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-Scribbling Women-
Female Historians in the Early American Republic,
1790-1814

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Submitted, Spring 2012

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When I look back at the year I've had, one thing is undeniably certain: it would not have been possible alone. When I timidly knocked on Carol Lasser's door my sophomore year and asked her to be my academic advisor, I could not have anticipated the magnitude of support and guidance she would provide. Especially as my thesis advisor this year, she has been a major source of inspiration and validation. She pushed me through so many tears and to so much triumph that I cannot begin to thank her enough for her many amazing contributions to this thesis and my time at Oberlin College.

I would also like to thank other professors, whose lessons have influenced this thesis. Gary Kornblith's seminar, *Revolutionary America and the Early Republic*, provided me with much of the background for my topic. Through my research for the seminar, I discovered that early American history could be about more than just dead, white men. I was introduced to so many strong and inspirational female patriots—particularly Mercy Otis Warren, who was the first muse for this project. Pablo Mitchell's course, *American Sexualities*, also played a key role in my thinking for this thesis by teaching me different ways to approach the study of gender relations in American society.

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In the end, though, nothing would have been possible without my parents and my little brother.

The amount of time my mother spent on the phone, listening quietly as I read the roughest manifestations of this thesis aloud to her, seems almost a lifetime. My father, practically from the time I was born, emphasized the importance of telling a good story, and, although my spelling may have suffered under his influence, I know my narrative voice could not have been developed without his exciting bedtime adventures. My brother, Sean, kept my spirits high. No matter what my mood on any given day, a text from my best bro always made me smile.

- Introduction -

“It is almost impossible now to appreciate the vast influence of woman’s patriotism upon the destinies of the infant republic...History can do it no justice.”¹
- Elizabeth F. Ellet, 1848

“We are taught about Benedict Arnold, the first traitor in America, but I’ve never heard...about Deborah Sampson, the first woman to take a bullet for [the] nation...I am 60 years old and I learn this story...I should have learned that story in fourth grade. Because it helps you as a child to know that it is not just Paul Revere riding a horse and calling, ‘The British are coming, the British are coming.’ It’s not just Benjamin Franklin and George Washington and the battles won, it’s the bravery of all these people that are undiscovered, unknown.”²
- Meryl Streep, 2011

The study of early American history rarely escapes the penumbra of the male experience. Because men’s voices were more readily recorded and preserved, they are more easily accessible. Researching her 1848 history of women in the American Revolution less than a century after the war, Elizabeth Ellet lamented what she described as the “manuscript-destroying” generation of women.³ The leave-no-trace ideology that prompted many women to burn or shred their private letters and diaries, combined with the private, secluded nature of the sources that remained, made Ellet’s task a difficult one, and she woefully proclaimed, “The heroism of the Revolutionary women has passed from remembrance with the generation who witnessed it; or it is seen only by faint and occasional glimpses through the gathering obscurity of tradition.”⁴ While academia increasingly acknowledges the presence of women in early America, the problem of female representation in popular historical discourse persists.

Abigail Adams, Martha Washington, Sally Hemings—the few early American women’s stories introduced in schools are taught and remembered mainly by their relationship to male

¹ Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence: a one-volume revised edition of Elizabeth Ellet’s 1848 landmark series*, edited by Lincoln Diamant, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger (1998), 24.

² Vicki Woods, “Meryl Streep: Force of Nature,” *Vogue Magazine*, 12 December 2011.

³ Ellet, 16.

⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

relatives and friends. The rest are left to fade into the obscurity of the unknown. Under no pretense does this thesis claim to have solved this particular problem. It is, in its character and approach, an academic paper directed towards a limited audience. Neither does it wish to propose that women's stories should be studied wholly separate from men's. The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries formed a period when women's lives were, in fact, intrinsically linked to their male connections. However, what makes a woman worthy of study should not simply be the man she married. While connecting female voices to male-centric histories is useful and necessary in that it provides significant depth and understanding, the experience of women in early America is historically valuable in its own right.

The subjects of this thesis, female historians Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams, are prime examples of this fact. Warren's long writing career, which began in 1775 with a satirical drama lampooning British officials and culminated with her 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, eventually eclipsed that of her husband. Adams never married and began publishing her writing in 1784 to earn a living on her own. By 1799, she had entered the historical genre with her *Summary History of New-England*. Not only were these women among the first female authors in America, they were among the first *authors* in America, publishing their work just as the new nation's literary culture began to emerge. As individuals, their lives are fascinating and dynamic. As published female historians, their role in the development of a space for the female voice in the era's intellectual discourse is critical. Yet, both Warren and Adams, along with their scholarly contributions, have been largely unappreciated or forgotten. By examining their lives and experiences as female historians in the early American republic, this study seeks to recapture and celebrate their significance to the study of women in American history.

The American Revolution profoundly influenced the lives of many American women, including Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams. Due to the fact that ordinary actions, such as purchasing tea or sending letters, had become so sharply politicized, the war provided an accessible gateway for women to take the first step in identifying with a larger cause.⁵ Even though very few women physically left their homes to fight, almost a decade of battle waged on their doorsteps had greatly altered their lives and mindsets. Writing to friends and relatives across the colonies carried women's voices beyond the four walls of the home and provided a safe, private space for them to ruminate on current events. Unable to lift a sword in defense of their new nation, Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams, along with many other women, instead lifted their pens.

The timing of their literary debuts was opportune. While some men clung tightly to the tradition of a separate, domestic sphere for women, the entrance of women's writing into the public realm was a relatively accepted trend in the early republic. Inspired in part by the Revolutionary claim that "truth comes recommended from [female] tongues," the emerging concept of "Republican Motherhood" played a significant role in this acceptance.⁶ This doctrine argued that women had the power and the duty to promote virtue and republicanism in the rising generation of politicians. As such, it gave women an indirect voice in the affairs of the nation and greatly influenced the push for improvement in female education.⁷

⁵ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, University of North Carolina Press (1980), 38.

⁶ "To the Female Inhabitant of the Colony of Rhode Island." *Newport Mercury*. Newport, Rhode Island, March 13, 1775, Issue 862.

⁷ For more on this concept, see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980), and Rosemarie Zagari's *Revolutionary Backlash: women and politics in the early American Republic* (2007).

Despite some skepticism regarding whether a woman possessed a mind firm enough to be properly educated, if her duty was truly to instruct and guide her family, it was only logical that she should be educated as well. Many argued that the fault did not lie not with women's constitutions at all, but rather with a system that valued them only for their ability to stitch and remain silent. Charles Brockden Brown, a prominent novelist and advocate for female education, maintained in his 1798 novel, *Alcuin*, that "those who know no tool but the needle, cannot be skillful at the pen."⁸ Regretting that she was only ever taught to "make a pie, and cut out a gown," Brown's fictional female intellectual, Mrs. Carter, declared that disparities in education and the seemingly arbitrary separation of the sexes were "the most egregious" injustices, as they "[made] sex a reason for excluding half of mankind from all those paths which lead to usefulness and honor."⁹ If women were to be considered less mentally capable than men, Mrs. Carter argued that the blame rested with the exclusionary customs of the so-called republican government, whose "law-makers thought as little of...us in their code of liberty as if we were pigs, or sheep."¹⁰

Although Brown was a man, his arguments for female education reflect similar arguments made by women like Judith Sargent Murray, whose 1790 essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes," was published even before Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* made it to American shores in 1794.¹¹ Brown's *Alcuin* may be a work of fiction, but the fact that a male author penned such strong opinions in a female character is indicative of a larger discourse brewing. Into this pocket, nestled comfortably between the ideology of Republican Motherhood and the new appreciation for the potential of the female intellect, Mercy Warren and

⁸ Charles Brockden Brown, *Alcuin: a dialogue*, Bicentennial edition, Kent State University Press (1987), 11.

⁹ *Ibid*, 16, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

¹¹ Pattie Cowell. "Murray, Judith Sargent Stevens," *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-01184.html>. Feb. 2000.

Hannah Adams shrewdly inserted their historical works. This new space, however, was not entirely stable, and women writers still had to contend with centuries of male-dominated custom that viewed them as mere “scribblers” rather than true authors.¹²

As this thesis argues, where Warren’s and Adams’ socioeconomic backgrounds differed greatly, their gendered experience as female historians informed their authorial careers in remarkably similar ways. Having transgressed into a public, intellectual sphere traditionally reserved only for elite males, the backlash these women experienced was, at times, unrelenting. Oftentimes, their works were only accepted if they appeared suitably modest and amateur—the traits of a tolerable female scholar. A history that came across as too assertive and presumptuous was rejected for being pedantic and unfeminine.¹³ Nevertheless, by adhering to and manipulating contemporary gender tropes, both Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams were able to solidify and advance their place in a burgeoning American literary culture.¹⁴ Despite the male domination of academia at that time, the strong female presence of Warren and Adams in the intellectual development of the early republic provided a significant model for other generations of female scholars to follow and build upon.

In order to comment on the lives of Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, I make use of a variety of sources. For general background information on the experience of women in the early republic, I turned mainly to Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic* and Rosemarie Zagari’s *Revolutionary Backlash*. Both books examine the inherent tension behind the doctrine of

¹² Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, University of Pennsylvania Press, (2007), 56.

¹³ See Bonnie G. Smith’s *The Gender of History*, Harvard University Press (1998).

¹⁴ For more information on how Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams see Nina Baym’s *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860*, Rutgers University Press (1995) and Michael Everton’s “The Courtesies of Authorship: Hannah Adams and Authorial Ethics in the Early Republic.” *Legacy* 20, no. 1/2 (2003).

Republican Motherhood, which, while it allowed for some expansion of the female sphere, simultaneously restricted that expansion to the domestic realm. Likewise, these studies provide valuable information on the influence of the American Revolution on the hierarchy of the sexes, as well as the push to improve female education, and the increasing presence of women in public. *Founding Mothers* by Cokie Roberts centers around similar themes, with a more popular and more biographical approach.

For information on the experiences of Warren and Adams specifically, I employed a variety of primary sources, including a book of Mercy Warren's letters, compiled by Jeffrey Richards and Sharon Harris, and Hannah Adams' *Memoir*. Both sources provide a valuable window into their lives, as well as their experiences writing and publishing as women in early-nineteenth-century America. These sources, however, are not without their problems. There are events in both women's lives that they did not think to comment upon, or that editors did not find significant enough to include in a collection of letters. As such, some important details are missing or are quite difficult to access. To fill in the blanks, I relied almost exclusively upon three secondary source biographies. Because Warren did not begin keeping meticulous records of her letters until around 1773, Nancy Rubin Stuart's *The Muse of the Revolution* and Rosemarie Zagari's *A Woman's Dilemma* offer extensive narratives of Warren's life, especially her childhood and experience as a young adult.¹⁵ Regarding Hannah Adams, Gary D. Schmidt's *A Passionate Usefulness* fulfilled a similar role to the Stuart and Zagari biographies, fleshing out the many details of Adams' life that she herself found too insignificant to mention in her *Memoir*.

¹⁵ Zagari, in particular, engages in an interesting discussion of an important paradox in Warren's life—namely, the fact that she seized an education and initiated a writing career for herself, yet remained strikingly silent on the general issues of female education and the expansion of women's domestic roles.

While this thesis focuses on the lives and formal histories of Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, other women were also contributing to the field through teaching, playwriting, essays, and poetry. Two studies, *Women's Early American Historical Narratives* by Sharon M. Harris and *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* by Nina Baym, provide an effective overview of how women's voices (and eventually the history of women) emerged and persisted within the historical genre in America. Similarly, William Raymond Smith's *History as Argument: Three Patriot Historians of the American Revolution* provides a useful background on history writing in the early-nineteenth century. By comparing Warren's Republican *History* to the Federalist histories of John Marshall and David Ramsay, Smith comments on the significance of history as a genre to early American society, both as an instructional tool and as a device to cultivate a sense of national unity in states that were formerly considered quite separate in their governments and customs. I have also benefited from articles that explore the role of gender and class in influencing the character and subject of the works of Hannah Adams and Mercy Warren, their political and religious interests, and their successes and failures in manipulating the publishing industry to their advantage.¹⁶

Finally, to inform my close readings of primary source reviews taken from newspapers and periodicals, as well as the controversies between John Adams and Mercy Warren and Jedidiah Morse and Hannah Adams, I follow Bonnie G. Smith's *The Gender of History*, which tracks the nineteenth-century emergence of strong distinctions between the male professional and the female amateur. Applying this argument to positive and negative reviews, as well as the

¹⁶ Specifically, Michael W. Vella's "Theology, Genre, and Gender: The Precarious Place of Hannah Adams in American Literary History" (1993); Michael J. Everton's "The Courtesies of Authorship: Hannah Adams and Authorial Ethics in the Early Republic" (2003); Nina Baym's "Mercy Otis Warren's Gendered Melodrama of Revolution" (1991); Lester H. Cohen's "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory" (1980); and Lawrence J. Friedman and Arthur F. Shaffer's "Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism" (1975).

personal attacks levied at Warren and Adams regarding their histories, illuminates how directly society was engaged in constructing separate spheres for men and women, especially in the public, intellectual realm.

This thesis opens with an exploration of the familial, economic, and educational backgrounds of Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, as well as their Revolutionary experiences. Born into vastly different circumstances, their class backgrounds affected their writing careers in significant ways. Warren, for example, came from and married into a wealthy family. Originally, she treated writing as a hobby and an escape from anxiety in her husband's absence, necessitated by his political career. As the American Revolution developed, she began increasingly to see writing, especially political writing, as a part of her patriotic duties. Hannah Adams, on the other hand, turned to writing to escape a very different reality: poverty. The Revolution had taught her how to earn a necessary living for herself. Adams later considered her writing the fulfillment of her female duties under the doctrine of Republican Motherhood, but it was survival rather than ideology first prompted her to publish her writing.

In spite of these contrasting experiences, both Warren and Adams eventually found themselves writing American history. The second chapter examines this phenomenon, carrying their similarities and differences into a discussion of the process of writing history. Warren, with her elite status and epistolary influence, could access more diverse sources than Adams. Similarly, Adams chose the genre and audience for her *Summary History of New England* based on practicality, while Warren's lofty, three-volume *History of the Rise Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* did not need to sell to promote her livelihood. Where Warren's style and argument are more opinionated and directed towards a more elite audience, Adams' history

was modest and accessible. Even so, both women encountered difficulties due to their gender, and this influenced the character of their work. Further, because the publishing industry had been designed to accommodate wealthy men, neither woman was able to navigate it to her satisfaction.

The third and fourth chapters examine the positive and negative responses to Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams' histories, with the third focused on general receptions and the fourth devoted to the direct, personal attacks they encountered. Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams established a place for the female historian that can still reveal to us how the gendering of authorship and its reception shapes our understanding of the past. By investigating how gender functioned in the reviewers' comments, these chapters point to the creation of a separate discourse regarding female authorship. In order to distinguish serious, male-authored histories from what were considered amateur works by women, a dualistic vernacular was constructed, in which the male truth and rationality were elevated above the female drama and sentimentality. Similarly, these responses provide an interesting look into what was considered appropriate in female intellectualism. Hannah Adams, for example, was celebrated for her modesty and simplicity. Mercy Warren was criticized at times for being too opinionated. In the end, although neither woman could escape criticism, they did not give in to the pressure and held fast to their right to a historical voice of their own.

Chapter 1

*A Female Pen Might Be Excused:**Mercy Warren & Hannah Adams, the Early Years*

In 1774, as the British government enforced the so-called Intolerable Acts, a series of harsh retributive statutes in response to the recent Boston Tea Party, Mercy Otis Warren penned a bold letter to her loyalist friend, Hannah Quincy Lincoln. Offended that a “gentleman... acquaintance” had warned Lincoln against entering into any political discussion with her, Warren expressed no regret for touching on a subject “so much out of the road of female attention.”¹ The harbor at Boston had been forcibly closed; the royal government across the Atlantic had seized almost full control of Massachusetts local affairs; new loopholes in the judicial administration of that colony allowed royal officials to escape justice; and, to Warren, a bloody conflict seemed inevitable. While Warren apologized in her letter for upsetting her friend’s delicate sentiments and assured Lincoln that party politics would never stand in the way of their friendship, she simultaneously refused to tiptoe around current events. Instead, she resolutely asserted her belief that “every mind of the least sensibility must be greatly affected with the present distress, and even a female pen might be excused for touching on the important subject.”² As an American wife and mother, whose “every domestic enjoyment depends on the decision of the mighty contest,” Warren believed she was entitled by right and duty to her opinions. As for the less agreeable members of society, who would no doubt ridicule such political discourse by women, Warren wrote to another female correspondent that “their censure or applause is equally indifferent to [me].”³

¹ Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Quincy Lincoln, September 3, 1774: Jeffrey Richards & Sharon M. Harris. *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, University of Georgia Press (2009), 34.

² Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Quincy Lincoln, June 12, 1774: Ibid, 30.

³ Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Winthrop, 1774: Ibid, 27.

Still largely dependent on the approval of her male relatives and friends for her public writing in 1774, this set of letters nevertheless highlights the private, domestic development of Mercy Warren's famous patriotism and reflects a larger trend that galvanized a generation of American women. With the tendency of the Revolution to politicize even the tiniest details of a person's life, many women, inspired by the idea of liberty and equality, began for the first time to make political choices in defense of their new nation. While these choices were sometimes as simple as refusing to purchase British tea or muslin, they nevertheless engaged women in a discourse that brought them closer to the exclusively masculine public realm and prepared them to seize increased opportunities after the War. Mercy Warren, for example, justified the development of her public voice during the Revolution by claiming it as her patriotic duty. Hannah Adams, a younger female historian of the early republic, learned how to support herself financially during the Revolution, and carried these skills into her profession as an author. By highlighting aspects of their family lives, early education, friendships, and Revolutionary experiences, this chapter examines how two very different women both found themselves writing historical manuscripts.⁴

**“The only thing I can properly call my own”:
Mercy Otis Warren's Patriotic Duty**

Mercy Otis Warren was born in west Barnstable, Massachusetts in the fall of 1728, the third child and first daughter of James Otis, a successful merchant-politician, and his wife, Mary Allyne. While both her parents died before the termination of the Revolution, as biographers Nancy Rubin Stuart and Rosemarie Zagarri argue, their circumstances nevertheless left a lasting

⁴ In the following biographical sketches of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams, I do my best to address each subject by either their full name or their last name, as one should address any serious historical figure, male or female. However, in more potentially confusing instances (such as discussing Mercy Warren in conjunction with her husband, James, or Hannah Adams and her father, Thomas), I occasionally refer to subjects by their first names only.

impression on the young Mercy Warren. Mary Allyne Otis' strict parenting style, for example, affected Warren as an adult mother.

Having given birth to thirteen children, only six of whom survived infancy, Mary Otis' role in such an unrelenting cycle of childbirth and death, as well as her strict Calvinist outlook must have made things difficult for her eldest daughter. Although Mercy Warren came from an elite family background, with the matron of the house otherwise disposed, she was expected to take responsibility for various household duties, which most likely included sewing clothes, knitting stockings, preparing meals, churning butter, boiling laundry in bleach and lye, and making soap. Acting as her mother's domestic "deputy" in this way engaged Warren in skills that would one day be applied in her own home.⁵ Conversely, the severity of her mother's Calvinistic principles would not be carried on. A deeply religious woman proud of her Pilgrim ancestry, Mary Allyne Otis was a firm parent, who "expected youngsters to atone for every sin." Although it is likely that the Puritan emphasis on literacy prompted Mary Otis to teach her daughters to read the Bible, Warren would ultimately reject her mother's stern parenting style, dismissing it as the "Irksome Methods of Severity."⁶ A much more tolerant mother influenced by Enlightenment tracts on childrearing, Warren preferred, instead, to nurture her five sons like "tender plants."⁷

While Mary Otis is notably absent from Mercy Warren's later written records, affectionate references to her "venerated father" abound. At a time when women had virtually no legal existence outside of their male relations, it makes sense that the life of James Otis,

⁵ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren*, Beacon Press (2009), 12; Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, Harlan Davidson (1995), 10.

⁶ Zagari, 10.

⁷ Stuart 13; Zagari 9, 25-6.

described as a warm and genial man, influenced his daughter in profound ways.⁸ Zagarri and Stuart both identify James Otis' legal profession and connections, as well his obsession with educating his eldest sons, as particularly significant in the development of Warren's early political consciousness.

For example, Otis made a living arguing the cases of "Barnstable's poor whites and indentured servants" and settling property disputes between the area's wealthy elites. This connection to the town's working class, as well as Warren's own daily interactions with the farmstead's paid and indentured labor forces, provided her with "an appreciation of ordinary people...[and] introduced her to the frustrations of the disempowered."⁹ Likewise, decades before the Warren home at One Liberty Square in Plymouth became a sort of salon for the Sons of Liberty, her father's work on the legal circuit brought him into direct contact with John Adams and other patriots, who would later become his family's allies against the British government.¹⁰ Of course, while Mercy Warren may have been exposed to these political figures and ideas early in life, the lack of records kept from her youth makes this argument difficult to confirm. The influence of her father's views on education, however, is another story, and its effects can be traced unto Warren's death in 1814.

Although it did not seem to deter his clientele, the fact that James Otis lacked a formal education was a source of constant embarrassment for him, and he was determined that his sons should not suffer under the same yoke. Further, as Zagarri notes, Otis "wanted to be more than a simple farmer," and he worked hard to build a successful legal career. As his connections and influence expanded across Barnstable and eventually the entire colony, he understood that his

⁸ Ibid 11, 3.

⁹ Stuart 10.

¹⁰ Zagarri, xvi.

sons' graduating college would solidify his prominence.¹¹ To accomplish this goal, Otis lined up his Yale-educated brother-in-law, the Reverend John Russell, to tutor his oldest boys, James (Jemmy) and Joseph, in exchange for the Otis farm's produce.¹² Always close to her eldest brother, Mercy Warren grew even closer to Jemmy as the knowledge he brought home from lessons expanded her world and provided an escape from the restrictive boundaries of her rural, female upbringing. Eventually, after years of persistent begging, their father allowed her to join her uncle's tutorials, and her lessons there were remarkably similar to her brothers'. Although writing was not considered a useful skill for women, she was taught to hold a pen and encouraged to develop her talent through poetry. She eagerly devoured the prose of Shakespeare, Pope, and Dryden, and Raleigh's *History of the World* was said to have been one of her favorite books. Because Greek and Latin were typically only taught to college-bound men, Warren experienced the classics through translations.¹³ Proving herself as capable and intelligent as her brothers, Mercy Warren remained Jemmy's favorite intellectual confidant even after he left for Harvard in 1739.

Indeed, as her brother's opinions evolved in the decades leading up to the American Revolution, he became the first of many prominent men to stimulate and foster Mercy Warren's political awareness. As a strong, early voice in the fight against British tyranny, James Otis Jr.'s passionate and dramatic oratory inspired a generation of younger patriots, including his sister. As he had vowed, his words "set the province in flames."¹⁴ Known to his friends as "The Patriot" and credited with coining the phrase "no taxation without representation,"¹⁵ Jemmy's

¹¹ Zagarri, 2.

¹² Stuart, 11-12.

¹³ Ibid, 13; Zagarri, 13.

¹⁴ Stuart, 25.

¹⁵ Ibid, 5.

regular correspondence with his sister gave her unique access to a world largely unknown to colonial women—the world of politics.

Sheltered by the privacy of their letters, Warren felt free to think critically about British colonial policy, different forms of government, and, eventually, what it meant to be a female patriot. However, as Zagari points out, had the turbulent events of the 1760s not broken her brother's delicate mental state Warren's political experimentation "might well have remained a private hobby or curious feminine affectation."¹⁶ Physically beaten by the opposition and giving into despair, James Otis Jr. increasingly turned to drink in the 1770s and railed against his family and friends. Described by John Adams as a "ship without a helm," Jemmy had lost himself and was eventually removed to the countryside to recover.¹⁷ In his absence, Mercy Warren, who claimed she loved her brother more deeply "than...any other person in the world,"¹⁸ would take up his fight, at long last engaging her well-trained pen in the public debate.

In acknowledging the many influences on Mercy Warren's long and successful writing career, it would be irresponsible to neglect her husband, James Warren. While her father arranged for her unorthodox education, and her brother encouraged her to develop the skills she naturally possessed, Mercy Warren could not have published her work without the seemingly unlimited support of her husband. Over the course of their fifty-four year marriage, the happy pair raised five sons and played an instrumental role in the development of their new nation.

As a couple, the Warrens embodied the Enlightenment ideal that husband and wife should be intimate friends and near equals in marriage.¹⁹ While they were not married until

¹⁶ Zagari, 21.

¹⁷ Stuart, 41.

¹⁸ Mercy Otis Warren to James Otis Jr, September 10, 1769: Richards & Harris, 4.

¹⁹ Zagari, 18. Interestingly, Zagari also observes that the births of Warren's sons all were roughly two years apart. Extended periods of breast-feeding, often lasting one to two years, was an early, natural form of family limitation and planning, 25.

rather late in life—she was 26, he 28—Mercy described James as a “powerful magnet, the center of my early wishes and the star which attracts my attention.”²⁰ As the “first friend” of her heart, he, in turn, was fascinated by his wife’s “masculine genius.”²¹ During the Revolution, rather than containing her gift for writing within the walls of their Plymouth home, James’ unconditional support worked to set it free. As he was often away on business, he encouraged his wife’s writing in the hope that it would calm her active mind and keep her from anguish. This strategy was largely successful. In her private letters, she sought comfort and validation from women facing similar challenges. In her published work, she discovered her Revolutionary niche.

Reaching out to other “war widows,” wives whose husbands’ military and political careers kept them far from home, Mercy Warren found herself at the center of a network of kindred spirits, including Abigail Adams and Hannah Winthrop. This expanding network of female patriots provided Warren with a wartime domestic support group, as well as an opportunity to discuss the purpose and meaning of patriotism with other women. Likewise, her public writing increasingly came to enrich and define her life. Just as women began to assume a greater domestic role in their husbands’ stead, managing family farms and businesses, finances, and their children’s education, Mercy Warren began to write. “At a period when every manly arm was occupied,” she explained in the Preface of her history of the American Revolution, she saw it as her duty as an elite woman of leisure to record and deliberate on current events.²²

Despite his frequent absences, in the development of her writing, James Warren remained his wife’s devoted ally. When Mercy, fearing retribution for her boldness, shrunk from the

²⁰ Zagarri, 3.

²¹ Stuart, 20.

²² Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution: Interspersed with biographical, political and moral observations*, vol. 1, Manning & Loring, for E. Larkin, No. 47, Cornhill (1805), v.

public realm, James reassured her. “God has given you great abilities,” he explained. “For all these things I esteem I love you in a degree that I can’t express. They are all now to be called into action for the good of mankind, ...for the promotion of virtue and patriotism.”²³ In moments of intense self-criticism, he lifted her spirits, claiming that if she “had half the good opinion of yourself that I have of you[,] you certainly would not feel half the anxiety You do now.”²⁴ Although Mercy Warren’s political influence seems to have eventually surpassed her husband’s, this was never a source of bitterness for him, but rather a font of pride.²⁵ It was impossible, he wrote in 1775, for a husband to have ever “loved and respected a Wife more.”²⁶

As Mercy Warren’s public career grew, she began to look outside her immediate family for inspiration and mentorship. A major source of nonfamilial support came from the acclaimed British female historian, Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay.²⁷ With her brother, James, currently unable “to make those acknowledgments that are justly in your due,” Warren eagerly picked up his correspondence with Macaulay. Hoping that the younger woman would pardon “this free communication of sentiment from a person wholly unknown to you...whose bosom has been long warmed with affection and respect for your distinguished literary career,” Warren’s first letter to Macaulay in 1773 nevertheless opened ambitiously. “Has the Genius of liberty which once pervaded the bosom of each British hero...forsaken that devoted island?” she asked, initiating an exchange of news and ideas that would continue until Macaulay died in 1791.²⁸

Macaulay’s influence in Warren’s life is especially clear in the construction of Warren’s *History*. Many scholars posit that Mercy Warren began keeping records for her history of the

²³ Cokie Roberts, *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*, Harper Collins, New York (2004), 52.

²⁴ Zagarri, 20.

²⁵ Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, University of Pennsylvania Press (2007), 91.

²⁶ Zagarri, *Woman’s Dilemma*, 19.

²⁷ For more information on their friendship and correspondence, see: Kate Davies, *Catherine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender*, Oxford University Press (2005).

²⁸ Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay, June 9, 1773: Richards & Harris, 15.

American Revolution as early as 1775, and her letters to Catherine Macaulay provided a valuable source-base for this project. As a note in her Letterbook states, “several paragraphs...were afterwards transcribed by the author into her annals of the American Revolution.”²⁹ Further, these letters do not only record the events of the Revolution as they happened. While Warren had lived more years on Earth, Macaulay had lived more years in public and had much to teach her older friend. As Warren and Macaulay continued their correspondence, their letters trace the development of Warren’s political consciousness from an irritated but loyal subject of the British government, to a self-proclaimed “Daughter of America” and “*rebel lady*.”³⁰

Years later, despite the damaging scandal surrounding Macaulay’s marriage to a young man nearly thirty years her junior, Warren would remain a devoted supporter. When the younger woman came to visit North America in 1784-5, Mercy Warren was overjoyed. Although suffering from extreme writers block brought on by the death of her son, Charles, Warren had been waiting for this moment for decades. Contrasting the appearances of the two female authors—“Mercy in an unadorned American-made dress, her graying hair neatly tucked under a mob cap; the slender British author in a fashionable gown, her face ‘painted’ as usual in the French style”—Nancy Stuart also emphasizes the importance of the visit to Warren’s morale. Shortly after Macaulay left Plymouth, Warren’s pen was reinvigorated, and she wrote to her son, Winslow: “I mean to employ myself in writing, the ensuing winter, if my health and other circumstances will admit.”³¹ Among the first women to enter the field of formal history writing, Catherine Macaulay provided valuable inspiration for the older, more traditional Mercy Warren. Having finally met her idol in person, Warren’s mind was reenergized and she could once again return to her important work.

²⁹ See footnote no. 5 in Richards & Harris, 95

³⁰ Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay, August 24, 1775: Ibid, 61; February 15, 1777: Ibid, 95

³¹ Stuart, 172.

Equally central to her writing career was her relationship to John Adams. In December 1773, Adams wrote to James Warren, urging him to “make my compliments to Mrs. Warren and tell her that I want a poetical genius—to describe a late frolic among the sea nymphs and goddesses. I wish to see a late glorious event, celebrated by a certain poetical pen, which has no equal in this country.”³² The event referred to was the Boston Tea Party, and Mercy Warren initially refused Adams’ request, writing to Abigail early in 1774 that “a person who with two or three strokes of his pen has sketched out so fine a poetical plan need apply only to his own genius for the completion.”³³ In the end, however, John Adams did not need to write his own poem. A few weeks later, Warren sent him what would later be published in her book of poetry as *The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs*. Adams was so impressed with the poem that he had it printed anonymously in the *Boston Gazette*.³⁴ Although they first appealed to each other through their respective spouses, John Adams and Mercy Warren’s epistolary relationship later evolved into direct political discussion. By 1776, although she questioned his motives in asking her opinion on the future American government, she nevertheless felt bold enough to respond that she had “long been an admirer of a republican government,” and that, despite the assumed frivolity and superficiality of her sex, she could never be an advocate of monarchy. “Not even,” she added playfully, “to make you rich.”³⁵

For his part, Adams believed he was encouraging in Warren “one of the incontestable evidence of real genius.”³⁶ He relished in her series of plays lampooning Thomas Hutchinson and other British officials, and he frequently checked on the status of her *History* even as a diplomat abroad, providing her with helpful information, advice, and reassurance when needed.

³² Stuart, 3.

³³ Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Adams, December 29, 1774: Richards & Harris, 43.

³⁴ Stuart, 5.

³⁵ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, Marcy 10 1776: Richards & Harris, 69

³⁶ Stuart, 5.

By 1790, Warren felt confident enough to join a younger generation of female authors (including Judith Sargent Murray, Susanna Rowson, and Hannah Adams) in publishing under her own name. Her first foray into claimed authorship came in the form of a leather-bound compilation of her poetic and dramatic works, including two (*The Sack of Rome* and *The Ladies of Castille*) in which female patriots played a significant role.³⁷ While she dedicated the book to George Washington, most of the compilation had been written under Adams' mentorship, and she turned to him for help in staging *The Sack of Rome* in London.³⁸

Sadly, even though her book of poetry had been well received by the big names of the early republic—Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Adams all hailed it as a work of genius³⁹—politics and family deaths beat down her self esteem, and Warren's pen once again went silent, her historical manuscript kept hidden indoors. Having lost the battle against the ratification of the Constitution, Warren, as a vocal Democratic-Republican, began to feel that her family was grossly unappreciated in a staunchly Federalist Massachusetts. Even with their old friend John Adams as President of the United States, none of her sons seemed able to win even a local election. Feeling resentful and doubting herself, she began to wonder if her *History* was not best kept private as “a pleasant amusement to her children,” writing to Hannah Winthrop that “perhaps...I have blotted paper enough already.” After burying three of her five sons, she declared to Elbridge Gerry in 1793 that her “little talent for poetry” lay “buried in the grave of my dear children.”⁴⁰ Almost simultaneously, Warren's relationship with John Adams was cooling quickly.

