

At Home with History: History Books and Women's Sphere Before the Civil War

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IN THE ANTEBELLUM ERA, between the conclusion of the War of 1812 to the eve of the Civil War, American women began their tortuous, bitterly contested, yet apparently irreversible movement out of domesticity and into public space. This movement coincided with, and was complexly related to, dramatic changes in the nature of domesticity itself, as an economy of households producing goods at the homesite was replaced by one whose work- and homesites were spatially separated and segregated by gender. When men went out to work, they left women behind in domiciles that were isolated enclaves.

Such new and decidedly middle-class homes posed, for the first time, the question of what women's work should be. And it was from such homes that the women's movement emerged in answer to this question. Throughout the antebellum years, those who supported women's campaigns to enter public space and those who opposed them regularly defined, debated, and redefined the meaning of home.¹ At least three partly overlapping definitions competed for the minds and hearts of antebellum citizens, each

This paper, in slightly different form, was given on October 18, 1991, as the American Antiquarian Society's ninth annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture.

1. See Linda Kerber, 'Separate Spheres, Female World, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History,' *Journal of American History*, 75 (1989): 9-39, for the argument that the 'separate spheres' was never representationally accurate, but always an unstable, multiple, rhetorical construction.

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with its own correlated view of women's work. First, home was a 'haven in a heartless world,' a protected retreat where men could rest and recover from the injuries they sustained in the public sphere; women's job was to soothe, divert and entertain them. Second, it was a preserve for important human values that were at risk in the competitive, commercial, impersonal, public world; women's job was to advocate and perform the alternative repertoire of nurturant, sympathetic, sentimental virtues. The view of home as haven was firmly antifeminist. The view of home as alternative gave rise to a distinctly nineteenth-century kind of feminism, so-called 'domestic feminism,' in which home virtues became the basis for women's entrance into public life via social reform movements.²

A third, equally widely-circulated definition of home saw things very differently. According to this definition, home was the work-site where the most important product of all was manufactured—the citizen—and was thus already fully participant in public life. This sense of the domestic gave it the public, political meaning that Webster's 9th (and, for that matter, the *New York Times*) still ascribe to it: 'of, relating to, or carried on within a country, especially one's own country.' What was carried on in the home related crucially to one's own country, for it was nothing less than forming those beings who, according to whether they were good or bad Americans, would preserve or bring down the republic. An

2. For two influential studies of female passivity, see Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood,' reprinted in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 21–41, orig. p. 1966; and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1976). For contrasting studies of female vigor, see Ruth Bloch, 'American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815,' *Feminist Studies*, 4 (1978): 101–26; Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820–1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Jean Fagin Yellin, *Women and Sisters; The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Douglas's analysis implies a neo-Marxist representation of 'home' as a middle-class space for training in consumption and consumerism. I do not include this view of home in my survey, because I have not found it developed in any antebellum domestic writing.

'America' whose citizens were *bad* Americans from this perspective was a contradiction in terms, because 'America' could only be a politically ideal nation. Since citizens and patriots are made not born, theorists of the politicized domestic sphere needed only point to the importance of early childhood training to demonstrate how central mothers were to national well-being.³ Home, then, was neither a retreat from nor an alternative to the polity—it *was* the polity, the place where the state and the people became one. Let us call this homesite the 'American republican home.' From the perspective it opens, women at home could be charged with work with supposed considerable political and national resonance.

'The nature of our government demands our energies,' the popular writer Lydia Huntley Sigourney wrote in her 1833 *Letters to Young Ladies*, an advice book that was in its 16th edition by 1849. 'To a republic, whose welfare depends on the intelligence, and virtue of the people, the character and habits of every member of its family are of value. . . . Women possess an agency which the ancient republics never discovered,' she continued, explaining how Greece and Rome valued physical not moral force; and how these republics, shortsightedly oppressing and confining their women, ultimately fell. By contrast, 'our country has conceded every thing; the blessings of education, the equality of companionship, the luxury of benevolence, the confidence of a culturer's office' to woman. We women are obligated in return to 'give our hands to every cause of peace and truth, encourage temperance and purity, oppose disorder and vice, be gentle teachers of wisdom and charity.'⁴

3. For the ideology of republican motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber, 'The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—an American Perspective,' *American Quarterly*, 25 (1976): 187–205; Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Nina Baym, 'Mercy Otis Warren's Gendered Melodrama of Revolution,' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 90 (1991): 531–54.

4. Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies* (Hartford: P. Canfield, 1833), pp. 143–45, *passim*.

Note that Sigourney's argument was historical. She was claiming that American exceptionalism arose from the historical uniqueness of its appreciation of women's intellectual and moral capabilities. She was proposing that such appreciation, had the antique republics possessed it, might have preserved them. Clearly, from her point of view, women could better understand the importance of their work if they understood all this; and so Sigourney, like many other so-called 'domestic' or 'sentimental' writers of the era, insisted on the the importance of historical study for women. In the same vein, for example, Louisa Tuthill, author of many advice books, observed in her 1848 *The Young Lady's Home* that 'Every American woman should be familiarly acquainted with the history of her own country, its constitution and form of government. She should know that the stability and permanency of a republic depends upon the intellectual, moral, and religious character of the people; upon this broad principle she must act, and endeavor to induce everybody to act, over whom she exercises influence.'⁵ In effect, history made the American republican home coextensive with the body politic. Because republican women in republican homes could not do their work without history, they praised, valued, and disseminated it in their writings.

Actually, by the 1830s the advice that women should study history was old hat. But prior to the end of the War of 1812 the study of history was recommended chiefly as a means of forming individual female character, as an alternative or antidote to novel-reading, which was thought to form bad character. Benjamin Rush's 1787 'Thoughts Upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America' is generally taken to be the earliest expression of the argument that developing a taste for 'history, travels, poetry, and moral essays' will 'subdue that passion for reading novels which so generally prevails among the fair sex.'⁶

5. Louisa C. Tuthill, *The Young Lady's Home* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakison, 1848), p. 268.

6. Benjamin Rush, 'Thoughts Upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present

Scores, perhaps hundreds, of similar comments can be culled from the writings of the early national period. Susanna Rowson, author of the best-selling novel *Charlotte Temple*, ceased writing novels toward the end of the 1790s, opened a girls' school in Boston where she instituted a history-centered curriculum, and became a writer of history herself. And this is how she described her new subject:

History has always been considered as the light of the ages, the faithful depository of true evidence of past events. Confined without it to the age and country where we live, and to such branches of knowledge as are peculiar to it, we are strangers to the rest of the world, perfectly ignorant of all that has preceded, or even surrounds us. . . . Without it, we are liable to form false estimates of life, our ideas becoming either romantically wild or illiberally contracted; but the study of history leads us from ourselves and the objects immediately surrounding us, to the contemplation of all that is great and praise-worthy in former ages. . . . History is the common school of mankind, equally open and useful to all; every age, condition, and sex may derive advantages from its study. . . . It is a school of morality, it entertains and instructs, forms the heart and understanding, enriches the memory, excites a proper curiosity, inspires a love of literature, corrects the judgment, and improves the taste.⁷

Since this commentary appears in a book of commencement exercises designed as a graduation gift for women—the collection is called *A Present for Young Ladies*—Rowson is not concerned with men, and does not need to say what other writers on the subject made clear—that studying history produces even greater benefits for women than men.

This is because women's access to real-life experience was so much more constrained than men's. Men had plenty of opportunity, once out in the real world, to correct the 'false views' that

State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America,' *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 31. The history-novel contrast has been noted by many historians of women and women's education; yet, curiously, it has never been analyzed.

7. Susanna Rowson, *A Present for Young Ladies, Containing Poems, Dialogues, Addresses, etc. etc., as recited by the pupils of Mrs. Rowson's Academy at the annual Exhibitions* (Boston: John West, 1811), p. 54.

novels promulgated. Women did not. The problem was compounded because women, being less occupied with the world's work than men, had more time to read. Early proponents of women's education were therefore much concerned to provide women with corrective reading about real life as early as possible.

The pioneer women's educator Sarah Pierce developed a particularly full explication of the novel-history contrast in her October 1818 commencement address at Litchfield Academy:

It is still problematical whether the possession of a vivid imagination be of service and how far the light which it throws over the darkness and roughness of the path of life should be followed without hesitation. Imagination is a dangerous faculty where no control exists over its exercise and if accompanied in its unshackled efforts as it too often is by warm feelings it often hurries the possessor to the very brink of imprudence. But imagination when controlled gives a gift to every situation in life and throws a moonlight radiance over every feeling. To direct this faculty in its proper course we have put Universal History into your hands. In addition to the effect which this science has upon the memory the advantage it gives to the imagination is immense, it destroys that sickly relish for fictitious writings which are so justly considered the bane of imagination; it places before the imagination the contemplation of the scenes of real life and by giving a relish for such scenes takes away that morbid restlessness for something new and interesting in life which the readers of fictitious works so constantly desire.⁸

