

“Man’s Reasonable Companion:” Scottish Enlightenment Rhetoric and
Female Education Discourse in Revolutionary America

by

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We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

The impact of Enlightenment rhetoric on Revolutionary conceptions of gender has been a topic of historiographical debate. This thesis examines how Scottish Enlightenment stadial views of progress influenced early American female education discourse. Within this framework, upper middle-class white women transitioned from “slaves” to reasonable companions through the performance of feminine domesticity. Women who conformed to the prescriptions of Scottish moralists represented Anglo-American ideals of civility and refinement which served as a justification for the enslavement and dispossession of African and Indigenous peoples. Examining opinion pieces, advertisements for schools, academy addresses, and runaway slave advertisements reveals how early Americans participated in the simultaneous construction of race and gender. Beginning in the colonial era, editorialists deployed rhetoric from James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) to argue that upper-class white women were capable of reason and thus deserving of educational opportunities. Pre-revolutionary rationales persisted into the post-revolutionary era. This suggests that increased educational opportunities were not contingent on the Revolution. In the 1780s, editorialists deployed lines of reasoning from John Greogory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), to broaden the construct of reasonable companionship. They argued that upper middle-class white women influenced men’s manners and made society more virtuous. This conception gave women an informal public role as moral arbiters. In the 1790s, women’s rights rhetoric challenged but did not refute the ideological construct of reasonable companionship. Taking a critical race approach to studying Revolutionary women’s access to educational opportunities reveals how dominant discourses upheld the racial hierarchy.

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Introduction

All men agree that too little care has been taken, heretofore, of female education. No one will deny, however, that as the first principles of education are to be taught by mothers – as their discretion is to guide and counsel the conduct of husbands, as they are peculiarly the keepers of the public morals...the duty and character of females in the world are deeply important, nay more absolutely essential to its well being.

- “From a Correspondent,” *The Minerva* August 16, 1798.

What does early American female education discourse reveal about how race and gender were constructed in Revolutionary America? This question may be answered by examining underutilized newspaper sources, including eighteenth-century opinion pieces regarding female education and advertisements for ladies schools. Editorialists submitted their opinion pieces to local newspapers under classical pseudonyms, monikers, and initials and reinforced their arguments with pieces of poetry, anecdotes, and allusions to antiquity and the Bible. In the colonial era, proponents of female education began to call middle and upper-class white women’s perceived intellectual inequality into question by framing them as reasonable companions to men. In the years immediately following the Revolution, proponents of female education broadened the definitional framework of reasonable companionship to include an influential public role. In the 1790s, women’s rights discourse imbued female education with a political valence, as advocates such as Mary Wollstonecraft began to argue that education was the key to women’s independence. Implicit in these arguments was the racial exclusion of those who could not attain the same instrumental role in the young republic as those of the “fair sex.” Editorialists, instructors who placed advertisements for community-based schools, academy trustees, and female students participated in the making and transmitting of this ideology, which functioned to inscribe race, class, and gender.

Historiography

Since the 1970s, historians studying the impact of the American Revolution on women have viewed increased educational opportunities for upper-class white women as a prime example of how gender roles were renegotiated in the post-revolutionary era. Examining primary sources, including diary entries, correspondence, prescriptive literature, and newspapers reveals proponents and detractors of female education debated everything from women's mental capacities to their place in society. Prominent historians of women's education have traced these debates and their implications. However, many works concerning education more broadly understate the proliferation of discourse surrounding female education. For example, in his recent book chronicling the rise of common schools in the United States, historian Johann N. Neem states that "at the time of the Revolution, few girls had received a formal education, but Americans after the Revolution believed that women also needed to be educated."¹ This normative statement does not convey the complexities surrounding this seemingly unanimous decision.

Despite not delving more deeply into this discourse, Neem provides valuable information for those who wish to further explore this subject by citing prominent female education historians Mary Kelley, Lucia McMahon, and Margaret Nash. Examining their works reveals that three main analytical frameworks have influenced these historians. Linda Kerber's intellectual construct of republican motherhood, Joan Scott's definitional framework of gender, and Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere have been adopted, adapted, and reconstructed by historians studying women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Examining each of these concepts'

¹ Johann N. Neem, *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 64.

historiographies, in the context of advancements in women's education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, points to the value of synthesizing these approaches.

Republican Motherhood

Perhaps no other analytical framework has had such a lasting impact on the study of eighteenth-century American women as republican motherhood. Linda Kerber first introduced this intellectual construct in her 1976 article, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective."² Kerber argues that educated white women became crucial to the new republic's success in the post-revolutionary era through the influence they exerted on their husbands and sons.³ She firmly grounds this assertion in Enlightenment ideologies as she questions whether or not there was an American Revolution for women. She reveals that the writings of prominent French philosophes Montesquieu, Condorcet, and Rousseau, and British intellectuals, including John Locke, shaped American conceptions of gender. Relying primarily on prescriptive literature, including the writings of American educational reformer Dr. Benjamin Rush, Kerber argues that "theorists created a mother who had a political purpose, and argued that her domestic behaviour had a direct political function in the republic."⁴ Kerber wrote this article during a decade of massive social, political, and economic changes. Her insistence that white women had a political role before the nineteenth-century women's rights movement led to woman suffrage gave rise to

² Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – an American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28 no. 2, Special Issue: An American Enlightenment (Summer, 1976): 187-205, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712349>.

³ Kerber, "The Republican Mother."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

feminist history.⁵ It also privileged the lives and work of the upper-class white women who constructed their narrative, thus obscuring the lives, work, and challenges of non-white women.

Kerber's expansion on the contemporary significance of republican motherhood in her highly influential 1980 book, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology* (1980), must be understood in this context.⁶ Dividing her work into chapters regarding female patriotism, marriage, divorce, and coverture laws, education, and reading, Kerber presents compelling evidence that republican motherhood served as "justification for [white] women's political behaviour."⁷ This ideological construct, borne from Enlightenment conceptions, provided women with an informal political role, which made them vital to the new republic. Kerber argues that the legacy of the American Revolution for women extends beyond the nineteenth-century women's rights movement. She states in her conclusion that "the ambivalent relationship between motherhood and citizenship would be one of the most lasting, and most paradoxical, legacies of the Revolutionary generation."⁸ For second-wave feminists, including Kerber and her contemporaries, republican motherhood represents the Revolution's and thus America's failure to deliver on the promises of equality present at its founding.⁹ However, the promise of equality between the white women these scholars study and white men were never made explicit or extended to the enslaved and dispossessed Indigenous nations excluded from such empty promises.

Kerber wrote her work contemporaneously with Mary Beth Norton, whose account of the Revolutionary experiences of women uses several of the same archives. Norton expands her

⁵ For more information on the rise of feminism concurrent with other social movements, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 77.

⁶ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

⁷ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹ *Ibid.*

analysis beyond viewing middle and upper-class white women as the default to include free and enslaved black women. In her chapter regarding women's work, both domestically and outside the home, she expertly reveals how class, race, and geographic location shaped "the constant pattern of women's lives."¹⁰ In the preface to the 1996 Cornell Paperbacks edition, Norton laments that other historians have not continued her work. She is "disappointed by the lack of emphasis on women's actual experiences," and hopes scholars will "ask whether the Revolution had an impact on ordinary women," as well as examine the lives of free and enslaved black women.¹¹ At the time of its republication, historians had not pursued these lines of inquiry.

Scholars who have adapted Kerber's ideological construct continue to provide insights into the lives and experiences of upper-class white women. In her 1987 article, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," Jan Lewis presents compelling evidence for a broader definition of republican womanhood. She argues that marriage, not motherhood provided women with a crucial role in the new republic.¹² Lewis asserts that the "Republican Wife" was equated with Eve and marriage with the biblical account of the fall represented in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. A couple assumed the roles of a reasoning Adam and a loving Eve in a "symmetrical marriage."¹³ In this context, man and wife were not equals but rather fulfilled complementary gender roles. As "marriage was the republic in miniature," women were expected to conform to idealized notions of femininity for the good of the republic.¹⁴ By cultivating feminine virtues, the Republican Wife

¹⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Cornell Paperbacks Edition, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3-154.

¹¹ Mary Beth Norton, Preface to the Cornell Paperbacks Edition of *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Cornell Paperbacks Edition, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), xv.

¹² Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4. (October 1987): 690, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1939741>.

¹³ Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 708.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 710.

was able to exercise limited authority. She was “affectionate, virtuous, chaste, and capable of enormous moral authority over her husband” but had “no more power than man allowed.”¹⁵ Lewis’s provides a nuanced understanding of republican womanhood that reveals the concept hinges on marriage rather than motherhood.

Margaret Nash agrees that historians have overemphasized the importance early Americans placed on republican motherhood. In her 1997 article, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia,” Nash asserts that “historians have overstated [its] impact,” and obscured the impact of “other factors,” including “Enlightenment beliefs regarding women’s intellectual abilities...practical needs for literacy and numeracy skills in the new republic and rational approaches to religion.”¹⁶ After restating Kerber’s argument, Nash provides a brief historiographical overview. Historians have argued that republican motherhood led to an increased emphasis on female education and a re-evaluation of white women’s domestic and political roles in the post-revolutionary period.¹⁷ Nash agrees that republican motherhood “suddenly heightened the visibility of women in the Revolutionary generation.”¹⁸ However, she disputes historians’ assertions that it served to confine women within a domestic ideal that valued them as mothers instead of women. Re-examining Dr. Benjamin Rush’s addresses to the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy, Nash argues that Kerber overstated the primacy of women’s roles as mothers. Neither Rush’s “Thoughts Upon Female Education” nor addresses made by Philadelphia Young Ladies’ Academy’s trustees explicitly referenced women’s social roles.¹⁹ Valedictorian addresses made by students, wherein they reflected on their education,

¹⁵ Lewis, “The Republican Wife,” 721.

¹⁶ Margaret Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Summer, 1997): 171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3124445>.

¹⁷ Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood,” 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

further calls into question the view that these women were confined to domesticity. In direct contrast to Kerber's construct, "rather than learning how to be pliant wives, students at the academy boldly articulated critiques of the social conditions of women in a male-dominated culture."²⁰ Kerber's construct was first used to give women an essential place in post-revolutionary America, but as Nash illustrates, its subsequent usage obscures white women's actual experiences and voices. She concludes that "new analytical frameworks" are "need[ed] to restore depth to our understandings of women's lives in the early republic."²¹ More recent works suggest that further examining white womanhood requires getting to the roots of this ideological construct.

In her works, historian Rosemarie Zagarri argues that Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric impacted early American conceptions of gender. In a recent book chapter, Daniel O'Neill defines the Scottish Enlightenment as "a group of personally and intellectually connected eighteenth-century Scots who understood themselves as engaged in" a "common theoretical project...built on the interconnected pillars of moral philosophy and conjectural history."²² The emphasis on moral progress inherent in Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric gave upper-class white women a crucial societal role to play. In her 1992 article, Zagarri explains how this role translated to an early American context became republican motherhood. Influential Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, including Adam Smith, David Hume and Lord Kames, "articulated key concepts, such as a sociological understanding of the family, a four-stage theory of history, and a characterological concept of 'manners,' all of which provided critical links between European and American conceptualizations of womanhood."²³ Revolutionary American writers pulled directly from

²⁰ Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood," 188.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

²² Daniel O'Neill, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*, eds., Sandrine Bergés, Eileen Hunt Botting, Alan Coffee (London: Routledge, 2019), 66, eBook ISBN: 9781315186788.

²³ Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (Jun., 1992): 193. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713040>.

Scottish Enlightenment constructs in their discussions of morals, manners, and women's position within society. Using Scottish Enlightenment ideas concerning women's influence on society's morals as their foundation, "American thinkers...pursued the implications of their ideas for women's education."²⁴ Within the Scottish four stages theory, such advancements in female education served as signs of increased equality between the sexes. This conception placed further limitations on white women's political participation by defining their "role as protectors of society's morals and manners," separate from but analogous to that of male citizenship. Thus, as Zagarri states, "social equality affirmed traditional gender roles while it disparaged the desirability or necessity of a direct political role for women."²⁵ In her conclusion, Zagarri questions the applicability of the terms "republican" and "mother." This statement attests to the fall of republican motherhood from its ascendancy and the rise of other, more effective analytical frameworks.

Gender

The definition of gender Joan Scott presents in her 1986 article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," has been exceptionally impactful in many fields, including the study of eighteenth-century American women.²⁶ Finding previous essentialist definitions of gender unsatisfactory, Scott defines gender as "social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" and "a primary way of signifying power."²⁷ She further breaks down her definition into the four subsets of culturally available symbols, normative concepts, social institutions, and subjectivity. Taken together, the analytical framework which Scott provides

²⁴ Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother, 205.

²⁵ Ibid., 207.

²⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, "A History of 'Gender,'" *The American Historical Review*, 113, no. 5 (Dec., 2008): 1346-1356. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30223445>.

²⁷ Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986): 1067, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1864376>.

serves as a framework for historicizing gender. Written in a time when political history was still in its ascendancy, Scott's article serves as a feminist challenge to a status quo that has dismissed the legitimacy of gender history. In recent years, the legacy of Scott's framework has become contested.

In her November 2008 article, Jeanne Boydston asserts that the two core components of Scott's definition of gender have had unforeseen implications. Providing a historiographical overview of the evolution of the concept, Boydston argues that both Scott's emphasis on 'perceived differences between the sexes' and 'relations of power' has "secured a binary, oppositional framework for thinking about matters of male and female."²⁸ Gender is a means of signifying power, but in many non-Western societies, it is not the primary means of signifying power. African historian Oyèrónké Oyewùmi reveals that "in pre-colonial Yorubaland....gender construction *as defined by the current category of analysis in the form employed by so many western historians* did not occur."²⁹ As Boydston argues, re-evaluating Scott's definition also has implications for studying historical power relations in early America. Boydston explains that some scholars have "discovered variations in the historical meaning of gender" and "concluded that the imposition of a particular category of 'gender' was integral to the category of colonization."³⁰ Others have broadened our understanding of African American and Indigenous conceptions of gender. Such scholarship, which pays "careful attention to historical processes and to the specificity of cultural systems," leads to a deeper understanding of how other power relations, including race and class, intersect with gender. For Boydston, questioning the use of gender as an analytical category and its primacy as a signifier of power relations is the key to revealing such

²⁸ Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis." *Gender & History* 20, issue 3 (November 2008): 563. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00537.x>.

²⁹ Boydston, "Gender as a Question," 565.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 571.

insights. In her conclusion, Boydston challenges historians to “interrogate both our category and our evidence.”³¹ Only by doing so will we effectively historicize gender.

Scott’s answer to her critics appeared the following month in the *American Historical Review* forum that revisited her article. Following a discussion of the influence and application of her definitional framework by several scholars, Scott reflects on her work. She explains that as she was not the first to define gender, her article provides a space for discourse rather than a “programmatically or methodologically treatise.”³² This statement places the onus on scholars who have adopted her approach rather than her definitional framework. Scott explains that “‘the language of gender’ cannot be codified in dictionaries,” but rather, “the particular meanings...need to be teased out of the historical materials we examine.”³³ Thus, while frameworks such as Scott’s serve to facilitate historical analysis, they must be carefully applied. Recent scholarship attests to the value of taking a Scottian approach to studying gender in post-revolutionary America, which acknowledges the context in which it was constructed.

Taking a Scottian approach, Zagarri argues that Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric influenced Revolutionary American conceptions of gender. In her 2008 article, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America,” Zagarri illustrates how the application of gendered rights rhetoric limited the subversive potentials of women’s rights discourse. Zagarri explains how this deployment of gendered rights theory occurred as “Americans attempted to reconcile two conflicting principles: the equality of the sexes and the subordination of women to men.”³⁴ In a

³¹ Boydston, “Gender as a Question,” 579.

³² Joan Scott, “Unanswered Questions.” *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (Dec. 2008): 1423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30223450>.

³³ Scott, “Unanswered Questions,” 1429.

³⁴ Rosemarie Zagarri, “The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (April, 1998): 204, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2674382>.

country whose founding document emphasized individual rights and personal autonomy, successfully maintaining the gender hierarchy required applying a different kind of rights rhetoric to elite settler women. As Zagarri explains, “to men, writers applied a Lockean conception of rights that emphasized equality, individual autonomy and the expansion of personal freedoms” while “to women, authors applied a Scottish theory that treated rights as benefits, conferred by God and expressed in the performance of duties to society.”³⁵ In doing so, proponents ensured that women’s rights discourse would not jeopardize the stability of the young republic. As Zagarri states, “just as rights rhetoric had enabled white males to challenge social and political institutions, so too, might the rhetoric of women’s rights undermine an even more basic structure, the gender status quo.”³⁶ Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric, which discussed women’s rights in terms of duties, served to effectively exclude women from formal politics by confining their enactment of citizenship to the domestic realm. It also served to naturalize the category of woman, to indicate upper-class and elite white women. Zagarri states that “Americans could have decided that women, like slaves, were sub-human or second-class human beings, unworthy to be the possessors of rights.”³⁷ Juxtaposing women with slaves without acknowledging that some slaves were Black and Indigenous women obscures other unequal hierarchies in early America. Numerous times throughout the article, Zagarri differentiates between the rights of women and those of “white males.”³⁸ This level of specificity is often absent when discussing gender in Revolutionary America as historians, including Zagarri, rely on primary sources which privilege upper-class white women.

³⁵ Zagarri, “The Rights of Man and Woman,” 205.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

Zagarri's subsequent monograph provides insights into how scholars can historicize gender in Revolutionary America within the context of other power relations. In *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (2007), Zagarri further develops her argument that Revolutionary Americans employed a gendered rights rhetoric. In her introduction, she explains that Mary Wollstonecraft's introduction of the term "women's rights" into common parlance in 1792 forced Americans to consider what those rights entailed. Zagarri states that "although they were socially and legally subordinate to men, white women...enjoyed a privileged status" as "unlike slaves or free blacks, [they] were distinct individuals who shared certain rights with men."³⁹ Examining white women's subordination contributes to, rather than precludes, analyzing other signifiers of power, including race. White Americans were forced to ask the question of how "the United States [could] reconcile its commitment to equality and natural rights with the exclusion of women from government and politics?"⁴⁰ Answering this question has implications for examining the exclusion of other groups, including lower-class women, enslaved and free African American men and women, and Indigenous peoples. Zagarri's work centers on "female politicians" who participated in informal politics before a "Revolutionary backlash" occurred.⁴¹ Reiterating points from her previous article, she asserts that Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender contributed to this backlash and women's subsequent exclusion from formal politics. Zagarri's analysis of Scottish Enlightenment rights rhetoric and American conceptions of gender are crucial to this thesis. Recent works by historians of women's education have not thoroughly examined the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on female education discourse.

³⁹ Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early Modern Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 5.

⁴⁰ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In her book, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in Early America* (2012), Lucia McMahon takes a Scottian approach to studying female education in the early national period.⁴² Her analysis occurs “explicitly within the context of an equality versus difference debate,” which seeks to reveal “how...a society committed to equality maintain[s] what are perceived as necessary differences.”⁴³ McMahon does not delve into the broader implications of this debate, including slavery and imperialism. However, she explicitly states that “the women highlighted in this study...were white [and] members of an emerging middle-class or elite families that subscribed to new cultural ideals stressing the importance of education for women.”⁴⁴ This statement allows for an implicit understanding of the race and class of the women she discusses throughout her work. McMahon studies women’s education in the nineteenth century. However, her concept of “mere equality” is valuable to those who study female education in Revolutionary America. McMahon defines this concept as “an imperfect, paradoxical attempt at compromise” which attempted to reconcile “the tensions between intellectual equality and sexual difference that informed the era’s understandings of women’s education.”⁴⁵ McMahon argues that “mere equality” allowed middle and upper-class white women to gain increased educational opportunities despite reinforcing the gender hierarchy.⁴⁶ Examining academy students’ correspondence and diary entries, McMahon highlights the inherent tensions between women’s acknowledged intellectual capacity and the gendered nature of their education. In the conclusion of her work, McMahon reflects on the significance of mere equality on contemporary notions of gender differentiation. McMahon concludes that “in a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are

⁴² Lucia McMahon, *Mere Equals: The Paradox of Educated Women in the Early American Republic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), x.

⁴³ McMahon, *Mere Equals*, ix.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

created equal,” we must “consider the ways in which women continue to achieve certain measures of equality that have not required men to cede significant power or privilege.”⁴⁷ Revolutionary America did not live up to these aspirations. As recent scholarship attests, further insights may be found in examining female participation in the public sphere.

The Public Sphere

Since its introduction in the 1980s, Jurgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere has been adopted, adapted, and debated by historians and critical theorists.⁴⁸ In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas provides a lengthy etymology of the terms “public” and “private,” beginning in ancient Greece and Rome. He then traces the origins of the public sphere through its formation in eighteenth-century Germany, France, and Great Britain.⁴⁹ Habermas defines the “bourgeois public sphere” as “the sphere of private people come together as a public” who “engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the...sphere of commodity exchange and social labour,” using “reason.”⁵⁰ Such debate occurred in social structures such as newspapers, coffeehouses, and salons, where the public discussed topics as diverse as art, government, philosophy, and literature. As a result, “a political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which in opposition to absolute sovereignty...came to assert itself (i.e., public opinion) as the only legitimate source of this law.”⁵¹ Many historians and critical theorists have asserted that Habermas’s emphasis on class in his articulation of the

⁴⁷ McMahan, *Mere Equals*, 170.