³⁷ Stuart, 210; Zagari, *Woman's Dilemma*, 134-8.

³⁸ The play was never printed or performed in London. As Adams informed Warren, “Nothing American sells here.” Ibid, 138.

³⁹ Stuart, 217-8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 240; 210; 225.

As Catherine Macaulay had predicted in 1788, the Warren and Adams families “[did] not agree quite so well on public matters as [they] did formerly.”⁴¹ By the late 1790s, Adams’ presidency was floundering, and, rather than blaming the detested 1798 Alien & Sedition Acts for his unpopularity, his paranoia instead saw his former friends as new enemies, spreading malicious rumors. Adams had earlier written facetiously to James Warren that he dreaded Mercy’s *History* because, unlike others who would play a role in her narrative, Adams “knew what eyes were upon him.”⁴² By the time her *History* was actually published in 1805, he had retired in ignominy to his family in Braintree, and he now felt her discerning eyes upon him in an unsettling way. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, disparity in political opinions and a long, cold silence between Mercy Warren and John Adams in the early years of the republic bred an unfortunate misunderstanding and deep resentment, from which their relationship would never fully recover.

In 1790, Mercy Otis Warren willed the copyright of her poetry book to her favorite son, Winslow, claiming that she had “nothing else I can so properly call my own.”⁴³ As a young woman raised under traditional colonial values, it is entirely possible that she would have had nothing at all to leave behind. However, an innate curiosity and natural flair with the pen, as well as the constant support and protection of her male relatives set the stage for her later career as the Revolution’s leading female author. The growth of Mercy Warren’s patriotism and literary voice epitomized how the harrowing events of the American Revolution affected other women in society. With her biting satire and political acumen as her weapons, she stepped out from behind her male shields to perform what she saw as her patriotic duty, to publically attack

⁴¹ Stuart, 204.

⁴² Ibid 151.

⁴³ Ibid, 223.

British (and later, Federalist) tyranny. By the time of her death, the “Celebrious name of Warren” had inspired many of the next generation of female authors in the United States.⁴⁴

**“Desperation, therefore, and not vanity”:
Hannah Adams’ Literary Profession**

While Mercy Warren’s active writing fulfilled what she claimed as her patriotic duty, Hannah Adams’ work played a quite different role in her life. Born in 1755 in Medfield, Massachusetts, to a frustrated farmer and his wife, Adams did not grow up surrounded by the same financial and intellectual security as Mercy Warren. While Adams descended from the same relatively wealthy agricultural stock as Warren, by the age of twelve, she and her family were consumed by the stress of poverty. This was mostly due to a failure on the part of her father, Thomas Adams. Although he had been educated to attend Harvard, he never actually attended the college. In spite of this, he never fully relinquished his dreams of achieving gentleman status, and like James Otis, Thomas Adams yearned to be more than just a farmer. In 1763, he rented the family farm to open a bookstore, claiming he would “rather be librarian of Harvard than emperor of all the Russias.” Two years later, however, the business failed, and the political clout of the Adams family in Medfield had diminished such that Thomas was not elected a Medfield selectman, a position that had been in the family for generations.⁴⁵

Thus, even though Hannah Adams, like Mercy Warren, was naturally curious and remembered that her “first idea of the happiness of Heaven was, of a place where we should find our thirst for knowledge fully gratified,” she did not have an influential father, older brother, or Yale-educated uncle to support and protect her as she experimented with intellectualism.⁴⁶ She

⁴⁴ Judith Sargent Murray, quoted in Zagarri, *Women’s Dilemma*, xv.

⁴⁵ Gary D Schmidt, *A Passionate Usefulness: The Life and Literary Labors of Hannah Adams*, University of Virginia Press (2004), 16-19.

⁴⁶ Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams written by herself with Additional Notices by a Friend*, Gray and Bowen (1832), 4.

was never married, and she had no children. Unlike most of her female contemporaries, then, Adams would need to support herself. To do this she turned to her pen, capitalizing on the increasing presence of literary women and transforming the duty to write into the profession of writing.

However, while Adams would eventually become the first American woman to make writing her main profession—indeed, one could say she was the first *American* to do so, as most contemporary authors were elite men with primary religious or political careers—her initial attempts to enrich her mind began haltingly.⁴⁷ Adams, by her own description, was sickly child who lost her mother at the age of ten, “when maternal direction is of the greatest importance, particularly in the education of daughters.”⁴⁸ Like most girls her age, she had learned to read the Bible, but she was unable to attend the local country school due to her poor health, and she later admitted to a female friend that she was never taught how to hold a pen.⁴⁹

Despite a lack of formal education, Hannah Adams was an avid reader much like her father, who was known in Medfield as “Book Adams.”⁵⁰ Yet without the proper guidance, Adams described her first literary adventures as terribly foolish. The books she selected for herself were not the proper books for a developing mind, and she would later blame much of her social awkwardness on a propensity for reading romantic fiction. “I was passionately fond of novels,” she wrote in her *Memoir* as a warning to young girls, “and as I lived in a state of seclusion, I acquired false ideas of life.”⁵¹ Although her persistent illnesses had fortunately kept her “from many temptations which are incident to young people,” she claimed that her seclusion

⁴⁷Michael W. Vella, “Theology, Genre, and Gender: The Precarious Place of Hannah Adams in American Literary History,” *Early American Literature* 28, no. 1 (1993), 21; Michael J. Everton, “The Courtesies of Authorship: Hannah Adams and Authorial Ethics in the Early Republic,” *Legacy* 20, no. ½, (2003), 1.

⁴⁸Adams, 5-6.

⁴⁹Hannah Farnam Sawyer Lee, “Notices” in *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams*, 52.

⁵⁰Schmidt, 17.

⁵¹Adams, 4.

from society and immersion in fictional romances exposed her “to [more] errors of the understanding, than those who in early life have mixed more with the world.”⁵²

Fortunately, as Adams recounted in her *Memoir*, she was able to halt these quixotic indulgences in the 1770s by turning her mind to history and biography, “in each of which kind of reading I found an inexhaustible fund to feast my mind and gratify my curiosity.”⁵³ Likewise, when her father was forced by economic necessity to open their home to boarders, a silver lining to the grey cloud of poverty came when “some gentlemen... offered to instruct me in [Latin, Greek, geography, and logic] gratis, and I pursued these studies with indescribable pleasure and avidity.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, Latin and Greek were subjects closed to the more privileged Mercy Warren in her official tutorials with Reverend Russell. Adams, on the other hand, learning unofficially and sporadically from random sources, was able to pick up such skills, typically deemed useful only to young, college-bound men. Having rejected novels and acquired a more “masculine” knowledge for herself, Adams was able to redirect her studies, overcome the weakness of her mind, and develop an intellectual curiosity that would later help her earn a living.

Hannah Adams’ literary career did not begin during the American Revolution like Mercy Warren’s, but the conflict nevertheless taught her valuable lessons in economic independence. Capitalizing on the boycotts of British goods, to support herself during the war, Adams had learned to weave bobbin lace, “which was then saleable, and much more profitable... than spinning, sewing or knitting.”⁵⁵ However, this period of subsistence was short-lived. As her friend remarks at the end of the *Memoir*, “home-made lace could only be tolerated, when no

⁵² Adams, 9.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵⁴ Schmidt, 22, 25; Adams, 5-9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

other could be procured; and as soon as importation became easy, it sunk into disuse.”⁵⁶ With fingers less skilled than her older sister Betty’s, Adams was no longer able to support herself with needlework. Reluctantly, then, she turned to her mind as an economic vehicle.

For some time, she was able to use what she had learned of Latin and Greek to tutor three college-bound young men, one of who continued his studies at Cambridge. As a last resort, necessity induced her “to attend to my manuscript, with the faint hope that it might afford me some little advantage.”⁵⁷ Aware that her publication would expose her to censure and ridicule, she nevertheless decided, “that what is right and necessary in the situation in which Providence has placed me, cannot really be improper.”⁵⁸ During the Revolution, Adams had heard of women like Mercy Warren publishing their writing, and, in 1784, she joined them, publishing the first of her three-volume *View of Religions* with the help of her father and their family minister, Thomas Prentiss.⁵⁹

However, the advantages of a renowned literary career, while they did come eventually, did not come easily. Untrained to enter the public sphere, Adams described herself as “entirely destitute of pecuniary resources, ignorant of the world, incapable of conducting business, and precluded from almost all intercourse with persons of literature and information, and consequently destitute of friends who were able and willing to assist me.” Her first publishing arrangement with Benjamin Edes, who had also published Mercy Warren’s *The Group* in 1775, was so disastrous that Adams refused to mention his name in her *Memoir*.⁶⁰ Although her father’s business advice was rarely effective, he was also prevented by “age and infirmities”

⁵⁶ Lee, “Notices”, 68.

⁵⁷ Adams, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

⁵⁹ Schmidt, 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 42.

from assisting her in procuring materials and selling copies of her works.⁶¹ When her beloved and supportive sister died in 1789, Adams, like Mercy Warren, turned to writing as a coping mechanism for the grief. Embracing her increased isolation rather than fighting it, Adams devoted herself entirely to her work with the hope that, should it fail to rescue her from the grips of poverty, it would at least “awaken the activity of my mind, and preserve me from sinking under the weight of affliction I sustained in losing the best of sisters.”⁶²

Regardless of Adams’ desire to write as an escape from sorrow, she desperately needed the money from her publications. Without the added income from her sister’s needlework, Adams began to protect her work and profits from misleading publishers. While Thomas Adams had provided his daughter with very few influential connections, he did have one friend in Congress: Fisher Ames. In 1790, Hannah Adams turned to Ames, sending him a request to petition for the passage of a federal copyright law. Applying the right to private property to the ownership of a text, Ames effectively argued for the bill, and on February 25, 1790, the Federal Act of Copyright was passed. Despite the fact that relatively few authors availed themselves of it (perhaps because so few at the time expected to profit from their publications), Hannah Adams would copyright her texts for the remainder of her life.⁶³

Unfortunately, a copyright alone would not be enough to guarantee the profitability of her work. Failing at navigating the masculine publishing industry on her own, Adams began to search out a larger circle of more influential friends. By 1804, she had acquired this, both by chance and by the charming uniqueness of her character. Through her minister in Medfield, she had earlier met the influential Reverend James Freeman of Boston, who was one of the first

⁶¹ Adams, 17, 33.

⁶² Schmidt, 46.

⁶³ Ibid, 48-9

ministers to preach Unitarianism in New England.⁶⁴ His later assistance and success in procuring subscribers for Adams' various works brought her intellectually, though not yet physically, to the attention of elite Boston circles. Freeman's connection to the founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society, for example, provided Adams with some access to its published collections, as well as an effective arena for her own work to impress prominent intellectuals like Jeremy Belknap, author of *The History of New-Hampshire*, and James Winthrop, a professor at Harvard College.⁶⁵ These initial connections in Boston had undeniable value for Adams, expanding her paying audience from rural Massachusetts to the urban elite. However, without the added benefit of her own quirky character, her fame would surely have been short-lived.

As Michael Everton observes, it was Adams' shrewd manipulation of gender stereotypes that excited the "imagination, pity, and respect" of the Boston elite and finally catalyzed her success.⁶⁶ Adams' new circle of friends were mostly male, Federalist, and the members of a younger, more religiously liberal generation.⁶⁷ Her timidity and awkwardness were endearing to them; her destitute situation and lack of a strong male arm to uplift her appealed to their moral obligations to make a poor old woman remarkably happy. Indeed, Adams' close friend Mr. Buckminster, who she met when he was only sixteen, later gave her the use of his "large and valuable library, which was of great advantage to me in compiling my History of the Jews." He also introduced her to many of his acquaintances, including the Winthrop family, and was instrumental in facilitating her move to Boston. Josiah Quincy, Stephen Higginson, and William Shaw, other wealthy Boston Federalists, worked to gather an annuity for her. As the founders of

⁶⁴ Schmidt, 50; Alan Seaburg, "Freeman, James," *American National Biography Online* (Feb. 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/08/08-00505.html>.

⁶⁵ Schmidt, 68; George B. Kirsch, "Belknap, Jeremy," *American National Biography Online* (Feb. 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/14/14-00049.html>.

⁶⁶ Everton, 16.

⁶⁷ Schmidt, 142.

the Anthology Society and the Boston Athenaeum, these men also negotiated her unprecedented entry into their famed institution.⁶⁸

As the first woman to enter the prestigious Athenaeum, Hannah Adams attracted a significant level of attention. Charming accounts of her character and habits circulated throughout the public consciousness, increasing the national recognition of her name. By displaying her unselfish, unassuming, simple and pure devotion to her work, the proliferation of these stories also worked to normalize Adams' unmarried status. For example, Josiah Quincy, the future mayor of Boston, reminisced in his diary over the first time Adams entered the vast library, writing: "Nothing daunted, the little lady browsed among the books, content to look as singular and as much out of place as a woman of to-day would look who frequented a fashionable club designed for the exclusive accommodation of males."⁶⁹ Hannah Lee provided a similar account at the end of Adams' *Memoir*. She wrote: "It was said that [Hannah Adams] often spent days at the Athenaeum; and that the librarian, after some ineffectual attempts to disengage her from her book, would lock the door, go home to his dinner, and return again, [to] find her in the same spot." Without a family to care for, "she was at liberty to read, or write without interruption; to turn over huge folios or musty manuscripts, from morning to night."⁷⁰ These stories, which saluted Adams' work ethic and character, also promoted the idea that, although she was wife and mother to no one, Adams was nevertheless dedicated to making herself useful to society.

Although Adams had won a supportive circle of friends and become a sort of national figure, her success also attracted negative attention. As Michael Vella writes, "a border had been

⁶⁸ Adams, 33-39.

⁶⁹ Schmidt, 143; Robert A. McCaughey, "Quincy, Josiah," *American National Biography Online* (Feb. 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/03/03-00407.html>.

⁷⁰ Lee, "Notices," 74, 83.

transgressed when Adams emerged as a theologically informed, and nearly economically independent liberal interpreter of New England history.”⁷¹ By the publication of her *Summary History of New England* in 1790, the thought of a woman entering such a masculine space and profession had shaken orthodoxy to its core, and the Reverend Jedidiah Morse stepped up to defend the traditional boundaries. Only a few years after Adams published a history of New England, Morse published his *Compendious History of New England*, interfering with the sale of her *Summary History* and abridgment. For this offense, Adams would later demand compensation. As will be detailed in later chapters, Morse’s complete disregard for the legitimate existence of the literary female voice sparked a long, drawn-out battle over legal and moral publishing rights, which ultimately ended in a disappointing stalemate for both parties.

Hannah Adams’ early years were defined by economic and intellectual struggles. With her biological mother dead and her father struggling to keep his business alive, Adams took charge of her own education. Never officially taught how to hold her pen, she later made her pen her work. The American Revolution had shown her that, as a woman, she could earn a living, and she brought this knowledge to her literary career. As one of the republic’s first professional female authors, Adams was remarkably successful at manipulating the era’s gendered language to promote and normalize her work. Writing that “it was desperation, therefore, and not vanity that induced me to publish,” she was able to justify her entrance into an exclusive and largely male profession.⁷² Once there, she used her position to advocate for the improvement of the “faulty mode of female education,” arguing that “under similar culture, and with equal advantages, it is far from being certain, that the female mind would not admit a measure of improvement, which would at least equal and perhaps in many instances eclipse, the boasted

⁷¹ Vella, 36.

⁷² Lee, “Notices,” 68.

glory of the other sex.”⁷³ While the defenders of tradition may have found the thought of a professional female author distasteful, they could not discharge Adams from the field once she had entered it.

Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams lived very different lives that led them down a remarkably similar path—that of the historian. While they were both affected by the events of the American Revolution, it shaped their careers in different ways. From her elite position as the daughter, sister, and wife of influential men, Mercy Warren was deeply affected by the politics of the conflict. Considering it her patriotic duty to record the events of the American Revolution, she later published her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* for an elite, male audience. Less economically privileged than Warren, Hannah Adams was motivated to write by necessity. She shrewdly seized the expanded economic opportunities for women after the Revolution, at the same time manipulating traditional gender norms, to construct and solidify a legitimate profession as a female author, especially when her *Summary History of New England* was abridged into a cheaper, more saleable edition for the use of schoolchildren. The next chapter explores how the different lives of Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams affected their experiences writing American history.