Hannah Adams, the first professional author in the United States, expressed the same sentiments in her posthumously published memoirs: 'I read with avidity a variety of books, previously to my mind's being sufficiently matured, and strengthened, to make a proper selection. I was passionately fond of novels; and, as I lived in a state of seclusion, I acquired false ideas of life.' Adams laments the common plight of the 'female, whose mind, instead of being strengthened by those studies which exercise the judg-

8. Emily Vanderpoel, comp., *Chronicle of a Pioneer School from 1792 to 1833, Being the History of Miss Sarah Pierce and her Litchfield School* (Cambridge: University Press, 1903), pp. 177-78.

ment, and give stability to the character, is debilitated by reading romances and novels, which are addressed to the fancy and imagination, and are calculated to heighten the feelings.⁹ Since Adams was a historian, it is implicit in her commentary that those 'studies which exercise the judgment, and give stability to the character,' are historical in nature.

Cathy N. Davidson has argued that the early American novel possessed radical countercultural force; but these extracts (and all the others that I have come across) locate the danger of novels somewhat differently.¹⁰ Even in potential, oppositional politics would have been unthinkable without opportunities for public mobilization; novels were firmly positioned within the private sphere. The dangers identified by anti-novelists were precisely fiction's enhancement and encouragement of privacy. Opponents of novel-reading claimed that novels, by saturating women's interior worlds with fantasy, ruptured their connections with, loyalty to, and usefulness for, the public world. Novel-reading from this perspective led not to overt or covert oppositional behavior but to social passivity, to withdrawal.

Passivity or withdrawal, to be sure, can be effective forms of rebellion, and I do not mean to suggest that opponents of novel-reading thought that withdrawn women were socially or politically inconsequential. On the contrary. It was dangerous when novels occupied hours that they would otherwise have contributed to a fragile economy; it was dangerous when those hours produced a love of excess, expectations of pleasure, or attractions to rank that their lives in a self-denying republic could not possibly endorse or gratify.

An amusing representation of the immediate damage inflicted by the novel-reading woman is the widely circulated (albeit some-

9. Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written by Herself, With Additional Notices, by a friend* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1832), pp. 4, 14-15.

10. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Davidson's neo-Marxist analysis, however, is derived from formalist readings of early American novels rather than the period's own anti-novel enunciations.

what belated) 1833 print called 'The Novel Reader.' (The print was still being circulated twenty years later.) Richard D. Brown describes it in *Knowledge Is Power* as showing 'a family in disarray as, at fifteen minutes past noon, a dog makes off with the dinner meat, a cat feasts on the milk supply, and the tradesman husband and the children protest because the midday meal is unmade while mother, ignoring the chaos, sits entranced by her novel.'¹¹ The mother in this scene, preferring the novel's imaginative world to her menial domestic duties (and who can blame her?), perfectly illustrates the anti-novelists' economic argument. A woman reading her novel is *not* cooking the family dinner. Indeed, she is wasting precious and hard-earned family resources, or more precisely, passively allowing them to go to waste: the dog consumes the meat, the cat the milk.

This comic print does not represent the greater fear of novel opponents that exposure to the excesses of fiction, to its world of wealth and splendor and its fondness for titles and other appurtenances of rank, might induce aristocratic pretensions in young republican women: a yearning for kings and courts, along with extravagant tastes. Looking ahead from the perspective afforded by historical knowledge of the past, one could fear for the future of the republic if women were not disciplined to a greater sense of their republican responsibilities. This sense of the nation's need for disciplined women, rather than a democratic desire to help women develop themselves to the fullest, was the motive behind, e.g., Emma Willard's 1818 'Plan for Improving Female Education':

In those great republics, which have fallen of themselves, the loss of republican manners and virtues, has been the invariable precursor, of their loss of the republican form of government. . . . It may be said, that the depravation of morals and manners, can be traced to the introduction of wealth, as its cause. But wealth will be introduced; even the iron laws of Lycurgus could not prevent it. Let us then inquire, if means may not be devised, to prevent its bringing with it the destruction of public virtue.¹²

11. Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, p. 196.

