conservative and Federalist, her reading was catholic. She read Thomas Paine as well as attacks on him; she read criticisms of "Peter Porcupine" as well as "Porcupine's" attacks on the Federalists. She even perused the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau, remarking, "I like him not, or his ideas."¹⁰ She ordered "Bolinbroke on the study and use of History" from the library, but was dismayed to conclude "that it set at nought the Holy Scriptures." She was even embarrassed that it was signed out in her name and "sent it back unread."¹¹

The sheer volume of Elizabeth Drinker's reading is impressive. In 1796, the year she read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and made her well-known elliptical remark about it, Elizabeth Drinker read a collection of fifty Cheap Repository tracts and at least twenty-eight pamphlets on religious and political subjects. She read both sides of the pamphlet war for and against William Cobbett (three years later she followed the published transcript of the Rush-Cobbett trial). In 1796 she read at least sixteen books in addition to Wollstonecraft's, some in several volumes. Among her selections were Dante's *Inferno*, Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Gar-*

7. *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1795, July 26, 1797.

8. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1797, June 20, 1795.

9. *Ibid.*, Feb. 29, 1796.

10. *Ibid.*, end of 1800; Reading list of Elizabeth Drinker, May 6, 1800.

11. Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, July 24, 1800.

den (which she liked very much), and Madame de Genlis's *Adelaide and Theodore*. Though she was no Jacobin, she read six volumes of Wollstonecraft's friend Helen Maria Williams, and several books of poetry, including the sentimental verse of the Della Cruscan. Despite all her embarrassment, Elizabeth Drinker read at least eight novels, including William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, a book she felt free to like since she as yet knew nothing of the author's politics.

Reading was an integral part of Elizabeth Drinker's daily life, but it was an element about which she always felt self-conscious. She needed to reassure herself and the descendant whom she imagined to be the ultimate reader of her diary that she had not been irresponsible in the amount of time she devoted to reading. She retained from her younger years the sense that there was something inappropriate, even immodest, about fiction. "It may appear strange to some," she wrote, "that an infirm old Woman should begin the year reading romances—'tis a practice I by no means highly approve, yet I trust I have not sined."¹²

Drinker's self-consciousness suggests the impact of the enormous prescriptive literature that counseled everyone, but especially women, against reading novels. Young women were thought to be most vulnerable to the attractions of irresponsibility and passion as depicted in novels, and few observers credited women with a catholicity of tastes and interest approaching Drinker's. "Novels are the favourite, and most dangerous kind of reading, now adopted by the generality of young ladies," thundered Hannah Webster Foster in 1798. "I say dangerous . . . [because they] fill the imagination with ideas which lead to impure desires . . . and a fondness for show and dissipation. . . . They often pervert the judgment, mislead the affections, and blind the understanding." *The American Lady's Preceptor*, a collection of "essays and poetical effusions, designed to direct the female mind," which was widely used in schools, warned that reading novels would encourage self-indulgent "sensibility."¹³

It was assumed that romantic fiction could affect its readers' actual behavior—and for the worse. "Never let my poor Child Read a Novel or Romance," cried the unhappy Elizabeth Gouverneur, divorced by her husband for bearing a child that was not his. "These I am sure helped to [shape] Ideas in my head which perhaps I never should have had, and the

12. *Ibid.*, Jan. 7, 1796. She had just read *The Victim of Magical Illusions*. See also Scott, "Self-Portraits," in Bushman *et al.*, eds., *Uprooted Americans*, 46–55.

13. Hannah Foster, *The Boarding School; Or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils* . . . (Boston, 1798), 18; *The American Lady's Preceptor* (Baltimore, 1810), 14–17.

person who brought them to me took care to pick out such as would Suit his Purpose."¹⁴ The young William Gaston, lonely in boarding school, wrote to warn his younger sister against romantic novels: "Under those stories, which are thought entertaining, lies a venomous poison. . . . setting aside religion, they never fail to inspire those who read them, with romantic ideas, to give them a disgust for all serious employments." Even Mercy Otis Warren, who wrote her own fiction in the form of plays, warned a niece about to marry that novel reading made for inefficient housewifery: "Throw away no part of your time, in the perusal of . . . the puerile study of romance." John Trumbull versified the fears and dangers.

We own that Ladies sometimes read,
And grieve *that* reading is confined
To books that poison all the mind
The bluster of romance, that fills
The head brimfull of purling rills
And swells the mind with haughty fancies

For while she reads romance, the Fair one
Fails not to think herself the Heroine

Thus *Harriet* reads, and reading really
Believes herself a young *Pamela*,
The high-wrought whim, the tender strain
Elate her mind and turn her brain . . .¹⁵

Fiction itself warned against fiction. The first step in the seduction of the title character of *Laura* is taken when her suitor, Belfield, provides her with Pope's "Letter of Eloise to Abelard" and copies of romantic novels. Alicia Sheridan LeFanu's *Lucy Osmond* was written "to exemplify the danger attending the early study of works of mere imagination," and the young heroine is early cautioned against novels. *Emily Hamilton* was offered by "A Young Lady of Massachusetts" as "a Novel founded

14. Isaac Gouverneur Jr. v. Elizabeth Gouverneur, Chancery No. 41, Mar. 31, 1787, Historical Documents Collection, Queens College, City University of New York. I am indebted to Leo Hershkowitz for this reference.

15. William Gaston to Mrs. Gaston, Jan. 4, 1792, William Gaston Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.; Mercy Otis Warren to Rebecca Otis, n.d., 1776, Mercy Otis Warren Letterbook, Warren Papers, Mass. Hist. Soc.; John Trumbull, "The Progress of Dulness," in Edwin T. Bowden, ed., *The Satiric Poems of John Trumbull* (Austin, Tex., 1962), 88.

on incidents in real life," and therefore more wholesome than the usual novel, which was frequently "in the highest degree prejudicial to young minds, by giving them wrong ideas of the world, and setting their tastes so high as to occasion a disrelish for those scenes in which they are necessitated to take a part."¹⁶ The famous Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth wrote an epistolary novel, reprinted in America, in which one sister, Julia, indulges her taste for romances and acquires "the eager genius, the exquisite sensibility of enthusiasm" rather than her sister Caroline's "stoical serenity of philosophy." Julia's preference for romance leads her directly to the choice of a flashy but unreliable husband, causing her disappointment in marriage, her separation from her beloved children, and her premature death.¹⁷ It was warnings like these that Elizabeth Drinker took to heart, and that are reflected in her diary entries begrudging the time spent on fiction.