⁷³ Hannah Adams *View on Religions* (1784), quoted in Vella, 24.

Chapter Two

*But They Must be Witnesses:**Mercy Warren, Hannah Adams, and American History*

In acknowledging her male companion's comment that "women are most eloquent on a fan or a tea-cup," Charles Brockden Brown's fictional Mrs. Carter nevertheless insisted that women "must be, in some degree, witnesses of what is passing." "Theirs is a limited sphere," she argued, but "they are accurate observers. They see and hear, somewhat of the actions and characters of those around them. These are, of course, remembered, [and] become the topics of reflection... All this is perfectly natural and reasonable."¹ During the American Revolution, the absence of male relatives as well as the various boycotts, quartering acts, and forced evacuations had inextricably linked politics to the domestic realm. Fans and tea-cups suddenly had new meaning, and as women began to consider these public issues affecting their private lives, they also began to write about them. Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, in particular, turned these thoughts on current events into published histories.

For Mercy Otis Warren, who published her *History of the Rise Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* in 1805, history-writing was the logical climax of her literary career. She had observed and faithfully recorded the events and characters of the Revolution while the men were otherwise occupied, and she viewed her *History* as the fulfillment of a patriotic duty. Because women were developing new, indispensable roles for themselves in the early republic as the teachers and moral guides of civilization, and because histories were generally thought to play a similar role, Warren considered her *History* as an acceptable extension of the domestic

¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Alcuin: a dialogue*, Kent State University Press (1987), 9.

sphere.² For Hannah Adams, as well, her *Summary History of New England* (1799) and later abridgment for the use of schoolchildren (1805) were successfully promoted as the fulfillment of her female duties. Encouraged by the success of her *View of Religions*, Adams felt financially and intellectually stable enough to finally begin making herself “useful” to society.³ Although she never married and had no children, her *Summary History* in particular allowed her, in part, to claim her role as a Republican Mother, providing the next generation of citizens with easily accessible examples of the virtues and piety of their ancestors.

The transformation of a manuscript into a copyrighted, leather-bound volume for sale, however, was not always an easy one. Catherine Macaulay had written a famous history of Great Britain, but across the pond, the place of women in the field was still largely undetermined, mostly due to the fact that very few had attempted it. As this chapter discusses, Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, as the first American women to write formal histories of their country, faced many challenges. The sources available to them were often greatly limited and difficult to access. Long prefatory justifications of their entrance into a predominately masculine genre were an unfortunate necessity. Additionally, the printing industry was accustomed to dealing with rich men and was not always prepared to facilitate the publication of literary women. Thus, although they lived under vastly different socioeconomic circumstances, Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams encountered many of the same constraints due to their gender.

² See more: Lester H. Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren’s Historical Theory.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 2. Third Series (April 1, 1980): 200–218; Sharon M. Harris, *Women’s Early American Historical Narratives*, Penguin Classics (2003), xviii-xxiv.

³ Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams written by herself with Additional Notices by a Friend*, Gray and Bowen (1832), 33.

**“I was utterly unable to purchase books”:
The Beginnings of Narrative**

Although Mercy Warren presumably had begun writing her *History* as early as 1775, Hannah Adams was the first to publish with her *Summary History* in 1799. While Adams had primarily focused on printing information on religion, she was motivated by the openness of the historical field. “When I compiled this work,” she recounted in her *Memoir*, “there was not any history of New England extant, except Mather’s *Magnalia*, and Neal’s *History*; and these extended only to an early period in the annals of our country.”⁴ An 1805 review of her abridged work in the *Monthly Anthology & Boston Review*⁵ corroborated this dearth of material, claiming, “[Adams] indeed found the materials of her work scattered in many large volumes, musty records, and almost illegible manuscripts. *Then, the Summary History...was a desideratum.*”⁶ Like many historians today, Adams saw a historical vacancy and sought to fill it. Having first published out of financial desperation, she now “formed the flattering idea, that I might not only help myself, but benefit the public.”⁷ Without a husband or children to occupy her time, Adams instead devoted herself to her work so that “those early in life, who had not time or opportunity to peruse the large mass of materials” could have a single volume at their fingertips.⁸

Michael Everton and Sharon M. Harris highlight both sides to Adams’ motivation to write a history of New England for young people—the monetary and the moral. Everton observes that the market for textbooks was “exploding in accord with the post-Revolutionary

⁴ Adams, 34.

⁵ Founded in 1803 by Phineas Adams as a way to consolidate the intellectual culture of Massachusetts into a publication, editorship of *The Monthly Anthology* was soon passed to Reverend William Emerson. It was a miscellany publication, accepting literature reviews and poetry, as well as scientific articles. It was overseen by Emerson and the Anthology Club, of which many of Hannah Adams’ friends were members (e.g. Reverend Buckminster and William Shaw). Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850*, D Appleton & Co. NY (1930), 253-259.

⁶ Art 66. *Monthly Anthology & Boston Review* (1805).

⁷ Adams, 33.

⁸ *Ibid*, 33.

emphasis on education.”⁹ Although Adams could no doubt profit from this emphasis on education, it held a double meaning for her. Harris notes that the women who followed in Adams’ footsteps, like Sarah Pierce and Emma Willard, wrote their textbooks “to inculcate in young women a lifelong interest in history.”¹⁰ As someone whose early education had been haphazard at best, and who claimed to have rescued her mind from the frivolity of novels by redirecting it to the study of history, it is not difficult to imagine that making the history of New England accessible to young people—particularly young girls—was important to her.

Once Hannah Adams had settled on writing a history for her next publication and resolved to write it for the benefit of young people, the next course of action was to gather her sources; yet this was no easy feat. With colleges and libraries closed to women, those who wished to write history had to rely mainly on family libraries and male connections to send them books, and Adams had very few of these luxuries.¹¹ In fact, what books she had managed to acquire for herself were eventually sold to provide for her family in times of trouble.¹² As she wrote in her *Memoir*, “I found it difficult to procure proper materials, as I was utterly unable to purchase books.”¹³ Instead, Adams was known to frequent various bookshops, perusing her source material in-shop as an alternative to purchasing it.

There were also very few people available to send her information for her history. While she had limited access to the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society, when she found no authentic account of Rhode Island’s history, Adams had to travel to Providence herself “in order to examine the Records in the Secretary’s office.”¹⁴ For her account Revolutionary War’s

⁹ Everton, 11.

¹⁰ Harris, xii.

¹¹ *Ibid*, xiii.

¹² Schmidt, 126.

¹³ Adams, 39

¹⁴ Harris, xiii; Adams, 34

military aspects, a subject she felt uncomfortable tackling as a woman, with the author's permission, she relied mainly on David Ramsay's 1789 *History of the American Revolution*.¹⁵ It was not until later in life, after she had gained access to Reverend Buckminster's personal library and the vast collection of the prestigious Boston Athenaeum, that Adams found her need for sources fully satisfied.

For Mercy Warren, unlike Hannah Adams, the idea to publish a historical work on the American Revolution had been at the front of her mind for decades. During the Revolution, Warren had taken over where men could not spare the time to faithfully record the events of the war as she and her correspondents experienced them. Thus, while her status as an elite woman may have physically removed her from the conflict, Warren nevertheless considered herself an ideological insider.¹⁶ Due to the active role she had taken in its creation, Warren felt personally invested in the direction her new American society would take, and she hoped her *History* could guide and influence political leaders to be virtuous republicans. Less concerned with pedagogical improvements than Hannah Adams, Mercy Warren instead selected the gentleman elite as her audience, sending copies of her history to all the big names. "Sir," she wrote Thomas Jefferson on April 14, 1806, "with respect and diffidence the author asks his acceptance, and presents the first two Volumes of the History of the American Revolution to the President of the United States."¹⁷ Other prominent men who read her *History* included John Dickinson, Elbridge Gerry, James Winthrop, and John Adams.

¹⁵ According to Adams, in response to her appeal to Dr. Ramsay, she received a letter from Mrs. Ramsay "expressing her approbation of my work, and inclosing a bill of ten dollars." Adams, 37; William Raymond Smith notes that "contemporary scholarly opinion saw nothing wrong with the practice" of borrowing from other histories. William Raymond Smith, *History as Argument: Three Patriot Histories of the American Revolution*, The Hague, Mouton & Co (1996), 33.

¹⁶ Friedman & Shaffer, 214.

¹⁷ Mercy Otis Warren to Thomas Jefferson, April 14, 1806 in The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress, Series 1: General Correspondence 1651-1851. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib016068>

If Hannah Adams and Mercy Warren's life experiences had led them to select different historical genres and audiences for their works, they also shaped their ability to access sources. Warren's elite background and extensive connections gave her opportunities unavailable to Adams. Her own private correspondence with people like Catherine Macaulay, Hannah Winthrop, John Adams, and Elbridge Gerry provided her with an incredibly detailed picture of what had transpired during the Revolution. What she could not fill in, given her long friendships with these leaders, she could request to be told.¹⁸ After deciding in 1791 to extend her narrative to include "a few strictures on the origin...nature, and the probable consequences of the new government," Warren wrote to Elbridge Gerry asking him to provide descriptions of men like Robert Morris, James Wilson, and Patrick Henry, whom she had never met, and events she had not experienced firsthand. To this he agreed and promised to send her what he could.¹⁹

For sources outside her immediate circle of correspondence, Warren turned to mostly American documents to fill in the details. While contemporary, Federalist histories such as John Marshall's *Life of Washington* (1804) or David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution* gathered much of their information from the British *Annual Register*, historian William Raymond Smith notes that Warren "consistently treats military events from an American rather than from a British point of view."²⁰ As Nina Baym has observed, much of Warren's dramatic account of the battle at Lexington & Concord was drawn from *The Narrative of the Excursion and Ravages of the King's Troops under the Command of General Gage, on the Nineteenth of April 1775*, which was issued by an order of the Provincial Congress.²¹ Providing testimonies of

¹⁸ Harris, xiv

¹⁹ Stuart, 229-30

²⁰ Although Warren admitted to using the *Annual Register* as her main source for an account of naval engagements, "instead of merely copying from it, she digested and supplied her own interpretation of the material." Smith, 31-8.

²¹ Nina Baym, "Mercy Otis Warren's Gendered Melodrama of Revolution."

the various atrocities the British inflicted upon civilians, including the forcing of barely-clothed women and children from their homes, this document was clearly written with sympathies for the colonies. Together with her own collection of eyewitness accounts, Warren's *History*, then, is not simply the only history written from the Republican point of view, it is also one of the few from that era written from a primarily American perspective.²²

**“The historian has never laid aside the tenderness of the sex”:
The Female as Historian**

Although neither Mercy Warren nor Hannah Adams wrote history specifically to pave the way for other American female authors, as Nina Baym notes, “the act of writing history was itself, self-reflexively, the act of inserting a woman into history, as record keeper and referee if not major player.”²³ By arguing for themselves, both Warren and Adams promoted a general discourse that simultaneously played into, and cleverly subverted, American patriarchal literary customs. Nowhere is this more clear than in the language of their histories' prefaces. While they emphasized the femininity and weakness of their bodies, they described their minds quite differently. Indeed, with varying degrees of caution, both Warren and Adams argued that reason and virtue, being intellectual rather than physical traits, were not exclusive to men. Therefore, they asserted, public expression through writing should not be considered a step out of the traditional female sphere.²⁴ It was an argument later generations of women writers would seize and carry with them into the twentieth century.

Mercy Otis Warren firmly believed that she had produced a superior historical account of the American Revolution. Although Hannah Adams published her *Summary History of New-England* six years before Warren's account of the American Revolution, the older woman had

²² Smith, 38

²³ Nina Baym, quoted in Michael Everton *Courtesies of Authorship*, 9.

²⁴ Harris, xvi

been considering her project for decades, and it must have come as a shock that another Massachusetts woman's history had beaten hers to the press.²⁵ However, Hannah Adams was not Mercy Warren's only competition. John Marshall and David Ramsay, both male Federalists, had published histories of the American Revolution before Warren. Thus, not being the first in her field—not even the first *woman* in her field—Mercy Warren used her preface to promote her work in two ways. By drawing attention to her gender, Warren argued that historical writing fell within the boundaries of the female sphere. Then, by asserting the authority and superiority of her sources and narrative, she attempted to set her *History* above its competition.

Throughout the six-page introduction to her work, Warren did not attempt to hide the fact that she was a woman; rather, she used it in order to mollify her critics. She began her work by asserting her patriotic duty to write. “At a period when every manly arm was occupied,” Warren explained, “and every trait of talent engaged, either in the cabinet or the field, apprehensive that amidst the sudden convulsions, crowded scenes, and rapid changes...many circumstances might escape the more busy and active members of society, I have been induced to improve the leisure Providence had lent, to record as they passed the new and unexperienced events.”²⁶ In other words, while the men were busy fighting the war, Warren, as a woman, had the time to observe and write about it. By doing so, she was not contradicting her domestic role, nor did she endeavor to lay aside “the tenderness of the sex or the friend.”²⁷ Instead, she was simply expanding her feminine duties under the strained circumstances of wartime in order to benefit society.

²⁵ Stuart, 238

²⁶ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution: Interspersed with biographical, political and moral observations*, vol. 1, Manning & Loring, for E. Larkin, No. 47, Cornhill (1805), iii.

²⁷ *Ibid*, vi

Although Warren acknowledged that war was necessarily a masculine pursuit, she simultaneously insisted that *this* war had unique qualities that permeated the domestic sphere, and thus, made it relevant to her concerns as a woman. Indeed, Warren described the Revolution as a “civil war” in her preface, a phrase Nina Baym interprets not as an “internecine conflict... but rather a mode of warfare that methodically attacks civilians and domestic life.”²⁸ This conflict, according to Warren, rushed “to habitations not inured to scenes of rapine and misery; even to the quiet cottage, where only concord and affection had reigned.”²⁹ Although her weak female body with its “trembling heart” and shrinking hand had “recoiled” from the task of writing on such matters, the strength of her mind prevailed, “reflecting that every domestic enjoyment depends on the unimpaired possession of civil and religious liberty, that a concern for the welfare of society ought equally to glow in every human breast.”³⁰ Following this idea, she completed her work and published it. Once again, Warren argued that, while history was not a *traditional* means of domestic fulfillment, it was not inherently wrong for a woman to write when the writing coincided with her duties.

While Mercy Warren’s sex allowed her to argue for the acceptance of her *History*, it presented a paradox when she came to argue for the quality and authority of her work. On one hand, Warren used her femininity to shield her from harsh criticisms, blaming any “incomplete execution” of her work on her womanhood, which had not accustomed her to such endeavors. As a woman who had not received a higher education, her *History* was necessarily far from perfect, yet she argued that she had tried her best, with “rectitude” and “a beneficent regard for the civil and religious rights of mankind,” to share her knowledge with the rising generation.³¹

²⁸ Baym, “Gendered Melodrama.”

²⁹ Warren, iv.

³⁰ Baym, “Gendered Melodrama.” Warren, iv.

³¹ *Ibid*, v-vi.

Emphasizing this idea Warren closed her preface with “a modest expectation, that the following pages will be perused with kindness and candor: this she claims, both in consideration of her sex, the uprightness of her intentions, and the fervency of her wishes for the happiness of all the human race.”³²

On the other hand, sprinkled discreetly amongst the mentions of the inherent failings of her sex, Warren firmly asserts the superiority of her historical narrative. Her sources, for example, being eyewitness accounts and experiences from the most prominent Revolutionary figures, were naturally more reliable. Highlighting this advantage to her *History*, Warren wrote:

Connected by nature, friendship, and every social tie, with many of the first patriots and most influential characters on the continent; in the habits of confidential and epistolary intercourse with several gentlemen employed abroad in the most distinguished stations, and with others since elevated to the highest grades of rank and distinction, I had the best means of information.³³

While Friedman and Shaffer note that Warren could have easily passed this extensive material on the American Revolution to a male author, it is significant that she did not.³⁴ Warren truly believed that she was the best “historian” to convey the information she had gathered. Indeed, in the same sentence that she claimed the title of “historian” for herself, she asserted that only “the strictest veracity...and the most exact impartiality [were] the guide of her pen.”³⁵ This underlying display of fortitude amidst demure admissions of femininity has led Friedman and Shaffer to suggest that, at the same time that Warren was adhering to the patriarchy, she was also manipulating it to her advantage. She had, after all, written earlier to a female acquaintance: “My dear, it may be necessary for you to *seem* inferior, but you need not be so. Let them have

³² Warren, viii

³³ Ibid, iii.