⁴⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ Habermas, *The Public Sphere*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

public sphere, however compelling, serves to marginalize those who were not in a position to participate in it, including non-whites and women.

Despite Habermas's assertion that the public sphere facilitated more democratic government systems, critical theorist Nancy Fraser argues that its application to actual democracies is limited. Her 1990 article, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," provides a compelling critique of Habermas's concept. Fraser argues that the paradigm must be reconsidered to be applied to "the limits of actually existing democracy."⁵² To support her argument, she provides a brief historiographical overview of how different fields of inquiry have applied the term. Feminists, for example, have "conflat[ed] at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse."⁵³ Fraser argues that scholars must re-examine Habermas's definition to apply it effectively. The public sphere may then be viewed not merely as an arena of public discourse but as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk."⁵⁴ This conception, which could allow for the inclusion of previously excluded groups, has theoretical implications for studying modern-day democracies. Some scholars have adapted Habermas's definition of the public sphere to analyze the participation of previously excluded groups. For example, Mary Ryan has shown how "nineteenth-century North American women of various classes and ethnicities constructed access routes to public political life, even despite their exclusion from the official public sphere."⁵⁵ Subsequent historians would build upon Ryan and Fraser's work, reframing discourse within the

⁵² Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 62, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466240>.

⁵³ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 57.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

public sphere to highlight how upper-class white women could achieve political agency despite their exclusion.

In his article “An Expanding Public Sphere: Women and Print in Colonial Virginia: 1736-1776,” Roger P. Mellen provides compelling evidence for reframing women’s involvement in the public sphere. He explains that during the pre-revolutionary era, “to take part in Habermas’ civic discourse...required taking part in discussions in taverns, coffeehouses, and other public spaces, activities that typically excluded women.”⁵⁶ Mellen reveals that despite their exclusion, middle and upper-class white women had a more significant role in the public sphere than has been previously suggested.⁵⁷ These women participated in public discourse by reading (and occasionally even writing) books for women, almanacs, and newspapers. Participation in the printed public sphere was not limited to women of the upper classes. Mellen explains that “while elite white women certainly were involved, so too were some female members of an emerging trade class or middling sort.”⁵⁸ The printed public sphere provided some opportunities for previously excluded groups. Mellen bluntly states, however, that “there is no evidence that any slaves, servants, Native Americans, or women from the poorest strata were contributing to this world of print in the Chesapeake region.”⁵⁹ In this context, Mellen’s work reveals the benefits and limitations of examining women’s participation in the printed public sphere. Extending his analysis to the post-revolutionary era, Mellen shows how women’s involvement in colonial print culture gained a political valence in the post-revolutionary era. Despite their exclusion from the “formal political process,” middle and upper-class women “were a part of the growing print culture in

⁵⁶ Roger P. Mellen, “An Expanding Public Sphere: Women and Print in Colonial Virginia, 1736-1776,” *American Journalism* 27, no. 4 (2010):7-35. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/09612025.2017.1306917>.

⁵⁷ Mellen, “An Expanding Public Sphere,” 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Virginia and did seek to become part of the body politic.”⁶⁰ Mellen’s analysis allows for a broader understanding of women’s participation in the printed public sphere while acknowledging excluded groups.

Recent scholarship by Carl Robert Keyes provides valuable insights into early American print culture. In his 2017 article, Keyes examines newspaper advertisements for schools in Philadelphia from 1765-1775. He explains how subscribers who placed advertisements and the residents who read them participated in disseminating ideas regarding gentility and morality. Instructors took various measures to assure readers that their students would receive the best care, stating that students would be taught out of refined classrooms where decorum would be maintained, and their morals looked after. It is difficult to discern the extent to which promises made in advertisements correspond to the instruction students received. However, examining these advertisements reveals how cultural mores spread in pre-revolutionary America. Keyes explains that instructors “played an active role in the process of cultural transmission” by placing advertisements.⁶¹ He argues that the people who placed advertisements differed from editorialists of opinion pieces who were subject to the printer’s decisions. However, Keyes’ articulation of how ideas and cultural norms spread in early America may also be applied to opinion pieces.

Republican Motherhood, Gender, and the Public Sphere Reconsidered

Susan Branson’s 2001 monograph, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia*, shows the value of synthesizing the three analytical

⁶⁰ Mellen, “An Expanding Public Sphere,” 26.

⁶¹ Carl Robert Keyes, “Selling Gentility and Pretending Morality: Education and Newspaper Advertisements in Philadelphia, 1765-75,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 141, no. 3, Education in Pennsylvania History (October 2017): 253, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.141.3.0245>.

frameworks presented by Kerber, Scott, and Habermas.⁶² Taking a transnational approach, Branson examines the informal political participation of a small group of elite white women in post-revolutionary Philadelphia. In doing so, she highlights the impact of the French Revolution on American political discourse and women's participation in the printed public sphere. In the introduction to her work, Branson re-evaluates several prominent analytical frameworks. She argues that it was necessary to reconsider "republican motherhood," which "did not constrai[n] women's civic activities," as well as the ideology of "separate spheres."⁶³ In her discussion of this latter concept, which highlights how gender and the public sphere intersect, she cites Habermas and Fraser. Branson states that "the ideas and activities generated in the Revolutionary era challenged the association of the terms domestic/private/dependent with women, and public/citizen/independent with the innate attributes of men."⁶⁴ This re-evaluation of terms allowed for women's greater informal political participation in print culture, theatre, and political salons. Branson acknowledges the limitations of her analysis. She states that "the ideas articulated by middle class and elite women...have survived in letters, diaries, essays and novels" and "delineate the extent to which gender defined participation in public cultural and political practices."⁶⁵ Like Zagarri and McMahon, her source base allows her to discuss women's political participation without directly addressing class or race.

In her first chapter, Branson discusses the role of print culture in facilitating women's involvement in public discourse. She states that "overlapping phenomena, all centred around the world of print, produced a new woman-centred public forum in which Americans discussed and

⁶² Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁶³ Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

debated women's familial, social, economic, and political roles."⁶⁶ Branson's discussion of magazines as central to how post-revolutionary Americans constructed gender may also be applied to other media types in the printed public sphere. Newspapers, which often reprinted articles from magazines, also "helped to develop an American public discourse on gender roles and gender."⁶⁷ The public discourse Branson identifies in late eighteenth-century magazines may be traced to colonial-era newspapers. Like magazines, newspapers "established a conversation among readers, and encouraged a dialogue between readers and the printed page by printing letters and comments." They also created a space for "women's characters, behaviours, and futures" to become "a matter for public discussion."⁶⁸ Newspaper editorialists participated in a broader discourse which included works by women's rights activists Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft.

These women also feature in Pauline Schloesser's *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic* (2002).⁶⁹ Schloesser's experience as a white woman teaching non-white students transformed her understanding of race and gender. She explains how she realized that she "needed critical race theory as well as critical feminist theory to adequately describe the intersectionality of race, class, and gender hierarchy."⁷⁰ Schloesser applies this nuanced approach to examining how gender was constructed in Revolutionary America. She states that "the cultural privilege of women's moral authority were delineated by age, class, and especially race" as "only *white* women of property-owning classes enjoyed moral authority in

⁶⁶ Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Pauline Schloesser, *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2002) *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁷⁰ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, ix.

republican discourses.”⁷¹ Race, class, and gender are simultaneous historical processes that cannot be understood in isolation. Taking an intersectional approach reveals that “race was constructed through discourses on white femininity.”⁷² Schloesser constructs her compelling argument around the “fair sex” ideology. Eighteenth-century Americans employed this term as “a category that in the first instance distinguished those with light complexions from those with dark complexions, and females from males.”⁷³ Her second organizing term of the “racial patriarchy” will not be employed here. As Allen G. Johnson argues in his influential analysis, patriarchy “is a system, which means it can’t be reduced to the people who participate in it.”⁷⁴ In this context, Schloesser’s assertion that influential white women, including Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams, and Judith Sargent Murray, “signed-on” to the racial patriarchy loses coherency. As explained by Johnson, the patriarchy is not a dichotomy wherein all men have power and all women are oppressed, but an “ongoing *process* that’s continuously shaped and reshaped” by all those who “occupy social positions in it” regardless of gender.⁷⁵ Using the term fair sex ideology historicizes this process which eighteenth-century proponents of female education shaped. They participated, in Schloesser’s words, in “debates on female education that began in the 1760s [that] came into full bloom in the 1790s centered on the *propriety* of educating females” and that were concurrent with “the debate on blacks and education [that] centered on whether those of African origin or descent had the *ability* to become fully literate in English.”⁷⁶ This thesis examines how Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric enabled female education discourse to become a tool of racialization.

⁷¹ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 7.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Allan G. Johnson, “Patriarchy the System: An It, Not a he, a Them, or an Us,” in *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* eds. Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998), 26. Johnson_Patriarchy.pdf (iu.edu)

⁷⁵ Johnson, “Patriarchy the System,” 32.

⁷⁶ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 47.

In her work *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (2006), Mary Kelley cites Schloesser as a vital source for understanding nineteenth-century “social and racial hierarchies.”⁷⁷ In doing so, she demonstrates the value of incorporating Schloesser’s insights into analyses of women’s education. In this profoundly impactful book, Kelley takes an intersectional approach to examining female academies for elite white women. She reconceptualizes the public sphere as “civil society” and republican motherhood as “gendered republicanism.”⁷⁸ Kelley historicizes these concepts by exploring the meanings that antebellum Americans assigned to civil society and the opportunities it presented for elite white women’s participation. She also explains how “gendered republicanism” gave elite white women a public role and emphasized female education “beyond the rudiments of reading, writing, and ciphering.”⁷⁹ Historians have emphasized the role of male educational proponents such as Dr. Benjamin Rush in formulating this ideological construct. However, Kelley asserts that women had a direct role in its construction. Kelley concludes that “women embraced an education wrapped in the values and vocabularies of gendered republicanism,” and in doing so, “became influential makers of public opinion.”⁸⁰ Kelley’s work has impacted the broader discussion of Revolutionary female education and political participation. In the Spring 2008 issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic*, historians Caroline Winterer, Phillip Gould, Jeanne Boydston, Rosemarie Zagarri and John L. Brooke contributed articles to a symposium entitled “Women and Civil Society,” wherein they discussed the significance of Kelley’s work.⁸¹ Her major historiographical interventions have

⁷⁷ Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 28, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁷⁸ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 42.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁸¹ Caroline Winterer, "Women and Civil Society: Introduction" *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008):23-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30043566>; Phillip Gould, "Civil Society and the Public Woman." *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30043567>; Jeanne Boydston,

paved the way for historians of women's education to re-examine well-trodden topics such as the rise of academies by focusing on female students.

Methodology

Searching for the term “female education” in Readex’s *Early American Newspapers* database reveals fifty opinion pieces, notices and extracts explicitly on female education. Editorialists and activists often disagreed on what it was appropriate for women to learn. However, they all agreed that female education included “the habits, customs, and manners that are taught to young women within the family and through social expectations.”⁸² These aspects of female education were culturally transmitted through the works of conduct literature written by Scottish moralists. Beginning in the 1760s, editorialists deployed lines of reasoning featured in James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), which dictated that women were not “formed only to be domestic drudges and the slaves of our pleasures; but as intended to be reasonable and agreeable companions.”⁸³ This pronouncement shares similarities with a work published a decade earlier. In his work, *The Oeconomy of Human Life* (1751), English poet Robert Dodsley urged women to “remember, thou art made man’s reasonable companion, not the slave of his passion.”⁸⁴ The

“Civilizing Selves: Public Structures and Private Lives in Mary Kelley’s ‘Learning to Stand and Speak,’” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 47-60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30043568>; Rosemarie Zagari, “Politics and Civil Society: A Discussion of Mary Kelley’s ‘Learning to Stand and Speak.’” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008):61-73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30043569>; John L. Brooke, “Spheres, Sites, Subjectivity, History: Reframing Antebellum American Society.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 75-82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30043570>.

⁸² Nancy Johnson, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*, eds. Sandrine Bergés, Eileen Hunt Botting, and Alan Coffee (London: Routledge, 2019), 111, eBook ISBN: 9781315186788.

⁸³ “Advertisement,” *New-London Gazette* (New-London, CT), Sept. 25, 1767.

⁸⁴ Robert Dodsley, *The oeconomy of human life, complete in two parts:/translated from an Indian manuscript, written by an ancient Bramin.; To which is prefixed, an account of the manner in which the said manuscript was discovered; in a letter from an English gentleman residing in China, to the Earl of ****** (New York: Printed and sold by Hugh Gaine, at the Bible, in Hanover-Square, 1790), 27. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

origins and attribution of this phrase are contested. However, its earlier usage places Fordyce's work within a broader Enlightenment renegotiation of gender roles.

Aspects of Fordyce's work suggest that he saw his conception of gender as more progressive than earlier ideas. However, by embedding women's ability to reason within what Rosalind Carr has termed the performance of "feminine domesticity," he, like his contemporaries, placed women in a subservient role to men.⁸⁵ Fordyce discussed upper-class white women's intellectual accomplishments and subjects alongside feminine virtues, including modesty and submission. This framework, which confined reasonable companions' intellect within the bounds of feminine domesticity, allowed editorialists to argue for increased educational opportunities for women. Katie Barclay and Rosalind Carr explain that "the domestic woman needed to be educated and rational to perform her domestic functions."⁸⁶ Revolutionary-era editorialists asserted that these upper-class white women were equally capable of reason as their male counterparts but would not transgress gender norms. This thesis traces how Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender facilitated fair sex ideology by giving middle and upper-class white women an opportunity to exercise informal political agency as reasonable companions to men.

Advertisements for community-based schools reveal how instructors also participated in the cultural transmission and making of gender norms. "Community-based schools" are defined here as schools that instructors placed advertisements for during the Revolutionary era. This broad term refers to ladies schools, boarding schools, and schools for the youth of both sexes. It underscores the role community members had in educating and socializing middle and upper-class

⁸⁵ Rosalind Carr, *Gender and Enlightenment Culture in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 13.

⁸⁶ Katie Barclay and Rosalind Carr, "Women, Love and Power in Enlightenment Scotland," *Women's History Review* 27 (2018): 186. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/09612025.2017.1306917>.

white women and girls. Unlike academies, which were “incorporated to ensure financial support beyond that available through tuition alone” and had a board of trustees, instructors of community-based schools relied on their fellow community members for financial support.⁸⁷ Advertisements for these social institutions provide descriptive evidence of the subjects available to young white women and girls in the Revolutionary era. They also demonstrate the role of instructors and schools in constructing and negotiating gender norms articulated in opinion pieces.

Historian Jay Mechling cautions historians to view prescriptive literature in the context in which it was produced.⁸⁸ White women contributed to female education discourse by writing opinion pieces, acting as correspondents, and giving academy addresses printed in newspapers. Students and religious figures spoke about female education in academy addresses. Included here are seven academy addresses that appeared in post-revolutionary newspapers. An oration on female education by a male university student and Reverend Sproat’s address to the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy demonstrate how those in power used academies to construct gender. The reflections of five female students from 1789 to 1799 reveal the extent to which these women internalized and were empowered by post-revolutionary notions of idealized femininity. Each of these speakers, regardless of gender, perpetuated and participated in fair sex ideology. Considering these sources as part of broader female education discourse shows how academy students participated in the cultural transmission of stadial theories of progress that gave educated white women a crucial societal role.

⁸⁷ Kim Tolley, “The Rise of Academies: Continuity of Change?” *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 227, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/369828>. Tolley provides detailed definitions for venture schools, dame schools, town schools, church schools and English grammar schools which are included in this broad definition.

⁸⁸ Jay Mechling, "Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers." *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 1 (Autumn, 1975):44-63. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/scholarly-journals/advice-historians-on-mothers/docview/1297346080/se-2?accountid=14846>.

These sources existed within the broader context of a dominant society that actively enslaved African peoples and dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands. Revolutionary Americans adopted Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender to justify an oppressive and exploitative racial hierarchy. Rosalind Carr explains how Scottish Enlightenment thinkers including Adam Smith, Thomas Ried and Lord Kames believed in a “stadialist conception of history,” which “defined human progress as a process of development through four distinct stages: hunting, shepherding, agricultural and commercial.”⁸⁹ Economics placed Scottish Enlightenment society at the commercial stage, but women’s transition from slave to men’s pleasures to reasonable companion justified the Scots’ place at the top of the racial hierarchy. Carr states that “gender provided a crucial category of analysis in this process; according to stadial history, European women’s femininity signified civility, and women’s perceived lack of it in so-called ‘savage’ societies illustrated barbarity.”⁹⁰ Fordyce’s *Sermons* was a work of conduct literature and a Protestant Enlightenment religious text that advanced this worldview. Thomas Anherter argues that “in eighteenth-century Scotland, as elsewhere in Europe, clergymen were among the most important participants in the republic of letters, and religion was a central intellectual concern of the Enlightenment, not distinct from it.”⁹¹ The Protestant ideals of virtue and morality espoused by Fordyce demonstrate the centrality of Christianity in constructing race and gender. Stadial theories of progress provided a rationale for the enslavement of Africans and enabled the usurpation of lands held by non-Christians.

Slave owners placed thousands of advertisements for runaway enslaved peoples, indentured servants, and apprentices in the Revolutionary era. Carl Robert Keyes’ *Slavery 250*

⁸⁹ Carr, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹¹ Thomas Anherter, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment: 1690-1805* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 2.

Project, which examines these sources demonstrate the ubiquity of notices regarding enslaved peoples that early Americans would have encountered. Keyes states that even “colonists who did not...own enslaved people were...confronted with slavery [and] invited to maintain the system by purchasing enslaved men, women, and children or assisting in the capture of so-called ‘runaways’ who sought to free themselves from bondage.”⁹² Not considering these sources obscures how elite white women’s quest for education maintained systems of oppression. Silvia Sebastiani has argued that, unlike other subjugated groups, the fair sex’s role in stadial theory gave them “a capacity for resistance.”⁹³ However, as these advertisements demonstrate, enslaved peoples actively resisted their oppression. Antonio T. Bly positions enslaved peoples who “protested with their feet” as active agents of resistance and “co-authors” of these advertisements.⁹⁴ These individuals claimed their freedom at the risk of their lives. Slave owners placed their advertisements in the same papers as community-based schools. Including these sources challenges a feminist approach that does not take racism and white supremacy as seriously as gender. Female education discourse occurred within this broader context of unfree individuals’ resistance to oppression and the dispossession of Indigenous lands. Deploying fair sex ideology, editorialists, instructors, school trustees and academy students constructed white womanhood to justify racism. David A. Copeland argues that “the conduct and advice literature that newspapers printed telling [women]” to be “virtuous wives and dutiful workers in the home would not have been necessary if women were remaining complacently within the domestic sphere.”⁹⁵ Likewise, prescriptive literature founded on stadial

⁹² Carl Robert Keyes, “Slavery Advertisements Published June 14, 1771,” Slavery Adverts 250 Project | The Adverts 250 Project

⁹³ Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (Online: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 150, *Springer Link*.

⁹⁴ Antonio T. Bly, “‘Indubitable signs’: reading silence as *text* in New England runaway slave advertisements,” *Slavery & Abolition* 42, no. 2 (Sept. 2020): 240-268.
<https://doi.org/ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1801069>.

⁹⁵ David A. Copeland, “Virtuous and Vicious: The Dual Portrayal of Women in Colonial Newspapers.” *American Periodicals* 5 (1995): 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20770859>.

theories of progress would not have been necessary if people of colour had not actively resisted oppression. This thesis traces a Protestant Enlightenment pathway for education in which the enslavement and dispossession of people of colour provided scaffolding for white women's quest for equality.

Chapter One: The First and Increasing Rays of Reason

On September 25th, 1767, an advertisement in Connecticut's *New-London Gazette* for a Boston bookseller stated that the shop had just imported Scottish Presbyterian minister and moralist James Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women*.¹ The advertisement proclaimed that the author, "d[id] not consider [women] in that debasing light by which they are too often considered, as formed only to be domestic drudges and the slaves of our pleasures; but as intended to be reasonable and agreeable companions."² Four years later, an American proponent of female education, going by the masculine name of Philomathes, recommended Fordyce's work to a female editorialist as a vital source for furthering her education.³ Before the mid-eighteenth century, American social mores dictated that female education was at best unnecessary and at worst dangerous. Philomathes's piece illustrates how stadial notions of progress provided a framework for growing public discourse against the limitations placed on women's intellectual improvement. Historian Jill Lepore states that in the colonial era, those in power believed that "a taste for books could ruin a girl" and "when she grew up, she'd make a poor helpmeet."⁴ Reasonable companionship, represented in Fordyce's *Sermons*, enabled editorialists to argue that women's ability to reason would improve their capacity to fulfill their social roles.

In the pre-revolutionary era, women's educational opportunities were severely limited, with even upper-class white women learning only the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In his recent book, *Democracy's Schools* (2017), Johann N. Neem gives an overview of educational opportunities for children in colonial America. He explains that, broadly speaking,

¹ James Fordyce, *Sermons to young women: in two volumes*, 2 vols. (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, in the Strand, J. Dodsley in Pall-Mall, and J. Payne in Pater-Noster Row, 1767) *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

² "Advertisement," *New-London Gazette* (New-London, CT), Sept. 25, 1767.

³ "Philomathes to Camilla," *New-London Gazette* (New-London, CT), July 13, 1770.

⁴ Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 25.