When some twenty young women organized the Boston Gleaning Circle in 1805, they defined it as a self-improvement society. They met every week to read and discuss "any book favourable to the improvement of the mind"—by which they meant "Divinity, History, Geography, Astronomy, Travels Poetry &c but Novels and Romances are absolutely excluded." The danger of reading novels, these young women told each other, was that young people "will expect to meet in life the romantic incidents portrayed by the pen of the Novelist. . . . [In life,] the roses and thorns are intermixed, but in Novels the thorns come first, and the roses afterwards." They thought even virtue was too neatly rewarded in fiction, as it often was not on earth, and so a misleading impression of the instrumentality of good behavior might be given.¹⁸

These attacks on fiction, it is clear, were in large part attacks on emotion, on passion, and on sexuality. Even cautionary fiction, like *Charlotte Temple*, could be dangerous because it offered details of seduction in the very act of warning young women to be on their guard against rakes. The worst books were those that seemed to endorse the passionate way of life as a course to be emulated. The very worst example, the one fulminated against most vehemently, was Julie, Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*. Had *La Nou-*

16. [Mrs. Leonara Sansay or Rebecca Rush?], *Laura, By a Lady of Philadelphia* . . . (Philadelphia, 1809), 40-44; Alicia Sheridan LeFanu, *Lucy Osmond* (New York, 1804); [Sukey Watson], *Emily Hamilton* (Worcester, Mass., 1803), iii-iv.

17. "Letters of Julia and Caroline," reprinted in Edgeworth, *Letters For Literary Ladies*, 5-6. Similar plot outlines were used by Judith Sargent Murray in *The Gleaner* and Charles Brockden Brown in *Ormond*.

18. Boston Gleaning Circle, Record Book, Regulation #5, Boston Pub. Lib.; Boston Gleaning Circle, Minute Book, 25, Boston Pub. Lib.

velle *Héloïse* been a typical Sturm und Drang novel, Judith Shklar has observed, "the heroine would have defied her parents, run off with her lover, given birth to an illegitimate child, killed the child out of shame, and then died alone and in misery. The hero would, after similar disasters, have killed himself, or gone mad." But Julie invites her lover to visit while her own husband is home, she maintains throughout her love and affection for both men, and all major characters find a measure of happiness by the novel's close. This ending made Rousseau seem the more dangerous. For the English educator Hannah More, "novel" was a shorthand way of referring to Rousseau, and when she said Rousseau, she was thinking of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. "Novels . . . are continually shifting their ground, and enlarging their sphere, and are daily becoming vehicles of wider mischief," she complained in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, published in London in 1799 and in Connecticut in 1801. "Rousseau . . . annihilates the value of chastity, and with pernicious subtlety attempts to make the heroine appear almost more amiable without it."¹⁹

Julie—her name is sometimes mistranslated as Eloisa—appears and reappears in American fiction as a leitmotif, warning against the pleasures of passion. Martha Read's heroine Monima, browsing in her father's library, comes upon Rousseau's Eloisa, but she is forbidden to read it.²⁰ In 1802 a Washington, D.C., publisher reprinted an English cautionary novel in which an adulteress reflects: "In the impassioned letters of Heloise, I found sentiments so congenial to my own, that, regardless of the danger of perusing them in my present situation, I could read nothing else: and I was soon so fascinated with the beauties of the style, and the originality of the thoughts, that I considered every doctrine they contained as infallible. . . . like Heloise, [I] persuaded myself that there were moments of happiness for which life and honor would not be too great a sacrifice."²¹ As late as 1823, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was still considered dangerous. From Augusta, Georgia, Henry H. Cumming wrote to his fiancée that he suspected from her last letter that she was secretly reading "the enthusiastic (but unfortunately, *crack-brained*) Rousseau." Al-

19. Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), 29–30; Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (Hartford, Conn., 1801), 25.

20. Martha Read, *Monima; or, The Beggar Girl* (New York, 1802), 367–369.

21. *The Adulteress, or Memoirs of Characters Now Living In The Fashionable World* (Washington, D.C., 1802), 16, 42–48. Another extensive attempt to use a fictional vehicle to condemn Rousseau is *Lucy Osmond*, a British novel republished in New York in 1804.

though he admired some of Rousseau's work and promised to study it with her in French, he warned that "Julia or the modern Elisa probably contains as many glowing expressions of both sentimental & voluptuous love, and as much immorality as any book in any language."²²

Historians of American ideas have generally concluded that Rousseau seems to have had relatively little appeal to Americans of his own generation. He was not quoted, for example, in the debates at the Constitutional Convention; major political theorists like Madison, Jefferson, and Adams made little use of his work. *The Social Contract* was not widely available in American libraries until well into the nineteenth century, and when influential Americans encountered it, they seem to have found it either perplexing or frightening.²³ But what has been missed in this analysis is the widespread popularity of Rousseau's less theoretical works in America, particularly of *Emile* and *Héloïse*. Each of these books had significant, even revolutionary, things to say about women and their role in society. As we have seen, *Emile*'s Sophie provided the terms for much debate on the appropriate education for women, and she figured in Wollstonecraft's searing attack on Rousseau. *Héloïse*'s celebration of women's passion and instinct prompted an equally intense debate on the nature of women's emotions and the extent to which they could be trusted. There was thus a gender-distinction to be made on the ways Americans used the major works of the European Enlightenment. If *The Social Contract* or *The Spirit of the Laws* were "men's books," *Emile* and *Héloïse* were in some sense women's books. The throngs of second-rate heroines with names like Julia or Eloisa evince the extraordinary appeal of Rousseau's passionate women. The continued attack on romantic fiction for suggesting to young women that they might give free rein to their passions was in some measure a response to Rousseau.

Fiction that taught women to trust their passions was criticized in the picaresque *Female Quixotism*, published in Boston in 1801 and specifically addressed to "all Columbian Young Ladies, who read Novels and Romances."²⁴ It took as its subject a romantic girl whose head had been

22. Henry H. Cumming to Julia A. Bryan, May 17, 1823, Hammond-Bryan-Cumming Papers, S. Caroliniana Lib., Univ. S.C., Columbia.

23. David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly*, XXVIII (1976), 285; Paul Merrill Spurlin, *Rousseau in America: 1760–1809* (University, Ala., 1969).

24. [Tabitha Gilman Tenney], *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon*, 1 (Boston, 1801), iii. The book is an extended parody of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote; or the Adventures of Arabella* (London, 1752), which in turn is an extended parody of romantic heroines.

turned by the "unrestrained perusal" of fiction. Its author, writing under the possible pseudonym Tabitha Tenney, linked her attack on passion to the need to build virtuous republican citizens.