³⁴ Friedman & Shaffer, 209

³⁵ Warren, vi.

their little game, since...it will amuse them.”³⁶ By 1805, it seems, Warren had mastered that game for herself.

Unlike Mercy Warren, Hannah Adams did not choose to publicly identify herself as a historian, but rather demurely considered her role as that of a “compiler.”³⁷ Perhaps because she needed to be assured an income from her work, Adams offered much more conventional prefatory remarks at the beginning of her histories.³⁸ While her prefaces were, like much of what she wrote, shorter than Mercy Warren’s (the prefaces for all three of Adams’ *Summary History* editions combined match the length of the single preface for Warren’s *History*), Hannah Adams similarly used contemporary gender tropes as a means to avoid criticism and to justify her entrance into the field of historical research.

Although author Ezra Stiles had called her a “Historian” and an “Authoress” in 1787, and although Adams privately identified as an author, publicly, she struggled to define her role, presenting herself ambiguously as an “author, or rather a compiler.”³⁹ Indeed, more than anything, she feared the damaging accusation of “arrogance and presumption.”⁴⁰ As a woman, and especially as a spinster, Adams needed to emphasize her modest and demure countenance and adherence to the proper female sphere. Otherwise, she risked the label of a social deviant and the scorn of the literary world. If, as a compiler, she could avoid incurring “the charge of arrogance” and better promote her work, then she would gladly assume that role.⁴¹

³⁶ Quoted in Friedman & Shaffer, 209, 211.

³⁷ Hannah Adams, *An Abridgment of the history of New-England: for the use of young persons*, Etheridge & Bliss No. 12 Cornhill (1807), iii.

³⁸ Harris, xxiv.

³⁹ Schmidt, 73

⁴⁰ Hannah Adams, *An Abridgment of the history of New-England: for the use of young persons*, B. & J. Homans, and John West, Devonshire Street, Boston (1805), iv.

⁴¹ Hannah Adams, *A Summary History of New-England from the first settlement at Plymouth, to the acceptance of the federal Constitution: Comprehending a general sketch of the American war*, printed for the author by H. Mann and J.H. Adams (1799).

However, having established her role as a compiler of historical information, Adams proceeded to suggest many of the same arguments as Warren—namely, that public writing did not necessarily fall outside of the female realm. While her narrative was an “imperfect sketch,” and while “a female cannot be supposed to be accurate in describing, and must shrink back with horror in relating the calamities of war,” Adams asserted that “she may be allowed to feel a lively interest in the great cause, for which the sword was drawn in America.”⁴² In other words, Adams argued that, as a writer (albeit a self-consciously mediocre one), she had remained within the appropriate sphere. It may have been an unusual sphere for a woman to enter, but, by the new principles and customs established by the Revolution, it was not unacceptable.

The content of both Adams’ and Warren’s histories are nearly as similar as their prefaces. Naturally, they differ in style, reflecting their different educational and financial backgrounds, as well as a difference in the intended audience of their books. Hannah Adams wrote simply and concisely for her “workaday volume,” while Mercy Warren expounded upon events in dramatic detail, reflecting her penchant for prose and the lofty authority she connected to her work.⁴³ However, both women realized that writing history meant more than a simple compilation of facts. The way that they organized those facts told a story and argued a point.⁴⁴ In particular, both histories focused on New England (specifically Massachusetts), and emphasized the role of Providence and the firm industriousness of colonists in the founding of the nation.

Regarding the focus on Massachusetts, William Raymond Smith notes that Warren pinpointed Boston as the origin of the Revolution, and “that the events following Lexington and Concord were so similar in all places that one story is the epitome of all the rest.”⁴⁵ Given her

⁴² Adams, *Summary History*.

⁴³ Schmidt, 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

⁴⁵ Smith, 82

emphasis on the importance of her home state, it was no coincidence that Mercy Warren flaunted her Plymouth heritage on the title page of her *History*, thus connecting herself to her subject by lineage and habitation.⁴⁶ Adams' *Summary History* is similarly "Massachusetts-centered." As Gary Schmidt writes, even though her sources may have been about different states, including Vermont and New Hampshire, she often made use of them only in their relation to her own state.⁴⁷ While the focus on New England in the study of Revolutionary America was a common theme in other contemporary histories and remains a trend even today, it made sense in relation to the writing experience of both Warren and Adams. Neither had travelled far from their homes. Mercy Warren had occasionally traveled to visit friends and family in Barnstable, Cambridge, and Braintree, but her journeys were limited to within Massachusetts. Adams, who had ventured to Rhode Island, did not leave New England. Taking a role in an unfamiliar genre with unfamiliar rules, both women stuck to their comfort zones.

Two other themes also make sense when examined in the context of the authors' female experience—the role of Providence in effecting the founding of the nation, and the industry and republican virtue of the nation's founders. As women historians, both had used their designated roles as Republican Mothers to advance and justify their works. Since the role of women was to fill the rising generation with a love of republicanism and a sense of moral duty, history, seen largely as a teaching tool, became their vehicle. Both histories draw on analysis of individual characters, especially those dominant in enacting change, in order to provide good examples to their readers. Mercy Warren, for example, described the colonial American as a person, "[whose] environment enforced the natural equality of men, and... who knew his rights and was

⁴⁶ Warren printed her name on the title page of each of her three volumes: "Mrs. Mercy Warren of Plymouth (Mass)." Smith, 110

⁴⁷ Schmidt, 81.

ready to defend them with his life.”⁴⁸ Adams also celebrated the industrious and liberty-loving nature of the first settlers, whose discontent with the tyranny in England had led them to seek asylum on foreign shores; the influence of this determination, she argued, could be traced well into the Revolutionary generation.⁴⁹ Moreover, both female historians suggested that the will of divine Providence had joined with these high virtues in the American people to win the Revolution. Believing that God had especially set the stage for liberty and freedom to flourish in America, both Adams and Warren celebrated the patriots’ Revolutionary victory as part of a worldwide movement directed by the divine Creator.⁵⁰

In short, although neither Mercy Warren nor Hannah Adams had endeavored to write the history of women specifically, and while neither joined the emerging battle for women’s rights, they were not able, nor did they seek, to escape their womanhood. Instead they embraced it, using the era’s gendered discourse both to temper the criticism of their works and to justify their entrance into a field formerly closed to them by custom. As the next section examines, however, a completed manuscript did not signify the end to the difficulties of a female attempting to publish. The rocky road to a bound edition on the shelf held even more challenges.

**“Genius is not possessed by the multitude”:
Women and the Publishing House**

As the fledgling United States began to develop its own publishing industry separate from Europe, practicality made it difficult for women to put their manuscripts to the press. Lack of materials and the high cost of production often forced the authors to foot the bill themselves. Indeed, Jeremy Belknap, the author of *The History of New Hampshire*, wrote of his publishing experiences, “I am the only person concerned whose expense is certain & whose profit is

⁴⁸ Smith, 74-9.

⁴⁹ Schmidt, 85-6.

⁵⁰ Smith, 100, 175; Schmidt, 86-7.

uncertain.”⁵¹ In other words, to be a published author typically required a primary source of income. John Marshall, for example, was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court when he published his *Life of Washington*. David Ramsay was also a prominent politician, and Jedidiah Morse, who published his *Compendious History* in 1804, was a famous, Yale-educated theologian.⁵² As women, Hannah Adams and Mercy Warren did not have access to these same occupations, and had to find other means of facilitating their publications. These brought them varying degrees of success.

Hoping that her *Summary History* would bring her “temporary support” as well as “a small provision for future subsistence,” Hannah Adams worked diligently on her manuscript through the winter, expecting to publish in the spring. However, the strain of hours of research took a toll and, after she returned from her trip to Providence, Adams found her eyesight “fail to that degree, that I was obliged to lay aside reading, writing, and every employment which required the use of my eyes.”⁵³ The struggle to publish her *View of Religions* had taught Adams how best to deal with publishers, and, previous to her ailment, Adams had sent out a subscription paper for her *Summary History*. With individual buyers subscribing to, or guaranteeing their purchase of, a work before the publisher printed it, subscription was a safe and popular way to publish in the early American republic, as it ensured that the printer, at least, would suffer no losses.⁵⁴ Once again, however, Adams would endure a costly embarrassment in publishing.

Fearing that the strain on her eyes was severe enough that her historical work would never be finished, Adams withdrew the subscription paper. “The idea that I never should be able to complete the compilation,” she wrote in her *Memoir*, “induced me to drop it; and I was

⁵¹ Schmidt, 41.

⁵² Elizabeth Noble Shor, “Morse, Jedidiah,” *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org/articles/13/13-01182.html>. Feb. 2000.

⁵³ Adams, *Memoir*, 24.

⁵⁴ Everton, 5.

obliged to publish the work almost entirely at my own expense.” When she had finally succeeded in completing her narrative, the printer required payment for the paper and production before accepting her manuscript. Adams was “therefore obliged to borrow a sum of money to defray the expenses of the work.”⁵⁵ Needless to say, following a trend of consistent disappointment, Adams did not profit from as her *Summary History* nearly as much as she had hoped.

The small profit was not Adams’ only frustration with her historical narrative. Because the trouble with her eyes had kept Adams from properly editing her *Summary History*, she was unsatisfied with the overall work as well. Hoping to remedy the inadequacies of her narrative, Adams determined that, once the bulk of her history of New England had been sold, she would abridge it for the use of schools.⁵⁶ By 1805, she had completed her abridgement at long last. Knowing the success with which other textbooks had been printed, she eagerly brought her work to Cushing & Appleton’s bookstore, but her request for publication was unfortunately denied. As she was informed, Jedidiah Morse and his co-author, Elijah Parish, had already applied to them to print the second edition of their *Compendious History of New England*, a work which, due to its title and the nature of its content, was in direct competition with Adams’ own *Summary History*.⁵⁷ Unable to match Morse and Parish’s vast financial reserves and business skills, Adams once again suffered losses. The only comfort, she later remembered, was the hope that her works might still be useful. Although she had received very little monetary compensation for

⁵⁵ Adams, *Memoir*, 26-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 27.

⁵⁷ Adams, *Narrative of the Controversy between the Rev. Jedidiah Morse, D.D. and the Author*, Cummings and Hilliard [etc.], Boston (1814), 5.

her historical works, she nevertheless “was highly gratified by their candid reception by the public.”⁵⁸

Mercy Warren also faced difficulties getting her work published, despite her advantages. In 1804, she and her husband had negotiated a deal with Bostonian Ebenezer Larkin to print fifteen hundred copies of her three-volume *History*, and a subscription notice was put out. A few months later, however, as Nancy Stuart writes, “Larkin, worrying over the *History*’s female authorship and lackluster sales, suggested he print only one thousand copies.”⁵⁹ Unsatisfied, Warren continued to push for more subscribers. After receiving the prospectus of her work, President Thomas Jefferson responded in 1805 with “his own subscription and that of the heads of departments excepting General Dearborne who had signed another paper.”⁶⁰ Of course, while Jefferson and his cabinet members were pleased to support a Republican work, not everyone was so inclined. As fellow female author, Judith Sargent Murray, reminded Warren, “genius is not possessed by the multitude.” While Murray herself had subscribed to her literary compatriot’s work, she had difficulty convincing her Federalist friends to do the same. “Marshall’s ‘Life of Washington,’” Murray apologized, “forestalls, if not wholly precludes, the utility of this history; and very many urge the political principles attributed to the otherwise admired writer, as a reason for withholding their signatures.”⁶¹ Thus, while Mercy Warren had the family name and money to facilitate the publication of her *History*, her Republican political opinions prevented the success of her publication. Within decades, Warren’s *History* had faded into obscurity.

⁵⁸ Adams, *Memoir*, 32

⁵⁹ Stuart, 245

⁶⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Mercy Otis Warren, February 8, 1805 in The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress, Series 1: General Correspondence 1651-1851. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib014338>

⁶¹ Stuart, 245-6; Smith, 38; Harris, xix.

Authorship in the early American republic was often a privilege open only to the wealthy and male. Both the cost and custom of publishing excluded women, who could neither afford to pay for the necessary printing materials or acquire a profession to help foot the bill. Likewise, their gender disqualified them from gaining a higher education and barred them from entering most of the nation's libraries. Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams, however, met these challenges head on. Although they struggled to access conventional sources for writing history and suffered unfair publishing deals, their presence in the field was nevertheless solid and unique. As will be examined in the next chapters, male reaction to their histories was varied, but both women stood strong in their conviction that they, like their male contemporaries, had a right to their public, historical voices.

Chapter 3

*To the Ocean of Public Opinion:**Public Reaction to Female Historians in the Early Nineteenth Century*

Writing to John Adams in 1807, Mercy Otis Warren acknowledged that she had expected her history of the American Revolution to “pass under the criticisms of great and little men; but conscious that I have uniformly endeavored to write with impartiality...I have ventured to submit it to the ocean of public opinion. I think I feel a firmness of mind at my advanced period of life that will not be shaken by censure or elated with applause.”¹ Warren was wise to steel herself against censure; for, as a woman offering her expertise in a predominantly male genre of writing, she was sure to encounter it. For all the difficulties women faced in researching, writing, and publishing histories, the journey did not end with a thousand copies fresh off the printing press. As Rosemarie Zagarri observes in her study on female politicians of the early republic, female authors, unlike their male counterparts, were judged “not just for the content of [their] works,” but also for their transgression of traditional gender spheres.² This chapter, by examining both positive and negative reviews, explores the backlash confronted by Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams following the publication of their respective histories of the American Revolution.

Female historians faced a public predisposed to classify their work as something “less” than that written by men. In an attempt to separate male-authored histories from what were considered “low, unworthy, and trivial” histories written by women, male professionals of the nineteenth century began to construct binaries by which to describe themselves and exclude the

¹ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, 16 July 1807, in *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren*, Charles F. Adams, New York: Arno Press (1972), 329.

² Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, University of Pennsylvania Press (2007), 61.

amateur other. Historical works written by women came to be considered “derivative, secondary, and merely competent,” inextricably linked to the “low” and “superficial.”³ This discourse based in rigidly defined boundaries—between male truths and female drama, depth and superficiality, and compilations and critical histories—began developing with the advent of female authorship in early America, and can be seen in both positive and negative reviews of the works of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams. Persisting well into the twentieth century, such rhetoric worked to separate the unreliable female voice from the more credible male narrator.

Further, women writing history had more to prove than simply the worth of their endeavors. Tradition was a difficult bullet to dodge. As Linda Kerber writes, “the intellectual world of republican America was a milieu in which female learning was easily equated with pedantry and masculinity.”⁴ Thus, women aspiring to make a career of writing were required to demonstrate by their actions that their intellectual pursuits did not negate their womanhood. Neither Mercy Warren or Hannah Adams faced the same intense scrutiny of their private lives as other contemporary female authors (such as Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft), but their circumstances in life still left them vulnerable to the claim that “intellect in a woman unfitted her for domesticity” and lead her to masculine tendencies.⁵ Hannah Adams was an eccentric spinster, described as “awkward” and in possession of few social graces.⁶ Although Mercy Warren was “virtually the only prominent American example, who could be trotted out against the complaint that intellect necessarily meant rejection of domesticity,” her vocal and

³ Bonnie G. Smith, *The gender of history: men, women, and historical practice*, Harvard University Press (1998), 7, 15, 16, 9.

⁴ Linda K. Kerber. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, University of North Carolina Press (1980), 227.

⁵ Ibid, 227

⁶Hannah Adams, *A memoir of Miss Hannah Adams written by herself with Additional Notices by a Friend*, Gray and Bowen (1832), 48.

often assertive political engagement seemed to contradict her womanhood.⁷ As Warren's politics leaned increasingly towards Republicanism, in a staunchly Federalist Massachusetts she was left open to the criticism of many men, who read her *History* and wondered if the time of an old woman was not better spent at the tea table rather than the writing desk.

This chapter examines but a few of the challenges faced by women endeavoring to try their hand at writing history in the early republic. Riding the wave of the Revolutionary generation's political galvanization of women, Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams both lifted their pens in an effort to record what they had witnessed for posterity. Their works were read and reviewed, accepted or cast aside. By exploring public critiques of these works, the emergence of a gendered discussion becomes clear. In both positive and negative reviews, the diction of the male reviewer serves to separate the female-authored histories into a separate, and often lower, group of work.