“structured schooling in special buildings subsidized by tax dollars and composing a large part of a child’s life did not yet exist.”⁵ However, some states did include provisions for education in their constitutions. For instance, in 1642, “the Massachusetts Bay Colony required all children to be taught to read” among other subjects and subsequently “required that towns with more than a hundred families support a public grammar school.”⁶ Other New England colonies were exceptional in offering publicly funded schools. According to Neem, “Connecticut...devoted public funds to schooling so that all children could gain basic literacy and knowledge of religion.”⁷ Neem’s brief discussion of colonial education serves as a precursor to his detailed discussion of post-revolutionary schooling.

Similarly, several scholars frame colonial women’s lack of advanced educational opportunities merely as a precursor to post-revolutionary improvements in women’s education. For instance, Norton states that “prior to the Revolution, Americans had paid little attention to the formal education of women” while “in the new republic...the importance of female education was repeatedly emphasized.”⁸ Recent scholarship has continued this pattern, with prominent historians Lucia McMahon and Mary Kelley situating their analyses of early American women’s education almost entirely in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹ These omissions in historical writing reflect the lack of formal educational institutions for women in the colonial era. In her recent engaging work, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (2013), Jill Lepore explains that while Benjamin Franklin gained literacy and acclaim as a printer and writer in the first half of the eighteenth century, his sister Jane Mecom documented the lives and deaths of her

⁵ Neem, *Democracy’s Schools*, 7.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 256.

⁹ McMahon, *Mere Equality* and Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*.

children in what she termed her “book of ages.” Unable to gain the exceptional education her brother did, her letters were always filled with misspellings, and her education remained rudimentary.¹⁰ Lepore’s work highlights the need for further research into the educational opportunities available to lower-class women in colonial America.

Carl Robert Keyes’s examination of colonial Philadelphia advertisements for schools highlights how these underutilized sources provide valuable insights into the educational opportunities available to upper-class white women. Instructors offered to teach the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many also offered to teach ornamental skills that included various types of needlework and other subjects, including music, drawing, and French. Keyes argues that advertisements that offered to teach only “young ladies” demonstrate how instructors culturally transmitted notions of gentility.¹¹ This term is also indicative of fair sex ideology. Schloesser asserts that “articles on the fair sex or the ‘ladies’ were directed at white women from the property-owning classes, not women of colour, enslaved, or indentured women.”¹² By referring to students as “ladies” or “misses,” these instructors participated in racial exclusion. According to Keyes, statements regarding “imposed sexual segregation” were used to assure readers that morality would be maintained in the classroom.¹³ Instructors often separated the sexes into different classrooms or apartments. For instance, in his advertisement placed on April 25, 1763, in *The New-York Mercury*, John Nathan Hutchins stated that students would “be provided with two convenient rooms, one for the reception of young gentlemen, mariners, & c. the other for young ladies.”¹⁴ Such references are also indicative of fair sex ideology. Schloesser states that “the ascribed virtues

¹⁰ Lepore, *Book of Ages*, 106.

¹¹ Keyes, “Selling Gentility and Pretending Morality,” 262.

¹² Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 8.

¹³ Keyes, “Selling Gentility and Pretending Morality,” 262.

¹⁴ “Advertisement,” *New-York Mercury* (New York, NY), Apr. 25, 1763.

and vices of the fair sex created “women” and “ladies” as categories through a system of ethics that was bounded by race and class.”¹⁵ Advertisements for community-based schools provide evidence of how notions of gentility and morality were both gendered, racialized, and class-based.

Advertisements placed by over fifty subscribers in the decade immediately preceding the Revolution demonstrate which subjects were available to young ladies at this time. In his advertisement placed on April 22, 1763, in Portsmouth’s *The New-Hampshire Gazette*, Penuel Bowen stated that he “intend[ed] to open for the benefit of young ladies,” a school where he would teach “reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, and perhaps a little of the English grammar.”¹⁶ Many schools offered similar instruction in the rudiments, while others offered to teach young ladies various types of needlework. In an advertisement placed on April 7, 1763, in *The Massachusetts Gazette*, a Jane Day stated that she “intend[ed] to open a school...where [would] be taught in the best manner, plain work, Dresden, embroidery in gold and silver, and all sorts of shading work in colours, &c.”¹⁷ Marla Miller’s work, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution*, shows how the attainment of skills such as needlework offered many women a chance to exercise agency. Those of the lower classes could earn a living as mantua makers and tailors. For elite women, “the acquisition of special skills required by ornamental works...was part of genteel women’s general education.”¹⁸ It is unclear if, at community-based schools, lower-class women trained in needlework and tailoring alongside genteel women. Often instructors offered to teach young ladies both useful and ornamental subjects. In an advertisement placed on August 2nd, 1769, in *The Georgia Gazette*, Elizabeth Bedon stated that she “intend[ed] to keep a boarding school in

¹⁵ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 8.

¹⁶ “Advertisement,” *The New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Apr. 22, 1763.

¹⁷ “Advertisement,” *The Massachusetts Gazette* (Boston, MA), Apr. 7, 1763.

¹⁸ Marla R. Miller, *The Needle’s Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 97.

Savannah, for the education of young ladies” where she would teach “Reading, Writing, Arithmetick [sic.] and all kinds of Needle Work.”¹⁹ This advertisement reveals how southern women, like their northern counterparts, operated dame schools.

Advertisements for community-based schools run by husbands and wives provide further insights. At the bottom of an advertisement placed on April 13, 1767, by a Mr. Garner in *The Pennsylvania Chronicle*, it is noted that “Mrs. Garner continues her school for the instruction of young Ladies and Children, the former of whom have the advantages of being taught Writing, Accounts, and English Grammatically.” She assures readers that “the greatest Decorum, in point of prudential Behaviour becoming the sex, will be strictly adhered to.”²⁰ Another advertisement placed by a married couple suggests that a gendered division of labour between married couples who ran schools together was common. An advertisement placed on November 12, 1767, in *The New-York Journal*, states that “Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Merchant’s Accounts” are taught by Mr. Grimstone while “All Sorts of Needle-Work,” will be taught by “Mrs. Grimstone who has kept School for fifteen years last past.”²¹ Mrs. Grimstone’s partnership with her husband, teaching experience, and subsequent advertisements display the crucial role colonial women played as instructors. By April 18th, 1768, she had “opened a school...where young ladies [would] be instructed in all sorts of needle-work, reading, spelling, & c.” and “the greatest care [would] be taken to instill into their minds, the rules of virtue and genteel behaviour.”²² By instilling students with gentility and morality, schools run by instructors such as Mrs. Grimstone made it possible for upper-class white women to gain an education.

¹⁹ “Advertisement,” *Georgia Gazette* (Savannah, GA), Aug. 2, 1769.

²⁰ “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA), Apr. 13, 1767.

²¹ “Advertisement,” *New-York Journal* (New York, NY), Nov. 12, 1767.

²² “Advertisement,” *New-York Gazette* (New York, NY), Apr. 18, 1768.

In the mid-eighteenth century, cultural transmission of gender norms occurred in a transatlantic context, as British culture was imported into the pre-revolutionary American colonies. Sarah E. Fatherly explains how, in colonial Philadelphia, elite white men and women participated in the “cultural borrowing” of both merchandise and “educational models” by reading the works of prominent British moralists and philosophers.²³ As gentility became more accessible to the lower classes in the pre-revolutionary era, elite Philadelphians began to emphasize the attainment of intellectual virtues by both men and women as a means of maintaining social status.²⁴ British conduct and advice literature became crucial foundational sources for inculcating upper-class white women with feminine virtues, including modesty and submission. Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* was particularly influential. Interestingly, in a note citing historian Kevin J. Hayes’ *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf* (1996), Fatherly argues that Fordyce was not representative of eighteenth-century works of conduct literature. She states that it was more conservative than “a host of works that advocated a substantive curriculum for women and” thus, is not “a reflection of the dominant messages of that literature.”²⁵ However, Hayes argues that despite the prominence of more ambitious works such as *The Lady’s Calling* (1673), Cotton Mather’s *Ornaments for the Daughter of Zion* (1692), and the *Ladies Library* (1714), Fordyce’s *Sermons* was the “best-known woman’s conduct book in colonial America.”²⁶ This discrepancy suggests that colonial Americans were particularly receptive to a work that placed limitations on their prescriptions regarding women’s intellectual accomplishments.

²³ Sarah E. Fatherly, “The Sweet Recourse of Reason: Elite Women’s Education in Colonial Philadelphia,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128, no. 3 (Jul., 2004): 232. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/09612025.2017.1306917>.

²⁴ Fatherly, “The Sweet Recourse of Reason,” 235.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 77, *Google Books*.

Recent scholarship shows that Fordyce's *Sermons* was influential on Scottish and colonial American conceptions of gender. He interweaves biblical scripture with didactic passages on female character and comportment in sermons regarding modesty of apparel, reserve, virtue, friendship, domestic and intellectual accomplishments, piety, and meekness. In the introduction to his work, Fordyce stated he "was prompted to publish [his sermons], from an unfeigned regard for the Female Sex and a fervent zeal for the best interests of society, on which he believes their dispositions and deportment will ever have a mighty influence."²⁷ According to Fordyce, by adhering to the strict principles he outlined, women would fulfil their pre-ordained role as reasonable companions to men. This ideological construct was rooted in a complementary view of gender, which "depend[ed] on women's ability to enact their 'natural'...female emotional delicacy" in a "performance of inferiority."²⁸ Central to stadial theories of progress, reasonable companionship gave members of the fair sex who adhered to precepts such as those advanced by Fordyce a crucial societal role. Literary scholar Katarzyna Bronk closely examines the "set of rules of conduct which are to make the young woman desirable in the eyes of God, society, and in particular, its men."²⁹ She demonstrates how, despite Fordyce's emphasis on feminine domesticity, following his prescriptions could improve upper-class white women's lives. The feminine virtues he urged women to cultivate "not only guarantee a sense of women's self-fulfillment, but they also help to seduce the eighteenth-century man of sensibility who will truly appreciate such a virtuous woman."³⁰ The more expansive construction of gender offered by Fordyce, which placed women's

²⁷ Fordyce, *Sermons to young women: in two volumes*, Vol. 1 (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1767), iv.

²⁸ Carr, *Gender and Enlightenment Culture*, 13.

²⁹ Katarzyna Bronk, 'Much I am Sure, Depends on You': James Fordyce's Lessons on Female Happiness and Perfection," *Studia Anglicana Posnaniensia* 48, no. 4 (Dec. 2013): 50, DOI:10.2478/stap-2013-0014.

³⁰ Bronk, "James Fordyce's Lessons," 61.

ability to reason alongside her feminine virtue, confined the fair sex to a set of ideals, but it also provided a rationale for their intellectual improvement.

Fordyce's tenth sermon, "On Female Virtue, with Intellectual Accomplishments," placed women's ability to reason within a domestic framework. This framework allowed proponents to argue for increased educational opportunities for women that maintained gender norms. In this sermon, Fordyce asserts that uneducated women who have "formed no taste for those [thoughts] that arise from reading, writing, agreeable reflections, and rational conversation" will be beholden to their passions and become sinful.³¹ Following this line of reasoning, educated women who engage in these activities will become virtuous. Fordyce argued that gaining knowledge through reading would not conflict with women's domestic duties but lead to their fulfillment as women gained a surety of purpose in their role as reasonable companions.³² Proponents would find this line of reasoning particularly useful, as it pre-emptively dismissed those who believed female education would lead women to transgress gender roles. Despite the progressive nature of some of his statements, Fordyce adhered to an eighteenth-century sensibility that viewed women as prone to frivolity. He briefly raised the possibility that men were to blame for women's lack of educational opportunities before ultimately asserting that female preoccupation with dress was to blame. He stated that there were no laws against women learning, and "the price of one expensive gown, or of one shining toy, will at any time furnish a little library of the best authors."³³ Many colonial American editorialists also relied on this line of reasoning, which placed the onus on upper-class white men and women who valued beauty above intellect. Carr argues that works which "rejected misogynistic notions of men's natural superiority...did not present an argument

³¹ Fordyce, *Sermons to young women: in two volumes*, vol. 2 (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1767), 5.

³² Fordyce, *Sermons to young women*, 2:85-86.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:25.

for gender equality” and were inherently tied to stadial theories of progress.³⁴ Jane Austen famously criticized Fordyce’s Sermons in her 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, due to the conservative conception of gender it forwarded. However, its limitations were what made it useful for colonial-era proponents of female education.

Opinion Pieces (1757-1773)

Searching for the term “female education” in the *Early American Newspapers* database reveals just over a dozen opinion pieces explicitly on the subject written from 1757 to 1773 in New England and the middle colonies. A precursor to the discourse which proliferated in the post-revolutionary era, these opinion pieces provide significant insights into colonial American conceptions of gender and cultural norms. Editorialists employed authoritative classical pseudonyms such as Philomathes and Aspasia and descriptive monikers such as the Visitant. The gender of the writers behind these exchanges is difficult to ascertain; however, scholarship indicates that white elite and middle-class women participated in the printed public sphere.³⁵ Speaking with a different kind of authority, male writers who adopted female personae acknowledged the role these women played. In the colonial era, editorialists employed lines of reasoning drawn from works such as Fordyce’s *Sermons* emphasizing feminine domesticity. Pauline Schloesser explains that “female education was designed to empower the fair sex for their instrumental role as wives and mothers.”³⁶ Deploying fair sex ideology grounded in Scottish Enlightenment stadial theories of progress, editorialists framed upper-class white women as reasonable companions to men deserving of educational opportunities.

³⁴ Carr, *Gender and Enlightenment*, 12-13.

³⁵ Mellen, “An Expanding Public Sphere.”

³⁶ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 75.

On December 9th, 1757, the *New Hampshire Gazette* printed a letter from an unnamed gentleman “to Amanda,” his female acquaintance, concerning female education. He prefaced his letter with an excerpt from English poet Robert Dodsley’s work, *The Oeconomy of Human Life*. The gentleman stopped short of the pronouncement that women are “made man’s reasonable companion, not the slave of his passion.”³⁷ This implicit pronouncement underscores the connection, within Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender, between woman’s reason and her social role as man’s companion. Within stadial notions of progress, women’s transition to companionship facilitated the enslavement of peoples of African descent. Thus, the word “slave” in this context served to both rationalize and obscure their subjugation.

The unnamed gentleman opened his letter “To Amanda” with nature imagery, emphasizing how pleasant their conversation had been before they turned to the subject of female education. Despite acknowledging that “the fair sex are not so happy in the advantages of improving their minds as ours,” he stated that women’s taste for dress prevented them from improving their minds and being beneficial to society.³⁸ This statement demonstrates the value of arguments for female education, which framed women’s intellectual improvement as necessary to fulfilling their social roles. If instead these women’s “minds were filled with sentiments of virtue...men of learning and sense would not only be favoured with agreeable companions, but the world would become more knowing and virtuous.”³⁹ This statement placed the onus on women to turn their attention away from frivolous pursuits rather than examining the societal causes behind their lack of educational opportunities. In her response, Amanda argued that some women’s preoccupation with fashion was due to “the misconduct of men.”⁴⁰ As they valued female beauty, women did not see the

³⁷ Robert Dodsley, *The oeconomy of human life*, 27.

³⁸ “Portsmouth,” *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Dec. 9, 1757.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “Portsmouth,” *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Dec. 30, 1757.

necessity of cultivating their intellectual virtues. She argued that “ladies are conscious from invariable experience, that the charms of feature and complexion, the elegance of dress, and a certain gayety of air and behaviour will more infallibly attract the attention of Gentlemen...than...the acquisitions of learning.”⁴¹ Amanda’s suggestion that women took an empirical approach to attain a suitor reveals the inherent tension between female education discourse and courtship. It also reveals the limitations inherent in employing a discourse that presumes men would desire a female companion capable of reason.

An exchange between the Visitant and Aspasia in 1768 reveals a similar tension between acknowledging women’s intellectual capabilities and confining them within a domestic framework. In his piece, printed on February 15, 1768, in *The Pennsylvania Chronicle*, The Visitant began by stating his character “oblige[d] him to frequent the company of the Fair Sex.”⁴² Like his fellow editorialists, he confined his discussion of female education to notions of idealized white femininity. He dismissed arguments that “women [had] little minds, that they are naturally vain, and disposed to be pleased with trifles.”⁴³ He argued that proper female education instilled women with virtues that drew respectable men’s attention. Like Amanda’s acquaintance, he believed that female education’s primary purpose was to shape women into ideal companions to men. Women’s ability to reason was crucial to fulfilling this social role. However, it was “modesty and submission” that “engage[d] universal respect.”⁴⁴ In doing so, he demonstrated the limitations of the complementary view of gender advanced by moralists such as Fordyce that acknowledged women were capable of reason but demanded their subservience to men.

⁴¹ “Portsmouth,” *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Dec. 30, 1757.

⁴² “For the Pennsylvania Chronicle. The Visitant,” *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA), Feb. 15, 1768.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The Visitant claimed to be an advocate for the fairer sex, but in a piece printed on April 11th, 1768, in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, a female editorialist using the pseudonym Aspasia took issue with his views of women. Some scholars argue that Philadelphia intellectual Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson adopted the powerful pseudonym of the Athenian philosopher and consort of Pericles.⁴⁵ Aspasia began her piece by implicitly questioning the Visitant's authority and speculating about the anonymous editorialist's profession. Accusing men of having limited views of women, she argued that even if a woman gained intellectual virtues, she was not thought to be as alluring as if she relied on external accomplishments, including dress and beauty. Drawing from Fordyce's *Sermons*, she dismissed those who thought that intellectual virtues would conflict with a woman's ability to do her duties as wife and mother. She also cited the Presbyterian minister as a writer who had "condescended to treat us as reasonable beings."⁴⁶ In doing so, she highlighted the relatively progressive nature of aspects of his work. Unlike "timidity and implicit submission," the ability to reason may be viewed as an ungendered trait, which allowed women to face differing stages of life with "fortitude and resolution."⁴⁷ Women's ability to reason was thus not merely helpful for attracting a suitor but ensured future happiness.

Aspasia's remarks set her apart from other female editorialists, such as Betty Tell-Truths, who argued that a woman's ability to reason was crucial to fulfilling her social roles as wife and mother. On May 29th, 1769, in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, a male editorialist named Atticus printed a letter from his female correspondent on female education. She addressed him deferentially by "excus[ing] [her] presumption in endeavoring to keep up an epistolary

⁴⁵ "Aspasia," in *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions*, eds. Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks and Caroline Wigginton (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 144.

⁴⁶ "Mr. Visitant," *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA), Apr. 11, 1768.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

communication.”⁴⁸ The employment of this rhetorical device implies a woman indeed wrote this piece. Turning to a discussion of female intellect, she took a more assertive tone, stating that “nature...ha[d] made no essential difference in the distribution of genius to either of the sexes,” but the “chains of custom” had prevented women from achieving their potential.⁴⁹ Citing historical examples of remarkable women, including Sappho and Queen Elizabeth, she argued that improper education emphasized beauty over intellectual virtues. This practice left women unprepared to fulfill their expected social roles. Parents who educated their daughters would be able “to observe the first and increasing rays of reason” and “to think that in time she may become the prudent head of a numerous family, respected, revered and beloved.”⁵⁰ As Betty Tell-Truth demonstrated, female education that imbued women with feminine virtues and reason would benefit themselves and those around them.

An exchange between a male and female editorialist further illustrates how proponents used lines of reasoning featured in Fordyce’s *Sermons* to argue for increased educational opportunities for women. On June 22, 1770, a Connecticut editorialist going by Camilla lauded a fellow editorialist, Philomathes, for his recent piece concerning female education. She stated that his piece had struck her because his views differed considerably from other members of his sex. Like Aspasia, she argued that men’s under-valuing women’s intellectual accomplishments had led women to pursue external accomplishments as a means of attaining a suitor. In contrast to these men, Philomathes served as an advocate for her sex who valued female education. She suggested that if more men were to support female education, women would be “as...assiduous to cultivate *intellectual virtues*, as now they are studious to shine in gaiety of dress and trifling conversation.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ “To the Printer of the Pennsylvania Chronicle,” *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA), May 29, 1769.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Mr. Printer,” *New-London Gazette* (New London, CT), June 22, 1770.

Deferring to Philomathes' implicit authority, Camilla closed her piece by asking him to expand upon his plan of female education.

These pieces are presented as an exchange between two editorialists, but certain aspects suggest the same author wrote them both. Significantly, this rhetorical device acknowledged women's participation in the printed public sphere and provided an opportunity for Philomathes to prove his plan's utility. Philomathes began his piece by discussing the intimate connection between piety and learning before quoting directly from Fordyce's Sermon "On Female Virtue, with Intellectual Accomplishments." He explained that the province of knowledge which was open to women "ha[d] the *heart* for its object," and "[was] secured by *meekness*, and *modesty*, by *soft attraction* and *virtuous love*."⁵² Within a complementary view of gender, women's "province" was attained by performing feminine subservience. However, feminine domesticity also provided a rationale for white women to read history, voyages, and travels, which all cultivated women's ability to reason. Philomathes concluded that he "rejoice[d] in the prospect of seeing" Camilla become "a bright and shining ornament of the *Female Sex* and *Learning*."⁵³ As Philomathes's piece attests, reasonable companionship, though limited by social conventions, provided a rationale for increased educational opportunities for upper-class white women.