12. Emma Willard, 'Plan for Improving Female Education' (Middlebury: J. W. Cope-

Pointing out that morals and manners were traditional domains of female influence, Willard proposed to educate women in a way that would bind them to the polity, and transform them from silent, appetitive beings into vocal partisans, exemplars, and conservers of the national character. Before the republican mother could be trusted to produce republican citizens in her home, she had to be produced as a republican mother herself. This was to be done by schooling her in republicanism.

Willard had no place for fiction in her curriculum, but even as she wrote, anti-novel rhetoric was losing force. Arguably, this happened because the novel was taken over by history via the historical novel, a form that arrived definitively on the English-speaking literary scene in 1814 when Walter Scott published *Waverley*. This book made history more accessible, and it made novels more respectable. Its immediate effect on the status of the novel is manifest in the changed tone of novel criticism in the 1820s and 1830s. The editor of Hannah Adams's memoirs, for example, gently corrected her subject's earlier quoted denigration of novels by remarking that 'had the *Waverley* novels made their appearance in her youthful days, they would probably have rendered harmless the greater part of those [other novels] which fell into her hands.'¹³

Whether Scott was even more popular in the United States than he was in England, as some scholars believe,¹⁴ he unquestionably provided a formula that American writers could adapt to United States history at just the moment when the conclusion of the War of 1812 unleashed a powerful surge of nationalist energy. According to George H. Callcott, 'never before or since has history occupied such a vital place in the thinking of the American people

land, 1819), p. 30. For a more elaborate discussion of Willard and history, see Nina Baym, 'Women and the Republic: Emma Willard's Rhetoric of History,' *American Quarterly*, 43 (1991): 1-23.

13. Adams, *Memoir*, p. 85. For diminishing anti-novel sentiment, see Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

14. For Scott and the American historical novel, see George H. Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

as during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ At this point, then, although the argument for the private benefits of women's history-reading did not disappear, it took second place to an argument for the public benefits of such reading.

Without history books, of course, the entire enterprise was impossible; and had not women already been perceived as voracious readers, the enterprise would have necessarily taken a different shape. So to nationalism and women we must add a third term: history books. The history book acquired immense *cachet* in the woman's library, and women displayed their knowledge of history at every turn. As writers, many of them attempted to write history in various guises, including but not exclusively historical fiction. And even novels that were not historical defined themselves as serious by joining in the advocacy of history-reading and demonstrating its effects.

A source in which one would not expect to find public, history-based expressions of female national identity or praise of history books is Susan Warner's enormously popular novel of 1851, *The Wide, Wide World*. This novel, according to virtually all accounts of women's antebellum writing, represents a virtual watershed of domestic sentimentalism, in which the development and preservation of an autonomous and interiorized female self against all odds (and with the help of an evangelical Christianity) is represented with great pathos (some would say bathos).¹⁶ Yet the novel also

15. George H. Calcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 25.

16. For readings of *The Wide, Wide World*, see Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs* and 'Introduction,' *The Wide, Wide, World, by Susan Warner* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987); Joanne Dobson, "'The Hidden Hand' Subversion of Cultural Ideology in Three Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers,' *American Quarterly*, 38 (1986): 223-42; Mary P. Hiatt, 'Susan Warner's Subtext: The Other Side of Piety,' *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 8 (1987): 250-61; David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Nancy Schnog, 'Inside the Sentimental: The Psychological Work of *The Wide, Wide World*,' *Genders*, 4 (1989): 11-25; Susan S. Williams, 'Widening the World: Susan Warner, Her Readers, and the Assumption of Authorship,' *American Quarterly*, 42 (1990): 565-86; Grace Ann Hovet and Theodore R. Hovet, 'Identity Development in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*: Relationship, Performance, and Construction,' *Legacy*, 8 (1991): 3-16; Erica R. Bauermeister, '*The Lamplighter*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *Hope Leslie*: Reconsidering the Recipes for

contains a recurrent, albeit critically unremarked, motif of history-reading in Ellen's education that is overtly connected to the themes of national and nationalist self-assertion.