The heroine, Dorcas Sheldon, has no mother to protect her from reading the novels in her father's large collection of history and fiction. Dorcas's father does not realize that novels that may be harmless when read by men may have a "dangerous tendency to a young inexperienced female mind." Because novels have taught that love is a "violent emotion," Dorcas distrusts her own quiet affection for her first suitor. When his letter of proposal does not come up to the epistolary standard of her favorite novels, she rejects him.²⁵

The departure of this young man leaves a series of increasingly unpalatable options. Dorcas's suitors include anti-intellectual men, who disapprove of all reading: "enemies to female improvement, thought a woman had no business with any book but the bible, or perhaps the art of cookery; believing that everything beyond these served only to disqualify her for the duties of domestic life." There finally appears a dashing adventurer, to whose obvious faults she is blinded by her appetite for mystery and romance. She explains away her father's demurrers by reflecting that her favorite heroines had often had cruel and unsympathetic parents. She changes her name to the more poetic "Dorcasina." She hides notes in hollow trees. She does not resist an abduction because she had "frequently read of ladies being forcibly carried off by resolute lovers." In short, she makes a fool of herself. "Oh! those poisonous, those fatal novels!" exclaims her father. "How have they warped your judgment. . . . Would to heaven people could find some better employment, than thus turning the heads of inexperienced females!"²⁶

But Dorcas's novels have misled her. The false realism of the picaresque novel encouraged the unsophisticated girl to conclude that fiction reported life as it might be lived. Although she first came to her novels for entertainment, Dorcas soon finds herself using them as guides to her conduct, and from them she learns hopelessly inappropriate and artificial forms of behavior. Sure that the only certain guide is emotion and passion, she learns to distrust her own reason in the belief that people have no rational control over their relationships.

In a mode more subtle than the didactic essays of Hannah More and Judith Sargent Murray, the tale of Dorcasina suggests what contempo-

raries found to criticize in the new fiction. Novels celebrated passion; they suggested that women were well guided by their own emotions. They encouraged people to break out of socially accepted roles, roles thought to be guided by reason. These novels may be understood as examples of the new sensibility that would be labeled romanticism, with which Americans would eventually make their peace. Dorcasina's experiences of romantic love were set against the requirements of the republican enlightenment: rationality and self-control. As Murray argued, the Republic had defined an ideal filled with political implications for woman: she was to be clearheaded and in control of her own emotions so that she could in turn control her husband and her children and thereby guarantee the virtuous behavior on which the security of the Republic depended. The Republic did not need emotional women who could easily be manipulated by men for their own gratification or who would lure men away from the path of virtue. Novels seemed to offer approbation for precisely the sort of behavior that political and didactic literature had labeled a danger to the Republic.

Thus the extensive didactic literature critical of women's interest in fiction served an implicit political purpose. It began with a political ideal of what women *ought* to be and attempted to persuade women to emulate one social type—the Roman—at the expense of another—the romantic. It sought to substitute civic virtue for passion. The continued popularity of the criticized fiction, however, suggests that the didactic literature fell on deaf ears. Even so conservative a woman as Elizabeth Drinker read the forbidden genre, though not without embarrassment.

Some demographers have shown that there was a sharp rise in the incidence of premarital pregnancy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This increase in what can easily be called "passionate behavior" accompanied the proscriptive literature against novel reading; in that context, the attacks on romantic fiction may be seen as a response to a perceived rise in deviant sexual behavior. It is not completely clear how this apparent rise in premarital pregnancy ought to be interpreted. It is, however, safe to suggest that it almost certainly is not a mark of increased options and freedom for women; it may well have signified the reverse. At least one historian has suggested that pregnancy may have been a tactic by which young couples pressured parents into allocating property earlier than they otherwise might have, and so may be seen as an emblem of declining prosperity. But the proscriptive moralizers blamed the alleged decline in morality not on economic pressures, but on women who indulged their passions because fictional models had

25. [Tenney], *Female Quixotism*, I, 7, 15.

26. *Ibid.*, 17, 129, 171.

made the previously unthinkable seem possible. Though the demographic record suggests that most of these seduced women ultimately married, the didactic purpose of the cautionary novelists dictated that fictional heroines who were seduced must ultimately also be abandoned.²⁷

If women were not to read fiction, what ought they to read? Admonitions against novel reading were characteristically accompanied by the recommendation that women read history instead. Mercy Otis Warren's "rational system" left no time to be "thrown away in the perusal of books that have not a tendency to instill lessons of virtue and science." She thought women ought to read "authentic history, which is now written in a style equally elegant to the many volumes of romance, which in the present age croud upon the public." As Warren's endorsement suggests, there was a double rationale for encouraging the study of history. The entire literate culture agreed that knowledge of history helped develop a sense of social perspective. The classic statement is David Hume's brief essay "Of the Study of History," published in 1741. Hume limits his analysis to a very specific recommendation "to my female readers" of historical study "as an occupation, of all others, the best suited both to their sex and education." Hume contrasted histories with novels, which he believed offered "false representations of mankind." Novels encouraged, he thought, an expectation of human perfection and a belief that love is the primary "passion which governs the male world," rather than the "avarice, ambition, vanity, and a thousand other passions" that in fact regularly overcame love. Women read fiction self-indulgently. Hume urged them to satisfy their passion for intrigue with real plots instead of fictional ones: with Cato's sister and Brutus, rather than Fulvia and Philander. At the same time that history satisfied the taste for excitement and for magnificent spectacles, it was also "a most improving part of knowledge." Much of "what we commonly call erudition . . . is nothing but an acquaintance with historical facts." History, he thought, was an easy way to achieve a reputation as an intellectual, for it "opens the door . . . to most of the sciences" and "extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most distant nations." Nearly a

27. Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, "Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, V (1975), 537-570. Nancy Cott has linked the skepticism of passion to the role of evangelical religion and to women's desire to demonstrate their strength in overcoming sexual temptation, a strength that could then be used in support of a claim to increased independence and political autonomy ("Passionlessness: An Interpretation," *Signs*, IV [1979], 219-236).

century later, the young women of the Boston Gleaning Circle echoed Hume. "The mind enlarges, its local prejudices subside," they wrote, urging each other to read history. The struggles of the people of the past suggested solutions to private problems and to public dilemmas. The uses made of historical precedent in the political debates of the early Republic are ample evidence of the pervasiveness of this assumption. Counseling women to read history was in part to encourage them to become more involved in the intellectual life of the Republic.²⁸

