

*Designing a Past for the Present:
Women Writing Women's History
in Nineteenth-Century America*

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ON February 16, 1816, twelve young women gathered in Colchester, Connecticut, to establish a literary society. 'Being desirous of informing our minds in religious and literary knowledge,' the founders agreed to hold weekly meetings, to rotate responsibility for reading aloud to each other, and to prepare a series of commentaries. In all this they made reading a collective practice that belies our conventional sense of readers as engaged in solitary activity. Together they also made reading the means by which to construct a past that spoke to their aspirations in the present.¹

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1. Records of the Female Reading Class, Colchester, Connecticut, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn.

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Initially, the members of Colchester's Reading Class occupied themselves with Joseph Priestley's *Historical Lectures*. They then turned to biographies of women. Preparing commentaries on the biographies they read together at meetings, the members left their impressions in the literary society's records. They marked the subjects of the women's history they wrote into these records with two characteristics—dazzling intellectual talents joined with more conventional attributes of womanliness, including selflessness, self-deprecating humility, piety, and highly developed domestic skills. The members of the Reading Class noted that Elizabeth Bury's 'sagacious and inquisitive mind was ever penetrating into the nature and reason of things.' Of course, she remained humble about her impressive achievements, speaking 'of her ignorance, in comparison with what others knew.' They found that the Countess of Suffolk's 'powers of judgment, imagination, and memory were extraordinary.' Simultaneously, they stressed none excelled her in a 'livelier sense of relative duties, none discharged them [in a more exemplary fashion] than she.' Describing Ann Baynard as blessed with 'an elegant and sprightly genius united with a natural propensity to learning,' they added that she understood that the state of her soul mattered more than the potential of her mind. And they remarked that Lady Mary Armyne combined exceptional 'natural abilities' with dedication to the 'management of domestic concerns.' In all of the representations, these historians situated the subject's intellectual and cultural life in the context of society's conventions of femininity. They made a Bury, a Countess of Suffolk, a Baynard, and a Lady Armyne into learned women who performed gender.²

In constituting themselves as a literary society, in the reading in which they engaged, in the history that they made, the members of Colchester's Reading Class participated in antebellum America's 'reading revolution.' Characterized by a series of radical and mutually reinforcing changes in the relationship between

2. Records of the Female Reading Class, Colchester, Connecticut, Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn.

authors and publishers; in the technologies of production, distribution, and marketing; and in the patterns of readership, this 'reading revolution' had a significant impact upon all parties involved in the making of a book.³ Perhaps the most visible marker of this 'revolution,' the shift from relative scarcity to abundance in printed matter provided readers with unprecedented choices in books, periodicals, and newspapers.⁴

A combination of circumstances made all this possible. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, authorship became a profession in which writers and publishers shared in the profits from a rapidly expanding print culture. In the eighteenth century, authors had recruited printers to produce and distribute their books. Now these two parties to publication began to collaborate and to share in the profits and the attendant risks.⁵ Now, too, more and more of the authors were American. Antebellum author and publisher Samuel Goodrich estimated that thirty percent of

3. Rolf Engelsing is responsible for the phrase. Although I have used the idea of a 'reading revolution' to describe all of the major changes in the making of a book, Engelsing himself focused upon a supposed shift in readers' behavior at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Noting that earlier readers concentrated upon the relatively few texts available to them, he suggested that individuals began to read extensively when a significantly larger variety of printed matter became available. The evidence from my research challenges the premise that once texts were relatively abundant intensive reading was no longer practiced. Cathy Davidson has also found the premise unpersuasive, noting that reading a larger number of texts did not necessarily lead to diminished identification or comprehension. And Robert Darnton has commented that individuals used reading for a variety of purposes, whatever the availability of texts. See Engelsing, *Analphabetentum und Lektüre: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Lesens in Deutschland zwischen feudaler und industrieller Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1973); Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 55-79; Davidson (ed.), *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1-26; Darnton, 'First Steps Toward a History of Reading,' in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 166.

4. David D. Hall has analyzed the significance of the shift from scarcity to abundance in books, periodicals, and newspapers. See his 'Introduction: The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850,' in William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench (eds.), *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 1-47.

5. See William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993. Originally published Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), esp. 17-37. James Green has offered an alternative interpretation of literary publishing in a series of pathbreaking lectures, 'Book Publishing in Early America,' The A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures for 1993, Philadelphia, Pa. I have relied upon Green's interpretation.

the books printed in the United States in 1820 were written by Americans. During the next three decades, Americans gained steadily on their British counterparts. By 1850, the relative percentages of 1820 had been reversed. American books now counted for seventy percent of the works published here.⁶ Other changes were also transforming the world of books. Innovations in the manufacture of paper, in the mechanization of presses, and in the casting and setting of type contributed to the most significant technological changes in the production of books since the fifteenth century. Simultaneously, improvements in transportation facilitated the emergence of Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston as publishing centers with large houses and sophisticated methods of distribution and marketing.⁷

Historians and literary critics have begun to explore the social and cultural consequences of this 'reading revolution.' Unlike those women and men who continued to rely upon oral communication, readers also had access to print culture. They could immerse themselves in the traditional 'steady sellers,' the Bibles, psalm books, and devotional works to which many colonial Americans had devoted themselves. Simultaneously, they could read the secular literature, be it history, biography, travel literature, or fiction. This engagement with books enlarged the possibilities for participation in antebellum America's private and public communities of discourse, both of which were increasingly mediated by print.⁸

6. S. G. Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime, or Men and Things I Have Seen*, 2 vols. (New York: C. M. Saxton, 1859) II: 388-89.