Of numerous allusions in the novel to Ellen's history-reading and her knowledge of history, I will focus on two. The first occurs when she receives Weems's *Life of Washington* as a Christmas present. 'She opened the book, and presently sat down on the floor where she was by the side of the sofa. Whatever she had found within the leaves of the book, she had certainly lost herself. An hour passed. Ellen had not spoken or moved except to turn over the leaves.'¹⁷ In this scene, as the metaphor of losing and finding invites us to understand, Ellen—who has already been instructed in morality and Christian meekness—gives over her individual identity to the father of her country and, as we will see, becomes an American. A few years after this scene takes place, Ellen goes to Scotland to live with relatives. 'She must learn to have no nationality but yours,' her aunt says to the uncle who is her legal guardian. The uncle then explains to Ellen that the Americans were a 'parcel of rebels who have broken loose from all loyalty and fealty,' who 'forfeited entirely the character of good friends to England and good subjects to King George.' Ellen rejoins that she does not think the Americans were rebels, that King George 'and the English forfeited their characters first.' Asked where she got 'these strange notions about the Americans,' Ellen enumerates her reading: two lives of Washington (I will guess that the second after Weems was Marshall, since the heroine of Warner's second novel, *Queechy*, mentions that book), the Annual Register, a history of the United States, and other items. When her uncle asserts that this

Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels,' *Legacy*, 8 (1991): 17–28. Among scholars of domestic fiction only Susan K. Harris observes the importance of historical study in the heroine's education as well as in the author-reader interaction. See her *Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), which however focuses on individual female selves not public concerns. See also her "But is it any good?": Evaluating Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction,' *American Literature*, 63 (1991): 43–61.

17. Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), p. 329. (Originally published 1851.)

reading gave her only one side of the issue, she rejoins that the Annual Register was an English publication written by Edmund Burke, a fact apparently unknown to him. Later in the same conversation, when asked if she can sing anything besides hymns, Ellen responds—‘with some humour twinkling about her eyes and mouth’—‘I can sing “Hail Columbia!”’ The discussion draws to a close with her uncle saying: ‘Forget that you were American, Ellen—you belong to me’ and with Ellen inwardly resisting, thinking ‘there are some things he cannot command; nor I neither;—I am glad of that!’¹⁸

Throughout this long episode, Ellen is strengthened by expressing her participation in the national collectivity, while her position as a subject within this Scottish family is made analogous to that of the American patriots. Accordingly, the entire transaction acquires a national, public character. Ellen’s resistance, albeit inward and circumscribed, is an aspect of the Americanness that she has come to know and been enabled to possess through her reading of history. Nor is it irrelevant that she has been introduced to American history specifically, and the life of Washington in particular, by a mentor (whom she will later marry) who is a patriarchal figure. This is a conservative republican politics, whose point is not that there should be no rulers, but that they must govern by consent of the governed. Ellen’s mentor and her uncle stand respectively for republicanism and monarchism; the organization of family and state coincide.

Ellen, to be sure, is not a domestic activist. What the depiction shares with Emma Willard’s vision, however, is a sense of home as a space for receiving and giving lessons—not just moral lessons, but school lessons. Willard’s students did not ‘read,’ as the negligent homemaker in ‘The Novel Reader’ is reading; they ‘studied.’ Judith Sargent Murray’s sentimental novel of education serialized in the *Massachusetts Magazine* has its youthful heroine, Margareta, spend three hours a day on history under her mother’s tutelage:

18. *The Wide, Wide World*, pp. 505–10.

one hour reading, one hour reciting, and one hour writing a composition about the reading. When Murray padded her weekly contributions to make the three-volume *Gleaner*, published in 1798, she filled much of Volume II with examples—not of Margaretta's historical compositions, but of her mother's long replies. The relationship of mother and daughter was constructed as an intensely charged teacher-pupil relationship centered on history. In brief, the project of reading history in the home had the result of making home look and feel like a school.

Consider, for example, an anonymous, unpretentious little book published in 1833 called *Evening Readings in History*. Running to 128 pages and measuring 4 x 5.5 inches, it is designed to fit the hands of children, and its modest size comports oddly with its imposing subtitle: *Comprising Portions of the History of Assyria, Egypt, Tyre, Syria, Persia, and the Sacred Scriptures; with questions, arranged for the use of the young, and of family circles*. The frontispiece and preface clearly designate the book as a teaching tool for mothers. The author—Lydia Sigourney once again—explains in her preface that the book was written to aid 'a laudable custom, established by some of my particular friends, of devoting an hour in the evening to a course of reading with the younger members of their families, and examination into their proficiency.'¹⁹ She divides the book into brief narrative chapters correlated to days of the week, giving over the Saturday chapter entirely to review questions, and the Sunday chapter to Sacred, or Biblical history. *Evening Readings* might be called a 'home history text,' a lesson book designed to use the home as a place of quasi-formal book-based instruction.