Camilla began her response by thanking Philomathes for his recommendations, which she believed would lead to improvements for her sex. Echoing his sentiments regarding women's proper province, she permitted herself to "adopt [his] language."⁵⁴ This clever turn of phrase suggests that the same writer was behind Philomathes and Camilla. Adopting a female pseudonym to contemplate why women had fewer educational opportunities implies that the writer

⁵² "Philomathes to Camilla," *New-London Gazette* (New London, CT), July 13, 1770.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ "Camilla to Philomathes," *New-London Gazette* (New London, CT), July 27, 1770.

acknowledged women's participation in the printed public sphere. Despite beginning cordially, Camilla's response underscores the tensions that emerged in a discourse that placed feminine virtues alongside women's ability to reason. Taking into consideration women's "*want of Time*" and their "Circumstances and Situation in Life," Camilla asserted that "the most effectual Bar against the Ladies engaging in Learning is the Coolness, Indifference" and "Contempt," which men showed to learned women.⁵⁵ Like her fellow female editorialists, Camilla acknowledged that men held power to shift social mores. After thanking Philomathes once more for the attention he had paid to female education, she concluded by asking him to address an objection of hers. Becoming the reasonable companion of a man who viewed female education with contempt made a woman "with a kind of forced Resignation, content to circumscribe her Knowledge within the small Circle of Domestic Life and common Place Conversation."⁵⁶ In other words, a learned woman could live a disappointing life if she married a man disdainful of educated women. A single male writer may have been behind both Camilla and Philomathes. Nevertheless, Camilla's objection demonstrates how some pushed against the boundaries that Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric placed on the female intellect.

While Camilla was drawing attention to the potential flaws in arguments made for female education, another editorialist was pleading with male readers to stop being indifferent to the subject. Like Philomathes, the writer behind a series of "Letters to Parents" chose a name whose root translated broadly to "love of learning." Written in *The Connecticut Courant* in the winter of 1772 to 1773, Philometis's letters employed Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric to argue for increased educational opportunities for women. Highlighting the role of practical considerations in

⁵⁵ "Camilla to Philomathes," *New-London Gazette* (New London, CT), July 27, 1770.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

prescriptive works, he began his first letter by asking fathers a series of questions regarding why they had failed to educate their daughters. Philometis asked if their sons were better educated because they believed their daughters “ha[d] no capacities for improvement, except in household drudgery,” and thus “[were] of little importance to society,” if “female capacities c[ould] be called into question.”⁵⁷ These questions suggest Philometis believed women were intellectually equal to men. For his final question, he asked, “do you not, *My Friends*, design your daughters shall marry, shall be mistresses of families, and is not *Education* important in regulating these affairs?”⁵⁸ In his following letter, he further underscored the value of deploying Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric to argue that female education allowed women to fulfill their social roles. He explained that education was necessary to instill women with the feminine virtues, which would turn them from “slatternly and peevish demons” to “the innocent, lovely things, Nature intended them.”⁵⁹ Early American anxieties regarding overt female sexuality manifested in the coquette. McMahon explains that “unlike the pedant, who was preoccupied with learning, the coquette neglected her education, afraid that overexertion might interfere with her beauty and charm.”⁶⁰ Existing between these two extremes, the reasonable companion was neither preoccupied with learning nor frivolous. She made society more virtuous by adhering to fair sex ideology and keeping her intellect within accepted gender norms.

In his last two letters, Philometis discussed what subjects he felt women should learn. At the bottom of his fourth letter, he noted that mothers should teach their daughters “housewifery.”⁶¹ Scholars have discussed the vast number of household duties that colonial society expected women

⁵⁷ “To the Printer,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Nov. 17, 1772.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “On Female Education. Letter II to Parents,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Dec. 15, 1772.

⁶⁰ McMahon, *Mere Equals*, 12.

⁶¹ “On Female Education. Letter IV to Parents,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Jan. 13, 1773.

to accomplish. The types of work performed were dependent on class, race, and geographic location. Servants and slaves primarily performed domestic labour for elite southern women. By contrast, northern middle-class women performed manual labour ceaselessly. In her 1994 work on the subject, Jeanne Boydston states that even in “mid-eighteenth-century urban homes, women remained responsible for cooking, cleaning, fire-tending, food storage, the manufacture of a wide range of household items, the care of household linens and clothing, and child-rearing.”⁶² The time and energy required for these tasks made assurances that female education would not conflict with fulfilling women’s household duties a necessity. In his fifth letter, Philometis urged parents to teach their daughters more than the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. He stated that they should also be able to read critically and be taught “discourse and composition...English grammar...geography and history...philosophy and astronomy.”⁶³ These last two subjects were uncommon for young women to learn in colonial America. Thus, their inclusion makes it challenging to discern if Philometis’ suggestions were initially published in the colonies. Nevertheless, in subsuming the female intellect within a domestic framework, he underscored the vital role Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric played in justifying female education’s utility to a colonial American readership.

Conclusion

Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender provided a crucial discursive framework for American proponents to argue for increased educational opportunities for the fair sex. Anticipating arguments regarding women’s intellectual ability, editorialists insisted that not only were women capable of reason, but this capability enabled them to fulfill their social roles. Reasonable

⁶² Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labour in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15. *ACLS Humanities Ebook*.

⁶³ “On Female Education. Letter V. to Parents,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, CT), Jan. 26, 1773.

companionship was rooted in a model of gender which emphasized feminine subservience. However, this ideological construct placed upper-class and middling white women on an equal intellectual footing with white men. Some female editorialists emphasized the limitations of domestic femininity, which placed limitations on how they could exercise their intellect, while others argued that men placed too much value on female beauty. These assertions made by reasoning women highlighted gendered power constructions but did not threaten to destabilize gender or racial hierarchies. In the years immediately following the Revolution, editorialists expanded the definition of reasonable companionship to include a crucial public role.

Chapter Two: Companions and Equals

On January 30th, 1789, a proponent using the pseudonym Horatio wrote a piece on female education for the *Herald of Freedom*. Like pre-revolutionary editorialists, he emphasized female education's ability to imbue women with feminine virtues. Horatio stated that while men were attracted to beauty, "good sense and refinement, those graces of the mind, engage their judgement and interest their hearts." Educated women who cultivated these virtues could transform even "gallants" to become men of good sense and refinement.¹ This statement, drawn from Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), frames women as moral arbiters. This shift in focus from reason to refinement represented in this work did not necessitate a break from pre-revolutionary rationales. In the only piece on female education printed during the war, an unnamed editorialist illustrated how a young woman named Sophia became the ideal wife and mother through reading Fordyce's *Sermons*. Though the editorialist does not reference women's ability to reason, all of Sophia's accomplishments are reasonable. Thus, his assertion that "her charms of virtue" rather than her intellectual accomplishments give her a crucial social role is not as limiting as it first appears.² In the years immediately following the Revolution, proponents would expand the ideological construct of the reasonable companion to give members of the fair sex a crucial public role. This shift made female education discourse nationally important.

Educational opportunities greatly increased between the outset of the Revolution and the post-revolutionary era. Scholars have shown how various types of schools offered instruction in the Revolutionary era. In her article, Kim Tolley provides several useful definitions for differentiating between them. For example, "venture schools" were "supported entirely by tuition"

¹ "For the Herald of Freedom," *Herald of Freedom* (Boston, MA), Jan. 30, 1789.

² Ibid.

and “were entrepreneurial in nature.”³ Some of these schools were run by female instructors out of their homes. According to Tolley, these “dame schools...enabled students to gain a basic literacy necessary to read Bible passages, knowledge of simple sums, and skill in sewing.”⁴ These schools often admitted young white women and girls. Others provided an advanced level of education to male students. For example, “a few of the larger towns established *Latin grammar schools* for boys already able to read.”⁵ Tolley’s analysis reveals how these different educational institutions represent a through-line from the colonial era to the nineteenth century.

In his more recent evaluation, Neem provides an in-depth account of how geographic location contributed to the variety of educational opportunities available to students in this period. In the North, a combination of local governance, state legislation and federal ordinances shaped the educational landscape of the young republic.⁶ Thus, states took a variety of approaches to institutionalizing schooling. In some states, academies emerged which “were not-for-profit, open access, and supported by local and state funds.”⁷ These institutions, and other community-based schools, offered young white women and girls unprecedented access to educational opportunities. Neem argues that following the Revolution, “the number of schools serving girls increased dramatically, transforming women’s lives by providing access to knowledge and skills that had long been reserved to men.”⁸ The transformative effect of education on young white women and girls was dependent on state legislation. Many southern states lacked the political structure necessary to institutionalize schooling in the Revolutionary era. Neem asserts that “the southern

³ Tolley, “The Rise of Academies,” 226.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Neem, *Democracy’s Schools*, 71.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁸ Ibid.

political system initially failed to tap into local communities' reservoirs of social capital.”⁹ Thus, as with the broader expansion of educational opportunities in the Revolutionary era, white women's access to education was uneven.

Advertisements between 1783 and 1789 attest to the various community-based schools and academies that began teaching young ladies subjects beyond the rudiments. For example, an advertisement placed on October 15th, 1783, in the *Connecticut Journal* by Abel Morse states that “young misses” will be instructed in “English grammar, geography, composition, and the different branches of needle work.”¹⁰ The reference to “young misses” indicates the persistence of pre-revolutionary rationales which limited educational opportunities to elite white women and girls. Advertisements that emphasize gentility and morality provide further evidence that subscribers adhered to fair sex ideology. In an advertisement placed on March 17th, 1786, in the *Pennsylvania Mercury*, John Mease stated that “a genteel school for young ladies” would be opened, where he would instruct students in the rudiments, while his wife, Mrs. Mease, provided instruction in needlework. Their assurance that “politeness in carriage and behaviour w[ould] be attended to” highlights how female education remained a means of shaping female comportment.¹¹ In a similar advertisement placed the following year, Mrs. Mease provided a detailed list of subjects before making similar assurances. Having “opened a genteel boarding school for ladies” where various types of needlework would be taught along with the rudiments, geography, and history, she stated that “decency, morality, and a genteel carriage and behaviour, shall be strictly observed.”¹²

⁹ Neem, *Democracy's Schools*, 71.

¹⁰ “Advertisement,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Oct. 15, 1783.

¹¹ “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Mercury* (Philadelphia, PA), Mar. 17, 1786.

¹² “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, PA), June 30, 1787.

Instructors such as Mrs. Mease placed a lady's attainment of advanced subjects alongside her feminine virtues and comportment.

Advertisements that refer to both sexes provide further insights into post-revolutionary preoccupations with virtue and morality. In an advertisement placed in *The United States Chronicle* on May 18th, 1786, and reprinted into August, Christopher Hill stated that along with "a school for both sexes," he had also opened "a Morning and Evening School for Misses." He stated that at this school, "decorum w[ould] be observed, and particular care taken to inculcate the best Principles of Morality and Politeness," and "youth w[ould] be taught to write, read, and speak with Propriety, Elegance, and Ease."¹³ Youth may refer to members of either sex; however, this advertisement shares similarities with one printed in the pre-revolutionary era, suggesting a gendered understanding of these principles. On April 17, 1775, in *The New York Gazette*, a Mrs. Cozani stated that "a peculiar attention is paid to the morals and manners of the ladies to bring them up in the paths of piety, modesty, and virtue, as also in other accomplishments which compleats the gentlewoman."¹⁴ These under-utilized advertisement sources demonstrate how the educational opportunities available to elite and middling white women in the post-revolutionary were predicated on notions of gender difference established before the Revolution.

Scholars have argued that as colonial Americans transitioned from colonial subjects to citizens, renegotiating gender roles became crucial to stabilizing the gender hierarchy. According to Linda Kerber, this led to the ideological construct of republican motherhood, within which educated women exerted political influence over their husbands and sons.¹⁵ Subsequent historians have positioned their works in the context of this ideological construct. Despite disagreeing with

¹³ "Advertisement," *United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), May 18, 1786.

¹⁴ "Advertisement," *The New-York Gazette* (New York, NY), Apr. 17, 1775.

¹⁵ Kerber, "The Republican Mother."

some aspects of Kerber's interpretation in the introductions to their monographs, Rosemarie Zagarri and Susan Branson suggest that the Revolution allowed the small groups of elite white women they studied to exercise informal political agency in the public sphere.¹⁶ Significantly, both historians identify the influence of Enlightenment thought on American ideas of gender. Branson states that "as Americans participated in a transatlantic world of thought and culture, they adapted old-world ideas to their new republican culture."¹⁷ In this context, "republicanism" may be viewed as a subcategory of Enlightenment thought. Similarly, in her monograph, Zagarri builds on her previous work, which traced the roots of republican motherhood to the Scottish Enlightenment. She argues that Americans applied "the more duty-bound theory" of rights "associated with the Scots to women" to avoid the implications of natural rights theory in the post-revolutionary era.¹⁸ Their works demonstrate the influence of Enlightenment rhetoric on American conceptions of gender.

Comparing Jan Lewis' republican wives with the Scottish Enlightenment conception of women as helpmeets suggests that a post-revolutionary shift in discourse was not contingent on the Revolution. Jan Lewis argues that as republican wives, women gained a crucial societal role by influencing men's manners.¹⁹ This ideological construct was rooted in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Lewis explains that the Fall as depicted in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which served as a "reminder of woman's unhappy role in effective human destiny had never been far from the minds of Puritan ministers such as Cotton Mather."²⁰ Like the republican wife, the helpmeet "enabled men to exercise self-control over their passions and to become rational, political actors"

¹⁶ Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames* and Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*.

¹⁷ Branson, *The Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 22.

¹⁸ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 176.

¹⁹ Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 700.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 704.

by refining their manners.”²¹ This ideological construct was also rooted in a biblical understanding of gender that placed women in a subservient role. Barclay and Carr explain that referring to women as helpmeets “clearly located [them] in a subsidiary role, with some ministers using the story of Adam and Eve to reinforce the risk entailed when women led.”²² Revolutionary Americans did not employ this term. As such, their emphasis on women’s crucial societal role indicates an expansion of republican companionship. Its use represents a subtle shift to acknowledging that women’s reason, subsumed within a domestic framework, gave them informal political influence.

Examining Benjamin Rush’s 1787 “Address to the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy” reveals that the influential proponent viewed women as reasonable companions to men.²³ Rush’s address occurs in a post-revolutionary context; however, his subsequent remarks draw on the same lines of reasoning featured in Fordyce’s sermon “On Female Virtue, With Intellectual Accomplishments,” deployed by editorialists in the pre-revolutionary era. Addressing men in the audience who may still harbour doubts, Rush states that women’s education would not conflict with their domestic duties and mentions the role dress has played in preventing women from gaining intellectual accomplishments.²⁴ In his closing remarks, Rush further underscored the role the Young Ladies Academy and other similar institutions had in shifting cultural norms. Rush acknowledged the crucial role that the students were expected to fulfill in the new nation. However, he also asked them to demonstrate “that the cultivation of reason in women is alike friendly to the

²¹ Barclay and Carr, “Women, Love and Power in Enlightenment Scotland,” 180.

²² *Ibid.*, 180.

²³ Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon female education, accommodated to the present state of society, manners, and government, in the United States of America. Addressed to the visitors of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia, 28 July 1787, at the close of the quarterly examination. By Benjamin Rush, M.D. professor of chemistry in the University of Pennsylvania. To which is added, a prayer, by Samuel Magaw, D.D. Rector of St. Paul’s Church, and vice-provost of the University of Pennsylvania; delivered upon the same occasion.* (Boston: Printed by Samuel Hall, 1787). *America’s Historical Imprints.*

²⁴ Rush, *Thoughts upon female education*, 24.

order of nature, and to private and publick [sic.] happiness.”²⁵ This statement implies that ensuring the success of post-revolutionary female education discourse required moving past pre-revolutionary rationales that emphasized women’s ability to reason.

John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774) provided post-revolutionary editorialists with a view of women as reasonable companions to men that subsumed women’s ability to reason within a domestic framework.²⁶ Scholars examining the impact of *A Father's Legacy* on both Scottish and American conceptions of gender have argued that its emphasis on sensibility confined women within the domestic sphere. For example, in her ground-breaking work on race, gender and progress in the Scottish Enlightenment, Silvia Sebastiani argues that Gregory’s work “confined women to the private sphere” where “they had the duty to render their husbands’ character more human, guiding their feelings and polishing their way of life.”²⁷ Women’s role as moral arbiters and influencers of refinement and civility simultaneously subordinated them to their husbands and other male relatives and elevated them to a crucial societal role. Americanist Ruth Bloch argues that this work of “literary sentimentalism” contributed to “the equation of female virtue with chastity, modest dress, and useful knowledge [which] became more pronounced in the eighteenth century as women were increasingly deemed the moral instructors of men.”²⁸ Her reference to feminine virtues reveals how Gregory’s work reified gender norms. However, it also offered upper-class white women the opportunity to perform a crucial societal role.

²⁵ Rush, *Thoughts upon female education*, 24.

²⁶ John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, 6th Edition, (Dublin: Printed for John Colles, 1774)

²⁷ Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 149.

²⁸ Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13, no. 1, Women and the Political Process in the United States (Autumn, 1987):52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174026>.

As reasonable companions to men, educated upper-class white women exerted influence over the manners and morals of society by fulfilling their social roles. In the introduction to his work, Gregory stated that he viewed women “not as domestic drudges, or the slaves of [men’s] pleasures, but as [their] companions and equals; as designed to soften our hearts and polish our manners.”²⁹ The first half of this statement resembles Fordyce’s view of women as reasonable companions to men. Like Fordyce, Gregory advanced a complementary view of gender central to stadial views of progress that required women to perform femininity. However, the second half of his statement represents a shift in emphasis from women’s ability to women as influencers of refinement and civility. Scottish Enlightenment scholar Daniel O’Neill explains that Scottish Enlightenment thinkers believed women had a greater capacity for sensibility, which he defines as the “innate capacity inherent in women’s nervous systems that enabled them to experience feelings and emotions in ways that were both more sensitive and profound than men.”³⁰ Upper-class white women’s cultivation of sensibility gave them the capacity to influence men’s manners and morals. This view reified gender differences, but it also gave women a crucial societal role. In chapters on religion, conduct and behaviour, amusements, friendships, love and marriage, Gregory placed gendered boundaries on the conduct of his daughters while also demonstrating how they could perform their role as moral arbiters. This framework provided American proponents with a means of arguing for increased educational opportunities for women while maintaining the gender hierarchy.

Influential educational philosophers such as Noah Webster deployed lines of reasoning featured in *A Father’s Legacy*. Johann Neem states that Webster, who was “famous for his effort

²⁹ Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy*, 3.

³⁰ O’Neill, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” 66.

to simplify the English language for Americans,” along with many of his contemporaries, argued that young women, like men, needed to be educated. However, his thoughts on female education are marked by notions of gender difference.³¹ Although Webster’s work, *On the Education of Youth in America*, was not published until 1790, excerpts appeared in Maine’s *Cumberland Gazette* and Rhode Island’s *United States Chronicle: Political Commercial and Historical* in 1788. Articulating women’s role as reasonable companions, Webster argued that “the influence of women in forming the dispositions of youth, is not the sole reason why their education should be particularly guarded,” citing “their influence in controuling [sic.] the manners of a nation as another powerful reason.”³² Kabria Baumgartner has shown how this ideology, which justified white women’s educational opportunities in academies, also known as seminaries, facilitated black women’s racial exclusion. Baumgartner’s analysis of nineteenth-century seminaries applies to the post-revolutionary era. She states that “the dominant rationale for white women’s education made the presence of African American women at female seminaries precarious, at best” as their attendance “might imply that [they] could make valuable contributions to the project of nation-building.”³³ In this context, the sentiments expressed³³ by those in positions of power, including Noah Webster, represent the simultaneous construction class, race, and gender.

In his following remarks, Webster highlighted how women’s role as reasonable companions justified their increased access to educational opportunities. He stated that, “females should be well educated and extend their influence as far as possible over the other sex.”³⁴ Inherent in this construction of gender is the reassertion of class and race-based assumptions regarding who

³¹ Neem, *Democracy’s Schools*, 11.

³² “Extract from an Essay on Female Education,” *United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), July 24, 1788.

³³ Kabria Baumgartner, “‘Cruel and Wicked Prejudice:’ Racial Exclusion and the Female Seminary Movement in the Antebellum North,” in *Women’s Higher Education in the United States* ed. Margaret A. Nash (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 50, https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1057/978-1-137-59084-8_3.

³⁴ “Extract from an Essay on Female Education,” *United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), July 24, 1788.

should receive the benefits of female education. Webster stated that “education of females, like that of males, should be adapted to the principles of government,” but asserted “that education is always wrong, which raises a woman above the duties of her station.”³⁵ Webster’s discussion regarding which subjects women should learn further underscores the intersection between class and gender. Webster argued that women should learn “useful” subjects, including the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic, and not overvalue “ornamental” subjects, including music, drawing, and dancing.³⁶ Margaret Nash argues that ornamental accomplishments were not predicated on gender differentiation. According to Nash, “[ornaments] signified a class-based sensibility about refinement far more than they signified anything about different academic standards for women and men.”³⁷ Nash’s claim regarding the class-based nature of sensibility is well-supported, but Webster’s statements regarding ornamental subjects were inherently gendered. As he argued, while ornamental accomplishments “constitute a part of female education...no man ever marries a woman for her performance” on musical instruments. Webster contended that the value of female education lay instead in how it gave women the appropriate knowledge to “preside over their own families with dignity.”³⁸ This statement situates the purposes of female education firmly within the domestic sphere. It also indicates how Gregory’s emphasis on women’s role in influencing male manners provided American proponents with a framework to argue for female education’s national importance.