7. See Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt with Lawrence C. Wroth and Rollo G. Silver, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1972). More recently, Ronald Zboray's study has examined the implications of these developments. See *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3-82.

8. Here I am mindful that reading can empower those who are not literate. In this regard, I am indebted to Nell Irvin Painter's insights about Sojourner Truth's ways of knowing. An itinerant minister who interpreted Scripture for thousands of listeners, Truth learned from the Bible 'not through seeing words and reading them silently, but in the traditional manner, through listening to someone read writing aloud.' See 'Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known,' *The Journal of American History*, 81 (Sept. 1994): 461-492.

Historians Rhys Isaac and Richard D. Brown have noted other important ramifications. In commenting upon the contrast between oral and print cultures, Isaac has observed that the latter provided more latitude for the expression of dissent. In oral cultures, where words themselves were experienced within socially determined circumstances, self-presentation, dress, and demeanor were likely to reinforce already established relationships. Isaac might well have included gender, an attribute that was much more subject to social codes in oral culture.⁹ Brown has examined related structural differences between oral and print cultures in the context of America's rapidly expanding system of communication. In colonial America, oral networks, which were governed by hierarchically structured communities, conveyed relatively scarce public information. Nineteenth-century America was a study in contrast. Delivered through an impersonal print culture, public information moved directly to antebellum Americans who selected from a constellation of books, periodicals, and newspapers. Determining for themselves the content and form of information, they participated in a system that encouraged an individual's sense of independence, regardless of gender.¹⁰

Personal and more intangible consequences were equally significant. Print culture broadened the network of communication available to individuals and exposed them to a wider variety of perspectives. It introduced a world beyond the familiar that offered a host of alternatives. It fostered a denser and more diversified mental life. And it served as a catalyst in self-fashioning. Engagement with print culture served all these ends for the members of Colchester's Reading Class. In both the books they selected and the meanings they derived from them, these young women constructed the act of reading as self-education. They

9. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 121-24. See also William J. Gilmore, 'Literacy: The Rise of an Age of Reading and the Cultural Grammar of Print Communication in America, 1735-1850,' *Communication*, Vol. II, no. 1 (1988): 23-47.

10. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 268-96.

read for instruction on topics they themselves had chosen. They read for intellectual and cultural stimulation, sampling ideas and measuring their significance for themselves. Most important, they read for identification with female figures, either historical or contemporary.

READING HISTORY

When the members of the Reading Class began with Priestley's *Historical Lectures*, they located themselves in a tradition that is familiar to students of the early republic. Only a few decades earlier, the Revolutionary Generation had searched the past for political structures appropriate for newly independent Americans. There they had found the republicanism of classical Greece and Rome and the practice of virtue, an attribute considered necessary to the survival of republics. Having tread upon 'the Republican ground of Greece and Rome,' as Edmund Randolph described his generation's engagement with the past, they insisted that later generations do the same. Only then would the merits of republicanism be understood. Only then would virtue's significance be acknowledged.¹¹

In the decades following the American Revolution, these convictions were displayed in seemingly endless admonitions to read, to meditate upon, to learn from history. Obviously, the lessons of the past had become a means by which to secure republicanism in the future. Indeed, the casual reader of these exhortations might well have thought that the very survival of the republic rested upon the study of history. Immersion in the past also served a second objective. It deflected readers from an alarming alternative. Anyone reading history was *not* reading novels, tales, and sketches, which were seen as a serious threat to the republic. Because women were perceived as inordinately vulnerable to the

11. Edmund Randolph is quoted in Gordon S. Wood (ed.), *The Rising Glory of America 1760-1820* (New York: George Braziller, 1971), 7. The uses that the past served for the Revolutionary Generation have been explored in H. Trevor Colbourn's *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

perils of fiction it seemed all the more important that they be habituated to history.

Those engaged in this project did everything they could to influence female readers. Educational reformer Benjamin Rush typified those who suggested alternatives to fiction, recommending in their stead 'history—travels—poetry—and moral essays.' Important in their own right, these genres also 'subdue[d] that passion for reading novels, which so generally prevails among the fair sex.'¹² Founder of one of the most famous female academies in post-Revolutionary America, Sarah Pierce made history the core of her curriculum. Students at Litchfield Female Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, read, recorded, and recited history on a daily basis. Lest that not be sufficient, Pierce provided them with a compilation of histories. Published in 1811, Pierce's *Sketches of Universal History* was designed to 'intermix moral and historical information.' Telling her students that the *Sketches* schooled their memory, she suggested that reading history also destroyed 'that sickly relish for fictitious writings which are so justly considered the bane of imagination.'¹³ Published yearly during the second decade of the nineteenth century, *The American Lady's Preceptor* struck the same note. Those who read this collection of excerpts from religious and secular literature were told that the female who took to fiction corrupted 'her imagination and cloud[ed] her understanding.' All this could be avoided if she immersed herself in history, which provided her with 'useful lessons for the conduct of life.'¹⁴

12. Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1787), 11. Cathy N. Davidson explored the controversy surrounding the reading of fiction in the fourth annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture. See 'Ideology and Genre: The Rise of the Novel in America,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 96 (Oct. 1986): 295–321. See also Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 38–54.