In the endorsement of historical study there was also an appreciation of the narrative value of good history and a lurking hope that a taste for narrative could be more wholesomely satisfied by true tales of life and manners, of kings and queens, of battles and leaders, than by fictional accounts of the emotional struggles of ordinary young women. History seemed "safe" in a way that the sciences, the classics, and philosophy were not.²⁹ It promised learning, but not too much learning. The essayist who believed that "history and natural philosophy are alone sufficient to furnish women with an agreeable kind of study" also recommended that women "avoid all abstract learning, all difficult researches, which may . . . change the delicacy in which they excel into pedantic coarseness." Serious mental exercise was thought to be literally dangerous to women. The *Port Folio*, for example, published the widely reprinted memoir of Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson, a Philadelphia bluestocking who had translated *Télémaque* in order "to relieve and divert her mind" from a broken engagement. "But this, instead of saving," had the result of "impairing her health." Historical narrative seemed to promise to improve the mind without exciting the passions. Women were urged to read history, but not

28. Mercy Otis Warren to Mary Warren, Nov. 1791, Mercy Otis Warren Letterbook, Warren Papers, 486; David Hume, "Of the Study of History," in *Phil. Works of Hume*, IV, 528-533; Boston Gleaning Circle, Minute Book, 101. For other advice to women to read history, see Noah Webster, "Importance of Female Education," *Am. Mag.* (May 1788), 369; *Wkly. Mag.*, Apr. 7, 1798, Aug. 4, 11, 1798; and Milnor, "On Female Education," *Port Folio*, 3d Ser. (May 1809), 392.

29. Hume felt confident that historians' minds, constrained by reality, were protected against poetic or philosophical flights of fancy; good historians would inevitably be defenders of virtue. He claimed that even the amoral Machiavelli did not deny the reality of "moral distinctions" when he acted primarily as a historian rather than as a philosopher. Historical study had for Hume, as for so many others who wrote on this subject, the added advantage that a woman so prepared would be more attractive to men: "A woman may behave herself with good manners, and have even some vivacity in her turn of wit; but where her mind is so unfurnished, it is impossible her conversation can afford any entertainment to men of sense and reflection" (Hume, "Of History," in *Phil. Works of Hume*, IV, 531).

to study it intensely; they might read *The History of England*, but they were not to think of themselves as Catharine Macaulays. History was the anti-intellectual's compromise with higher learning.³⁰

The line between the novel and the history, however, was not so clear. Samuel Richardson's implicit promise that he would report human experience in accurate detail seems to have had a historical dimension, and the immense care novelists took to render a setting accurately suggests an interest historians would share. It is no accident that the subtitle of *Clarissa* is *The History of a Young Lady*. The novel that purported to be "founded on fact" sought to straddle the ground between fiction and history. The novel that masqueraded as "true history" sought to claim the respectability of history and the appeal of romantic fiction: it could criticize fiction at the same time that it capitalized on the taste for romance.

One of the most popular of these masquerades was *The Coquette*, an epistolary novel set in Massachusetts that claimed to be a true narration of the lives of real people. It was written by Hannah Webster Foster, who had also compiled *The Boarding School*, a popular textbook of belles lettres for women. *The Coquette* is the history of Eliza Wharton, a young woman who scorns a virtuous minister because he seems too serious. She throws herself at a young gentleman of uncertain background who is as rakish as it is possible to be in a small New England town. In the end the minister finds another virtuous woman and settles into a happy marriage, while the fallen coquette, who has maintained her romanticism against the advice of mother and friends, is seduced and abandoned. Left to bear her illegitimate child alone in the bedroom of a distant tavern, she dies soon after of exposure and malnutrition.

The twentieth-century reader cannot help noting an uncanny resemblance between the pattern of the fictional Eliza Wharton's life and the progression that Edith Wharton described a century later in *The House of Mirth*. The protagonist first rejects a man who the reader is given to understand is suitable for her, then drifts as a house guest on extended visits through the establishments of the rich, where she is superficially welcomed, but made to know that she does not belong. The dashing men she seeks out wish only to use her; yet she has consciously made herself vulnerable to their irresponsibility. Eliza Wharton finally recognizes that the cause of her ruin "may be found in that unrestrained levity of disposi-

30. *American Lady's Preceptor*, 25–26; *Port Folio*, 1 (1809), 521. For the merger of reading history with Republican Motherhood, see John Adams to Abigail Adams 2d (Nabby), Aug. 13, 1783, Butterfield et al., eds., *Book of Abigail and John*, 360.

tion, that fondness for dissipation and coquetry . . . the delusive dream of sensual gratification."³¹ At the very end, she makes a moral choice that results in her death.

Although the tone of the narrative suggests that Eliza is young as well as emotionally immature, a closing footnote identifies her as thirty-seven years old at the time of her death. This detail points to the germ of fact at the core of the fiction. Hannah Foster's novel was indeed a history, loosely based on the life of a distant relative, Elizabeth Whitman.³² But *The Coquette* only masquerades as history; in fact it is a novel that attempts to teach the reader not to read novels. It offers itself as a permissible indulgence in a mildly wicked form. Like others of its genre—*Clarissa*, *Charlotte Temple*—it offers sexual adventure, but blames the heroine for it. Eliza Wharton loses her control of reality because she misreads her novels.

If one variant of the attack on novel reading was the fear that novels taught women to trust their own passions, another variant was the criticism that fiction wasted women's time. It may be that the increase in leisure reading by women implies that women had increasing amounts of leisure time. But leisure does not happen, it is made. Nothing is more easily manipulated than one's use of time. Within broad limits, leisure is a matter of priorities. If women were in fact reading more, it may not mean that more leisure was *given* to them by increased urban services

31. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady*, ed. John Angus Burell (New York, 1950); [Foster], *The Coquette*, 221–222.

32. Elizabeth Whitman and the poet Joel Barlow carried on an extended flirtation and correspondence while Barlow was contemplating marriage to another woman. The poet's biographers have trivialized the correspondents' references to each other as husband and wife, but these endearments may signify a physical relationship between the two. "O you are certainly the paragon of Husbands—" Whitman wrote Barlow on Feb. 16, 1779. "Were all married men like you, what a happy world for our Sex!" (BN 435, Baldwin Family Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.). After Barlow's marriage the letters dwindle. See James Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow* (Philadelphia, 1958), 63–64, and Elizabeth Whitman to Joel Barlow, Feb. 9, 16, 1770, Mar. 17, 29, 1770, Apr. 15, 1770, May 12, 1770, June 8, 1770, Baldwin Family Collection, Huntington Library. Caroline Healey Dall's account of the affair in *The Romance of the Association; or, One Last Glimpse of Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton: A Curiosity of Literature and Life* shields Whitman's reputation by using the fictional name Foster had used, but identifies the minister as Joseph Buckminster and the seducer as Pierpont Edwards. Dall complained that *The Coquette* smeared Whitman's name and represented the work of a "warm imagination . . . heated by the reading of Richardson's novel" (*The Romance of the Association* . . . [Cambridge, Mass., 1875], 68). For a defense of the men, see Charles Knowles Bolton, *The Elizabeth Whitman Mystery at the Old Bell Tavern in Danvers* (Peabody, Mass., 1912), and Woodress, *Yankee's Odyssey*, 64.