The frontispiece shows a family activity of group reading in which several copies of the book are being used by young people ranging in age from early childhood to young adult. They are being vigorously supervised by the mother, whose energetic pos-

19. Lydia Sigourney, *Evening Readings in History; Comprising Portions of the History of Assyria, Egypt, Tyre, Syria, Persia, and the Sacred Scriptures; with questions, arranged for the use of the young, and of family circles* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1833), p. v.

ture, arm outstretched, book in hand, dominates the visual field. The iconic merging of mother with book identifies her as the intellectual leader of the family, a role to which the father's deference—he is in the picture but apart from the action, discreetly stationed behind her chair—also testifies. A second adult woman who, the preface informs us, represents a family friend, underscores the female investment in this project of home education.

If this illustration invokes in any way the colonial New England tradition of evening reading—father reading the Bible to his family—it does so to override it. Writing in 1815, Hannah Mather Crocker, who had been born in 1752, identified the Revolutionary era as one in which there was a decided change in women's intellectual status. 'At that period,' she reminisced, 'female education was at a very low ebb. If women could even read and badly write their name it was thought enough for *them*, and by some were esteemed as only "mere domestic animals."' But, at just this time, 'the aspiring female mind, could no longer bar a claim to genius. They roused to thought, and clearly saw they were given by the wise author of nature, as not only helps meet, but associates and friends, not slaves to man.'²⁰

The frontispiece of *Evening Readings in History* shows the fulfillment of this movement that the Revolution—and, of course, the Enlightenment—initiated. Mother occupies the patriarch's place, by his leave. Deferential listening has given way to active individual participation, one big book has become many small ones, and the subject has become politics not theology. The patriarchal Bible-reader is not the only figure whose obsolescence is declared by this image. An archaic female presence is also laid to rest—the old crone by the fireplace recounting what, from this enlightened point of view, would be called 'traditional' or 'legendary' rather than 'authentic' history. 'Authentic' history is the written testimony of eyewitnesses, at once reliable and permanent, available

20. Hannah Mather Crocker, *A Series of Letters on Free Masonry, by a Lady of Boston* (Boston: John Eliot, 1815), n.p.

in books, and hitherto (i.e., prior to the Revolution) associated with the masculine. 'Traditional' or 'legendary' history is whatever did not pass the tests necessary to get into the written record, matter contaminated by the unreliability of memory and the vagaries of oral recitation, matter associated with illiteracy, ignorance, superstition, and, ultimately, with witchcraft and a primitive image of the feminine. Insofar as the picture implicitly narrates the supplanting of colonial patriarchal theocracy by republican civil religion, and does so by placing secular political culture in the hands of a woman, it demonstrates that the 'mere domestic animal' has indeed been replaced by the 'aspiring female mind.' The maternal figure in this frontispiece assuming the father's place without becoming masculinized, represents a feminization of power that erases all views of women derived from their exclusion from print culture. She is a new woman, or a newly born woman, born into the power of the printed word and the culture of books.

Along with home lesson books like *Evening Readings in History*, the antebellum era saw a proliferation of historical compendia—many written by women—designed for the home libraries of ordinary people. Prefaces and advertising supplements bound into such books frequently describe them as compilations, condensations, or summaries of costly, erudite, rare scholarly works that were inaccessible to the general public. Such lesson and library books, carefully differentiated by their authors and publishers from elite works, were with similar care equated to their institutional counterparts—school texts and school library books. The same prefaces and advertising inserts often emphasized a text's equal suitability for home and school, or offered one basic text in marginally different packages to fit it for home or school settings. Indeed, it is fair to say that the antebellum era, as homes were likened to schools, educational reforms also had the effect of making schools look and feel more like homes; the two institutions mutually constitute each other and an idea of pedagogy as well. History books facilitated this identification, circulating easily from one site to the other.

In 1799, for example, Hannah Adams synthesized all the extant New England histories into one book designed for the libraries of non-scholars, a book that she called, forthrightly, a *Summary History of New England*. In 1807 she revised it for schoolroom use by shortening it, interpolating moral reflections, and adding an appendix with review questions for each chapter. In 1811, Sarah Pierce worked up a series of four question-and-answer textbooks of universal history based on her course at Litchfield Academy. While stressing that she had 'compiled these Sketches for the use of Schools,' she added pointedly that they might be useful in private families which 'are not able to purchase the larger works' from which she had selected.²¹