13. Emily Noyes Vanderpoel (comp.), *Chronicles of a Pioneer School From 1792 to 1833* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1903), 81–2, 178. Lucy Sheldon's diary highlights history's centrality in the curriculum of Pierce's Litchfield Academy. See 43–53.

14. *The American Lady's Preceptor: A Compilation of Observations, Essays, and Poetical Effusions* (Baltimore: Edward J. Coale, 1810), 25–26. This initial edition was followed by ten more editions which appeared yearly. The compilers interleaved advice literature, essays on female education, and historical biographies of women through all the editions.

MAKING HISTORY

The highly charged rhetoric surrounding the reading of history contributed to the popularity of volumes such as Rollin's *Ancient History*, Stanyan's *Grecian History*, and Vertot's *Revolutions of the Roman Republic*. Issued in 148 editions in the five decades after the Revolution, *Plutarch's Lives* became the most popular of these histories. This collection of biographical sketches was typical in the glorification of its subjects, all of whom were male. These histories of Greece and Rome provided readers of both sexes with illustrations of agency they might claim for themselves. Nonetheless, the past presented in all of these volumes included relatively few female subjects through whom such agency might be claimed. Of course, there was the Spartan wife and mother whose patriotism had been honored by the Revolutionary Generation. And here and there the poet Sappho, the philosopher Hypatia, and the orator Hortensia made an appearance. With only scattered examples was it possible to recover a female tradition marked by the agency celebrated in portrayals of classical heroes?

Obviously it was. Those who had joined Colchester's Reading Class had done exactly that. And they were hardly the first to do so. In recovering women from the past, the members of this literary society were participating in a tradition that had begun as early as the seventh century. Recording, documenting, and chronicling the lives of individual women had served a signal purpose for its practitioners—highlighting female achievement. Historians in pursuit of this objective brought *intellectual* achievement to the fore. In looking to learned women, in highlighting their talents, they challenged the idea that women were inferior to their male counterparts. With the power of print and with the equally important power of history, they constructed a usable past that offered readers subjects for emulation.¹⁵

Women writing women's history in the decades following the

15. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 247–73.

American Revolution adopted the same strategy. In pamphlets, in collections of essays, and in histories themselves, they looked to the past to substantiate their claims to intellectual equality in the present. The Revolution itself had provided the impetus for this recovery of women's history. Despite the fact that the Revolution had made the issue of equality a topic for debate, those who claimed either legal or political equality on behalf of women met with little success. Instead, females remained subject to coverture, a legal tradition that submerged a wife's property in her husband's. And women continued to be denied participation in the nation's body politic either as voters or as jurors. Simultaneously, however, the Revolution had stimulated women's ambitions in terms of educational opportunity and intellectual equality. Drawing upon an ideology of republican womanhood that made wives and mothers social and moral guardians of their society, advocates of increased educational opportunity took the position that women had to be schooled for this vital responsibility. Those involved in the recovery of women's history built upon this widely accepted premise. They also began with the related premise that women would be men's intellectual equals once they had the same opportunity to educate themselves.¹⁶

In a three-volume collection of essays, Judith Sargent Murray pressed her claims on behalf of women with decisiveness. Writing in the voice of the 'Gleaner,' Murray dismissed the suggestion that females might be less capable as 'totally *inadmissible*.' Instead,

16. There is now a considerable body of scholarship that examines the Revolution in relation to women. Linda Kerber has written extensively on the Revolution's legal and political implications. She identified Republican motherhood in her pathbreaking article, 'The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,' *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 187–205. See also Rosemarie Zagarrri, 'Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,' *American Quarterly* 44 (June 1992): 192–215. Both Kerber and Mary Beth Norton have addressed the significance of women's increased educational opportunities. More recently, I have done the same in "'Vindicating the Equality of Female Intellect": Women and Authority in the Early Republic,' *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies* 17 (1992): 1–27. See Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); 'The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of Martin vs. Massachusetts, 1805,' *American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 349–78; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).

she insisted that 'as far as relates to their understanding, [women] in every respect, [are] equal to men.' In offering evidence for this claim, Murray looked to the past for illustrations. Not surprisingly, she began with the Spartan. Here was the woman who worshipped at 'the shrine of patriotism.' Here was the wife and mother who taught 'undaunted bravery and unimpeached honour.'¹⁷

Having acknowledged the most familiar of the Revolution's female icons, Murray pursued her basic objective—proving, 'by examples, that the minds of women are naturally as susceptible of every improvement, as those of men.' The classical world yielded Corinna, Sappho, and Sulpicia, each of whom had distinguished herself as a poet. The achievements of Hypatia were duly noted. Then there was the unnamed thirteenth-century resident of Bologna who 'at the age of twenty-six, took the degree of Doctor of Laws, and commenced her career in this line, by public expositions of the doctrines of Justinian: at the age of thirty, her extraordinary merit raised her to the chair, where she taught the law to astonishing numbers of pupils, collected from various nations.' Murray also noted that two more learned women had succeeded her in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. More recent examples included Madame Dacier, the Duchess of Newcastle, Marie de Sévigné, Mary Astell, and Catharine Macaulay. Murray concluded with her contemporaries, Hannah More, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Inchbald, Frances Burney, and Ann Radcliffe.¹⁸

But if the learned women Murray summoned from the past testified to female intellectual equality, her representation of Mary Queen of Scots may have led readers to wonder about the impact of the gender conventions that had been encoded in representations of learned women. In historical sketches that focused upon Henry IV of France, Charles I of England, and Peter the Great, Murray emphasized these monarchs' proficiency in the

17. Judith Sargent Murray [Constantia], *The Gleaner*, 3 vols. (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1798), 3: 191, 192.

18. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 3: 197, 213.

wielding of power.¹⁹ The only woman to whom she devoted an entire historical sketch, Mary Queen of Scots was a study in contrast. Incapable of challenging those who sought her destruction as Scotland's monarch, she had tried instead to conciliate them. This strategy had only increased her vulnerability. Equally unsuccessful in defending herself against the machinations of Elizabeth, the woman whose crown had already been taken lost her life.

In a narrative written in gendered terms, Murray made femininity a significant determinant of Mary's fate. Indeed, it appeared as if the gender conventions that Murray lauded throughout the sketch had made that fate inevitable. The 'open, generous, inexperienced and confiding' Mary had been ineffective in exercising the power vested in her. The 'beneficent mildness of her disposition' had served her badly in protecting herself against those bent upon her destruction.²⁰ Murray's portrayal of Mary Queen of Scots highlighted a dilemma that had disturbing implications for the claim that learning made women men's equals. The conventions of femininity so carefully attached to the representations of learned women appeared incompatible with equality, contributing instead to female subordination. And yet acknowledgement of those claims seemed dependent on a model that privileged those conventions.

Novelist, teacher, playwright, and actress Susanna Rowson shared Murray's concern with establishing women's claims to intellectual equality in post-Revolutionary America. Confident that 'the mind of the female is certainly as capable of acquiring knowledge as that of the other sex,' Rowson established one of the earliest academies dedicated to the education of women. In a volume

19. Murray did acknowledge Charles's notable failures, including 'the frequent dissolution of parliament; illegal taxes; arbitrary imprisonment; billeting soldiers; martial laws; the severe and ill-judged zeal of Laud; the attempt to establish Episcopacy in Scotland; the prosecution of the citizens of London, in the star chamber; the despotic proceedings of that court, and the repetition of extorted loans.' Nonetheless, she insisted that the actions taken by his opponents were 'truly unwarrantable and highly atrocious.' Murray, *The Gleaner*, 2: 193-94.

20. Murray, *The Gleaner*, 2: 141, 140.

she filled with poetry, dialogues, and addresses recited by her students, she turned to the past to provide models for those students. Rowson's 'sketches of female biography,' which went beyond Murray's relatively brief commentaries on learned women, offered readers a history filled with notable women. Designed to stimulate 'a noble emulation to equal those who have gone before us,' Rowson's biographies were chosen from both ancient and modern history, from Spartan heroines and European monarchs, from religious martyrs and distinguished actresses. And yet her sketches were marked by the same dilemma that had characterized Murray's portrayal of Mary. This time that dilemma was placed in sharper relief if only because one of the subjects was a learned woman.

Not surprisingly, Rowson began with a glorification of the Spartan wife and mother. Daughter of one king and wife of another, Sparta's Chelonis had shared exile with both of them. That sacrifice was more than equalled by Rome's Eponina, whose husband Sabinus had been condemned to death. She had hidden in a cavern with him for nine years and then had insisted that she also be executed when they were discovered by the authorities. Having included the seemingly requisite commemoration of womanly sacrifice, Rowson turned to female intellectual achievement. Highlighting Hypatia's intellect, her 'profound erudition,' Rowson reminded her readers that these characteristics in no way detracted from the brilliant philosopher's womanliness. Hypatia had simply 'added all the accomplishments of her sex.' She conducted herself with 'purity and dignified propriety.' She 'lived in the society of men with unblemished reputation.' Simultaneously, Hypatia conducted herself as an equal of the men who surrounded her. Gathering a circle of disciples about her, she taught philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy, both in private classes and in public lectures. She counselled municipal and imperial officials. In all this, she commanded 'general reverence' throughout the classical world. Was Hypatia then a subject for emulation? One certainly presumed so. Her intellectual talents were readily

apparent, as was the respect she commanded in the public world. And yet this woman's fate had been the same as Mary's. The object of a conspiracy concocted by envious men, Hypatia was 'beset one evening returning from a visit, murdered, her body cut in pieces and burnt.' Was this then the price exacted from any woman who entered a domain men had reserved for themselves? Were the conventions of femininity insufficient protection? These questions went unanswered. Nonetheless, Rowson's readers may well have faltered before Hypatia's example. At the very least, they were left with a cautionary tale.²¹

Modern history presented Rowson with a variety of subjects for emulation. Sketching the lives of two of Europe's most powerful monarchs, she lauded England's Elizabeth and Russia's Catherine the Great. Praising Elizabeth as 'the patroness of genius, the encourager of the arts, [and] the mother of her people,' she also stressed that 'under her government England [was] supposed to have arrived at the zenith of its glory.' Rowson located Catherine 'among women eminent for talents, political discernment, and munificence.' Her achievements seemed almost limitless. Catherine had 'extended [the Russians'] territories, polished their manners, secured their liberties, and extended their commercial interests.' With all this she had also 'founded and endowed schools and universities, and encouraged the arts and sciences.'²² Both of these

21. Susanna Rowson, *A Present for Young Ladies* (Boston: John West & Company, 1811), 85-86. Sarah Josepha Hale presented Hypatia in similar language, telling readers 'never was a woman more caressed by the public, and never had a woman a more unspotted character.' Hale's description of Hypatia's death was more grisly than Rowson's. Hypatia's enemies had 'waylaid her, and dragged her to the church called Caesais, where, stripping her naked, they killed her with tiles, tore her to pieces, and carrying her limbs to a place called Cinaron, there burnt them to ashes.' See *Woman's Record: Sketches of All Distinguished Women From 'The Beginning' Till A.D. 1850* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 111-12. In their descriptions of Hypatia, Rowson and Hale were participating in the making of a legend. Presented as the innocent victim of fanatical Christians, Hypatia came to symbolize the demise of classical antiquity for many Europeans and Americans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Rowson's and Hale's source was probably Edward Gibbon. The same interpretation and very similar language appears in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. By the middle of the nineteenth century, some were portraying Hypatia's death as an attack on female intellectual achievement. See Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-26.