John Singleton Copley, *Mercy Otis Warren* (1763).
 Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; bequest of Winslow Warren.



Needlepoint embroidery by Mercy Otis Warren. Warren wrote privately of the difficulty of merging intellectual interests with traditional female responsibilities. She herself practiced elegant needlework, as this embroidered tabletop attests. Courtesy Pilgrim Society, Plymouth, Massachusetts. Photograph by Anthony J. Baker.

and industrial inventions, but that they had themselves rearranged their priorities and were *making* time to read. If so, that development would account for the shrill complaint that reading absorbed time that normally would be spent on household tasks and household production. When Mercy Otis Warren warned her niece against fiction, she set her caveat squarely in the context of the use of time in the domestic economy: "As your rank in life has not, nor perhaps ever will set you above an attention to the economy of domestic life; an acquired habit of continual industry will enable you to discharge the duties of prudence, decency and elegance in family affairs, and yet leave you leisure to improve your taste to culti-

vate your mind, and enlarge your understanding by reading, provided you throw away no part of your time."³³

It could hardly be denied that "profound or abstruse learning" took long periods of time and concentrated attention—what one writer called "abstraction of mind"—which were thought to be "incompatible with . . . [women's] duties in life, which, though comparatively less important than those of men, are hourly recurring." American women, like British women, were supposed to work to benefit their husbands and families. In the explicitly titled *The Female Guide; or, Thoughts on the Education of That Sex, accomodated to the State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States*, John Ogden deplored "the increasing luxurious stile of living in America" and complained that women were learning that "it is not genteel to work." He warned his female readers against "the pernicious consequences of that dangerous custom, of spending whole afternoons in company without any work. . . . Idle afternoons are proof of corrupt times, they make bad wives and gay daughters, they make families poor and a country wretched, by circulating scandal and folly, instead of industrious and useful arts, which make us rich and innocent."³⁴ Stating the popular case against learned women the better to answer it, Maria Edgeworth prepared a "Letter from a Gentleman to his friend, Upon the Birth of a Daughter." The essay, reprinted in America in 1810, cautioned, "I would not expect that my house affairs would be with haste dispatched by a Desdemona, weeping over some unvarnished tale, petrified with some history of horrors . . . at the very time when she should be . . . paying the butcher's bill."³⁵

Comments like these were not metaphorical. They reveal that early modern homes were the site of enormous amounts of household production. The romanticization of the home in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has tended to obscure the economic functions of the home and the housewife, but the steady drone of the spinning wheel and the loom persisted long after industrial development began. Even upper- and middle-class women who lived in cities and towns spent immense amounts of time at work. Elizabeth Drinker began her diary with an account of the work she did between 1757 and 1760, a list covering

33. Mercy Otis Warren to Rebecca Otis, n.d., 1776, Mercy Otis Warren Letterbook, Warren Papers, 57–58.

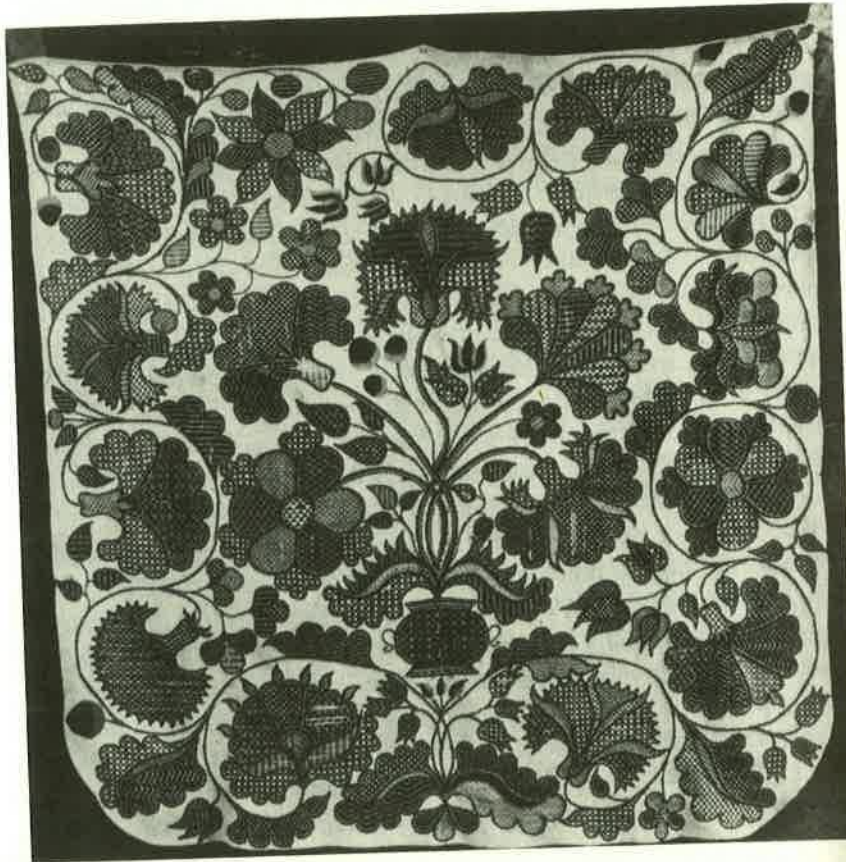
34. West, *Letters to a Young Lady*, 310; John Ogden, *The Female Guide; or, Thoughts on the Education of That Sex, accomodated to the State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States* (Concord, N.H., 1793), 34, 39–41.

35. Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, 23–24.

nearly eight closely written pages. It includes frivolous gifts like braided watchstrings and pincushions, but it also included baby clothes, stockings, and shifts for herself. Long after the Revolution, when she was in her fifties—her children grown and married, her household staffed with both permanent and day-hired servants—she still produced many of the household necessities, "tireing . . . [her] eyes, cutting out Shirts and drawing threads." She measured her days by the rhythms of household production: "To day, like yesterday, only that instead of knitting I was mending stockings." Poorer women worked longer and harder on heavier materials; they made their own mattresses and bed ticking as well as their clothes. Poor relief was often furnished in terms of wool to spin. It seemed a commonsense assumption that women should be constantly busy.³⁶ A taste for literature—like a taste for dissipation—drew women's attention away from domestic work. In this context, reading of any sort was self-indulgent; it was an assertion of individual choice.