In 1828, Charles Goodrich expanded his extremely successful school *History of the United States* into a book for the general public. Emma Willard, who had conceived of her *History of the Republic of America* as a book both for elite academies like her own Troy Female Seminary and for home libraries, soon abridged it for the common schools as well. The preface to her *Universal History, in Perspective*, first published in 1844, points out some typographical features designed for teachers and students (questions at the foot of each page and numbered paragraphs) and others that make it 'convenient for reference, and a good family *Universal History*' (an extended chronological table and large-type, bold-faced dates in the margins).²² The preface to a second home text by Sigourney, a *History of Marcus Aurelius*, explains that the book's 'highest ambition is to be in the hand of the mother, who seeks to aid in that most delightful of all departments, the instruction of her little ones. The daily perusal of a chapter with them, the patient use of the annexed questions, and the repetition of this process, until the contents of the volume are impressed on the memory of the learner, will, it is trusted, confer both intellectual and moral benefit'; to this it adds the qualifier that 'Though the original des-

21. Sarah Pierce, *Sketches of Universal History*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Joseph Barker, 1811), p. 4.

22. Emma Willard, *Universal History, in Perspective* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1844), pp. 4-5.

tionation of this work was for the family circle,' it may also be 'adapted to primary schools, not merely by the knowledge it imparts, but by the love of historical research which it is calculated to cherish, and the mental discipline to which it may be rendered subservient.'²³

Publicity appended to several volumes in Peter Parley's twenty-book Cabinet Library, the work of Samuel G. Goodrich (brother of Charles), described the series as 'expressly written for a School and Family library' and boasted of its having been 'adopted into many of the libraries of the leading schools and seminaries in New England and New York, and . . . introduced, in the space of a few months, into more than 3000 families in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.' And for two final examples: in 1832 and 1833 Elizabeth Peabody published three textbooks under the general title, *A Key to History*. In her preface to the first volume Peabody argued that the study of history 'should continue after the period of school-going is over' and offers her key as 'serving in a humble degree the place of an instructor to a family of sisters, or a party of friends, or a solitary student, that feels the importance and the interest of the subject.' In the advertisement to the second volume she praises her organization for enabling 'the instructor to depute a pupil to hear a class in history recite; and a mother or sister, though inexperienced in teaching, to instruct a family at home.'²⁴

If the maternal image in the frontispiece to *Evening Readings* invokes a couple of colonial stereotypes only to displace them, it also shows a variety of goods and services indicative of nascent Victorian consumer culture. These include books, of course, as well as maps and a patriotic print on the wall. The evening reading is being conducted by the light of an oil lamp—not candles—placed on a cloth-covered table. I would hazard that the image hints obliquely at a message that other sources made crystal clear:

23. Lydia Sigourney, *History of Marcus Aurelius* (Hartford: Belknap & Hammersley, 1835), p. iii.

24. Elizabeth Peabody, *First Steps to the Study of History. Being Part First of a Key to History* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1832), p. 13; Peabody, *Key to History. Part II. The Hebrews* (Boston: March, Capen & Lyon, 1833), n.p.

that middle-class women should dedicate the goods and leisure consequent on national prosperity to the service of the nation. One should neither reject material gods nor succumb to their allure—one should put them to productive use. *Godey's Lady's Book*, under Sarah J. Hale's editorship from the late 1830s on, may be taken as the most powerful exponent of this message in the antebellum era, openly interpreting the emergent middle class as fulfilling what had only been prefigured by the embattled, impoverished, fractious early republic.

In an odd but telling inversion of stereotypical gender roles, Sarah Hale's editorship of the *Lady's Book*—as it was always called in its own day—involved a protracted although cordial struggle with Louis Godey to minimize the magazine's attraction to opulence and encouragement of consumer display. In her early sketches and her longer fiction *Northwood*, Hale had espoused an anti-fashion position: a sketch in *Traits of American Life* called 'The Mode,' for example, argues for establishing a national costume, 'which would, wherever an American appeared, announce him as a republican, and the countryman of Washington.' Hale goes on to assert that

The men would probably do this, if our ladies would first show that they have sufficient sense and taste to invent and arrange their own costume (without the inspiration of foreign milliners) in accordance with those national principles of comfort, propriety, economy, and becomingness, which are the only true foundation of the elegant in apparel. It is not necessary to elegance of appearance, nor to the prosperity of trade, that changes in fashion should so frequently occur.²⁵

In fact *Godey's Ladies' Book* and its editor are still poorly understood. It is not widely known that Hale wrote a historical closet drama about the Revolutionary War that she serialized in the journal in 1838, soon after she became editor. Nor that she ran substantial segments of Elizabeth Ellet's historical *Women of the*