22. Rowson, *A Present for Young Ladies*, 98, 103-4.

monarchs seemed to demonstrate that being female, being a friend of learning, *and* being equal to men were compatible.

Simultaneously, however, Rowson countered these accolades. She did acknowledge that Elizabeth and Catherine might be styled 'great.' They might 'with firmness and propriety sustain the regal dignity.' Nonetheless, their 'greatness' had not been sufficiently cloaked in the gender conventions of their century. Their display of 'regal dignity' had not been truly feminine. Rowson herself preferred a different combination of 'masculine virtues, feminine softness, and christian meekness.' Those who redressed the imbalance that flawed Elizabeth and Catherine displayed a 'christian meekness' that restrained any vaulting ambitions, intellectual or otherwise. The Ann Baynard who had been honored by Colchester's Reading Class was described by Rowson as 'well acquainted with philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics.' She also had a striking facility with Greek and Latin. Simultaneously, Rowson told her readers that Baynard counted all this learning 'as nothing, but as it led to a knowledge and a love of God.' The same could be said about Elizabeth Rowe, whom Rowson celebrated as a model of 'talent and literature, united to exemplary piety.' Elizabeth Bury, yet another choice of the Reading Class, was described as 'greatly distinguished for her quickness of apprehension, fluency of expression, and unremitting application.' In all this Rowson reminded her readers she did not forget 'the majesty in whose presence she constantly stood, and to whom she [had to] render a strict account of all her actions.' And Rowson observed that Mary Astell, who successfully employed herself in 'literary pursuits,' was always 'very strict in the observance of her religious duties.'²³

The ambiguities, the tensions, and the contradictions apparent in the women's history written by Murray and Rowson reflected their society's ambivalence about highly accomplished women, intellectual or otherwise. However constituted, such women seemed to challenge the conventional system of gender relations.

23. Rowson, *A Present for Young Ladies*, 105, 107, 110, 112, 119-20.

It was almost as if their presence symbolized the system gone awry. Murray's and Rowson's representations had been designed to allay those concerns. Ironically, however, their histories were inscribed with those same concerns.

Women writing women's history in antebellum America began with the same premise as their predecessors. Committed to demonstrating that female intellectual equality and female difference were consonant, they highlighted the practice of feminine conventions in their representations of learned women. They also embarked upon their recovery of women's history in the context of a debate about the appropriate role for America's females. The most immediate impetus for this debate, the emerging movement for women's rights, focused upon structural reforms that provided women control of property they brought to marriage and the wages they earned thereafter. Advocates sought equal rights in matters of divorce and custody of children. They championed equal educational opportunity for women. And the more radical advocated female suffrage.

These historians were decidedly ambitious. Between 1832 and 1835, Lydia Maria Child presented readers with a five-volume *Ladies Family Library*. In the initial three volumes, which looked to women in the Western world, Child tacked back and forth between ancient and modern history. She went beyond that relatively familiar world in *The Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations*, a two-volume cross-cultural description of women's experiences. Editor of the popular *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale issued a collection of nearly 1,700 biographies in 1852. *Woman's Record*, as she titled her collection, registered the achievements of (supposedly) all distinguished women, past and present. Poet, essayist, and historian, Elizabeth Ellet took a narrower focus, offering readers three volumes on *Women of the American Revolution*, two of which were published in 1848, a third in 1850.

Lydia Maria Child's *Ladies Family Library* opened with two volumes of biography that juxtaposed the highly learned Germaine

de Staël and Manon Roland against Lady Rachel Russell and Madame Guyon. The difference between these presentations was striking. De Staël and Roland emerged from the pages of the volume devoted to them as relatively autonomous individuals with independent minds. Sacrificing their individuality to husband and God respectively, Russell and Guyon disappeared into the male figures to whom they had dedicated themselves. The epitaph on Russell's gravestone might have served Guyon equally well. Quoting from that epitaph, Child noted approvingly that Russell's 'name will ever be embalmed with her lord's, while passive courage, devoted tenderness, and unblemished purity, are honored in [her] sex.'²⁴

Child's celebration of womanly self-sacrifice culminated in *Good Wives*, the third of her volumes that took a biographical approach to women's history. Here the author disappeared into the figure of her husband. Identifying herself on the title page as 'Mrs. D. L. Child,' she encoded herself as one of the forty-two *Good Wives* whose lives filled the next 316 pages of the volume. Supposedly a series of sketches about the women themselves, the shape and the content of the narratives were actually determined by the husbands' biographies into which the putative subjects had been absorbed. The wife of painter and poet William Blake, Katharine Boutcher Blake, exemplified the process in which a separate self disappeared into a male authority figure. Katharine Blake had performed the responsibilities expected of any good wife, "set[ting Blake's] house in good order [and] prepar[ing] his frugal meal." Meeting these responsibilities did not necessarily entail the loss of whatever persona she had brought to the marriage. But other expectations did. Katharine Blake had "learned to think as he thought, and, indulging him in his harmless absurdities, became as it were bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh."²⁵

24. Mrs. Child [Lydia Maria Child], *The Biographies of Lady Russell, and Madame Guyon* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Co., 1832), 137.