This emphasis on the efficient management of domestic responsibilities, and the notion that domestic work is a woman's *business*, has a curiously modern ring. Alex Inkeles's classic list of the characteristics of the modern personality mentions an acute sense of time and a need for efficiency in using it as leading traits. Mercy Otis Warren suggested this notion privately; Judith Sargent Murray spread it publicly in her writings. Both popularized the home as an efficient workplace as well as the locale of domestic production, a definition that foreshadows the home economics movement of the early twentieth century. Judith Sargent Murray's "new era in female history" was to be marked by women opposed "to every trivial and unworthy monopolizer of time." She spoke explicitly of "*female administration*" and of the impact efficient housekeepers could have. Her choice of words—"machine," "methodical," "economical"—conveys the sharp edge of her vision of the household. "It would be pleasant to observe the contrast between a family, the females of which were properly methodical, and economical in their distributions and expenditures of time, and one accustomed to leave everything to the moment of necessity. . . . The one is the habitation of tranquillity; it is a

36. Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, Mar. 13, 1798, Sept. 14, 1798. See also the detailed accounts of work kept by Ruth Henshaw of Leicester, Mass., beginning in 1801, Ruth Henshaw Bascom Diaries, Am. Antq. Soc. For poor relief furnished as wool for spinning, see Record Book, "Out of Doors Spinners Accounts, 1806–1807," Record Group 35.97, Philadelphia City Archives. Of the 256 recipients, all but a single male weaver were women, reflecting the common occupational segregation. For detailed description of women's work within the New England household, see Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 19–62.



Bed rug made by Abigail Foote of Colchester, Connecticut. Abigail Foote's diary testified to the contributions to the family economy made by the work of young women. "Fix'd gown for Prude—Mend Mother's Riding-Hood—Spun short thread—Fix'd two gowns for Welsh's girls—Carded two—Spun linen—Worked on Cheese basket, Hatchel'd flax with Hannah, we did 51 lbs a-piece—Pleated and ironed—Read a sermon of Doddridge's. . . . Had two scholars from Mrs. Taylor's—I carded two pounds of whole wool and felt Nationaly" she wrote on the eve of the Battle of Lexington. Quoted in Thomas H. Woody, *Women's Education in the United States* (New York, 1929), I, 162. Courtesy Historic Deerfield, Inc., Deerfield, Massachusetts.



Cover from *Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*, V (1790).
Courtesy The Library Company of Philadelphia.

well ordered community; it is a complicated machine, the component parts of which are so harmoniously organized, as to produce none but the most concordant sounds. . . . While the other . . . is a restoration of the reign of chaos."³⁷

Mercy Otis Warren wrestled valiantly throughout her life with the problem of finding time for writing and reflection while raising four children and maintaining a large, elegant household. At intervals she reflected on these competing claims for female attention and recognized that the answers were not simple. Warren took these issues more seriously than virtually any other woman of her generation. Often the occasion for writing down her thoughts was the marriage or betrothal of a young woman relative or friend, when she would try to describe the new life her correspondent faced.

When she considered the domestic economy, Warren used the quasi-official term "department." She recognized that when a woman married she took on substantial economic responsibilities that resisted rearrangement. "Whatever delight we may have in the use of the pen," Mercy Warren wrote, "however eager we may be in the pursuit of knowledge . . . yet heaven has so ordained the lot of female life that every literary attention, must give place to family avocations." All reading except the Bible, she reported, "must" be postponed "till all matters of economy which belong to her department are promptly adjusted." Warren did not think these responsibilities could be evaded, though she did occasionally describe women as "confined to the narrow circle of domestic cares," and she did indulge herself in a bit of envy of unmarried women who were "free from those constant *interruptions* that necessarily occupy the mind of the wife, the mother and the mistress."

But for the long run Warren counseled a careful allocation of time that would permit the model woman to live in both the world of intellect and the world of domesticity. "A methodical and uniform plan of conduct, united with an industrious mind" would make a double life possible. She even permitted herself a deprecating comment on women who could not blend both worlds. She was scornful of those "who swim on the surface of pleasure," but she also pitied the woman who "is wholly immersed" in her household "and has *no higher ideas* than those which confine her to the narrow circle of domestic attention." Mercy Otis Warren's vision of the fully domestic woman was not unlike that of Mary Wollstonecraft,

37. Murtagh, *The Gleaner*, III, No. 87, 189, II, No. 35, 6, I, No. 3, 29-30.

who decried those who remained "immured in their families groping in the dark." Warren recognized that ordinary household dynamics encouraged this immersion. "We have one advantage peculiar to ourselves," she wrote bitterly. "We can conceal in the obscure retreat, by our own fire-side, the neglect of those mental improvements to which the more domestic animal stands in little *need* of, as it is not necessary for her to leave the retired roof—whereas *man* is generally called out to a full display of his abilities." But if the woman who drowned her mind in domestic detail was shallow and shortsighted, the woman who had "both genius and taste for literary enquiry" but could not "cheerfully leave the pursuit to attend to the daily cares of the prudent housewife" was also to be pitied. Even for Warren, literary pursuits were a form of luxury, and the woman who could not keep their attractions under tight rein was indulging in her own form of folly.³⁸

The new attitudes toward housekeeping were reflected in satires in the popular press that suggested that housework was undervalued and should be modernized and made rational. These satires generally were written from the point of view of a woman who desperately seeks to maintain an orderly household, only to be outdone by a selfish, slovenly husband blind to the significance of her work. It may be that the satirical mode freed the writers to be less cautious than usual; certainly the sentiments expressed are sharp and often shrewd. When pursued energetically, housework was shown to be disruptive. "The rage for scouring and cleaning . . . is the vice of the ladies," wrote one satirist. "Mops, pails and brushes . . . Are scepters of control." Men in these caricatures are lazy; they do not care how much disorder they create or how much trouble they give their wives and servants. "The Drone" splatters ink, tracks mud in the house, stashes things on the mantelpiece, conveniently forgets his errands. In Francis Hopkinson's "Nitidia" the husband demolishes the parlor with his scientific experiments, and then expects his wife to prepare a formal dinner for his friends. "Nitidia" refers to her household as her "business" and suggests that it interferes with women's intellectual development; had women time for intellectual matters, surely they would put it to better use than men do. "You hear it echoed from every quarter—My wife cannot make verses, it is true; but she makes an excellent pudding. . . . she can't unravel the intricacies of political

38. Mercy Otis Warren to the daughter of a deceased friend, n.d., Mercy Otis Warren Letterbook, Warren Papers, 117; Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, Feb. 1774, *ibid.*, 145.

economy and federal government; but she can knit charming stockings—and this they call praising a wife, and doing justice to her good character—with much nonsense of the like kind.”³⁹

Critics thought that instead of reading fiction, women ought to be reading something else (history) or doing something else (household production). But women seem to have persisted in their consumption of fiction; their loyalty to the genre was not undermined.