³⁵ “Extract from an Essay on Female Education,” *United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), July 24, 1788.

³⁶ “On Female Education,” *Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, ME), Sept. 11, 1788.

³⁷ Margaret A. Nash, “‘Cultivating the Powers of Human Beings’: Gendered Perspectives on Curricula and Pedagogy in Academies of the New Republic,” *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 239-250, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/369829>.

³⁸ “On Female Education,” *Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, ME), Sept. 11, 1788.

Opinion Pieces on Female Education (1785-1789)

From 1785 to 1789, just over a dozen opinion pieces and three academy addresses explicitly on female education were printed in newspapers in New England and the middle colonies. These opinion pieces and academy addresses were placed in newspapers whose mandate was ostensibly political, alongside pieces on the American Constitution, proceedings in Congress, and other political discourses regarding the nation's newfound independence. Despite occurring in a post-revolutionary context, female education discourse was not contingent on the Revolution. Margaret Nash argues that treating Rush's remarks as quintessential of republican motherhood places too much emphasis on the Revolution as a watershed, thus limiting historians' insights into women's lives.³⁹ The success of pre-revolutionary rationales led to a dramatic increase in educational opportunities for women. The uneven distribution of community-based schools and academies for women indicates that many early Americans still had to be convinced of female education's utility. Gregory's work asserted that reasonable companions made society more virtuous by fulfilling their social roles and provided post-revolutionary proponents with a valuable framework.

In 1784, Boston's *Massachusetts Centinel* began running a series of contemplative pieces on a diverse array of subjects, entitled "The Collection." In February and March of 1785, editorialists using the names Humanus, Daphne, Z., and Tantarabogas wrote on female education. An exchange between the first two editorialists demonstrates how highlighting women's crucial social role in sensibility could be used to argue for increased educational opportunities for women. As each editorialist attests, while public schools for boys were being opened in Boston, many still

³⁹ Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood," 191.

had to be convinced of the utility of opening similar institutions for girls. Reminiscent of Philometis' 1772 "Letters to Parents," in his piece printed on February 19th, 1785, Humanus asked the "Fathers of the Town" a series of questions that called into question misconceptions regarding female intellect.⁴⁰ In doing so, he placed the onus on the town's men for not supporting public schools for girls. This statement reveals how editorialists were beginning to advance arguments concerned with the funding of educational institutions for women.

Humanus hoped the public "would take the matter into serious consideration and digest some plan for the advantage of those on whose future conduct depends in so eminent a degree the manners and morals of the rising generation."⁴¹ This statement reflects how editorialists deployed notions of sensibility to argue that female education was beneficial to society as it enabled women to fulfill their role as reasonable companions. In his concluding remarks, he urged "some abler hand to take up the subject to second the demands of humanity, charity and justice on behalf of the FAIR."⁴² Like many of his fellow editorialists, Humanus participated in a construction of white womanhood that facilitated racialization.

Daphne began her response to Humanus's piece by walking a fine line between deference and assertiveness. She did not view herself as "an abler hand" but had decided to "improve Humanus's hint...in behalf of [her] sex" out of "an anxious desire of promoting their welfare;" she could only offer "feeble assistance to their cause," but this meant she was contributing "to the cause of every branch of civilized society."⁴³ These statements demonstrate how the fair sex negotiated gender norms, which emphasized female subservience but acknowledged their moral

⁴⁰ "The Collection, &C. For the Centinel," *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Feb. 19, 1785.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ "The Collection, &C. For the Centinel," *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Feb. 26, 1785.

authority. Working within this framework, she argued that as men's companions, women should have the opportunity to learn more than the rudiments and subjects which made them pleasing. Her remarks were not directed towards unrefined "fops and scribbles about town" but to "those men whose good opinion it would be an honour to merit, and who are capable of rising above the vulgar prejudice against female abilities."⁴⁴ Deploying notions of refinement and civility demonstrated her sensibility and justified the authoritative tone she took in the rest of the piece. She chastised those who neglected female education by stating that it was "highly unjust in the republick [sic.] to neglect the best interest of so large a part of the inhabitants" and "inhuman" for parents not to educate their daughters.⁴⁵ She outlined the practical advantages of female education before concluding with a powerful statement. She asserted that women should be "enabled to partake of that felicity that proceeds from an improved understanding, a benevolent heart, and a well regulated disposition, each refined by that acquired knowledge and wisdom that affords a source of delight...and which justice loudly demands for them."⁴⁶ In short, she believed that female education should be supported because it was a public good that also improved the lives of those fortunate enough to receive it.

Humanus addressed his March 9th piece to those who had failed to see the utility of educating young women. He dismissed the concerns of those who viewed the cost of educating girls to be too great and accused a committee tasked with making plans for public schools of failing to factor in female education. He hoped this "alarming evil" would be remedied by those who wished "to promote the honour, virtue, and happiness of the town."⁴⁷ Ideological arguments were also a way of justifying the expenditure. Examining advertisements for young ladies' schools from

⁴⁴ "The Collection, &C. For the Centinel," *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Feb. 26, 1785.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "The Collection, &C. For the Centinel," *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Mar. 9, 1785.

1783 to 1789 reveals the educational opportunities available to young women in Boston. Some instructors continued to run schools they had established in the pre-revolutionary era and maintained during the war. John and Eleanor Druitt placed advertisements on March 25th, 1773 for their school where she taught young ladies “French grammatically [and] Needle-works,” and he taught “writing and aithmetick,” in October of 1774 for “a boarding school for young ladies after the most approved English method,” and in March of 1775 for an “Evening School.”⁴⁸ By April 6 of 1785, they had moved houses and continued to run a boarding school where they taught the same subjects they had since the pre-revolutionary era.⁴⁹ Other instructors opened schools in this era, offering to teach both useful and ornamental subjects. On May 20th, 1784, in Boston’s *Independent Chronicle*, Caleb Bingham “propose[d] to open a school...for teaching young ladies in...writing, arithmetic, English grammar and Geography” while the Misses Sutherlands “opened a boarding school for young ladies” where they taught “all kinds of fine needle work, embroidery, paper work, writing, drawing, and dancing.”⁵⁰ The variety of educational opportunities available to women in Boston, from both established and new instructors, suggests that proponents advocated for an advanced level of education for women not offered at community-based schools.

Two pieces by editorialists going by Z. and Tantarabogas illustrate the skepticism which some still had concerning the utility of female education. Citing both Humanus and Daphne’s writings, Z. argued that the plan of female education put forth by the former “would be very difficult in practice” as it would prevent masters from taking the time they needed to educate “the

⁴⁸ “Advertisement,” *Massachusetts Gazette* (Boston MA), Mar. 25, 1773 (A variation of this advertisement was placed on March 28, 1773 and reprinted into June); “Advertisement,” *Boston-Gazette* (Boston, MA), Oct. 3, 1774; “Advertisement,” *Essex Journal* (Newburyport, MA), Mar. 22, 1775.

⁴⁹ “Advertisement,” *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Apr. 6, 1785.

⁵⁰ “Advertisement,” *Independent Chronicle* (Boston, MA), May 20, 1784; “Advertisement,” *Boston Gazette* (Boston, MA), Sept. 6, 1784.

rising generation.”⁵¹ Z.’s piece underscores the necessity of framing female education as a public good. As reasonable companions, upper-class white women would not be imposing upon masters but gaining intellectual accomplishments that benefited those around them. An editorialist using the name Tantarabogas also viewed Humanus’s plan as potentially problematic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “tantrabogus” was “commonly applied in [nineteenth century] Vermont to any ill-looking object,” and “tantrabogs” was “a Devonshire word for the devil.”⁵² The precise etymology is unclear but choosing a pseudonym that contains the word “bogus” calls the sincerity of the arguments made into question. Nineteenth-century historian Justin Winsor placed Tantarabogas alongside other pieces in the *Centinel*, which were “generally marked by turgid and pompous rhetoric, savage and brutal personal abuse, and ridiculous attempts at satire.”⁵³ Tantarabogas may have intended to poke fun at female education’s resisters. However, as the earnestness of its author is challenging to ascertain, this piece may be viewed as representative of Revolutionary American concerns regarding class, race, and gender.

Tantarabogas prefaced his piece, printed in the *Centinel* on March 23rd, 1785, by citing Ecclesiastics 1:8. He stated that Humanus should heed the maxim that “He that encreseth [sic.] knowledge, encreseth [sic.] sorrow.”⁵⁴ Opening with this phrase underscores how Christian principles continued to inform female education discourse. Unlike prior editorialists who had relied on lines of reasoning featured in Presbyterian minister Fordyce’s *Sermons*, Tantarabogas asserted that few women were capable of learning. Furthermore, if those of the lower classes

⁵¹ “The Collection, &C. for the Centinel,” *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Mar. 23, 1785.

⁵² “bogus, no. 1 and adj.” OED Online. Oxford University Press.

⁵³ *The Memorial History of Boston Including Suffolk County, Massachusetts 1630 – 1880 in Four Volumes, Volume III The Revolutionary Period, The Last Hundred Years, Part I*, ed. Justin Winsor (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), 622. *Google Books*.

⁵⁴ “The Collection, &C. for the Centinel,” *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Mar. 30, 1785.

gained educational opportunities, they would no longer be modest and submissive.⁵⁵ Tantarabogas illustrated how dominant discourses which facilitated the fair sex's access to education became subverted when applied to women of other classes. Unable to fulfill the role of reasonable companion, these women could not claim the same instrumental role as those of the upper classes. This assessment had implications for the systems of oppression that fair sex ideology justified. Tantarabogas compared the apparent absurdity of educating women with educating enslaved peoples when he asked readers to consider if "those excellent servants the natives of Africa would be good for anything were they taught to consider themselves any thing more than the first in the rank of brutes?"⁵⁶ If this piece is satirical, Tantarabogas delivered a scathing critique of the unfairness of denying education to enslaved peoples, which kept them subordinated. Regardless of the sincerity of its writer, this piece speaks to early American anxieties that extending education to those deemed undeserving of its benefits could destabilize the social hierarchy.

Four years later, "A Bachelor" suggested that educated women threatened the gender hierarchy. This male editorialist prefaced his piece, printed on September 25th, 1789 for the *Herald of Freedom*, with lines from John Dryden's *Juvenal's Sixth Satire*, regarding the dangers of having a learned wife. The juxtaposition between these lines and his pseudonym suggests the writer intended to call the arguments made under this name into question. Historian John McCurdy has shown that the bachelor was a suspicious figure.⁵⁷ Regardless of the potentially satirical nature of his statements, The Bachelor spoke to Revolutionary anxieties. He stated that he was "no enemy to female education, so far as it [was] necessary to enable them to appear in the humble sphere

⁵⁵ "The Collection, &C. for the Centinel," *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston, MA), Mar. 30, 1785.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Bryan C. Rindfleisch, "'What it Means to be a Man': Contested Masculinity in the Early Republic and Antebellum America," *History Compass* 10, no. 11 (Nov. 2012): 853, *Wiley Online Library*. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1111/hic3.12005>.

which nature designed they should move,” but could not support a plan for the introduction of public schools for girls which would “place them on par with the other sex.”⁵⁸ This statement represents the necessity of framing arguments for female education in a way that demonstrated the utility of funding these educational institutions while providing assurances that women would not transgress gender norms. He asserted that some women were already demonstrating that, contrary to Fordyce, attaining knowledge conflicted with women’s domestic duties. His neighbour’s wife’s neglect of her family “in favour of calculating the appearance of [a] comet...ar[ose] from her being acquainted with arithmetic.”⁵⁹ For the Bachelor, this woman represented all those who attained more knowledge than their husbands. Addressing the printer, he lamented “the chagrin and mortification, a man must be subject to on finding his wife possessed of so great a share of knowledge...whilst he, a poor man, knows just enough to charge a day’s labour.”⁶⁰ The Bachelor demonstrates how some men were hesitant to support educational institutions for women while their educational opportunities were limited.

A response to his piece, written by “A Married Woman,” demonstrates how some female editorialists attempted to assuage such fears by framing women as reasonable companions to men. Her piece “From the Massachusetts Centinel” begins with an excerpt from the *Turkish Spy*, written by Giovanni Paolo Morano in 1683. Historian Jacob Crane explains that the popularity of this novel, which was excerpted many times in American newspapers, led to “a successor novel that adopts and adapts the *Turkish Spy* to address the pressing concerns of postcolonial America.”⁶¹ The excerpt featured in this piece demonstrates how female editorialists deployed lines from this

⁵⁸ “For the Herald of Freedom,” *Herald of Freedom* (Boston, MA), Sept. 25, 1789.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Jacob Crane, “The long transatlantic career of the Turkish spy,” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 228. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/14788810.2013.785199>.

work to argue against women's oppression. Quoting from the book, she stated, "'tis an inhuman tyranny to debar [women] the privilege of an ingenious education, which would also render their friendship so much more delightful to themselves and us."⁶² This line placed the onus on men to support female education, not as a means of achieving equality, but because it was beneficial to them. Demonstrating the continuation of pre-revolutionary rationales, she concluded her work by echoing a line from Fordyce's Sermon "On the Importance of the Female Sex." She argued that "the amiable part of [her] sex ha[d] ever been held in the highest estimation by men of sense and merit, who chuse [sic.] them for the companions of their days," and viewed them as "the most refined sweetners [sic.] of human bliss."⁶³ By calling the Bachelor's integrity into question, this Married Woman performed the role of the reasonable companion who exerted influence over the men's manners.

Women who conformed to the conception of femininity featured in Fordyce's *Sermons* and Gregory's *A Father's Legacy* gained a modicum of power and access to educational opportunities. A short piece entitled "To Parents," printed on February 26th, 1788, in Keane's *New Hampshire Recorder*, by an editorialist using the pseudonym Orlando, reveals that some men viewed educated women as a threat to their power. He lamented that "was it not for their more lively conception, and the *superiority* of their natural genius, many of them would scarcely have an idea, but what was bounded within the narrow limits of a family."⁶⁴ Despite not drawing on Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender, Orlando demonstrated the necessity of discourse that tied women's access to education to their social roles. Orlando's piece underscores how limiting access to education was a means of maintaining power differentials. He argued that "one cause, why their

⁶² "From the Massachusetts Centinel," *New York Daily Gazette* (New York, NY), Oct. 13, 1789.

⁶³ "For the Herald of Freedom," *Herald of Freedom* (Boston, MA), Sept. 25, 1789.

⁶⁴ "To Parents," *New-Hampshire Recorder* (Keene, NH), Feb. 26, 1788.

education [was] so much neglected is, that lordly man trembles lest his boasted superiority be called in question...and that he could not *claim* that *respect* and *awe*, which he thinks due to his *superior* knowledge and understanding.”⁶⁵ Framing women as reasonable companions to men assuaged doubts that women would transgress their sphere while allowing them to gain knowledge outside of it. By predicting the fair sex’s access to education on their performance of femininity and fulfillment of social roles, men maintained a sense of superiority.

In a piece printed on November 28th, 1789 in *The Federal Gazette*, an unnamed editorialist eschewed dominant discourses rooted in Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender for republican rhetoric. Addressing “ye patriots of America,” they stated that “the disregard paid to FEMALE EDUCATION [was] a despicable prejudice.”⁶⁶ Republican men should be ashamed of making objections that placed women in the domestic sphere and called their intellectual capabilities into question. Women, he argued, “[we]re certainly [men’s] equals” as “nature ha[d] gifted them...a more sprightly genius.”⁶⁷ He argued that custom and prejudice had prevented women from gaining intellectual virtues and created artificial differences in character. This unnamed editorialist’s concluding remarks situate it within fair sex ideology. The editorialist reminded “Ye Fair Daughters of Columbia...that wisdom is the touchstone of attraction and that it will add ten thousand graces to their natural charms.”⁶⁸ By referring to the young women he addressed as “fair,” this editorialist underscored how women’s access to education required a performance of white femininity that shored up colonialism.

⁶⁵ “To Parents,” *New-Hampshire Recorder* (Keene, NH), Feb. 26, 1788.

⁶⁶ “On Female Education,” *Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), Nov. 28, 1789.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Two pieces written by editorialists who employ fair sex ideology provide an opportunity to compare prescriptions offered by editorialists with the descriptive information featured in advertisements for community-based schools. In the middle of his piece written for *The Norwich Packet* on October 18th, 1787, an editorialist going by the initial T. included lines from an unattributed poem, stating, “’Tis *Science* decks the fair one’s face, and adds those charms which cannot rust.”⁶⁹ Arguing that it was shameful that many women had been prevented from learning the rudiments, he placed the onus on men who had upheld tradition rather than educate their daughters. As he asserted, women learning penmanship, reading, grammar, languages, mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy contributed to them “being what nature attended them, the most dignified, yet handsome work of God” rather than “blank in conversation.”⁷⁰ In the years immediately following the Revolution, opportunities for women to learn philosophy were severely limited. In a unique advertisement placed in Philadelphia’s *Pennsylvania Packet* on March 2nd, 1787, a Mrs. Carter announced that she had hired masters to teach “the necessary, as well as the polite parts of a lady’s education,” including “any branch in natural or moral philosophy.”⁷¹ Whereas advertisements for community-based schools in the colonial period list astronomy among the subjects offered, more opportunities for women to learn philosophy would not emerge until the 1790s. In Connecticut, there were opportunities for women to learn various other subjects. A school run by James Olmstead taught “young misses” only “the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic,” but two schools for young ladies, instructed by Barna Bidwell and Jonathon Leavitt, and Jedidiah Morse also offered “English grammar, geography, rhetoric, vocal music, history,

⁶⁹ “For the Norwich Packet. of Female Education,” *Norwich Packet* (Norwich, CT), Oct. 18, 1787.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, PA), Mar. 2, 1787.

letter-writing, and other branches of composition.”⁷² This extensive list of subjects reveals how female education discourse increased advanced subjects available to upper-class white women.

While T. offered a list of subjects for women to learn, another editorialist transmitted notions of morality rooted in gender difference. On September 11th, 1789, an editorialist using the name Leonidas assured his readers that his prior inattention to female education in a piece on education more generally was not because he viewed it as unimportant. He argued that “the schools for the Misses ought to be separate from those of the boys” due to “that delicacy which constitutes one of the brightest Ornaments of the Fair.”⁷³ Since the pre-revolutionary era, many instructors had been careful to differentiate by gender in their advertisements. For example, in his advertisement placed on October 26th, 1767 in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* a Mr. Dove stated that “youth of both sexes, in separate apartments w[ould] be taught a variety of subjects.”⁷⁴ One advertisement placed in the post-revolutionary era makes it challenging to discern which sex was learning the subjects offered and if they were instructed separately. In their advertisement placed on January 1st, 1784 in *The Norwich Packet*, Andrew Huntingdon and Dudley Woodbridge stated they had opened a school for a “large number of young gentlemen and ladies, lads and misses” to learn “every branch of literature,” including the rudiments, “the learned languages, rhetoric, logic, geography, [and] the mathematics.”⁷⁵ The lack of specificity in this advertisement suggests that Leonidas was responding to fear regarding the mixed-sex classrooms. Revolutionary American anxieties and social norms led to the establishment of academies reserved for female students.

⁷² “Advertisement,” *Connecticut Gazette* (New London, CT), Apr. 4, 1788; “Advertisement,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), May 17, 1786; “Advertisement,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Aug. 31, 1785.

⁷³ “For the Cumberland Gazette,” *Cumberland Gazette* (Portland, ME), Sept. 11, 1789.

⁷⁴ “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA), Oct. 26, 1767.

⁷⁵ “Advertisement,” *Norwich Packet* (Norwich, Connecticut), Jan. 1, 1784.

Academy Addresses (1786-1789)

Reverend Sproat's 1789 address to the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia underscores how Scottish stadial notions of progress, which justified people of colour's subjugation, led to increased educational opportunities for white women. He opened his address by stating that "the education of youth in the various branches of useful knowledge" was valued "among all nations in a civilized state."⁷⁶ This assertion racially excluded those who could not claim the same societal role as upper-class white women. Female education allowed members of the fair sex to exercise their intellect and, more importantly, "tend[ed] to mollify the temper, refine the manners, amuse the fancy, improve the understanding and strengthen virtue."⁷⁷ In other words, it shaped the female character into the ideal companion. After acknowledging the importance of the young ladies' knowledge of various subjects, the Reverend turned his attention to a subject befitting his profession. Urging students "to secure [their] interest in our common Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ," he discussed "God's grace" using similar language to that employed by proponents to describe the advantages of proper education. He argued, "it w[ould] beautify [their] minds" and "render [their] conversation amiable to [their] fellow creatures."⁷⁸ As the reasonable companion was rooted in Christian theology, it stands to reason that fulfilling this role required the attainment of both secular and divine knowledge. As the Reverend concluded, "while the fair youth as led by the gentle hands of their worthy instructors, in the paths of useful learning, may the purest morals be here cultivated and maintained."⁷⁹ Upper-class white women's learning was

⁷⁶ "Philadelphia, June 18," *Independent Gazetteer* (Philadelphia, PA), June 18, 1789.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

inseparable from their cultivation of virtue and morality. By performing femininity, female academy students gained the opportunity to contribute to society.