25. Mrs. D. L. Child [Lydia Maria Child], *Good Wives* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Co., 1833), 131. Child told her readers that she had intended to title the volume 'The Wives of

Child's sympathetic portrayals of these women did not succeed in reconciling female intellectual equality with female difference. The Russells, the Guyons, and the *Good Wives* were not the equals of their male counterparts. Instead, their most distinguishing characteristic was the subordination (and sacrifice) of self that Child applauded in the biographies. Simultaneously, however, Child had celebrated Germaine de Staël and Manon Roland, women whose claim to intellectual equality was readily apparent in her presentation. (Indeed, Child told Harvard's George Ticknor that as far as de Staël was concerned, she 'might have wished a more able biographer; but she could not have desired a more partial one.'²⁶) Noting that both de Staël and Roland had been precocious, Child emphasized that they embraced the world of learning. Beginning in early childhood, de Staël's 'pleasures, as well as her duties, were exercises of intellect.' Roland took the same pleasure in the play of the intellect, and 'her bright and active mind made rapid progress in everything she undertook.'²⁷

Lest her readers think that de Staël and Roland were concerned only with matters of the mind, Child hastened to tell them that these learned women were also committed to more traditional responsibilities. De Staël was the devoted mother whose daughter recalled that when "I was twelve years old, she used to talk with me as an equal; and nothing gave me such delight as half an hour's

Distinguished Men' and had decided not to do so only because some men had 'bad wives' (vii). Either Mrs. D. L. Child or Mrs. Child appeared on the title page as the author of all the original editions of *Ladies Family Library*. Child published subsequent editions under either Lydia Maria Child or L. Maria Child. Child's description of Katharine Boutcher Blake was drawn from Allan Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. I am indebted to Michael Ferber for this citation. Sarah Josepha Hale quoted from the same commentary, including Cunningham's statement that Katharine Boutcher Blake "seemed to have been created on purpose for Blake," as indeed Cunningham's representation suggests. See *Woman's Record*, 209.

26. Lydia Maria Child to George Ticknor, [1831-2?], *The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880*, edited by Patricia G. Holland, Milton Meltzer, and Francine Krasno (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Microform, 1980). Child remarked elsewhere that 'it seems to be universally conceded that Madam De Staël was intellectually the greatest woman that ever lived.' See *The History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations*, 2 vols. (Boston: Otis, Broaders, & Co., 1843) 2: 157.

27. L. Maria Child, *Memoirs of Madame De Staël, and of Madame Roland* (Auburn, Me.: A. L. Littlefield, 1861), 12, 114.

intimate conversation with her. It elevated me at once, gave me new life, and inspired me with courage in all my studies.” (Not surprisingly, Child was cautious in commenting on de Staël’s relationship with her husband Baron de Staël-Holstein, noting only that ‘like most marriages of policy, [de Staël’s] was far from being a happy one.’ She said nothing about the extramarital relationships that had made de Staël so controversial).²⁸

A woman who was an equally dedicated wife and mother, Manon Roland was more appropriate for Child’s purposes. The accolades about Roland’s commitment to her family were pro forma. It was Child’s presentation of a wife and mother who simultaneously pursued a life of the mind that was illuminating. Roland had been schooled for such a life. Child told readers that Roland ‘did not entertain the common, but very erroneous idea, that when she left school, education was completed.’ Instead, as Child noted approvingly, she ‘continued to read and study, and never neglected an opportunity of learning anything.’ As laudatory as this engagement with learning might have been, it had marked Roland as deviant. There were those who ‘called her a prodigy, others a pedant.’ Still others predicted that she would become a woman of letters. Absolutely not, Roland had declared in her autobiography. Child chose to cite Roland’s declaration in its entirety: “‘at a very early period, I perceived that a woman who acquires the title loses far more than she gains. She forfeits the affection of the male sex, and provokes the criticism of her own. If her works be bad, she is justly ridiculed; if good, her right to them is disputed; or if envy be compelled to acknowledge the best part to be her own, her talents, her morals, and her manners, are scrutinized so severely, that the reputation of her genius is fully counterbalanced by the publicity given to her defects.”’ Obviously, Roland was not willing to risk the ostracism that attended a woman with such unwomanly ambitions.²⁹

Nonetheless, Roland did become a woman of letters, albeit

28. Child, *Memoirs*, 59, 28.

29. Child, *Memoirs*, 138, 139, 139-40.

anonymously. Quoting extensively from her autobiography, Child described a strategy in which a husband served as a learned woman's vehicle. Whatever the topic, wife and husband had collaborated on the essays that were published with his name on the title page: "If he wrote treatises on the arts, I did the same, though the subject was tedious to me. If he wished to write an essay for some academy, we sat down to write in concert, that we might afterward compare our productions, choose the best, or compress them into one. If he had written homilies, I should have written homilies also." Throughout their collaboration Roland remained resolutely anonymous, sharing her husband's "satisfaction without remarking that it was my own composition." Disclaiming any personal ambition, she said her only desire had been to serve a useful purpose. Readers of Roland's autobiography or Child's biography may have interpreted the matter differently. Roland had chosen a strategy (and a husband, I might add) that allowed her to become a woman of letters without being ostracized.³⁰