Only Jane Austen sought to explain this loyalty. Her explanation appeared in 1818 in *Northanger Abbey*. Henry Tilney, his sister Catherine, and their friend Miss Morland are out for a walk. Miss Morland confesses her fondness for popular novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She is aware that most people would consider history more suitable: “I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all.”⁴⁰

The last phrase is the telling one. History promised to teach statecraft, human nature, the management of political affairs. Even the farmer’s son, were he ambitious, might be persuaded that historical writing had some personal significance for him. The instrumental argument by which history was justified for boys was inappropriate for girls: women could not be statesmen, they could not preside over legislative assemblies. Even Catharine Macaulay’s *History of England* had virtually no women as principal actors, nor, for that matter, did Mercy Otis Warren’s *History of the American Revolution*. The best that could be offered girls as a justification for reading history was either the very distant promise that the history they learned could ultimately be taught to their as yet unborn sons, or the argument that history was attractive for its anecdotes and example. If history were reduced to human interest, anecdote, and the idiosyncrasies of individual behavior, it could easily be argued that fiction presented the same material—perhaps better.

If a young woman, or her teacher, acted on the advice of Benjamin Rush or Judith Sargent Murray and took to reading history, she would

39. “On Saturday and abused Cleanliness,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), Sept. 1, 1788; “The Drone,” *Burlington Advt.*, Feb. 22, 1791; Francis Hopkinson, “Nitidia,” ed. Linda K. Kerber, *Signs*, IV (1978), 402–406.

40. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (London, 1971), 97–99.

find very little that was not vulnerable to Jane Austen’s criticism. In the years of the early Republic, the only history about women consisted of assortments of biographical sketches, many lacking chronological order and usually lacking interpretative force. One of the most obvious uses of these compilations was made in the Philadelphia fund-raising broadside of 1780 which, as shown earlier, justified itself in part by reference to heroic women of biblical and historical times. Little was offered to explain the behavior of the women named in this list extending from Deborah to Catherine the Great. Other compilers could be more ambitious; the list in *The American Lady’s Preceptor* was chronologically ordered and more coherently discussed: Cornelia, Boadicea, Margaret of Anjou, Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Marie Antoinette. All except for Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson—who had been conveniently written about by a friend in a recent issue of the Philadelphia *Port Folio*—were European.⁴¹

Judith Sargent Murray’s *Gleaner* essays, though they also marshaled scattered examples, were considerably more purposeful. Murray’s vision of women’s collective past was a history of strength and fortitude. “Courage,” she wrote, “is by no means *exclusively* a masculine virtue.” She admired the Spartan women for their “uncommon firmness.” She believed women could be patriots, though she did think they displayed that patriotism in sacrifice rather than in legislation or fighting. Her interpretation of politics was mildly defensive: “If the triumphs and attainments of THE SEX, under the various oppressions with which they have struggled, have been thus splendid, how would they have been augmented, had not ignorant or interested men, after clipping their wings, contrived to erect around them almost insurmountable barriers.” Murray tumbled her historical examples about, heedless of chronology: Charlotte Corday and Lady Jane Grey, Jane of Flanders and Margaret of Anjou, Portia, Julia, Aspasia, Volumnia, Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay. To name them was not to provide an analytical history; her purpose was to use historical data as evidence against the “*idea of the incapability* of women.”⁴²

Women’s history as a subject of study in America may be said to have begun with the late eighteenth-century search for a usable past, begun by

41. *The American Lady’s Preceptor* had a subtitle: “A compilation of observations, essays, and poetical effusions, designed to direct the female mind in a course of pleasing and instructive reading.” It was designed as a textbook for female academics: “No volume of selections has been published in this country especially designed for the reading of females.”

42. Murray, *The Gleaner*, III, 192, 193, 197, 191.

compilers of "Ladies' Repositories," ladies' magazines, and textbooks for girls' schools. Much of their material came from British and European sources. When literary nationalists complained about the persistence of European reading materials in America, these women's books were among the offenders they had in mind. Long after political independence had been accomplished, women's reading remained a part of a transatlantic literary culture, of which cultural nationalists like Noah Webster were deeply skeptical. Books reflecting the European class-based social order would, it was feared, give young women a taste of such hierarchies and undermine the effort to build a democratic social order in America. In this sense, imported women's reading seemed unrepugnant.

But there were no ready solutions to this problem, even for those who would agree that women ought to pay more attention to works speaking to the American experience. It would be nearly another generation before there were coherent histories of American women available for the female audience. Samuel L. Knapp's *Female Biography* did not appear until 1834, Lydia Maria Child's *Brief History of the Condition of Women* until 1845, Sarah Josepha Hale's *Woman's Record* until 1853. Elizabeth Ellet's great compilation of the activities of women during the Revolution appeared in 1850. Not until the 1840s did Benson Lossing begin the travels that culminated in his *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, which included many accounts of women's deeds.⁴³

In the years of the early Republic, very few histories could meet the demands of educators like Rush and Webster, yet refute Jane Austen's criticism that they treated "hardly any women at all" in their pages. When they were available, they were likely to be unsophisticated, even boring. But another sort of history was indeed widely available, one that met general approval and one in which there was no dearth of female heroes: women's confessional tracts, religious autobiographies, accounts of conversion experiences, even, occasionally, funeral sermons delivered in honor of a notable woman and published by her family or her minister. The appeal of these accounts had something in common with the novel,

43. Samuel L. Knapp, *Female Biography; containing Notices of Distinguished Women, in Different Nations and Ages* (New York, 1834); L. Maria Child, *Brief History of the Condition of Women . . .*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1845); Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman's Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women . . .* (New York, 1853); Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet, *Domestic History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1850); Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1852). The work of Child and Ellet is perceptively discussed in Susan Phinney Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830-1860* (New York, 1976), 103-122.

which itself often masqueraded as fictional confession. Among the standard ingredients was the struggle of the heroine against temptation. Her letters to parents and to friends might be included, giving the narrative the coloration of history and the shape of an epistolary novel. Her courtship—sometimes by one man, sometimes by several—was recounted. The saga usually culminated either in a conversion experience or in a triumphant deathbed scene, two public successes for which no woman needed to apologize.