**“She is authentic, but not inflammatory”:
Positive Reactions to Hannah Adams' *Summary History***

Not every review of women's published work was a negative one. Both Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams had published their histories at a time when a rising belief in the equality of female intellect increasingly challenged the tradition of male intellectual superiority. Positive reviews of female literary work appeared in public journals and ladies' magazines, as well as private letters between correspondents and friends. However, while the overall tone of these reviews is praising, the qualities the authors chose to praise are revealing. In their compliments, contemporary reviewers focused on everything from the style, truthfulness and practicality of the work, as well as the character of the woman who had written it. Accepting only those who carried their feminine modesty and deference into the public sphere, critics

⁷ Kerber, 226-7.

hailed women like Hannah Adams as useful and exemplary, whilst those who flaunted their education were cast off as too arrogant and masculine to be taken seriously. Thus, while these positive reviews were ostensibly penned in support of the female historians and the yet unbridled potential of female intellect, they still originated from within and perpetuated a framework of male superiority.

In 1828, an article simply titled “Mrs. Hannah Adams” appeared in the popular *Ladies’ Magazine*. The headline may seem straightforward, as the article presented a general summary of Adams’ life work, but it is nevertheless significant, because it explicitly set the stage for the rest of the piece. Rejecting the American custom of prefixing “Miss” to the name of any unmarried woman, the reviewer chose instead to comply with the “more respectful... custom of the English,” addressing the esteemed female author as “Mrs. Adams.”⁸ Not only did this deliberate choice of honorific convey the reviewer’s respect for Hannah Adams and her works, signifying the article outright as a positive one, it also served to eliminate any potential evidence of deviance in the old woman’s life. In a society still convinced that marriage and domesticity were the most respectable occupations for a woman, to address one so mature and experienced as “Miss” would have surely seemed awkward. That awkwardness, in turn, might have drawn unwanted attention to the fact that Hannah Adams had *never* fulfilled either of these stations. Essentially wedding Adams to her literary work, this appellative choice accepted her intellectual contribution to society as a suitable alternative to marriage and eliminated the dangers of her eccentricities, enabling Adams to stand—modest and plain—for the critic’s ideal female intellectual.

Indeed, while the reviewer praised the life and literary career of Hannah Adams, this article simultaneously worked to invalidate a separate style of female intellectualism, regarded

⁸ “Mrs. Hannah Adams.” *Ladies’ Magazine*, July 1828.

here as purely superficial pretention. After paragraphs of effusive praise, the reviewer ultimately placed Adams' work "on the shelves of the learned, rather than the toilet of the fashionable; among the volumes of the student, rather than among the gilded ornaments of the *would be 'bas bleu'*."⁹ Although not originally levied as an insult against educated women, the term "bas bleu," or "bluestocking" in English, was later equated with pedantry, egoism, and unfeminine behaviors. In this case, the reviewer used the term to refer unfavorably to scholarly women who acted differently from Hannah Adams. Moreover, the placement of the French expression in the article underscored the supposed gilded foreignness of bluestocking women.

Happily, then, the reviewer did not consider Hannah Adams a bluestocking. Amid the shallow sophistry of the "*would be 'bas bleu'*," Adams' practical simplicity was meant to provide an example to the readers of the *Ladies' Magazine*, especially the next generation of female scholars. At every turn Adams' simple "neatness" of style was distinguished from those "light confections which please the taste of the mental dyspeptic." "Originality is not her aim," the critic boasted, "and therefore, she has drawn her materials from the 'store house,' of the understanding rather than from the *work shop* of the imagination." Although in publishing her work, Adams had transgressed the established border between female privacy and male publicity, she had done it with striking modesty and without such a "masculine massiveness" as to be overbearing. Therefore, she was presented as proof that not all female scholars were romantic and impractical idealists. Even as the critic saluted and proclaimed the acceptability of Hannah Adams' simple, restrained intellectualism, in its analogy and diction, the article simultaneously constructed a separate and less reputable category of female intellectualism that was ornamental, superficial, and merely "fashionable."¹⁰

⁹ "Mrs. Hannah Adams."

¹⁰ Ibid.

Other positive reviews of Hannah Adams' *Summary History of New England* followed a similar trend, recognizing Adams' deference, simplicity, and disinterest as the traits of the ideal female intellectual. In March 1800, following the publication of her first edition of the history, a critic for the *Columbian Phenix and Boston Review* praised Adams for being "authentic but not inflammatory."¹¹ Like a proper lady, according to the author, Adams recorded things simply as they were, without adding her own voice to the political din. In treating the British image, for example, Adams both acknowledged that atrocities occurred during the Revolution and recognized that "such instances are inseparably connected with the progress of war, and cannot be charged to the exclusive account of any particular nation."¹² Her style in discussing the government of the United States was hailed in the article as equally disinterested. Without igniting the fires of party zeal, Adams' *Summary History* justly fulfilled the "duty of all thinking and virtuous persons to sustain the public respect towards the Chief Magistrate." If she had contrary opinions, she suppressed them and instead praised the "integrity and spirit" of the President.¹³ Once again, Adams was treated as a prime example for her young readers (and perhaps to other female authors as well) to respect and venerate the law, rather than to try and change it.

A third review, contained within a pair of short articles in an 1805 edition of the *Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review*, considered Hannah Adams' abridged edition of her *Summary History* with comparable reverence. Described as "at once correct, comprehensive, and popular," the author promoted Adams' abridgement for schoolchildren as the ideal history over one more partisan and dense with fact and argument.¹⁴ Like the other reviews, this article

¹¹ "A Summary History of New England by Hannah Adams" *Columbian Phenix and Boston Review*, March 1800.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Article 65" *The Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review*, October 1, 1828.

favorably denoted Adams as a “judicious and impartial author,” who justly concealed herself from the narrative and presented her research in a “clear and unbiased” fashion.¹⁵ However, while similar compliments occur throughout, it is a small footnote at the beginning that offers the most illuminating explanation of Adams’ suitability as a female historian—namely, that she does not propose to call herself one. Quoting a British review of the abridged work, the footnote reads:

...in not arrogating to herself the honours of an original historian, [she] has exonerated herself from a large share of responsibility, and at the same time has earned considerable merit by the judicious use which she has made of the labour of others, in expanding or abridging their accounts, as occasion demanded, and in mingling with them the sagacious and liberal reflections, which her own strong understanding suggested.¹⁶

Male reviewers across the board might refer to her as their “fair Historian,” accepting her into their world of intellectualism for her unthreatening humility and plainness, but she did not explicitly claim such an opportunity for herself. Although Adams boldly published her own writing in a traditionally male genre, she managed to retain her feminine graces by not succumbing to arrogance, and, thus, she did not trespass too far into the territory of masculinity. For this reason, Adams was not considered a threat. Reviewers could feel safe in hoping for “a wide circulation” of her work to “remunerate the labours of a woman, who is as remarkable for her piety, filial tenderness, and general benevolence, as she is for her judgment and fidelity as a historian.”¹⁷

This pattern of selective praise, which centered on humbleness, unoriginality, and impartiality, was not unique to reviews of the work of Hannah Adams. While it is considerably more difficult to find positive reviews accepting Mercy Warren’s history of the American

¹⁵ “Article 66”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Revolution, they nevertheless exist. When sending Warren a notice of his subscription and the subscriptions of his cabinet members, for example, President Thomas Jefferson complimented her “high station in the ranks of genius” and predicted that her work would prove “equally useful for our country and honourable to herself.”¹⁸ The most detailed positive review appeared in *The National Aegis*, a Republican paper with limited circulation. With flowery words, the critic proclaimed Mercy Warren’s “loveliness” and “great, imitative skill,” which exalted “the character of the female...intellect...without denying her the additional advantages of intellectual improvements.”¹⁹ However, like the positive reviews of Hannah Adams’ *Summary History*, this review of Mercy Warren’s work also struggled with a particularly thorny aspect of its subject’s life. For Adams’ it was her spinster status; for Warren it was her disturbingly engaged role in politics.

The *National Aegis* review of Mercy Warren’s *History* worked around this issue largely by denying its existence. The reviewer applauded the “fair and natural character of the description” Warren used to portray the events of the Revolution before reducing her active wartime role to that of a distanced bystander. While Mercy Warren did not shrink from claiming the title of historian for herself, and while the reviewer, in fact, celebrated her closeness to her chosen subject, it was simultaneously made quite clear that she, as a woman, could only be *so* close. Although the author first suggested that Warren might be considered “as an actress in the events she describes,” he then quickly withdrew any indication of direct involvement, writing instead that she was a “spectatress,” a mere observer, rather than an instigator of action. The “advantages” Warren possessed in writing history did not originate from her own person, but

¹⁸ Lawrence J Friedman and Arthur H Shaffer, “Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism.” *The New England Quarterly*: 1975, 19; Thomas Jefferson to Mercy Warren Feb 8, 1805 (LOC archive)

¹⁹ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, Beacon Press (2009), 260; “January 31” *The National Aegis*, 1810.

rather from her removed and impartial position as an elite woman and her close connection to those “highly distinguished, both in the bloody field and the peaceful council.”²⁰ Even though Warren’s correspondence network included many intellectual women, because very few women took part in the battlefield and none were directly engaged in diplomacy, what the reviewer found noteworthy in her *History* was the help she received from great men.

**“Even aged women have a sphere of usefulness”:
Negative Male Reaction to Mercy Warren’s *History***

Unlike Hannah Adams, who had spent the Revolutionary War weaving and selling bobbin lace, Mercy Otis Warren was not a stranger to the world of political and historical commentary. Nearly thirty years in the making, her *History of the Rise Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* represented not only the culmination and publication of her extensive private work during the war, but also the climax of her confidence as an author. However, as Warren’s comfort as a female author and intellectual authority increased, the tide of public opinion began to turn against her. Her Republican *History* was not as widely read and, thus, did not receive the same recognition as its Federalist competition. As public reviews of her work show, the more she asserted her unpopular political opinions, the more she was treated as a second-class writer, an amateur whose efforts were best directed elsewhere.

The most negative journal critique of Mercy Warren’s *History* was published in a conservative religious and intellectual journal called *The Panoplist* in 1807.²¹ Stating outright that her work was clearly the product of “a mind that had not yet yielded to the assertion that all political attentions lay outside the road of female life,” the male critic consistently questioned the

²⁰ “January 10” *National Aegis*, 1810

²¹ *The Panoplist* was founded by conservative Congregationalist minister, Jedidiah Morse with the serious goal of promoting and defending “the outworks of christianity” and “the increase of sound theological knowledge and [the] character of primitive and unadulterated christianity.” The periodical also published literary reviews and brief biographical sketches. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850*, D Appleton & Co. NY (1930), 262- 5; “Front Material 1—No Title,” *The Panoplist (1805-1808)*, 1805, 0-3.

authority of the female narrative voice.²² For example, he noted unfavorably that “in the course of the work a great number of *characters* are drawn.” While praising Warren for her “facility” in this matter, he later negated most, if not all, of his praise. The article’s emphasis on the word “character” was used to suggest an element of fiction to Warren’s work. Rather than discussing real people, Warren, with her renowned skill in creating dramatic and satirical personalities, had reduced the men she describes in her *History* to mere caricatures. Further, in light of her dubious portrayal of figures like John Adams and George Washington, the critic pointed to what he considered “a freedom...in some instances which a *gentleman* would not, perhaps, have thought prudent.”²³ By pairing an obvious distrust of Warren’s Republican interpretation of people and events with a gendered allusion to the prudence of *gentlemen*, the article worked to classify Mercy Warren’s style and, likewise, the female voice as inferior, as not suitably masculine for the writing of serious history.

Further reasons were given to support the author’s claim that history suffers under the female touch, including the inability of women to comment on the more gruesome events of warfare. Like most contemporary women, Warren had never set foot on the battlefield, and therefore she relied heavily on correspondence to inform her narrative. While the review stated that Mercy Warren’s *History* would be read with pleasure, he limited the audience to those “who can be satisfied without entering into the minutiae of cruelty and carnage.”²⁴ Likewise, Warren’s connection to events through prominent men, considered an advantage in the *National Aegis* review, was here used to account for her ostensibly biased and mistaken portrayal of key characters of the Revolution. Acknowledging that “the historian has evidently aimed at being

²² “History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the Revolution” in *The Panoplist*, vol. 2, 580, 1807 quoted in Stuart, 259.

²³ “Review of New Publications: Mrs. Warren’s History of the American Revolution,” *Panoplist (1805-1808)*, 1807.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

impartial,” the reviewer nevertheless did not credit her with the fulfillment of this goal. Rather, he accused Warren of having fallen too heavily for the epistolary influence of her Antifederalist connections. “We naturally feel for our friends,” the critic explained, and, as a member of the more sentimental sex, he believed the forlorn complaints of her Republican friends during the Washington administration “may have excited her sympathy and upon some occasions influenced her pen.”²⁵ By placing the blame on Warren’s male acquaintances and her feminine sympathy, this hypothesis both reiterated the notion that the female voice was inherently inaccurate and implied a decided lack of agency in Warren’s historical narrative.

However, even instances where Mercy Warren chose to discuss subjects considered more suited for a female pen (such as social gatherings and displays of “filial piety”) earned the critic’s disapproval. Rather than accepting these more feminine topics as relevant to the Revolution, he instead suggested that Mercy Warren had completely misjudged her subject. The inclusion of seemingly irrelevant events throughout her narrative so offended the reviewer, in fact, that he peevishly declared that Warren had “forgotten that she was writing the history of the *American Revolution*.”²⁶ Moreover, the critic was particularly annoyed that the scope of Warren’s *History* exceeded that of her title, which promised to cease with the termination of the American Revolution. He noted irritably that Warren had drastically overstepped herself in order to comment on everything post-Revolutionary, from “the insurrection in Massachusetts;...the adoption of a new constitution; the choice of Gen. Washington as President;...[and] the French Revolution.”²⁷ Unable to properly comment on key battles and seemingly out of touch with her chosen subject, this particular critique suggested that Mercy Warren’s historical work, rather

²⁵ “Review of New Publications.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

than a cool, disinterested narration of events, was a wordy, confused tome that ultimately missed the point.

The climax of the review's argument against female historians further emphasized the notion that women should stick to domestic pursuits (and that these pursuits did not include historical commentary). In an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, the *Panoplist* review capitalized on Warren's remark that the clergy "should keep within their own line" to comment on two destabilizing trends in the early republic—the increased role of women in society and the disestablishment of the clergy.²⁸ Initially admitting that the statement was "certainly just, and if any of the gentlemen referred to have left *'the appropriate duties of their profession* to descant on political principles or characters,' they deserve and ought to receive censure," what follows in the review is an entire paragraph in support of the idea that the clergy have the right and the duty to publicly express their opinions. The passage reads:

It must be observed, that the clergy possess rights, liberties, privileges, and property, in common with their fellow citizens, and have an equal right to judge to whose care they may be best committed, and to express their opinion, as to the suitability of persons proposed: it is *their duty* to do so; for their profession, as clergymen, does not exempt them from their duties as men.²⁹

Ironically, this is also the moment the reviewer chose to assert his opinion that Warren's usefulness as a woman, even one married with five grown sons, did not lie in the study of history.

Believing that Mercy Warren's suggestion that the clergy leave politics out of their sermons was unfortunately misdirected, the reviewer concluded, however, that it "might with

²⁸The disestablishment of the clergy in Massachusetts occurred in the early-nineteenth century when the Congregationalist Church was formally no longer considered an organ of the state, depriving many ministers of their power as cultural and intellectual authorities. Famous antidisestablishmentarians included the founder of *The Panoplist*, Jedidiah Morse. For more on disestablishment, see Peter S. Field, *Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts (1780-1833)*, University of Massachusetts Press (1998).

²⁹ "Review of New Publications"

great propriety have been extended to *other* classes of the community.” Thus, at the same time that the article defended male clergy members’ right to vote and discuss politics, it attacked Mercy Warren for assuming the same rights for her sex. Rather than censuring the clergy, the reviewer instead used this opportunity to further condemn the female intellectual. Quoting the Bible to add weight and authority to his argument, he argued that “we all have our ‘appropriate duties:’ according to the apostle Paul (Tit. ii. 3) even ‘aged women’ have a sphere of usefulness; and in his first epistle to Timothy...he points out a part of the duty of women *generally*.”³⁰

Mercy Warren, herself 77 years old at the time of her *History*’s publication, was no doubt an “aged woman.” By helpfully indicating exactly where in the Bible she could find examples of her proper and useful duties as a woman, this statement seemed to hint that she was as out of touch with her womanhood as she was with the subject of her *History*. Alluding to proper female duties while at the same time positioning Warren as an example of how an intellectual woman might go astray in fulfilling them, this section further supported the review’s overall conclusion in favor of tradition, that political and historical commentary was best left exclusively in the masculine sphere.