In the concluding volumes of the *Ladies Family Library*, Child enlarged her domain to the *History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations*. Legal institutions, educational opportunity, social structures, economic production, gender roles, and political status were all included in the two volumes that examined the experiences of women throughout the world. In her depiction of past and present, Child made patriarchal gender relations central to her narrative. However, she made a basic distinction in this regard. Insisting that the subordination of women was more deeply embedded in those cultures whose religious traditions were other than Christian, she made them the object of her most severe criticism. Indeed, she suggested that women's very humanity was denied by those who had not yet been brought into the fold of Christianity. Her commentary on the status of Persian women was typical in this regard. Those whom Child la-

30. Child, *Memoirs*, 198-99, 197.

belled as the most charitable of Persia's patriarchs were still described as treating a woman 'in much the same manner as a favorite animal.'³¹

The Christian millennialism so apparent throughout Child's narrative privileged Protestant and to a lesser extent Catholic cultures. Not surprisingly, then, Child looked to a Christian America as the ultimate site of women's emancipation from centuries of oppression. Commenting that 'many silly things have been written, and are now being written, concerning the equality of the sexes,' Child declared that the meaning of equality itself had not yet been properly understood in the United States. Tellingly, she defined female equality in terms of 'the moral and intellectual condition of woman [which] must be, and ought to be, in exact correspondence with that of man, not only in its general aspect, but in its individual manifestations.' In choosing women's intellectual and moral status as her measure, Child inscribed learning with agency. Having schooled herself intellectually and morally, the learned woman became the empowered woman. Presumably, she now had the opportunity to participate in the private and public discursive communities that had been the domain of men.³²

Simultaneously, Child insisted that equality so defined did not entail the rejection of conventional gender relations. Instead it meant that both women and men had 'complete freedom *in* their places, without a restless desire to go out of them.' The gender relations posited by Child generated a series of questions about the agency that she had ascribed to women. On what basis were they to participate in discursive communities that had been appropriated by men? More generally, how were they to exercise power in

31. Child, *History of the Condition of Women*, 1: 77. Child made the classical world the exception. Although she did not hesitate to remind her readers that Plato himself had 'rejoiced that he was not born a woman,' she noted the presence of learned women including Sappho, Aspasia, Corinna, and Arete. She also celebrated the Spartan wife and mother. See 2: 2, 20-22.

32. Child, *History of the Condition of Women*, 2: 211. Nina Baym identified the Christian millennialism that informed the narratives of historians such as Child, Hale, and Ellet. See *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 214-39.

a system of gender relations in which women remained 'in their places,' in places that made women subordinate to men? How was Child's equality to be reconciled with difference?³³

It was here that Child promoted the strategy she had described in her biography of Manon Roland. The subject was the 'blue-stocking,' a label with decidedly negative connotations in antebellum America. Child herself noted that it had been 'applied to literary ladies, who were somewhat pedantic.' However, she also told readers that the learned woman who was 'sensible,' who was 'unaffected,' had received telling praise from her contemporaries: "She knows a great deal, but has no tinge of blue." Clearly, the damning mark needed to be eliminated, or at least hidden, in a society that equated being learned with being blue. Child looked to Lord Byron for a strategy that entailed a carefully crafted performance of gender. In remarking that "I care not how blue a woman's stockings are," Byron had added pointedly, "if her petticoats are long enough to cover them." Child herself remarked that the strategy Byron suggested (and the behavior Roland had exhibited) 'comprises all that ever need be said about the cultivation of female intellect.' Learning, then, needed to be cloaked in the conventions of femininity. The learned woman needed to don the metaphorical petticoats of selflessness, humility, piety, and domestic skills. Concluding with a litany of learned women who presumably had attired themselves properly, Child heralded Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, Harriet Martineau, and Mary Somerville, all of whom were familiar to readers of the women's history being written in these decades.³⁴

In its breadth of coverage and its commitment to improving female status throughout the world, Sarah Josepha Hale's *Woman's*

33. Child, *History of the Condition of Women*, 2: 211.

34. Child, *History of the Condition of Women*, 2: 144-45, 148. Byron actually said 'I do not despise Mrs. Heman[s]—but if [she] knit bluestockings instead of wearing them it would be better.' Child was also mistaken in crediting Byron as the author of this widely quoted statement about bluestockings. He was paraphrasing Francis Jeffrey, an editor of the *Edinburgh Review*. See Byron to John Murray, Sept. 28, 1820, in Leslie A. Marchand, ed., *'Between Two Worlds': Byron's Letters and Journals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977): 7: 182.