The Christian Mourning with Hope is a good example of this genre. It begins with Samuel Worcester's sermon at the funeral of Eleanor Read Emerson in 1808 in Salem, Massachusetts. In this sermon, Mrs. Emerson appears as the model woman; the minister celebrates "the superior endowments of her mind; her quick and clear intelligence, her brilliant imagination, her animating vivacity, her ingenuous disposition, and her engaging social qualities. You knew how admirably she was formed . . . to diffuse a useful and benign influence around her."⁴⁴

The sermon is followed by a lengthy memoir of Mrs. Emerson's life, extracts from her diary, and copies of her letters. While the funeral sermon is composed of glowing generalities, the historical materials introduce us to a woman who had not found her life simple or easy. Her health had been frail from childhood, but her mind was vigorous and her morale evidently high. When she was only fourteen she "commenced her beloved employment of school-keeping." Eleanor Read "kept" school steadily for the next twelve years; she was something of an entrepreneur, traveling to nine different Massachusetts towns in order to establish schools. She developed her own curriculum: reading, spelling, writing, grammar, composition, "religion," plain needlework, and public speaking. This last she considered a serious enterprise, though it was unusual in female schools; her purpose was "to rouse and improve the mind, to form the manners, give energy to the character, and perfect the pupil in the art of reading." She refused to teach painting and embroidery, thinking them "unnecessary." By the time of her death at the early age of thirty-one, she had taught "hundreds of young persons, whose minds she imbued with the rudiments of knowledge."⁴⁵

44. Samuel Worcester, ed., *The Christian Mourning with Hope. A Sermon, Delivered at Beverly, Nov. 14, 1808, on occasion of the Death of Mrs. Eleanor Emerson, Late Consort of the Rev. Joseph Emerson . . . To which are Annexed Writings of Mrs. Emerson, with a Brief Sketch of her Life* (Boston, 1809), 20.

45. *Ibid.*, 27-28, 21.

Throughout her career Eleanor Read considered the state of her soul, attending revival meetings of all sorts, anxiously hoping to be saved. She chose the towns in which she set up schools in part because of her expectations of the ministers or churches there; she introduced "public prayer" in her schools even though she had reason to fear that school prayer "would be deemed ridiculous enthusiasm. . . . Here I began to hesitate. I searched the scriptures, to see, if the injunctions to women, not to speak in the church . . . would not excuse me. . . . But I found nothing. . . . how can I ever describe the conflict in my mind between pride and duty."⁴⁶

Eleanor Read's world was a small one. Counseled to seek salt air for her health, she went to Salem, where she found the minister Samuel Worcester willing to be the patron for her school. In Salem she met Nancy Eaton, who was living with Worcester's family while she waited to marry another minister, Joseph Emerson. Nancy Eaton was fitting herself to become a minister's wife by living with and observing Worcester's family. The two women became close friends; after Nancy Eaton Emerson's death Eleanor Read married Joseph Emerson, and when Eleanor Read Emerson died, Worcester delivered her funeral sermon.

The two women "discoursed upon the importance of improving the female mind." It is clear that they were sensitive to the public argument about the limits of female intelligence. Eleanor Read reported their conclusions in her journal: "Let the man of real piety carefully examine the origin of the detested sentiment which leads him to consider learning and mental improvement as undesirable in a female. . . . will not the honest christian blush before his God for the unchristian and cruel degradation of the female mind? . . . We expatiated largely on the folly of multitudes of our unthinking sex."⁴⁷ Ironically, when Nancy Eaton Emerson died eight months after her marriage, Joseph Emerson blamed her death on the intensity of her studies. "Her bereaved husband is now convinced," wrote their friend Worcester, "that her education was not conducted upon the most judicious plan. While he entertains the same opinion of the capacity of females to understand everything, that man can understand, and also of the importance of improving their minds . . . He is fully of that opinion, that, if females wish to do the greatest possible good, they must not attempt to know every thing; but consent them-

46. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

47. *Ibid.*, 72.

selves to limit their attention to such pursuits, as are of the greatest moral and practical importance." Emerson thought that every hour that could be taken from "domestic pursuits" ought to be spent "in secret devotion, in religious conversation, in social worship," and in reading "a few of the best histories"—activities preferable to spending time "studying geometry, algebra, or natural philosophy."⁴⁸

The memoir ends with a detailed account of Eleanor Read Emerson's deathbed, her farewells to family and friends, her eloquence in calling on relatives to repent, and, finally, her funeral and burial next to her friend Nancy Eaton Emerson.

When Rush and Webster told women to read history they were thinking of Livy and Tacitus, of Rollin and Macaulay. But the narrative of a life like that of Mrs. Emerson, while generally categorized as a devotional tract, was also a history dealing with themes central to the life experience of women of the post-Revolutionary generation. Eleanor Read, after all, was a girl of respectable family who developed a career in a relatively new sort of work. She did not merely "keep school"; she traveled alone to towns where she thought she could keep it most advantageously. She developed a curriculum of her own, exercising some originality in the process. She formed a very close female friendship, and she and her friend seriously considered whether it was appropriate to set bounds on female intellectuality. Under the trappings of a traditional devotional tract is a biography of an intense young woman who explored more widely than most of her peers the options open to her community and her generation. A book like this one must be classified as women's history as well as religious history.

The novel was the only other widely available form of narrative that tended to place women at the center. Women were determinedly present in the fictional "histories" of *Charlotte Temple* or *The Coquette* as they were not in the public histories written by Rollin or Macaulay. Even novels that did not name women in their titles—for example, Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin* and *Ormond*—often had women as central actors. Whether or not these characters came to a good end, the reader had the opportunity to observe women in physical or emotional crisis, to feel sympathy for heroines in the cautionary tales.

If a woman sought to learn how other women coped with reality, she had few printed resources other than fiction to which she might turn. The

48. *Ibid.*, 80n.

novel that claimed to be "founded on Fact" smudged the clear line between fact and fiction, and may well have seemed to its readers to fulfill some of the functions of narrative history.⁴⁹ The unrealistic elements could be discounted, the elements of truth sifted out. To deny women access to novels, as Jedidiah Strong had done, was to deny them access to a rich imagery of what women were and what they might hope to become.

49. See especially Eliza Foster Cushing's *Yorktown: An Historical Romance* (Boston, 1826), and *Saratoga; A Tale of the Revolution* (Boston, 1824). For a treatment of novels by and about women in the 19th century congruent with the interpretation offered here, see Mary Kelley, "The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home," *Signs*, IV (1979), 434-446.

Chapter 9

THE REPUBLICAN MOTHER: FEMALE POLITICAL IMAGINATION IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The Spirit that prevails among Men of all degrees,
all ages, and sex'es is the Spirit of Liberty.

—Abigail Adams, 1775