Although the praise for Hannah Adams’ *Summary History* outweighed the criticism, her work was not immune to the notion of the male exclusivity of the authorial realm. Much like the *Panoplist* review of Warren’s *History*, the language of Sidney Morse’s attempt to contrast Adams’ narrative to the *Compendious History* of his father was exceedingly male-oriented. Both Hannah Adams’ and Jedidiah Morse’s works were originally intended to be used in schools, yet, in his critique, the younger Morse focused only on the education of young men. Because Adams was a woman, he observed, the style of her *Summary History*, “as might be expected, is not adapted to the capacity of boys.” His father’s history, on the other hand, because he was a man,

³⁰ “Review of New Publications” [emphasis added]

was perfect for “boys of the first classes in schools.”³¹ This emphasis on the education of young boys completely disregarded the growing movement for the expanded education of young girls, of which Hannah Adams herself was a strong advocate.

Further, Sidney Morse’s argument that a female author cannot write a book for a male audience dovetailed the fact that, in his opinion, Adams was hardly an author at all. To begin with, her title had missed the entire point of her work, which, after close analysis, he concluded was not actually the history of New England. Due to the fact that more than half Adams’ *Summary History* was spent discussing the American Revolution, Morse argued that “if the strict letter of propriety had been followed... Miss Adams’ work may with as much correctness be styled a *History of the American War* as a Summary History of New England.”³²

Moreover, due to this disproportionate focus on the Revolution and the female ignorance of military terms, Adams found it necessary to copy a great portion of this information from other male sources, including David Ramsay’s *History of the American Revolution*. “More than two thirds of Miss A.’s History of the American War,” Sidney Morse declared, using the new, supposedly more proper title he had bestowed upon her work, “is extracted *verbatim* from Dr. Ramsay!!”³³ Regardless of the fact that Adams had written to David Ramsay and received permission to use his work, Sidney Morse implied that a woman who cannot write about war should not devote half her historical work to war.³⁴ Indeed, given Adams’ extensive use of the work of others, Morse writes, “were the author of the Summary History a man, We would ask him, How he could have the boldness—and were it *really* a man, we would add *impudence*, to

³¹ Sidney Morse, *Remarks on the Controversy between Doctor Morse and Miss Adams: together with some notice of the review of Dr. Morse’s Appeal*, printed by Samuel T. Armstrong, Boston (1814), 4.

³² *Ibid*, 5

³³ *Ibid*, 6-7

³⁴ Adams, *Memoir*, 26.

demand compensation of Dr. Morse, barely for *writing on the same subject*.”³⁵ Thus, he used Adams’ reliance on Ramsay’s history to degrade her *Summary History* and place it below the work of his father.

The male critique both positive and negative met by literary women engaged in writing history was extensive. By scrutinizing their sources, judgments, and qualifications, men attempted to relegate female historians into a secondary role as “amateurs,” thereby protecting the masculine exclusivity of the public realm. However, men did not always have the final say. Negative critiques, especially when levied directly and personally, were not entirely accepted by women, and, as the next chapter will explore, Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams both held their own against the elite men their histories threatened and continued to assert their right to a historical narrative voice.

³⁵ Morse, 7.

Chapter Four

*The Object of Severe Inquisition:**Mercy Warren, Hannah Adams in Defense of their Work*

“It is pertly remarked,” reflected Hannah Adams in her *Memoir*, “that the ‘penalties and discouragements attending authors in general fall upon woman with double weight... Arraigned not merely as writers, but as women, their characters, [and] their conduct... become the object of severe inquisition. From the common allowances claimed by the species, literary women appear only to be exempted.” Hannah Adams had met mostly praise for her works and considered her life “too insignificant” for this observation to fully apply; yet, thinking back on her career, she, too, could recall a situation when she had experienced “the trials which attend literary pursuits.”¹ Adams was, of course, thinking of her lengthy disagreement with the Reverend Jedidiah Morse after his *Compendious History of New England* was brought into competition with her *Summary History*. In 1814, Morse published his extensive *Appeal to the Public*, detailing the events of the controversy while discounting Adams’ narrative and connecting her to a larger Unitarian conspiracy levied against him. Most painful for Hannah Adams, however, was the fact that Morse’s *Appeal* dragged their private argument before the scrutiny of the public, and she felt she had no choice but to respond.

Mercy Warren also suffered personal affronts related to her *History*. In a surprising turn of events, John Adams, who had so keenly supported Warren’s historical endeavors, initiated a heated correspondence, which began “in the spirit of friendship” and ended at “the climax of

¹Hannah Adams, *A memoir of Miss Hannah Adams written by herself with Additional Notices by a Friend*, Gray and Bowen (1832), 35.

rancor, indecency, and vulgarism.”² Ashamed and embarrassed by the failure of his presidential term, Adams had retired from public life intensely paranoid about how his character would be broadcast to future generations. Unfortunately for his friendship with Mercy Warren, he carried this paranoia with him when he finally sat down to peruse her completed *History*. His suffering ego, quick to catch on even the slightest offense, found nearly one hundred and fifty pages worth of complaints within the narrative, and his letters discounted everything from Warren’s sources and grasp of historical and political concepts, to her prose and diction. Convinced in 1774 that he had been supporting in Warren the “uncontestable evidence of real genius,” by 1814, Adams found himself writing to Elbridge Gerry, “History is not the Province of Ladies.”³

While both Hannah Adams and Mercy Warren experienced direct, personal attacks from powerful men, neither woman gave in to the pressure. Warren’s stubborn, biting responses and Hannah Adams’ own published account of her controversy highlight their courageous and dignified stand in defense of their work. Believing their contributions to be worthy even as they were torn to pieces, Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams persistently challenged the male domination of historical narrative and held fast to their right to shape a historical voice of their own.

**“Though I am fatigued with your...abuse, I am not intimidated”:
Mercy Otis Warren and John Adams**

Confronting Mercy Warren about her *History* in early July 1807, John Adams claimed that he could not even begin to write a review of the work; for, “if I were to do this under an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, the commentary would certainly be

² John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, July 11 1807, in *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren*, Charles F. Adams, New York: Arno Press (1972), 322; Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: *Ibid*, 490.

³ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren*, Beacon Press (2009), 5; Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, Harlan Davidson (1995), xviii.

twice as voluminous as the text.”⁴ He claimed he simply wished to point out a few of Warren’s errors, on the off chance that she would like to correct them in a future edition. Over the course of the next month, however, as his letters increased in length in vitriol, they adopted a similar tone to the *Panoplist* review of her *History*. Often too impatient to wait for Warren’s responses, Adams wrote a total of ten scathing letters that questioned the accuracy and capability of the female historian’s narrative.

Almost from the start, it is clear that what disappointed Adams most in Warren’s *History* was his exclusion from it. In her account of the early Revolutionary period, Adams found his mention particularly inadequate. “I ought to have been considered in your History as a figure on the stage from 1761 to 1774,” he wrote, treating her work more like a drama than a serious history, “call it the figure of a doorkeeper, a livery servant, a dancer, a singer, or a harlequin, if you will; but I ought not to have been shoved off the theatre and kept behind the screen for fourteen years.”⁵ Ironically, what John Adams lamented was exactly what men had been doing to women for generations—that is, relegating them to the margins of history. The self-deprecating quality of his words, moreover, gave a false impression. His words implied that Adams would not have been so upset if only he had been included, even as comic relief. However, when the time came for Mercy Warren to insert him into her *History*, Adams was, if possible, even more dismayed.

John Adams had spent much of his wartime correspondence with Mercy Warren anticipating her *History*, dropping not-so-subtle hints about what he thought she should include in her annals. A particular subject he considered “one of the most extraordinary in all...diplomatic records” was his negotiation of a five-million-guilder loan from the Dutch

⁴ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, July 11, 1807: *Correspondence*, 321.

⁵ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, July 30, 1807: *Ibid*, 387-9.

government in 1782.⁶ Taking his suggestion, Warren included the transaction, but Adams was appalled by her portrayal. Although the character and design of Warren's *History* was necessarily different from her satirical plays during the Revolution, he once again alluded to her penchant for crafting humorous lampoons, claiming that he "could never read without laughing" her suggestion that his habits were more "assimilated to the Dutch than the French nation." Warren had intended for the passage to speak positively of Adams' "republican virtues," which made interactions in an aristocratic court difficult, but Adams obviously read it quite differently.⁷ Bitterly refusing to acknowledge Warren's work as a historical achievement, he constantly evoked the language of the stage in an attempt to classify it as a less significant, less intellectual subgenre. With resentment, he wrote, "the satirical sneer intended in this place would have come from Mrs. Warren with a better grace in a satirical poem than in a grave history."⁸ Contradicting what he had claimed earlier, Adams anxiously wondered, "Why am I singled out to be stigmatized as a clown?"⁹

Adams also used Warren's interpretation of his European diplomacy to tear down the accuracy of her historical narrative. Although much of her information on the American relationship with foreign nations had been derived from his own reports, he nevertheless insisted that it was "very erroneous" and "foolish."¹⁰ Regarding France, Adams complained that Warren "was altogether unqualified to write the History she has undertaken" if she did not have a better

⁶ Stuart, 162

⁷ Warren wrote to Adams that her statement was only meant to "convey to my readers, an honorable idea of his impartiality, republicanism, and independence." Historian William Raymond Smith argues that Warren's positive intentions are "especially clear when [her] characterization of Adams; conduct in Holland is contrasted with Franklin's in France: 'intoxicated by the warm caresses and unbounded applause of all ranks...he appeared, notwithstanding his age and experience...little less a Gallican than an American.'" William Raymond Smith, *History as Argument: Three Patriot Histories of the American Revolution*, The Hague, Mouton & Co (1996), 93.

⁸ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, July 30, 1807: *Correspondence*, 387-9.

⁹ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 8, 1807: *Ibid*, 428.

¹⁰ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 3, 1807: *Ibid*, 408.

understanding of his efforts in that country.¹¹ Further, Adams countered Warren's assertion that his time spent in Great Britain had rekindled his passion for monarchy by claiming that "she does not know her own meaning."¹² Rather than simply inaccurate, Adams took his charge one step further to declare that her unfounded description of his character was "ladylike."¹³ Thus, according to Adams, not only was the female style in portraying historical information more suited to a spirited poem or play than a formal history, the information being conveyed was itself dubious. Mercy Warren's *History* only convinced John Adams, like *The Panoplist* reviewer, that history writing should remain an exclusively masculine pursuit.

Despite the quick succession of Adams' battering insults against her historical work, however, Mercy Warren did not end the conversation in August without having first defended her narrative authority. Adams had written his first disapproving letter to Warren as he had always written to her, "in the spirit of friendship," with the hopes that she would fold and take his advice as she had always done. Quite on the contrary, although she quickly realized that arguing with an offended John Adams was futile, Warren did not, in the end, give him what he wanted. The events of the Revolution had engaged her as much as it had engaged the men around her, and she did not consider herself simply the wife, sister, and mother of the new republic. By 1805, Mercy Warren was no longer afraid to assert the authority of her own voice.

Over the course of their dispute, as consistently and stubbornly as John Adams insisted on the factual mistakes and stylistic flaws of her *History*, Warren defended its truthfulness and quality. Although Adams had been a valued friend, Warren did not hold back, nor did she shy away from calling him out on his hypocrisy. Insisting the fault did not lie within her narrative,

¹¹ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 3, 1807: *Correspondence*, 411.

¹² John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, July 30, 1807: *Ibid*, 390.

¹³ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 3, 1807: *Ibid*, 408.

she assumed correctly that it was Adams' inferiority complex and paranoia that fueled his critique. She remarked, "had not Mr. Adams been suffering under suspicions that his fame had not been sufficiently attended to...he would not have put such a perverse construction on every passage where he is named in a work in which the author aimed to do him complete justice."¹⁴

When this early attempt to diffuse his anger proved unsuccessful, Mercy Warren once again assured Adams that her *History* was "impartially and candidly written," suggesting that he was probably the "only man in the United States" who would infer so absurdly that she and her family "have been the propagators of all the ridiculous stuff you mention."¹⁵

Indeed, while Warren willfully admitted to her inability to include every important detail of the Revolution within the constraints of her narrative, she could not think of a time when she had "ever penned a line that I did not know, or believe upon very substantial grounds, to be literally and sacredly true."¹⁶ Besides, as Warren coolly reminded Adams, the topic of her *History* was the American Revolution, not John Adams. "It was not the design of my historic work to write a panegyric on your life and character," she wrote, cheekily promising to leave that colossal task to Adams himself. Those memoirs, she teased, "'must necessarily be voluminous'...if you mean to include therein every trivial suggestion that may have come to your ear relative to friends or foes."¹⁷

Although Mercy Warren replied to John Adams with her usual biting wit, an element of pained confusion also appeared in many of her responses. Warren, who had kept meticulous records of the letters she sent and received, could not figure out exactly why Adams was

¹⁴ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 15, 1807: *Correspondence*, 359.

¹⁵ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, July 28, 1807: *Ibid*, 364.

¹⁶ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 7 1807: *Ibid*, 424; Mercy Warren to John Adams, August 1, 1807: *Ibid*, 398.

¹⁷ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 15, 1807: *Ibid*, 449; Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: *Ibid*, 485.

attacking her so vehemently. Citing a letter he had written her in 1775, in which he had instructed her that “the faithful historian delineates characters truly, let the censure fall where it will,” Warren rather thought he would be pleased with how candidly she had analyzed his character in her *History*.¹⁸ She had, after all, “never charged you with a single immorality, though her impartiality has led her...conscientiously to assert that you, like all other human beings, was subject to change.”¹⁹

Unfortunately, Adams’ letters offered Warren no obvious explanation, and as he continued his affront, Warren felt increasingly vilified. On August 15, she wrote to Adams, astounded by his accusation on July 30 that “it is presumption in a lady to write a History with so little information as Mrs. Warren has acquired.” She suggested instead, “Perhaps that presumption might have been excited by yourself, when...you acknowledged you had received a letter from an *incomparable satirist* and...that ‘God Almighty...has intrusted her with powers for the good of the world...; that, instead of being a fault to use them, it would be criminal to neglect them.’”²⁰ The idea that she should write and publish her work had not originated in her mind, Warren argued, and now the man who put it there dared to call her arrogant for it. Although John Adams had been her constant ally in the development of her narrative skills, as the warmth between them diminished, it was becoming clear to Warren that it was time to break away from her mentor.

Fed up with Adams’ blustering, Mercy Warren’s final responses to his diatribe grew even sharper. His suggestion, for example, that her thirty-first chapter read like “mustard after dinner, as our friends the French say; or like the volunteer toast after a feast, when the original list is exhausted,” simply prompted her retort that “mustard after dinner is not more disgusting to any

¹⁸ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, July 16, 1807: *Correspondence*, 329.

¹⁹ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: *Ibid*, 480.

²⁰ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 1, 1807: *Ibid*, 399.

palate than the vinegar and nitre which so plentifully seasons all your pages.”²¹ Likewise, after Adams suggested that a footnote on a scandal in Europe had made him “blush” for her, Mercy Warren once again turned the insult around, replying, “as you seem to be in a blushing mood, while you ‘blush for Mrs. Warren,’ ...I advise you to add one item more, and blush for yourself.”²² Despite her vivacious style, responding to Adams’ constant affront was draining for an elderly woman, who by then had almost completely lost her eyesight. Nearly two months after Adams had initiated their dispute, Warren was the one to end it.

Writing to John Adams between July 11 and August 27, 1807, Mercy Warren had made it abundantly clear that, “though I am fatigued with your repetition of abuse, I am not intimidated.”²³ It was not the empty threats to include her name “with a list of liars and libellers” nor the superiority of Adams’ intellect that elicited her withdrawal from the fight.²⁴ Rather, Warren had decided that spending the last years of her life responding to the abuse of a former friend was not desirable. Indeed, she no longer needed his patronage. As Warren explained, by 1807, she was “not afraid to stand before the tribunal of her fellow-citizens, either male or female; who may be disposed to examine her conduct through a long page of life, in which she has endeavored to discharge her domestic as well as all other duties with fidelity and kindness.”²⁵ Even still, she closed her final letter with the hope that Adams would eventually see reason and apologize for his cruel attacks.

After Mercy Warren lost her husband James in 1808, loneliness consumed her, and she longed to “again feel that respect and affection towards Mr. Adams which once existed in [her]

²¹ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, August 8, 1807; Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 15, 1807: *Correspondence*, 451.

²² Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 15, 1807: 456.

²³ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 15, 1807: *Ibid*, 454.

²⁴ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: *Ibid*, 479.

²⁵ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: 485.

bosom.”²⁶ With the help of Elbridge Gerry in 1812, Warren began to reestablish her relationship with the Adams family. As in the beginning of their friendship, she first reached out to Abigail Adams, and only tentatively asked for John’s opinion on contemporary political issues. When Abigail responded positively and sent along a ring containing a lock of her husband’s hair “at his request,” Warren was overjoyed and kept the token close, so as to “be daily reminded of... friends who have been entwined to my heart by years of endearment.” By 1814, John Adams was writing personally to Warren. Together, they reminisced about the Revolution, and, when another tried to claim authorship of her drama, *The Group*, he defended her right to it. Their correspondence, however, remained cautious, and Adams never apologized for his attacks in 1807.²⁷

**“He represents me as the mere instrument of others!”:
Hannah Adams and Jedidiah Morse**

Hannah Adams was faced with a similar, though much more public, situation after accusing the Reverend Jedidiah Morse of violating an unwritten code of authorship. Having published her *Summary History* in 1799 and just beginning to make plans for its abridgement, Adams learned in 1804 that Dr. Morse and his co-author, Elijah Parish, had published their similar *Compendious History of New England*. Their work was smaller than the *Summary History* and, given their experience negotiating deals with publishers, they were able to print and sell it at a much lower cost. Confronting Morse after one of his sermons, Adams explained her intention to abridge her *Summary History* for the use of schools and her fears that this might excite a rivalry between them. Assured by Morse and Parish separately that it would not, she then proceeded with her plan.

²⁶ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, August 27, 1807: *Correspondence*, 491.

²⁷ Appendix in *Correspondence*, 493-511.

To her surprise, then, when Adams approached the Cushing & Appleton bookstore in 1805 about selling her new edition, she discovered that Morse and Parish had apparently once again outmaneuvered her efforts to profit from her history of New England. Because Morse and Parish had already struck a deal to print a smaller, cheaper edition of their *Compendious History*, the bookseller rejected Adams' manuscript. Adams returned home hurt and confused. The fact that the two men had represented her history as "too expensive and disjointed to be useful to the rising generation" only added insult to injury.²⁸ Rumors about the controversy spread quickly within their groups of friends, and the facts of the dispute became ever more complicated and muddled until even Adams and Morse had difficulty discerning the truth. Too tangled in their own vilification, they were unable to reach a compromise on their own and decided to look for outside help.

Each believing that they were in the right, Hannah Adams and Jedidiah Morse agreed to settle their dispute through an unofficial trial presided over by three impartial referees. While Morse selected the men who would serve as referees, Adams enlisted the help of her friend Stephen Higginson as her counsel. With their respective publications delayed and costing them money, Adams and Morse both wished for a speedy resolution, and each played with contemporary gender tropes to accomplish this in their favor. In his account of the controversy, Jedidiah Morse masculinized the issues and dismissed Adams' own claims as trivial.²⁹ Adams, with Higginson, decided to argue a different approach, focusing on her femininity to make a moral argument rather than a legal one. Although neither would emerge wholly successful in

²⁸ Hannah Adams, *A narrative of the controversy between the Rev. Jedidiah Morse, D. D. and the author*, sold by Cummings and Hilliard, Bradford and Read, and Isaiah Thomas (1814), 7.

²⁹ Michael W. Vella, "Theology, Genre, and Gender: The Precarious Place of Hannah Adams in American Literary History," *Early American Literature* 28, no. 1 (1993), 34-6.

their endeavors, a study of their methods is useful to understand how gender functioned in the struggle to define and legitimate female authorship.

Almost from the beginning, Jedidiah Morse suspected an ulterior motive in Hannah Adams' claims against him. Her father was in his debt for the purchase of expensive imported books, and, in Morse's opinion, he had done nothing but support Adams' literary career.³⁰ With this in mind, Morse and his son, Sidney, who later published remarks in support of his father, argued the impossibility that "a woman, situated as delicately as Miss Adams... would, of *her own MERE motion*, have prosecuted... a claim against Doctor Morse."³¹ Assuming, rather, that the idea to attack him had originated with others, in his 1814 *Appeal to the Public*, Morse stripped Adams of all agency in conflict. Reducing her to a mere "*shield to certain individuals*," he tried to make himself the victim of Adams' male friends, many of whom were Morse's religious and political enemies.³² To him, Adams was marginal. Indeed, when Morse initially addressed the referees in the case, he wrote that he had "the full confidence of *men*, who are accustomed to judge between *man and man*."³³ Men like Stephen Higginson and William Shaw figure more prominently in Morse's *Appeal* than Adams herself. Thus, in his attempt to erase Adams and her womanhood from the controversy, Morse failed to prepare himself for a conflict in which his opponent was a shrewd, experienced woman who knew how to work her gender to her advantage.

By her earlier application of the 1790 federal copyright law to protect her *Summary History of New England*, Adams clearly understood at least some of the legal components of

³⁰Gary D Schmidt, *A Passionate Usefulness: The Life and Literary Labors of Hannah Adams*, University of Virginia Press (2004), 157.

³¹Sidney Morse, *Remarks on the Controversy between Doctor Morse and Miss Adams*, printed by Samuel T. Armstrong, Boston (1814), 14

³²Jedidiah Morse, *An Appeal to the Public*, printed for the author (1814), iii; 13-14

³³Quoted in Vella, 34 [emphasis added]

authorship. Out of what she considered common courtesy, Adams had humbly approached Morse and Parish about her impending abridgment, but she, “never having had a doubt of [her] own right,” realized that she did not need their opinion on it.³⁴ When Morse and Parish did not think to allow her the same consideration, Adams was roused to action. Aware that she had no legal right to an intellectual monopoly over the history of New England, Adams cunningly played the poor, feeble old woman being exploited by the wily, disingenuous minister to appeal to the sympathies of the referees, rather than their reason.

In response to Jedidiah Morse’s *Appeal to the Public*, Hannah Adams was induced to publish her own *Narrative of the Controversy* shortly afterwards, in which she skillfully used her femininity to discredit Morse. As Michael Everton argues, Adams was extremely adept at using “gender stereotypes to substantiate her argument that she had been wronged.”³⁵ Presenting herself as a poor, “feeble” martyr, Hannah Adams proved to be a real thorn in Jedidiah Morse’s side.³⁶ His son’s obvious bitterness towards how she portrayed herself to the public is telling.

Sidney Morse wrote:

First, Miss Adams is painted as a poor, delicate, nervous, timid, female; wearing out her eyes and her constitution, by searching into musty records, and poring over worn out newspapers and the shreds of manuscripts. By the side of her sits a “little ewe lamb, which she has cosseted and brought up with care, and which is the sole dependence of her declining years.” Every tender epithet is then employed to excite sympathy for a distressed and helpless female. After the reader is brought by these arts into a melting mood, Dr. Morse is introduced, and represented as *interfering with this lady’s literary labors, diminishing her profits,* and shearing her little ewe lamb. Christians, men, and barbarians are then called upon to witness the turpitude of the act, and to point the finger of indignation, at a cruel, unfeeling, relentless, miserly oppressor.³⁷

³⁴ Vella, 3

³⁵ Michael J. Everton, “The Courtesies of Authorship: Hannah Adams and Authorial Ethics in the Early Republic,” *Legacy* 20, no. ½, (2003), 13

³⁶ Adams, *Narrative*, 8; Everton, 16

³⁷ Sidney Morse, 18

While Morse's sarcasm is difficult to miss, the tone of this passage was not wholly unfounded. He sneered at her "little ewe lamb" and the effectiveness of the metaphor on men and "barbarians" alike, but these analogies were, in fact, used in Adams' own account of the events of the controversy. In it, she characterized Jedidiah Morse as an insincere man who, "when his object is to terrify a feeble woman into concessions, he throws all blame on me: In the next breath, when he wants to awake the sympathies of the public in his favour, he represents me as the mere instrument of others!"³⁸ Clearly, her own intention was to elicit the sympathy of the public, and as Jedidiah Morse continued to levy his "public attack" on "an unoffending female," it was ultimately effective.³⁹ Although Adams had not been raised and educated for the public sphere as her male contemporaries had, much to Morse's chagrin, the expert cultivation of her public image speaks to some degree of mastery.

Similarly, Adams worked to develop the idea that, even if she did not have a *legal* right to exclusivity in the field of New England history, she at least at a *moral* right to demand respect from Morse, who, due to their long acquaintance, she thought understood the extent of her poverty. Referencing Morse's skills in striking publishing deals, as well as his ample salary from his other books and his profession as a clergyman, Adams asked whether or not she had "a *moral* right to expect from my 'patron and friend' that if he needed any addition to his splendid income, he would have devoted his talents to some other subject, and have left to me the field chosen for my humble labours?"⁴⁰ Not only did Morse not respect her historical contribution, in Adams' opinion, he actively worked to prevent it. Upon discovering that Morse had lied and discredited her *Summary History* on many occasions throughout their controversy, Adams inferred that many of these actions had been meant "to deter me from exercising the

³⁸Adams, *Narrative*, 10

³⁹Ibid, 10

⁴⁰Ibid, 9

unquestionable right of abridging my own work.”⁴¹ He was using his superior intellect and income to shame her into backing down. Arguing her side of the story in her *Narrative*, Adams wondered whether his arrogant behavior towards her, “a helpless woman, dependent on the scanty products of my pen for subsistence,” did not merit some form of censure.⁴² The referees, according to their final verdict, wondered just the same.

Delivering an intentionally vague judgment, the referees first acknowledged Morse’s claim that he and Parish had not “violated any right, which any judicatory, legal or equitable, is competent to enforce.” However, they also concluded that Adams “was entitled to attention and respect from gentlemen, contemplating a publication of like import, embracing the same period of time, and which, unless obviously defective, must necessarily exhibit strong features of resemblance to Miss Adams’s work.”⁴³ In other words, while they could not force him to pay her, they could still insist that Morse at least partially reimburse Adams for her troubles out of common decency. At long last, Adams seemed to have won at least partial recognition for her historical contribution to society. The controversy, however, did not end easily. The ambiguity in the verdict invited different interpretations, and Jedidiah Morse was determined to avoid deferring to Hannah Adams.

While Adams optimistically understood the referees’ statement as meaning she deserved monetary compensation for her troubles, Morse clearly had not read the decision in quite the same way. Like Mercy Warren in her conflict with John Adams, Hannah Adams believed that all would have been forgotten if only Morse had approached her, saying: “I did not intend to injure you by my publication; but since it appears to be the opinion of these distinguished gentlemen, that I have been the occasion of suffering to you, I stand ready to make you a

⁴¹ Adams, *Narrative*, 9

⁴² *Ibid*, 8

⁴³ *Ibid*, 13

reasonable compensation.”⁴⁴ In his opinion, however, he did not owe her anything, not even an apology, and his halfhearted attempt to comply with the judgment, according Adams, was only to engage her in an “explanatory” conversation about “mutual concessions.”

Even after a written reiteration of the referees’ final decision, that “Morse and Parish equitably owed to Miss Adams a substantial and valuable recompence,” the most Jedidiah Morse ever managed to do was attempt to draw Hannah Adams into an interview.⁴⁵ For Adams, who no longer trusted him, this was unacceptable. In a face-to-face interview, rather than a written correspondence, she would have to think on the spot and would not have been able to consult her more experienced friends. She imagined that Morse’s superior intellect would dominate the negotiation of the terms, and she would leave even worse off than before. While she claimed that she would wait for and eagerly accept a proper apology from her offender, she hoped that it would “come from Dr. Morse’s voluntary sense of justice, and not at my solicitation.” In the end, this wish would never be fulfilled, and Adams would wait “in vain.”⁴⁶

Although the nature of the controversies that surrounded their histories were different, Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams nevertheless both engaged in a defense of their right to a historical voice. Warren, in defending her insider status and narrative authority, refused to be overpowered into submissiveness by John Adams’ seemingly unending diatribe against her *History*. Hannah Adams, by manipulating contemporary gender norms to her advantage and asserting her moral rights in her conflict with Jedidiah Morse, began to open a space in the public realm for the female author. Whether appearing in public or private, both women faced and courageously challenged attempts by men to classify their works as secondary and amateur.

⁴⁴ Adams, *Narrative*, 15

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 16-21

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 18

- Conclusion -

Comparing John Singleton Copley's 1763 portrait of Mercy Otis Warren to Chester Harding's 1827 depiction of Hannah Adams, it is difficult to imagine these two women were engaged in the same historical processes during the same time period. Warren, who appears in a ruffled, blue satin gown, her hands hovering delicately over an arrangement of flowers, turns her face to peer directly at the viewer. A small, knowing smile tugs gently at the corner of her lips as if to suggest the active, discerning mind that lay just beneath this richly colored façade.⁴⁷

Adams, on the other hand, is painted with light brushstrokes in earthy, simple shades of red and brown. Her face is framed by a modest white bonnet, her body wrapped in a thin shawl. Her fingers keep her place in a book resting on a desk, as her eyes peer absently away from anyone who should happen upon the scene.⁴⁸

While Adams' portrait rather explicitly points to her intellectualism by the book in her hands, the evasiveness of her gaze interestingly reflects her authorial style. Publishing her *Summary History of New-England* in the hope that it would rescue her from poverty, Adams' prose was modest and simple. Publicly, she considered herself a complier rather than a true historian, voluntarily placing herself just below the male-authored histories she used to inform her own work. To avoid all charges of arrogance and presumption, Adams consistently asserted that she was publishing out of the necessity of earning a living to support herself as an unmarried woman. This strategy was ultimately successful, and, although bad publishing deals diminished

⁴⁷Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren* (Beacon Press, 2009), 6; John Singleton Copely, American, 1738-1815. "Mrs. James Warren." Painting, oil on canvas, 1763. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

⁴⁸Chester Harding, American, 1792-1886. "Hannah Adams." Painting, oil on canvas, 1827. Boston Athenaeum.

her final profits, Hannah Adams found considerable support from Massachusetts' intellectual community.

Mercy Warren's portrait speaks similarly to her style as a female historian. Although she holds flowers, a typical symbol of femininity and fertility at the time, her face does not demurely turn away, but rather directly confronts the viewer.⁴⁹ Born into a world of wealth and influence, Warren was sheltered by her family's elite status as she developed her intellectual identity. Her father, older brother, and husband, as well as various male correspondents, all encouraged her penchant for satirical prose, proclaiming her wit and intelligence to be the marks of true genius. With her confidence elevated by these praises, by the time she published her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* in 1805, Warren was not afraid to express her opinions, no matter how contrary. Her three-volume work was written from a Republican perspective when most of Massachusetts identified with the Federalist Party. Supported financially by her husband, James, Warren did not need to worry over the profit of her work. Therefore, she could comfortably assert the authority and value of her narrative, at the same time that she directly claimed the role of "historian" for herself.

Although Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams had distinctly different life experiences that influenced their writing, their gendered experiences as women informed their historical endeavors in more similar ways. Despite Warren's self-assurance regarding her work, she made use of gender tropes, much as Hannah Adams did, in order to justify her entrance into the historical field and mollify potential critics. Likewise, neither Warren nor Adams found much success in navigating an American publishing industry that favored elite, male authors. Finally, while responses to their works varied from effusively positive to acidly negative, these reviews

⁴⁹Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2009), 142.

functioned within a largely gendered discussion. Praises and critiques were issued based on whether or not readers saw the works of Warren and Adams as supplementing or contradicting their proper roles as Republican Mothers.

In the end, what is perhaps most impressive about Mercy Warren and Hannah Adams was their strong efforts to defend their works when directly confronted by their critics. When John Adams wrote nearly one hundred and fifty pages of complaints levied against her *History*, Warren responded with her usual cheeky flair and refused to give in to his diatribe. Likewise, when Jedidiah Morse encroached upon Hannah Adams' ability to earn a living from her *Summary History*, she fought back. When Morse declared that her grievances against him were merely the instrument of her influential male friends, she played with contemporary gender stereotypes to assert her own agency and win the sympathy of the Boston intellectual community.

Female historians Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Adams wrote for different reasons and not necessarily to open the genre to other women. Although they had different styles—where Adams demurred, Warren asserted—both women nevertheless occupied a valuable space in the scholarly development of the early American republic. Their persistence in maintaining this space, whether intended or not, provided future generations of women with the opportunity to follow them into the public, intellectual realm. For this, Warren and Adams deserve recognition and a place in modern historical discourse.

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