An academy address by a young female speaker at the Young Ladies Academy, placed in the *Pennsylvania Packet* on January 5th, 1789, demonstrates how female students participated in female education discourse. Brief introductory remarks indicate that the individual who submitted her address to the printer considered it “a Production not unworthy of Public Notice.”⁸⁰ Her address reveals the link between piety and an individual’s position in society. Thomas Anherst states that in the late eighteenth century, “it was thought increasingly that a sincerely pious person was distinguished...by practical acts of virtue and good character.”⁸¹ Cultivating piety by fulfilling these gender-neutral requirements provided an avenue for women to participate in the public sphere. She stated that despite being “exempted from the duties of public life, ...numerous [were] the instances in which the display of [women’s] intellectual powers may be attended with pleasure to ourselves and advantage to others.”⁸² Women’s shift to reasonable companions who had an influential societal role signified a renegotiation of gender norms. After gaining an education at the academy, female academy students could “speak and write with propriety, without the imputation of pedantry.”⁸³ Predicating the fair sex’s access to educational opportunities on their performance of femininity effectively removed any stigma regarding them transgressing gender roles.

An “Oration on Female Education” delivered at an unspecified American university further demonstrates the benefit of framing women as reasonable companions to men who positively

⁸⁰ “On Education,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), Jan. 5, 1789.

⁸¹ Anherst, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 2.

⁸² “On Education,” *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), Jan. 5, 1789.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

influenced society. The male orator began his address, printed on November 17, 1786, in the *American Recorder* by describing himself as “a friend to the fairer part of mankind.”⁸⁴ This statement reveals how students who attended universities and academies participated in making and transmitting fair sex ideology. Provided it was limited to upper-class white women, “female education...[could] be very useful, very ornamental, and the source of much felicity in the world.”⁸⁵ As his subsequent statements underscore, Revolutionary American constructions of gender, like those of the Scots, were rooted in Christian principles. The male orator deployed the biblical story of Adam and Eve as evidence that men and women were intellectually equal. Unlike his contemporaries, he concentrated not on the Fall but on their companionship. He stated that “their happy minds differed no more from one another, that the parallel rays of yonder sun differ from one another.”⁸⁶ The male orator used the intellectual equality of the biblical pair to argue that women’s perceived inferiority was due to women’s lack of educational opportunities. He argued that “if female learning is not very conspicuous, it is not owing to the want of natural genius, but to the want of equal opportunities and advantages with the gentlemen.”⁸⁷ This statement placed the onus on men to support educational opportunities for women because they were capable of being educated beyond what custom dictated. The conclusion to the first half of his address clearly stated the central premise of post-revolutionary arguments for female education. He remarked that “as society is benefited by the education of the female sex, this must be a subject worthy of the attention and encouragement of every friend to his country and the happiness of

⁸⁴ “An Oration on Female Education,” *American Recorder* (Boston, MA), Nov. 17, 1786.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

mankind.”⁸⁸ The framework represented by Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy* made detractors of female education inimical to the public good.

In the second half of his address, printed in the *American Recorder* on November 24, 1786, the male orator reiterated the positive influence members of the fair sex had on society . He stated that “such is women’s influence over the manners of the world, that I am almost disposed to say, that it is their fault the world is not better and happier.”⁸⁹ This male orator highlighted how women’s role as moral arbiters allowed them to exercise limited agency outside of the private sphere. Quoting lines from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), which provide a character sketch of Eve, he argued that well-educated women could emulate her by fulfilling their role as reasonable companions. Fulfilling their roles as wife and mother by “instilling the best principles into the young minds of those who shall afterwards rise up and call them blessed,” they “add[ed] strength to the community, and ma[de] their country flourish in wealth and honour.”⁹⁰ By performing femininity and fulfilling their social roles, members of the fair sex contributed to aspects of society traditionally reserved for men without transgressing gender norms. The male orator stated, “it ha[d] ever been a sign of barbarity and cruelty to suppress a female genius and a female education.”⁹¹ This statement situated his address within a framework that justified Anglo-American dominance over subjugated peoples.

Runaway Advertisements (1767 – 1799)

The construction of white womanhood as an indicator of civility and progress facilitated the enslavement of African peoples. Slave owners often placed their advertisements alongside

⁸⁸ “An Oration on Female Education,” *American Recorder* (Boston, MA), Nov. 17, 1786.

⁸⁹ “An Oration on Female Education,” *American Recorder* (Boston, MA), Nov. 24, 1786.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

those for community-based schools. Thus, the community members who read them participated in the cultural transmission of ideas regarding racial hierarchy and exclusion. The Revolutionary era was characterized by rapidly shifting, geographically dependent variations in slaveholding. In his in-depth analysis, historian Van Gosse argues that post-revolutionary America was a “patchwork,” with various living conditions for free and enslaved people of colour and context-dependent conceptions of race.⁹² New England and the middle colonies introduced gradual emancipation in the 1780s. For example, Pennsylvania’s 1780 “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery” acknowledged the unjust subjugation of enslaved Africans and emancipated all those born after its passing.⁹³ This act represented a positive change in Northern attitudes towards slavery and increased opportunities available to people of colour in the North. However, Section 11 of this document placed it within a broader context of state-dependent legislation. It stated that “this act or any thing in it contained shall not give any relief or shelter to any absconding or runaway Negro or Mulatto slave or servant...[and] such owner, master or mistress shall have like right” to claim them.⁹⁴ This process was thus both inextricable from and concurrent with a strengthening commitment to slaveholding in the South. Despite the inherent complexities of this era, runaway slave advertisements provide insights into broader debates regarding education and racialization.

Slaveholders who placed advertisements and the community members who read them participated in the cultural transmission of ideas regarding racial hierarchy and exclusion. Antonio T. Bly argues that reading into the silences present in these sources provides evidence of the agency which enslaved peoples exercised. He asserts that “slaves...*co-authored*, indirectly through their

⁹² Van Gosse, “Patchwork Nation: Racial Orders and Disorder in the United States, 1790-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 45-81. doi:10.1353/jer.2020.0000.

⁹³ “Pennsylvania – An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780.” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

actions, the advertisements their masters were forced to place in newspapers.”⁹⁵ The vivid descriptions masters provided reveal insights into the lives of the enslaved individuals they sought and evidence of their capacity for resistance. Placing advertisements forced slave owners to humanize enslaved individuals to negotiate their return. Bly explains how names and descriptions to countenance “reflected the intimacy and complexity of master-slave relationships.”⁹⁶ References to literacy and fluency in English place these advertisements within the context of Revolutionary-era educational discourse.

The educational achievements of runaway slaves demonstrate how education was not universally acclaimed but a real danger to racial hierarchy. On June 28th, 1787, a runaway advertisement in Charleston’s *State Gazette of South Carolina* stated that “*A Mulatto Man Named Joe...speaks thick but good English, [is] very sensible, and it is likely he will pass for a freeman.*”⁹⁷ This advertisement highlights how attaining knowledge could contribute to a formerly enslaved individual’s ability to retain their freedom. A slave owner named Cotton M. Stevens also recognized how slaves who acquired knowledge had a better chance at gaining their freedom. On April 4th, 1788, Stevens provided a lengthy description of the pair he named Tom and Hester. They “both speak exceedingly good English and being artful may change their names and pass for free.”⁹⁸ This description, intended to aid in their apprehension, highlights their intellect and ingenuity. It also demonstrates how skin colour did not automatically indicate unfreedom. Revolutionary female education discourse, founded on stadial notions of progress, provided a justification for the subjugation of peoples deemed inferior.

⁹⁵ Bly, ““Indubitable Signs,”” 241.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ “Advertisement,” *State Gazette of South-Carolina* (Charleston, SC), June 28, 1787.

⁹⁸ “Advertisement,” *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), Apr. 4, 1788.

Conclusion

In the 1780s, proponents broadened the definition of the reasonable companion to include a crucial societal role. Drawing upon lines of reasoning featured in Gregory's *A Father's Legacy*, editorialists argued that educated women made society more civil, refined, and virtuous by improving men's manners. This discourse, predicated on a complementary view of gender that demanded women's performance of femininity, provided upper-class white women with advanced educational opportunities. Lucia McMahon argues that "after promoting women's intellectual capacities and celebrating their importance to civic society...prescriptive writers failed to advocate for women's legal, political and professional equality with men."⁹⁹ However, as moral arbiters, upper-class white women exercised informal political agency. Sheila Skemp explains that since "a woman could civilize and reform the manners and morals of her husband and children...she could also judge any culture in terms of the way it treated women."¹⁰⁰ The same discourses that gave upper-class white women this crucial societal role justified the subjugation and dispossession of African and Indigenous peoples. Advertisements placed throughout the Revolutionary era reveal how runaway enslaved peoples resisted oppression by protesting with their feet. Burgeoning women's rights discourse occurred within the context of systemic racial oppression.

⁹⁹ McMahon, *Mere Equals*, 165.

¹⁰⁰ Sheila Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 102, *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

Chapter Three: The Rights of Reasonable Companions

On November 23, 1795, the *American Mercury* printed an address by a female student at a New York Academy. Reflecting on “the material difference in the education between the sexes,” this “young lady” argued that if men continued to value female beauty over intellect, women would not see the value in gaining an education.¹⁰¹ This line of reasoning reminiscent of pre-revolutionary rationales demonstrates how proponents continued to draw on lines of reasoning featured in Fordyce’s *Sermons*. Unlike many female editorialists and academy students who had discussed female education in the decade before, she was not satisfied with containing her remarks within the framework of women as reasonable companions. Instead, she drew on lines of reasoning featured in works by Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft. She argued that by attaining “an independent and virtuous education” women could “establish [their] rights, and trample on the despised flattery of those who wish to keep us in the base chains of ignorance.”¹⁰² This piece “by a young lady” represents the more radical assertions made by some proponents of female education in the 1790s.

Educational opportunities available to women at both female academies and community-based schools dramatically increased in the last decade of the eighteenth century. From 1790 to 1799, over a hundred and fifty subscribers placed advertisements for community-based schools and academies for young women. These institutions perpetuated notions of gentility and morality established in the pre-revolutionary era. A lengthy notice placed by the Preceptor of The Bristol Academy placed in the *Columbian Centinel* states that the “young Ladies and Masters...will be in different apartments.”¹⁰³ It is unclear if both students are being taught advanced subjects, including

¹⁰¹ “On Female Education by a Young Lady,” *American Mercury* (Hartford, CT), Nov. 23, 1795.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “Advertisement,” *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), June 25, 1796.

philosophy, logic, and ethics; however, certain subjects are gender-specific. Williams states that “the boys will also be taught the Art of Speaking; and the misses Needlework” with other subjects “insisted on according to the peculiar destination of the Scholar.”¹⁰⁴ This statement may suggest that instructors offered instruction based on notions of sexual difference. However, a similar statement in an advertisement placed in Pennsylvania’s *Carlisle Gazette* suggests that instructors were thinking of their students’ social standing. In his advertisement placed on August 21st, 1799, a D. Searle “respectfully informs the public, that he continues to instruct young Ladies and Gentlemen...at his Grammar School” where “Particular attention will be paid to the situation of life the pupil is destined to move in.”¹⁰⁵ Scholars have shown how, in the 1790s, teaching became a growing profession for women. Rachel Hope Cleves explains how “the Revolution had inspired a movement to improve education for girls, creating a generation of young women with the skills to instruct children in elementary education.”¹⁰⁶ Presumably, women who anticipated working as teachers and those who anticipated marrying wealthy men would have received different types of instruction.

In this case, the reference to their “peculiar destination” or “the sphere they are destined to move in” may speak to how class shaped gendered experience. The variety of subjects offered to young women at some community-based schools further supports this inference. In an advertisement placed in Massachusetts’s *Salem Gazette*, a Wm. Biglow and his assistant offered to teach female students subjects that were not widely available to women, including, “History...The Latin and Greek Languages...Book-Keeping and the Mathematics.”¹⁰⁷ In this

¹⁰⁴ “Advertisement,” *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), June 25, 1796.

¹⁰⁵ “Advertisement,” *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette* (Carlisle, PA), Aug. 21, 1799.

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity & Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

¹⁰⁷ “Advertisement,” *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), Sept. 6, 1799.

context, the reference to “a young Lady [who] teaches Needle-work, and those branches of knowledge which are particularly proper for Misses” serves as the sign of a thorough education rather than the confinement of women’s intellectual abilities.¹⁰⁸ This progressive view indicates that editorialists' arguments for advanced educational opportunities for the fair sex had been successful. Fair sex ideology enabled the racial exclusion of non-white women and girls from northern female academies.

Class hierarchies, educational opportunities and literacy rates varied significantly between the South and the North. Two advertisements placed in South Carolina newspapers in 1790 provide insights into the educational opportunities available to young women in the South. In an advertisement placed in Columbia’s *South Carolina Gazette* on April 26th, 1790 by Mrs. O’Connor states that she will be opening a “Female Seminary” where “the Ladies, committed to her Care” will be taught “Spelling, Writing, English and French Grammars, Arithmetic, Geography, and the Art of Reading correctly, as well as every Species of Needle-work.”¹⁰⁹ Aspects of this advertisement resemble those placed in northern academies. However, educational opportunities were regionally specific. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain if Mrs. O’Connor limited her instruction to upper-class white women. A unique advertisement placed in the *State Gazette of South Carolina* suggests some educational opportunities were available to young black women and girls even in the region of the new nation where support for slavery was strongest. On April 29th, 1790, Mary Connelly stated that along with teaching “small children” how to “read, spell, and needlework, with the greatest attention and care...a few negro girls will also be taught...plain needlework and marking.”¹¹⁰ This advertisement serves as a reminder of the complex educational landscape in

¹⁰⁸ “Advertisement,” *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), Sept. 6, 1799.

¹⁰⁹ “Advertisement,” *South Carolina Gazette* (Columbia, SC), Sept. 3, 1793.

¹¹⁰ “Advertisement,” *State Gazette of South-Carolina* (Charleston, SC), Apr. 26, 1790.

which editorialists and instructors produced female education discourse and advertisements for community-based schools.

Notices placed by trustees and observers of student examinations demonstrate the limitations and possibilities inherent in fair sex ideology. Aspects of these sources resemble advertisements. For instance, a notice placed in Baltimore's *Federal Intelligencer* on April 10, 1795, stated that "the young ladies belonging to the academy superintended by Mr. Noyes...underwent an examination in reading, writing, spelling, English grammar, geography, and the use of the globes."¹¹¹ Other aspects situate academy examinations within the broader female education discourse alongside opinion pieces. The unnamed subscriber expressed their hope that this academy would be supported by the community, "that the neglected sex may give to the citizens of Baltimore the credit of not being among the last in paying attention to an object so closely connected with their happiness and welfare."¹¹² This statement suggests that examinations were crucial to attaining the patronage and students that would ensure the financial success of these educational institutions.

A lengthy notice for an examination of the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy, superintended by Mr. Poor, provides further insights into the role of academies as sites of cultural transmission. It states that "the branches of science taught in this seminary, are spelling, reading, grammar, writing, arithmetic, composition, rhetoric, geography, vocal music, &c. in all which the students were examined."¹¹³ This notice contains a level of detail regarding those who attended the academy above the insights into students' everyday experiences by advertisements for

¹¹¹ "Baltimore, April 10," *Federal Intelligencer* (Baltimore, MD), Apr. 10, 1795.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ [Ladies; Mr. Poor's; Moravian; Church; Race Street]," *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), June 8, 1795.

community-based schools. Some aspects are merely factual such as that “the number of the misses was [which] was nearly two hundred, mostly from seven to fifteen years of age.”¹¹⁴ Further observations concerning the students’ attire highlight how these social institutions constructed idealized conceptions of gender. A “bystander” stated that their attire “was plain, simple, neat and elegant” and had “nothing of that gaudy finery which some ladies of fashion adopt, and which often lessens our opinion of their understanding and taste without adding at all to their beauty or attractive grace.”¹¹⁵ This statement reveals how these young women’s performance of femininity gained them access to education and a public display of what they had learned. By conforming to gendered expectations, these “more perfect ornaments of society” could now confer to those around them the “ineffable advantages, inseparably connected with the refinement of manners, and a cultivated mind.”¹¹⁶ Young Ladies Academy usher J.A. Neale’s usage of the term “refinement of manners” demonstrates how those affiliated with female academies perpetuated the view of women as reasonable companions with a crucial societal role.

Educational reformer and author Susanna Rowson demonstrated how adhering to dominant female education discourse could ensure educational opportunities for women. Born in England in 1762, Rowson is best known for her sentimental novels, including *Charlotte Temple*, which serves as a warning against the dangers of seduction and premarital pregnancy. In her document collection, historian Bonnie Laughlin Schultz argues that Rowson viewed female education as a means of preventing women from being sexually vulnerable. Both *Charlotte Temple* and the Boston Academy for Young Ladies, which she opened in 1799, after emigrating to the United

¹¹⁴ [Ladies; Mr. Poor’s; Moravian; Church; Race Street],” *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), June 8, 1795.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “An Essay on the Genius and Education of the Fair Sex – by J.A. Neale,” *Philadelphia Minerva* (Philadelphia, PA), April 4, 1795.

States in 1795, were, according to Schultz, “intended...to enable women to deal with female choices about their sexuality in the early republic.”¹¹⁷ Rowson instructed her female students amid shifting social mores that necessitated educational advancements for white women aspiring to gentility. Beginning in the 1780s social mores shifted in America and Europe, taking a woman’s choice of marriage partner out of her parents’ hands and into her own.¹¹⁸ The broad scale of this transition reveals that post-revolutionary discourse occurred within an Enlightenment-era renegotiation of gender norms. Instructors like Rowson provided women with the knowledge and sense of autonomy necessary to exercise their newfound agency. Schultz concludes that “early academy education blended practical, ornamental, and moral instruction to equip women with the public and private virtues that would help them choose a marital partner and be good wives and rational mothers.”¹¹⁹ Instructors like Rowson contributed to public discourse that asserted female rationality and reason were conducive to the public good.

Rowson situated her 1799 textbook, *The New Pleasing Instructor: or Young Ladies Guide to Virtue and Happiness*, within the broader discourse of women as reasonable companions to men. In her preface, she eschewed mentions of women’s ability to reason for an emphasis on the role female education played in shaping female character. She stated she had compiled her work because she was “warmly interested in the happiness of the rising generation and wish[ed] for their improvement in the virtuous principles and habits...that [were] suitable to their sex.”¹²⁰ These

¹¹⁷ Schultz, Bonnie Lynn. Introduction, to *How Did Susanna Rowson and Other Reformers Promote Higher Education as an Antidote to Women’s Sexual Vulnerability, 1780-1820?*, Documents selected and interpreted by Bonnie Laughlin Schultz (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2007).

¹¹⁸ Schultz, Introduction.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Susanna Rowson, *The New Pleasing instructor: or, Young lady’s guide to virtue and happiness. Consisting of essays, relations, descriptions, epistles, dialogues, and poetry. Carefully extracted from the best modern authors. Designed principally for the use of female schools; but calculated for general instruction and amusement. By a lady.* (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T Andrew, 1799), iii, *America’s Historical Imprints*.

remarks underscore the gendered expectations associated with a complementary view of gender represented in Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*. Reflecting on her methodology, she assured readers, "she ha[d] admitted but few pieces, which d[id] not tend to either inform the mind, to improve the heart, to correct the manners, or to regulate the conduct."¹²¹ Selections regarding politeness, coquetry, sensibility, flattery, and virtue suggest Rowson supported the dominant discourse rooted in notions of gender difference.

This discourse provided upper-class white women with the opportunity to learn advanced subjects that required reason. Rowson's section on useful subjects including reading, writing, spelling, cyphering, grammar and geography contains selections from Charles Allen's *The Polite Lady*. First published in 1760, this typical work of conduct literature, structured as a series of letters between a mother and daughter, affirmed the class-based assumptions inherent in female education discourse. Allen noted that "to be able to read with propriety, is certainly a genteel accomplishment" as "nothing...is more unworthy of the character of a gentlewoman, than false spelling."¹²² Works such as Allen's emphasized notions of gentility and morality that limited such prescriptions, and thus access to education, to those of the fair sex. These social norms effectively excluded women of colour and the lower classes from learning specific practical skills associated with gentility.

Like her contemporaries, women's rights advocate Judith Sargent Murray limited her advocacy of female education to the fair sex. The daughter of wealthy merchants in Massachusetts, Murray's exceptional education led to her familiarity with Scottish Enlightenment works.¹²³ This ideology provided the means to assert upper-class white women's equality with their male

¹²¹ Rowson, *The New Pleasing Instructor*, iv.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 9-11.

¹²³ Skemp, *First Lady of Letters*, 102.

counterparts. Schloesser considers Murray "the founder of liberal feminist thought in the United States," an ideology that posits that "women should also be considered rational creatures with the capacity for judgement, choice, and intellectual and moral progress through education."¹²⁴ Murray's assertions were limited to members of her class. Schloesser states that "we also understand by liberal feminism that body of thought that has deployed the universal 'woman' or 'women' for strategic purposes" to advance "a specific grouping of females qualified for 'equality' with a specific grouping of men, with whom they identify based on similar race and class privileges."¹²⁵ In this context, Murray asserted that white women of her social standing should be considered equal to their male counterparts. This view helps account for inconsistencies in the spirituality which informed her writing. Schloesser explains, "Murray posits a universal soul, which turns out to apply only to white men and white women."¹²⁶ The conceptions of gender Murray deployed were rooted in Scottish stadial notions of progress that contributed to racialization.