25. Sarah J. Hale, *Traits of American Life* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1835), p. 273.

American Revolution a decade later, before it came out in book form. Nor that the magazine's book reviews prominently featured biographies and historical works, as did its rival *Peterson's*. Hale's monumental and monumentalizing *Woman's Record* of 1853 is a compendium of historical biography purporting to encompass *all* distinguished women from the Creation to the present day. The preface proposes that if so many women had achieved so much against so many obstacles, the Christian American woman who has so few obstacles to face can do virtually anything she cares to. The question is what she should care to do. Scrutiny of the historical record, from Hale's point of view, would point out the path for women to take.

The concept of the American republican home, then, may be seen as concerned to politicize and nationalize the increasingly comfortable home space inhabited by middle-class American families in the antebellum era. It is anchored by constant recourse to history, and constantly depends on history, for its intellectual and moral force. It is determined as well to install women as the agents through whom home performed its political responsibilities.

Although this concept of women's sphere did not entail keeping women within the home space, it was manifestly not intended to justify their movements out of it. Indeed, if the home space was already fully national and political, then it could be maintained that women at home were already enjoying all the rights of American citizens as well as all the opportunities they needed to exercise their citizen responsibilities. This is what increasingly was maintained, especially after the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 that produced the first official women's rights manifesto—the Declaration of Sentiments. Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, this document of course depended on historical knowledge. Still, opponents of women's rights could argue that, quite apart from what might happen to women themselves if they went to the polls or ran for office, to grant them these citizen perquisites would simultaneously strip the home of all political and public functions and rupture the bond between politics and domesticity. Public

politics would become mere electoral intrigue, and the primary meaning of republicanism as a suprapartisan preserve of domestic values would be forgotten. Women's rights could be opposed, then, not because of what it might possibly do to the female character, but because of what it would certainly do to the national character.

Many proponents of a republican domestic ideology saw women's rights from just this perspective; what might otherwise seem a surprising number of women activists and intellectuals in the antebellum years—Emma Willard, Elizabeth Peabody, Lydia Child, Sarah Hale, Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe among them—opposed the women's rights movement at least initially. In fact the organized female suffrage movement drove some adherents of republican womanhood into a defensive primitivism, arguing that it was almost better for women to be 'mere domestic animals' than mental beings, if women's rights was what female intellectuality led to. At this time a spate of 'women's history' texts began to appear, and from a later feminist perspective these texts were by no means always progressive. Elizabeth Ellet's five volumes about the American Revolution were designed to glorify our foremothers and complain about the state of contemporary American womanhood; Sarah Hale's *Woman's Record* alternately castigated or ignored women's rights women. American and world history were narrated to prove that women's home sphere was the only sphere in which they could hope to exercise political power.

Even as Louisa Tuthill's 1848 *Young Lady's Home* earlier quoted argued for the importance of American women's knowing the history of their country and implementing national principles, it expressly opposed women's rights: 'Has any female demagogue, though condemned by all sober well-wishers to their country and to the interests of the human race . . . aided in persuading American women that they are not allowed the rights of free citizens?' she asked rhetorically. 'Alas! are we to be persuaded out of our best and truest interests by these masculine marauders?' Tuthill went on to identify national salvation in American female conservatism:

'Men talk much of a conservative principle. We trust we shall not be accused of presumptuousness if we name one:—A high moral and intellectual character in the women of our country, that shall make them true patriots, preserving a consistent neutrality, and exerting their influence for the good of the whole. Leaving government, and all its multifarious concerns, to those to whom the all-wise Creator has delegated authority, let us be content with that influence which is "pure, peaceful, gentle, without *partiality*, and without hypocrisy.'"²⁶

It was perhaps the cardinal belief of a conservative American republicanism that party politics constantly threatened the stability of the union. The home, run by non-voting women, was political without being partisan. Home here is simultaneously the space into which certain kinds of political activity should never enter and the space in which politics of the highest kind—non-partisan politics—are already embodied. Taken somewhat farther, this argument could be made to suggest that women who wanted to vote were unpatriotic. After 1848, even the seemingly most apolitical representation of woman at home, woman in her sphere, carried a covert political message. The republican woman, however, is an overtly political figure. She is doing woman's work: she is at home, history book in hand, saving the nation.

26. Tuthill, *Young Lady's Home*, pp. 98, 268.

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