First printed in the March 1789 issue of the *Massachusetts Magazine*, "On the Equality of the Sexes," demonstrates Murray's familiarity with Fordyce's *Sermons*. Unlike pre-revolutionary editorialists who placed women's frivolity in direct opposition to women's ability to reason, she argued that "the variety of fashions which adorn the female world" require the intellectual power of imagination.¹²⁷ She also addressed those who feared women's intellectual accomplishments would prevent them from performing their domestic tasks. She argued that "while...pursuing the

¹²⁴ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 158.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes." *The Massachusetts Magazine*, Vol. 1, Mar. 1789. *Women Writers Online*.

needle or the superintendency of the family...[their] minds are at full liberty for reflection,” and women’s “ideas w[ould] then be worthy of rational beings.”¹²⁸ Murray did not advocate for an end to gender roles but the freedom for women to exercise their intellect. After arguing that women’s ability to reason, their memory, and their judgment were also equal to men’s, she asserted that women should receive an education equal to their brothers.

Murray argued that if allowed to learn advanced subjects such as astronomy, geography, natural philosophy, women would become closer to God. She concurred with members of the clergy, including Reverend Sproat, who emphasized female piety. However, characteristic of her Universalist faith, Murray took an unorthodox approach to retelling the story of Adam and Eve. In an appended letter, she argued that while Eve sought knowledge, Adam was beholden to his passions.¹²⁹ She concluded that “[man’s] soul is in no sort superior, but every way equal to the mind of her, who is the emblem of weakness, and whom he hails the gentle companion of his better days.”¹³⁰ Murray claimed the authority to retell the story of the Fall by way of her education. Unlike uneducated women who were “enmeshed in an oral tradition...[and] inhabited a world where personal authority emanated from on high, from ministers, fathers, and the occasional teacher,” Murray could read the Bible and reinterpret it.¹³¹ The moral authority that Murray gained as a reasonable companion was limited to members of the fair sex.

In her highly influential 1792 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, British author and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft introduced “women’s rights” to common parlance.¹³² Scholars

¹²⁸ Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes.”

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Skemp, *First Lady of Letters*, 25.

¹³² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (Boston: Printed by Peter Edes for Thomas and Andrews, 1792)

have shown how influential her work was in the American public sphere. Branson states that Wollstonecraft was popular in Revolutionary America because of “her ability to collect all the various arguments for the social, familial, and political advancement of women and put them in one place.”¹³³ In direct contrast to Murray, whose self-interest prevented her from extending her argument beyond class lines, Wollstonecraft threatened both class and gender hierarchies. Branson explains that she wrote her work during the French Revolution, which “raised the possibility of creating a radically new social, as well as political, structure.”¹³⁴ This context influenced Wollstonecraft’s views regarding the radical potential of female education. Scholar Nancy Johnson explains that for Wollstonecraft, “education is the means by which women can achieve [a] radical transformation, both for themselves, and the world, claim their agency, and thereby secure their place in the new political order.”¹³⁵ Wollstonecraft’s views more closely resemble those of radical French Revolutionary women. Female philosophes “Olympe de Gouges and Madame Roland demanded that women seize the opportunity to gain new rights for themselves.”¹³⁶ The radical transformation these feminists insisted upon required calling into question systems of power.

For Wollstonecraft, this included broadening the implications of Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender. In the preface to her work, she argued that as women were reasonable companions to men, their equal intellectual capacity entitled them to equal rights.¹³⁷ However, her use of the term “reasonable companion” envisaged a role far more egalitarian than previous deployments. According to Wollstonecraft, notions of sensibility articulated in work such as Fordyce’s *Sermons* and Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy* hampered women’s rights. In the fifth

¹³³ Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 35.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁵ Johnson, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” 104.

¹³⁶ Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 35.

¹³⁷ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, viii.

chapter of her work, Wollstonecraft offered “Animadversions on some of the writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt.”¹³⁸ Following a scathing critique of French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, she turned her attention to Fordyce and Gregory. Wollstonecraft argued that the former’s conception of gender, which placed women’s attainment of feminine virtues above their intellectual accomplishments, induced women to be artificial and submissive. Men were permitted to vary in character, but “all women [were] to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance.”¹³⁹ Wollstonecraft was more hesitant to disparage Gregory due to the personal nature of his work. However, she contended that the mores he prescribed for his daughters were unjust, as they should be allowed to exercise reason cultivated by education.¹⁴⁰ The emphasis on sensibility in these works, rather than reasonable companionship, prevented women from contributing to society in a meaningful way.

Despite her radical assertions, aspects of Wollstonecraft’s work adhered to fair sex ideology. In the ninth chapter of her work, entitled “of the pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society,” Wollstonecraft argued that women were entitled to political rights. She succinctly stated that “women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government.”¹⁴¹ She argued that an emphasis on white women’s feminine virtues had not only deprived them of political rights and access to occupations outside of the domestic sphere but had placed them in chains. For Wollstonecraft, the social, economic, and political restrictions placed on women were akin to enslavement. After discussing the qualifications of soldiers and statesmen,

¹³⁸ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 138.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

she turned her attention back to “the more specious slavery which chains the very soul of woman, keeping her for ever under the bondage of ignorance.”¹⁴² Despite her misgivings, stadial notions of progress gave her a valuable rhetorical device for illustrating women’s subservience to men. Discussing women’s subjection to “blind propriety,” she asked if “one half of the human species [was], like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard only to sweeten the cup of man?”¹⁴³ In one of the few articles that explicitly discusses Wollstonecraft’s views of slavery, scholar Carol Howard suggests that this comparison reveals the woman rights activist’s antislavery sentiments. She states that “the message is that blind propriety, like sugar produced by Caribbean slaves, is a luxury whose cost is far too dear.”¹⁴⁴ However, Howard does not address the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment on Wollstonecraft’s comparison. In stadial views of progress, comparing women to slaves enabled white women’s transition to virtuous and refined reasonable companions entitled to rights. Wollstonecraft concluded that “would men but generously snap our chains and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens.”¹⁴⁵ Vindicating women’s rights by comparing them to slaves disregarded the enslavement and dispossession of Africans and Indigenous nations justified by fair sex ideology.

Opinion Pieces on Female Education (1790-1799)

From 1790 to 1799, dozens of opinion pieces and four academy addresses explicitly on female education were printed in newspapers in New England and the middle colonies. Some

¹⁴² Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 252.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴⁴ Carol Howard, “Wollstonecraft’s Thoughts on Slavery and Corruption,” *The Eighteenth Century* 45, no. 1 (Spring, 2004): 67, <https://www.jsstator.org/stable/41467935>.

¹⁴⁵ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 262.

authors employed classical pseudonyms, such as Theophrastus and Terpander, while others adopted monikers that evoked authority, including “The American Spectator” and “the Moral Farmer.” These editorialists grappled with emerging women’s rights rhetoric that expanded the role of reasonable companion beyond its initial central premise. An emphasis on women’s political equality threatened to refute the complementary view of gender that justified the fair sex’s access to education. Amid fears of educated women’s gender transgression, some female editorialists reiterated how female education enabled women to fulfill their social roles. Others took a more radical stance, arguing that their class, race, and intellect entitled them to the same rights as their white male counterparts. The persistence of arguments rooted in Scottish stadial notions of progress demonstrates the value of a framework that constructed white femininity.

The American Spectator, who ran a series of pieces at the end of the decade in *Spooner’s Vermont Journal*, engaged with the different discursive threads that characterized female education discourse in the 1790s. On November 22nd, 1797, *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* printed “The American Spectator, No. VIX,” which opened with a character sketch of Camilla, an Amazon, from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Despite lauding her heroic exploits, he ultimately framed her as a representation of female superficiality. He stated that she was “captivated by the mere exterior of dress and the most superficial accomplishments of the opposite sex.”¹⁴⁶ If Americans wished to prevent women from cultivating similar character defects, the current mode of female education had to be improved. He illustrated his next point by stating that “the original formation of woman was right and good.”¹⁴⁷ Despite Eve’s virtues, the sexes were fundamentally different. Deploying Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of complementary gender roles, he argued that the sexes were

¹⁴⁶ “For Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), Nov. 22, 1797.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

designed to move in different spheres. The American Spectator stated that “whilst man is moving in his proper spheres of action and life...women were designed to be beautiful and witty” but should not be preoccupied with fashion. Deploying lines of reasoning featured in Fordyce’s *Sermons*, he concluded by stating that proper modes of education would turn women’s attention away from frivolous pursuits and cultivate their intellectual virtues.

The American Spectator’s subsequent pieces display the balancing act undertaken by editorialists attempting to reconcile notions of gender difference with assertions regarding female equality. In “The American Spectator, No. XII,” printed on December 13, 1797, the unnamed editorialist provided a historical example of Hypatia, “whose extensive learning, elegant manners, and tragical end, have rendered her name immortal.”¹⁴⁸ He attempted to contain her accomplishments within eighteenth-century gender norms, but this Hellenistic philosopher’s achievements do not fit such narrow precepts. According to historian Edward Jay Watts, “she was...a gifted philosopher who went into spaces usually reserved for men, dominated by men, taught ideas usually expressed by men, and exercised authority usually reserved for men.”¹⁴⁹ Surprisingly, the editorialist employed Hypatia to represent the possibilities open to women who gained educational opportunities. He stated that “the instance of Hypatia may convince us that women are also capable of philosophy.”¹⁵⁰ He followed this assertion by stating that men and women were intellectually equal. By receiving an education, upper-class white women would also have an opportunity to dictate courtship. He stated that “if our daughters were to receive a suitable education, they would presently cease to be captivated by a foppish, fantastic dress...and would

¹⁴⁸ “Miscellanies. for Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), Dec. 13, 1797.

¹⁴⁹ Edward Jay Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

¹⁵⁰ “Miscellanies. for Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), Dec. 13, 1797.

soon learn to admire the manly virtues and the noble endowments of the mind.”¹⁵¹ Providing suggestions for how sons and daughters should be educated, he once more cautioned against allowing young women to become preoccupied with fashion. In the conclusion to his piece, he urged the mothers of elite women to cultivate “amiable female accomplishments” in their daughters, including “delicacy of sentiment, kind affections, chastity, the love of virtue, and the beauties of sparkling wit, and pleasing conversation.”¹⁵² Even a learned woman who moved within spaces generally reserved for men could not escape the confines of feminine domesticity.

In “The American Spectator, No. XXVI,” printed on April 4, 1798, the editorialist underscores how upper-class white women’s access to education was predicated on a complementary view of gender. He stated that “were women of the same disposition and temperature with men, the world would presently freeze, and the two polar circles would immediately become coincident with the Equator.”¹⁵³ Taking a benevolent tone and dismissing supposedly natural flaws in women, he argued that women were better equipped to handle social situations. He argued that women were not naturally inferior but simply fundamentally different from men. In his concluding remarks, he placed women’s feminine virtues alongside their intellectual accomplishments. He stated that “I can never wish that womankind should suffer any other alteration than that which a proper female education will make.”¹⁵⁴ This statement suggests that some editorialists were concerned that improper education would cause women to transgress gender norms.

¹⁵¹ “Miscellanies. for Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), Dec. 13, 1797.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ “Miscellanies. For Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor VT), Apr. 4, 1798.

These sentiments are further advanced in “The American Spectator, No. XXVII, printed on April 11, 1798. Providing recommendations for which subjects benefit the female character and intellect, he warned against women “poring over Euclid’s elements, Locke on human understanding, or Newton’s principles” as these and similar works “will render a woman a pedant, or cause her to assume...peculiar airs of the pedagogue.”¹⁵⁵ Women learning these subjects would be problematic in the complementary gender system embraced by the author as it would suggest women and men were rational human beings rather than inherently different. The American Spectator’s pieces represent a microcosm of discourse that introduced small-town readers to arguments regarding female education and grappled with a shifting national discourse. Vermont did not become a state until 1791 and consisted primarily of small frontier towns leading to limited educational opportunities for girls. As in other states, this process of settlement required the dispossession of Indigenous lands, in this case those of the Western Abenaki.¹⁵⁶ Pre-revolutionary rationales, advanced by editorialists such as the American Spectator, thus occurred within the context of dispossession.

Amid fears regarding women’s rights rhetoric, a piece entitled “On Female Education” was published in *The Oracle of the Day* on March 30th, 1796. Philom signed this piece lamenting the neglect of female education. Harkening back to Philometis and Philomathes, this male pseudonym implies that a male advocate wrote it. However, it was initially published in the *Royal American Magazine* in 1774 under the female pseudonym of Clio.¹⁵⁷ The change in pseudonym highlights

¹⁵⁵ “Miscellanies. For Spooner’s Vermont Journal. the American Spectator,” *Spooner’s Vermont Journal* (Windsor VT), Apr. 11, 1798.

¹⁵⁶ For more information on the dispossession of the Western Abenaki see Jean L. Manore, “The Historical Erasure of an Indigenous Identity in the Borderlands: The Western Abenaki of Vermont, New Hampshire and Quebec,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 26, no. 2 (2011): 179-196.

¹⁵⁷ Several scholars have cited this piece in their discussions of Revolutionary-era female education discourse and the Revolutionary era more generally. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 191; other examples include Elizabeth

how its sentiments were valuable, but in the context of women's rights rhetoric, needed to be tempered by a male speaker. In an oft-quoted line, Clio asked, "how many female minds, rich with native genius and noble sentiments, have been lost to the world and all their mental treasures buried in oblivion?"¹⁵⁸ In her concluding statement, she articulated the view of women as reasonable companions to men whose education enabled them to fulfill their social roles. She stated that "a most powerful motive to induce the fair sex to acquire an education is the advantage it will be to their children, and as they advance in life, their learning and virtue may survive to posterity."¹⁵⁹ Despite the emergence of woman's rights rhetoric, pre-revolutionary rationales rooted in gender difference persisted.

In his letter in *The Republican Journal* on July 5, 1793, a male editorialist using the moniker "citizen A" suggested various ways for how his female friend could improve her intellect within the bounds of gendered expectations. In the introduction to his piece, he quoted Philom/Clio, stating that "a good education has already given a radiant lustre to your 'native genius and noble sentiment.'"¹⁶⁰ After lauding his female friend's intellectual achievements, he deployed lines of reasoning featured in Gregory's *A Father's Legacy*. Taking a similarly paternalistic tone, he discussed the books she should read, the company she should keep, and how she should act in social situations. Urging her to cultivate the feminine virtues of politeness, decorum, and modesty, he highlighted the role of female education in perpetuating idealized notions of white femininity.

Galewski, "The Strange Case for Women's Capacity to Reason: Judith Sargent Murray's Use of Irony in 'On the Equality of the Sexes' (1790)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 1 (May 2007), 92, *Children in Colonial America*, edited by James Marten, forward by Philip J. Greven (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 197, Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 108, Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 73.

¹⁵⁸ "On Female Education," *Royal American Magazine* (Boston, MA), Jan. 1774.

¹⁵⁹ "On Female Education," *Oracle of the Day* (Portsmouth, NH), Mar. 30, 1796.

¹⁶⁰ "From the Republican Journal. Letter from Citizen a-, to Female Friend," *American Apollo* (Boston, MA), July 5, 1793.

Quoting the same passage regarding “masculine forwardness in females,” which Mary Wollstonecraft criticized, he spoke to early American anxieties that educated women transgressed gender norms.¹⁶¹ Citizen A’s letter, which was printed numerous times in the 1790s, demonstrates how many regarded framing women as reasonable companions to men as necessary to place limitations on female agency. A piece printed on May 3rd, 1799 in *The Newburyport Herald* demonstrates how this view persisted into the end of the decade. “The Moral Farmer” stated that if women were educated, they would spend their time “not in idle prattle and nonsense; not wholly absorbed in fashionable cares...but in rational employments of domestic life.”¹⁶² The persistence of this discourse, which female editorialists also employed, demonstrates its usefulness in advocating for educational opportunities for members of the fair sex.

In her piece, printed on January 23rd, 1790, in New York’s *Gazette of the United States*, a “fair correspondent” displayed how reasonable companionship authorized female editorialists’ participation in the printed sphere.¹⁶³ Her moniker highlights how dominant discourses excluded women of colour from exercising agency in the same way as white women. Taking an assertive tone befitting her societal role, this fair correspondent argued that men were responsible for the neglect of female education. Those who asserted women had inferior intellectual capabilities “suffer[ed] themselves to be guided by custom” and were “guilty of the most criminal indifference.”¹⁶⁴ Deploying lines of reasoning found in Murray’s “On the Equality of the Sexes,” she argued that the sexes were intellectually equal. She stated that education “increases and adorns natural accomplishments and furnishes every qualification by which either sex ennoble and

¹⁶¹ “From the Republican Journal. Letter from Citizen a-, to Female Friend,” *American Apollo* (Boston, MA), July 5, 1793.

¹⁶² “From the Haverhill Federal Gazette. The Moral Farmer,” *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport, MA), May 3, 1799.

¹⁶³ “The Tablet No. LXXXII,” *Gazette of the United States* (New York, NY), Jan. 23, 1790.

¹⁶⁴ “For The Tablet,” *Gazette of the United States* (New York, NY), Jan. 23, 1790.

distinguish themselves.”¹⁶⁵ A lack of educational opportunities had prevented European women throughout history from gaining these qualifications and attaining more practical benefits, such as the capacity to resist seduction. Like Daphne and *A Married Woman*, the Fair Correspondent demonstrated how women’s role as reasonable companion also allowed members of the fair sex to judge the integrity of their male counterparts. She argued that education “t[ought] [women] in what true excellence consists, and how little she is to be esteemed by the sensible part of mankind, whose highest ambition is employed by gaining admirers by the gaudy appendages of dress.”¹⁶⁶ This assertion, reminiscent of Amanda’s assertions in the colonial era, challenged men of all classes to value the female intellect over beauty. She stated that education not only “embellish[ed] the mind,” but “add[ed] splendour to outward ornaments, and new graces to that decent, agreeable behaviour, which is the leading characteristic of female perfection.”¹⁶⁷ This fair correspondent’s piece reveals how female editorialists constructed fair sex ideology as a tool in white women’s quest for equality.

In his piece printed on February 17th, 1797, “The Rural Moralist” displayed how drawing from lines of reasoning featured in Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy* continued to be a valuable means of arguing for educational opportunities for women. He argued that “the benignant influence of female society on the manners and morals of mankind, ha[d] long been long and universally felt, acknowledged and admired.”¹⁶⁸ He asserted that women’s mental accomplishments would accentuate the feminine virtues, including purity, modesty, delicacy, and compassion. In this context, any man who did not support female education was “undeserving of a single smile from

¹⁶⁵ “For The Tablet,” *Gazette of the United States* (New York, NY), Jan. 23, 1790.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ “For the Federal Galaxy. the Rural Moralist – No. 5. Essay on Female Genius and Education,” *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), Feb. 17, 1797.

the fair daughters of innocence and virtue.”¹⁶⁹ As the Rural Moralist made clear, non-white women could not claim to have the same societal influence that provided upper-class white women with educational opportunities. They were exempt from this editorialist’s assertions that, as Rowson argued, education prevented female sexual vulnerability, and as Murray demonstrated, women were not naturally inferior. In his subsequent remarks, he stated that Wollstonecraft “ha[d] immortalized herself by a work in defence of the rights of her sex, which, with all its eccentricities and errors, is at once curious, spirited, agreeable and instructive.”¹⁷⁰ Despite its eccentricities, this work offered the fair sex a more expansive view of reasonable companionship.

In states with established community-based schools and female academies, editorialists had more freedom to draw on the radical possibilities of female education discourse. On December 19th, 1795, an editorialist using the pseudonym Theophrastus began writing a series of short pieces under the heading “The Reformer” for *The Philadelphia Minerva*. Taking a philosophical tone befitting his chosen pseudonym, he stated that “it must give every rational being the most unpleasant sensations to see one-half of the human species labouring under wrongs of the most deplorable nature.”¹⁷¹ Not only was this unjust, but it was not in men’s best interest. He stated that “if a proper mode of education were pursued with the female sex...man would be much the gainer in point of happiness.”¹⁷² In this statement, Theophrastus deployed women’s instrumental role as reasonable companions. However, his further remarks suggest he was also influenced by Wollstonecraftian rhetoric.

¹⁶⁹ “For the Federal Galaxy. the Rural Moralist – No. 5. Essay on Female Genius and Education,” *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), Feb. 17, 1797.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “For the Philadelphia Minerva. the Reformer,” *Philadelphia Minerva* (Philadelphia, PA), Dec. 19, 1795.

¹⁷² Ibid.

In his second piece, he traced the subject of Wollstonecraft's ninth chapter regarding "the rise and progress of those distinctions which now exist in society," stating that "the WRONGS OF WOMEN are but a small branch derived from that great source of human woes."¹⁷³ Like *The American Spectator*, he deployed historical examples to argue that women's oppression could no longer be justified as they were in antiquity, where strength equated to power. Carrying this argument through to his third piece, he argued that "wherever man has been ennobled by the blessings of liberty, there also has the female sex been held in the highest estimation."¹⁷⁴ This phrase, which evokes the fair sex's crucial role within Scottish Enlightenment stadial theory, further underscores the racial exclusion of non-white women from the possibilities advanced by women's rights rhetoric.

An exchange between a male and female correspondent printed in the *Connecticut Journal* in the winter of 1797 demonstrates how *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* began to influence female education discourse in early national America. On November 20, 1797, a gentleman submitted a letter "To the Author of the Olio" regarding the misfortunes which had befallen him after his wife read the work.¹⁷⁵ He stated that he had been happy and lived in domestic bliss, but since her acquaintance with Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, his wife had "wholly abandoned the superintendence of her family affairs" and "endeavour[ed] to dress to the masculine manners she ha[d] assumed." She also spoke "often about the *natural, inherent, and inalienable* rights of women."¹⁷⁶ This gentleman's assertion that his wife's political involvement had caused her to neglect her domestic duties is reminiscent of the satirical depiction of the 1774 Edenton Tea Party, wherein colonial women supported the boycott of tea leading up to the Revolution, by a British

¹⁷³ "For the Philadelphia Minerva. the Reformer – No. II," *Philadelphia Minerva* (Philadelphia, PA), Dec. 26, 1795.

¹⁷⁴ "For the Philadelphia Minerva. the Reformer – No. III," *Philadelphia Minerva* (Philadelphia, PA), Feb. 20, 1796.

¹⁷⁵ "The Olio. No. XXIV," *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Nov. 30, 1797.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

cartoonist. The 1775 print, entitled “A Society of Patriotic Ladies,” depicted the women who, preoccupied with their informal political activities, neglected their children.¹⁷⁷ Despite the potentially satirical nature of his remarks, his piece speaks to the anxieties of early national Americans. Stating that his wife has taken an interest in politics and taught their children about women's rights, he pled for the Olio to intervene. In his appended remarks, the Olio expressed his hope that “if she has any affection for her husband,” his wife “will...regulate her conduct so as to please him.”¹⁷⁸ This statement reveals how women who followed Wollstonecraftian lines posed a threat to the gender hierarchy.

In her response to the previous letter, an unnamed female editorialist argued that the sentiments expressed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* were in men's best interest. Addressing “the Author of the Olio,” she took a mock deferential tone, stating that she “sincerely hope[d], that if a female should, *accidentally*, write some truth, with a little nonsense, she will, for once, escape the imputation of *pedantry*.”¹⁷⁹ She assured him that she did not intend to refute all the husband's remarks regarding his wife. Surprisingly, she demonstrated how aspects of Wollstonecraftian rhetoric were conducive to the view of women as reasonable companions to men. If the previous generation had read *A Vindication*, she argued they would value female education as not only a means of attaining female equality but because Wollstonecraft had demonstrated its benefit to society. Her interpretation of the work suggested it was conducive to lines of reasoning featured in Fordyce's *Sermons* and Gregory's *A Father's Legacy*. She asserted that women had a crucial role in “the melioration of the manners of the males” and assured readers that female education would not conflict with women's domestic duties but make them better

¹⁷⁷ “A Society of Patriotic Ladies at Edenton in North Carolina,” 1775, Hand-coloured mezzotint, The British Museum, London. [print; satirical print | British Museum](#)

¹⁷⁸ “The Olio. No. XXIV,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Nov. 30, 1797.

¹⁷⁹ “The Olio [sic.] No. XXVI,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Dec. 14, 1797.

wives and mothers. She also addressed concerns that female education would cause women to transgress gender boundaries. As she stated, “I sincerely wish to see so much attention bestowed upon the education of the sex, as to attach a degree of respectability to their character and lead to the correction of both the prevailing frivolous manners and masculine behaviour, which are justly the subject of censure.”¹⁸⁰ Asserting their influence as reasonable companions, some female editorialists actively reinforced notions of gender difference that enabled them to gain access to education and a modicum of equality with their male counterparts.

A piece printed in Massachusetts’s *Rural Repository* on June 9, 1796, and reprinted in New Hampshire and Philadelphia demonstrates the necessity of framing educated women as reasonable companions. Terpander expressed concerns that female education would cause women to transgress gender boundaries. Taking an alarmist tone, he stated that “female pedantry [was] a distemper that ought to be shunned like the plague” and “it [was] a pitiful affectation for a lady to desire to excell in philosophy, astronomy or mathematics.”¹⁸¹ His subsequent remarks demonstrate how maintaining differences in education facilitated the construction of gender. He asserted that learning these subjects and following Wollstonecraftian lines was unnatural and not beneficial to either sex. He argued that “there are some very furious kind of women, the disciples of mrs. Woolstoncraft [sic.], who think that the priveliges [sic.] of their sex are exceedingly abridged unless they are allowed to engage in the same studies and pursue the same occupations, which have generally been engrossed by the men.”¹⁸² He found Wollstonecraft’s assertions regarding the potential for women to hold office particularly egregious. His further remarks reveal that he supported women’s access to educational opportunities within limits. He stated that

¹⁸⁰ “The Olid [sic.] No. XXVI,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Dec. 14, 1797.

¹⁸¹ “From the Village Messenger,” *The Rural Repository*, Leominster, Massachusetts, June 9, 1796.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

“notwithstanding what has been said, female education is a matter of the utmost importance” due to the feminine virtues it imbues women with that allow them to fulfill their roles as mothers.¹⁸³ Framing women as reasonable companions who fulfilled their social roles provided the fair sex with a valuable argument against fears that learned women would destabilize the gender hierarchy. Closing his piece by suggesting women read the Bible instead of the works of philosophers, he displayed the role of Christian principles in prescribing bounds on women’s intellectual accomplishments. Terpander’s piece demonstrates that many Americans were fearful of the consequences of following Wollstonecraftian lines of reasoning.

A piece printed on July 8, 1799, in Boston’s *Independent Chronicle* speaks to anxieties that women’s rights rhetoric would level the hierarchies that gave members of the fair sex an instrumental role.¹⁸⁴ Printed days after celebrations of American independence, an “Old Woman” equated “those who preached liberty and equality to the men” to those who lauded women’s rights.¹⁸⁵ This statement appears to call into question the patriotism of those who were against the latter. However, her subsequent statements underscore the threat that women’s rights rhetoric posed to those who benefited from becoming reasonable companions to men. She stated that they “must be bitter enemies, who would try to rob women of the influence derived from their beauty, their temper, and their worth” and argue for “an emancipation from those restraints, which are imposed by society, and sanctioned by God.”¹⁸⁶ Christian principles underpinned the stadial notions of progress that ostensibly limited upper-class white women to the private sphere while imbuing her performance of feminine domestic with an informal political significance. Unlike the men and women whose enslavement fair sex ideology justified, these women did not require

¹⁸³ “From the Village Messenger,” *The Rural Repository*, Leominster, Massachusetts, June 9, 1796.

¹⁸⁴ “The Lady’s Museum. the Old Woman. No. 3,” *Independent Chronicle* (Boston, MA), July 8, 1799.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

emancipation. The Old Woman concluded by illustrating the difference between good nature and good temper. Simplicia was good-natured, but the indulgence of her parents and weak character led her to consent to an unhappy marriage, “merely from a love of obliging.”¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, Cordelia, who had a good temper, corrected her foibles by obtaining an education and was happily married to someone who was learned rather than rich. Cordelia’s “good temper,...founded on principle,” led to her living a life “unruffled amidst all the vicissitudes to which even the most happy are exposed.”¹⁸⁸ The Old Woman demonstrated how, if members of the fair sex adhered to the prescriptions laid out for them and did not call systems of oppression into question, they could achieve happiness.

Not all female editorialists were content to be confined within gender norms. In her piece entitled “The Wrongs of Women,” printed in the *Hartford Gazette* on March 5, 1795, a female editorialist signing herself as “One of the Injured Sex,” compared her situation to that of American revolutionaries. She argued that as she was “a widow of considerable fortune and not very old so that I see company enough,” her male relations should not feel compelled to cease discussing politics in her presence.¹⁸⁹ Rejecting the implications of French Revolutionary democracy, which influenced Wollstonecraft to argue against class distinctions, this member of the injured sex asserted that her wealth and social status entitled her to participate in politics. She argued that elite women “[we]re indeed treated as if [they] had no right to be reckoned citizens,” but she, as a taxpayer, had “the very same cause to complain of oppression that all the Americans had at the beginning of the late war.”¹⁹⁰ In the Revolutionary era, taxation was limited by land ownership rather than gender. This female editorialist would have paid taxes on any land she inherited from

¹⁸⁷ “The Lady’s Museum. the Old Woman. No. 3,” *Independent Chronicle* (Boston, MA), July 8, 1799.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ “From a Late George-Town Paper,” *Hartford Gazette* (Hartford, CT), Mar. 5, 1795.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

her deceased husband. Her argument thus rested on the assertion that, like American revolutionaries, she was subject to taxation without representation. This member of the Injured Sex displayed the value of arguments that did not extend the benefits of female education beyond propertied members of the fair sex. This latter argument would prove to be more convincing than Wollstonecraftian rhetoric, as while Wollstonecraft would fall out of favour, elite women into the nineteenth century would argue that their class status entitled them to greater access to educational opportunities.

In her subsequent remarks, this member of the “injured sex” underscored an even greater grievance than being unjustly taxed without representation or unable to hold office. She stated that “we are not permitted to enjoy even the faculties of our own minds in their full extent, for want of the means of cultivating those faculties so as to give them that enlargement for which they were by nature designed.”¹⁹¹ In arguing that women were designed to have the same opportunities as men to cultivate their intellects, she effectively refuted those who used nature to perpetuate inequality. However, by claiming her class privilege, she limited that equality to white women of the upper classes. Staid notions of progress and the definition of equality advanced by women’s rights activists prevented men and women of colour from being viewed as reasonable human beings entitled to not only the faculties of their minds but bodily autonomy. She concluded by stating that “a laudable attempt [was] made at Philadelphia to introduce a more liberal and rational course of female education” which had gained “the attention of both the Federal and State legislatures,” but it was “far...short of the liberal extension that suits the dignity of human

¹⁹¹ “From a Late George-Town Paper,” *Hartford Gazette* (Hartford, CT), Mar. 5, 1795.

intellect.”¹⁹² The establishment of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia, which she is presumably referring to, contributed to the institutionalization of fair sex ideology.

Academy Addresses (1790 – 1799)

On June 10, 1790, Anne Loxley’s Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy valedictory oration was printed in the *New York Daily Gazette*. The preceding paragraph noted that she conducted herself with “judgment and decorum.”¹⁹³ This statement implies that because she did not transgress gender boundaries, the school’s trustees permitted her to speak publicly and have her address appear in print. She began her oration by showing the necessary deference to those in attendance. However, she stated that her age rather than her sex made the undertaking seem daunting. Her proceeding remarks show how white middle and upper-class women supported fair sex ideology. She argued that while “the female sex, in point of scholastic education in some measure, have been neglected...no age, sex or denomination, are deprived of the means whereby an ample and sufficient knowledge of the different branches of arts and science may be acquired.”¹⁹⁴ By definition, her view of the female sex omitted white women of the lower classes and all women of colour who were deprived of an education by dominant discourses. The statements made by “One of the Injured Sex” and the continued racist exclusion of African American women attest to the limitations of educational opportunities to a select few who performed white femininity. This female student was certain that “the veil of female ignorance w[ould] be laid aside, and our tender intellect be gently led forth by our kind instructor, in the flow’ry fields of knowledge.”¹⁹⁵ As a

¹⁹² “From a Late George-Town Paper,” *Hartford Gazette* (Hartford, CT), Mar. 5, 1795.

¹⁹³ “Philadelphia, June 7,” *New-York Daily Gazette* (New York, NY), June 10, 1790.

¹⁹⁴ “Reverend, Venerable and Respectable Audience,” *New-York Daily Gazette* (New York, NY), June 10, 1790.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

member of the fair sex, she could confidently assume that she and other upper-class women and girls would gain access to educational opportunities.

Similar sentiments were expressed by sisters from Massachusetts' New Salem Academy in 1798. In the preamble to an address by "Miss S.F.," an unnamed individual stated that it was intended to show "that all our fair countrywomen are not ignorant."¹⁹⁶ They also provided insights into the process of academy examinations. As stated, "the subject was the comparative advantages of education and polite accomplishments enjoyed by the fair sex at the present day."¹⁹⁷ The framing of this question automatically limited these women's educational advantages to the domestic sphere. However, it also implied that female education had improved considerably since the deployment of Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender. Taking a deferential tone, Mrs. S.F. deployed a crucial phrase in stadial notions of progress. Echoing Fordyce, she stated that women who did not attain "a knowledge of letters and figures competent to the most ordinary business of life...became drudges to their parents, or, if married...were slaves to unmerciful husbands."¹⁹⁸ Like Anne Loxley, her deployment of Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender obscured those subjugated in the fair sex's quest for education.

In her closing remarks, she underscored how some women viewed contributing to fair sex ideology as a valuable exchange for educational opportunities. She stated that if women conformed to gendered expectations, they would "ever attain that long-wished-for object, A POLITE AND ACCOMPLISHED EDUCATION...that none can take...from us, though we may be deprived of every thing else."¹⁹⁹ Miss P. Foster's address on the subject similarly begins by discussing the

¹⁹⁶ "For the Galaxy," *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), July 31, 1798.

¹⁹⁷ "[Comparative; Advantages; Education; Accomplish; Present]," *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), July 31, 1798.

¹⁹⁸ "No. 1 by Miss S.F.," *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), July 31, 1798.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

neglect of female education. She stated that female education had vastly improved since “parents viewed their daughters as throwing away, and irrevocably losing their time when pursuing the paths of science.”²⁰⁰ Employing poetic language, she discussed the advantages that women who were once barred from cultivating intellectual virtues could obtain. In doing so, she underscored the role that female education had in improving the lives of those who were fortunate enough to obtain it. She stated that education “render[ed] the transient moments pleasant and agreeable, and help[ed] the weary traveller to pursue his journey, with avidity, through the thorny paths of life.”²⁰¹ Miss S.F and Miss P. Foster’s pieces demonstrate how the fair sex did not extend their views regarding the benefits of female education to those of other classes, ethnicities, or nations.

An address printed in *American Mercury* on November 1795 demonstrates how some women used the platform academy addresses afforded them to argue for women’s rights. Lucia McMahon briefly discusses how this student of a New York seminary expressed republican sentiments but does not explore how this piece contributed to fair sex ideology.²⁰² Re-examining this address by “a young lady” reveals that the student employed some of the same rhetorical techniques and lines of reasoning as editorialists to argue against female oppression. Taking an authoritative tone, she stated that, unlike men who had pursued knowledge, women were expected to be content with cultivating being pleasing to gain male admiration. Drawing on lines of reasoning found in Murray’s “Equality of the Sexes” and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, she argued that as

[women] ha[d] the same natural abilities as [men], why should [they] not have the same opportunity of polishing and displaying them by the principles of an independent and virtuous education, and like them establish [their] rights, and

²⁰⁰ “Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings,” *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro, VT), Aug. 7, 1798.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Lucia McMahon, ““Of the Utmost Importance to Our Country’: Women, Education, and Society, 1780-1820,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 3 (Fall, 2009): 482. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40541858>.

trample on the despised flattery of those who wish to keep [them] in the base chains of ignorance?²⁰³

This statement demonstrates how some young women at academies warranted their participation in constructing national discourse by deploying fair sex ideology. Like, Wollstonecraft, this “young lady” compared women’s lack of political rights with the enslavement of African peoples. This comparison masked the racial hierarchy maintained by white women’s attainment of education as reasonable companions.

This “young lady” also demonstrated her awareness of the political context in which her access to education occurred. She expressed her wishes that “since the Americans have bravely established their liberties...their modesty will keep them from exercising that despotism over [women], which they so openly despised in the master.”²⁰⁴ This statement resembles one made by Abigail Adams in a letter to her husband in 1776. Famously pleading with her husband to “Remember the Ladies,” she stated that “all Men would be tyrants if they could” and warned him that if women were not treated well, they would “foment a Rebellion, and...not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or Representation.”²⁰⁵ This statement made by Adams also shares similarities with one made by “One of the Injured Sex,” suggesting that burgeoning women’s rights discourse provided a framework for women to express long-held resentments. Delineating between Americans and those they held power over, these women demonstrated their awareness that they were not to be reckoned citizens despite ostensibly having a crucial societal role.

²⁰³ “On Female Education by a Young Lady,” *American Mercury* (Hartford, CT), Nov. 23, 1795.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Conclusion

Opinion pieces printed in the 1790s demonstrate how editorialists continued to deploy women's role as reasonable companions to argue that the fair sex were entitled to an education. Women's rights activists expanded this ideological construct to include political rights but did not contradict its central premise. Upper-class white women's performance of white femininity entitled them to education, social influence, and a modicum of equality. Skemp argues that Murray and her contemporaries "challeng[ed] traditional gender definitions and cross[ed] gender boundaries."²⁰⁶ Female editorialists joined Murray's "Constantia" but reified rather than refuted a complementary view of gender that prevented accusations of gender transgression and the destabilization of hierarchies beneficial to them. Female academy students deployed the same lines of reasoning as editorialists. A "young lady" deployed Wollstonecraftian rhetoric to argue that white women were equal to their male counterparts and thus deserved to exercise their rights and be freed from bondage. This comparison has disturbing implications. Within the stadial view of progress, this young woman situated herself in white womanhood obscured the enslavement of Africans and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples' reasonable companionship justified.

²⁰⁶ Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 98.

Conclusion

In 1922, *The Famous Americans for Young Readers* series published its first work on a famous American Woman. As H. Oxley Stengel stated in the preface of the work, the founder of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary had been chosen because of the work she had done to improve the lives of nineteenth-century women. In a poignant line, Stengel stated that “because she lived, other girls have found it easy to obtain the higher culture which was once forbidden them.”¹ Providing an overview of the life of this educational pioneer, the work ended with a statement reminiscent of eighteenth-century female education discourse. As Stengel concluded, “the college-bred woman is the truer companion, wife or mother, because she is able to see far beyond the walls of her kitchen.”² Three years after women were granted the right to vote, pre-revolutionary rationales rooted in Scottish Enlightenment conceptions of gender persisted.

Historians, including Johann Neem, have suggested that Americans decided that young girls should also be educated in the post-revolutionary era. Opinion pieces on female education, academy addresses, and advertisements for ladies schools disrupt this notion of fixity. In the colonial era, proponents deployed a view of women featured in Fordyce’s *Sermons*. Editorialists argued that, as reasonable companions to men, upper-class white women were entitled to educational opportunities. The definitional framework of this ideological construct was expanded in the 1780s to include a crucial societal role. By cultivating sensibility, the fair sex exerted influence over the morals and manners of their husbands and sons. This instrumental role allowed upper-class white women to exert informal political agency in the printed public sphere. In the 1790s, emerging women’s rights rhetoric threatened to destabilize the gender hierarchies, which

¹ H. Oxley Stengel, Preface to *The Story of Mary Lyon* (New York: Barse and Hopkins, 1922) *The Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/22015397>

² Stengel, *The Story of Mary Lyon*, 181.

facilitated white women's access to education and role as moral arbiters. Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft's potentially radical assertions did not unsettle the racial hierarchy. In this sense, they contributed to re-imagining what rights those who performed white femininity were entitled to, rather than refuting the construct of reasonable companionship. Female editorialists and academy students participated in this discourse. Some, such as "a young lady," equated their lack of political rights to living in bondage. This powerful rhetorical device obscured the subjugation and dispossession of African and Indigenous peoples, which white womanhood supported.

Reading the silences reveals how white women's quest for education and equality with their male counterparts maintained the racial hierarchy. Women's transition from slave to reasonable companion justified a continuum of unfreedom that included subjugating peoples deemed inferior to justify enslavement and dispossession. Slave owners placed their advertisements alongside those for community-based schools. They provided detailed descriptions of the enslaved, indentured, and apprenticed individuals they asserted ownership over. Reading into the silences of these sources intended to aid in these individuals' apprehension provides valuable insights. Enslaved and unfree individuals actively resisted the systems of oppression that permeated Revolutionary America. They exercised their agency and took their freedom by protesting with their feet. Acknowledging white women's role in upholding unequal hierarchies of race, class and gender forces scholars to ask difficult questions. What role did Christianity play in Enlightenment discourses? What did equality with white men entail? Moreover, who did the fair sex's quest for equality leave behind? Understanding how the subjugation and dispossession of non-white peoples provided scaffolding for the fair sex's quest for equality has implications for addressing how white feminism upholds systems of oppression today.

The recent publication of Koa Beck's book *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who they Leave Behind* (2021) demonstrates the persistence of fair sex ideology. Beck defines this ideology as "a type of feminism that takes up the politics of power without questioning them – by replicating patterns of white supremacy, capitalistic greed, corporate ascension, inhumane labour practices, and exploitation, and deeming it empowering for women to practice these tenants as men always have."³ Eighteenth-century female editorialists and academy students were empowered by an ideology that justified the subjugation, enslavement, and dispossession of African and Indigenous peoples. A direct line may be drawn from their arguments to the nineteenth and twentieth-century suffragettes who deployed respectability politics to argue that they were entitled to the right to vote. Beck argues that suffragettes "did not digress too far from what women are supposed to be or who is deemed a woman in the first place."⁴ Beck argues that fourth-wave feminists take a collectivist and intersectional approach that does not laud the success of limited groups of women who uphold systems of oppression. Beck asserts that "white feminists will be the ones who decide how long we will keep playing to these historical scripts and when we will stop mythologizing that we are all aligned in the same way under the same power."⁵ Dismantling fair sex ideology requires those who have benefitted from it to support those it oppresses. Tracing the influence of Scottish Enlightenment rhetoric in eighteenth-century female education discourse contributes to understanding the roots of the systems of oppression that still operate today.

³ Koa Beck *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who they Leave Behind* (New York: Atria Books, 2020) xvii

⁴ Beck, *White Feminism*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

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