Record bore a notable resemblance to the concluding volumes of Lydia Maria Child's *Ladies Family Library*. The Christian millennialism that had informed Child's interpretation was also pronounced in Hale's collection of biographies. Including only 195 women from the forty centuries before the birth of Christ, she sketched Spartan mothers, Greek poets, and Roman orators in forty-four pages. Exceptions in a world filled with corruption, these women had broken through the 'gloom of sin, ignorance and misery cast over the lot of the woman.' Telling readers that matters had improved dramatically in the centuries following the appearance of Christ, Hale emphasized that women now had 'the aid of the blessed Gospel, which seems given purposely to develop [their] powers and sanction [their] influence.' With the Bible and the female influence Hale believed it authorized, the author of *Woman's Record* maintained that at least some women had been able to fulfill their potential. Fifteen hundred of those women were sketched in the volume's remaining 859 pages.³⁵

Despite the similarities in Child's and Hale's presentation of women's past and present, the latter's contribution was distinctive. A compilation of individual biographies, *Woman's Record* was not so much a *History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Nations* as it was an extended presentation of female achievement. Extolling the dedication of Christian martyrs, saints, and religious prophets, Hale reserved her highest praise for Ann Judson, a missionary who more than any of the other women cited in the *Record* combined 'the attributes of genius with the excellences of female character.' Hale also acknowledged that there were 'illustrious queens, who have ruled their people with a wisdom above that of kings.'³⁶ And she documented the achievements of learned women. Hale's learned women were represented as having 'made it highly feminine to be intelligent, as well as good.' Here, then,

35. Hale, *Woman's Record*, 17, xli.

36. Hale, *Woman's Record*, 152. Hale also appended a list of those women who had served as missionaries with the American Board of Foreign Missions, the Baptist Foreign Missions, the American Episcopal Foreign Missions, and the Presbyterian Foreign Missions.

were women who performed gender. Negotiating a reconciliation of learning with femininity, they made intellectual talents appear consonant with conventions of nineteenth-century womanhood. Simultaneously, Hale stressed that these women did a notable service on behalf of female learning itself. Serving as models of accomplishment, they testified to the fact that the "whole sex must adopt a new standard of education." The implications were easily discernible to any reader of *Woman's Record*. With the increased access to education that Hale championed throughout her career, all women would have the opportunity to perform the same negotiation. All of them would be able to make it "highly feminine to be intelligent as well as good."³⁷

Concerned that readers might conclude that women's pursuit of learning, their efforts to make themselves more 'intelligent,' deflected them from their traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers, Hale hastened to add that she was not one of 'those who are wrangling for "woman's rights."' Those who aligned themselves with such foolishness had gone astray. They pressed women to abandon the home for the world of men. They urged them to compete with their male counterparts. Most important, they refused to recognize the 'true idea of woman's nature and mission.' Telling her readers that the 'functions for which each [sex] was designed were dissimilar,' Hale posited a system of gender relations based on different roles and responsibilities. Women should 'leave the work of the world and its reward, the government thereof, to men.' They instead should 'fit [men] to their office, and inspire them to perform it in righteousness.'³⁸

In positing a system of gender relations that entailed distinct obligations for women and men, Hale appeared to restrict women to the home, to doing 'good' in that context alone. However, the

37. Hale, *Woman's Record*, viii. In perhaps the most striking example of this representation, Hale told her readers that Anne Bradstreet had been honored for "her gracious demeanor, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discreet management of her family occasions." Hale added almost as an afterthought that the poems had been "the fruits of a few hours curtailed from her sleep, and other refreshments." See 220.

38. Hale, *Woman's Record*, xxvii, vii, xlv.

rhetoric defending women's traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers was belied by the biographies themselves. In sketch after sketch, Hale documented the newly available opportunities that antebellum America's women were pursuing in the 'work of the world.' She applauded missionaries, writers, teachers, and editors who had entered that world and taken on work that was still marked as masculine. Indeed, she declared that 'in all that contributes to popular education and pure religious sentiment among the masses, the women of America are in advance of all others on the globe.' In the pages of *Woman's Record*, Hale negotiated between the old and the new. She devoted a paragraph here and there to a defense of the more traditional vehicle for the exercise of female agency, women's influence as wives and mothers. Notably, however, she spent many pages documenting fledgling possibilities for female agency in the world beyond the home. Almost certainly, readers were already familiar with the rhetorical defense that Hale included in introductions and conclusions. What they discovered in the intervening pages were alternative means by which to exercise agency.³⁹

Sarah Josepha Hale was hardly the first historian to locate claims for increased educational opportunity in the context of the ideology of republican womanhood. Murray, Rowson, and Child had used a similar strategy. Elizabeth Ellet went a step further. Taking as her subject *Women of the American Revolution*, she made the wives and mothers upon whom readers were expected to model themselves the subject of her three volumes.⁴⁰ Declaring 'history can do it no justice,' Ellet acknowledged that the subject had almost eluded her at every turn of the project. In documenting women's contribution to the struggle for independence, she had had to reckon with the 'inherent difficulty in delineating female character, which impresses itself on the memory of those

39. Hale, *Woman's Record*, 564.

40. In a companion volume that was designed to record 'the social and domestic conditions of the times, and the state of feeling among the people,' Ellet included the experiences of both women and men. See *Domestic History of the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850).

who have known the individual by delicate traits, that may be felt but not described.' It had been still more difficult to document women's most notable contribution—the vital role they had played in fueling the desire for freedom. In this regard, Ellet told her readers that the 'force of this sentiment, working in the public heart, cannot be measured; because, amidst the abundance of materials for the history of action, there is little for that of the feeling of those times.' This, then, was the dilemma: women's place, women's role, indeed women's very being were difficult to discern, at least by the conventional approach employed by historians.⁴¹

Undeterred by these obstacles, Ellet looked to a gendered history of the American Revolution that included the contributions of both sexes. Men's participation had already been acknowledged. It was now time to write women into the history of their nation's birth. Ellet began by incorporating their material contributions into the traditional narrative. Women may not have served as soldiers. They may not have taken to the battlefields. Nonetheless, Ellet insisted that their contributions to the struggle for independence had been significant. Women had produced foodstuffs. They had spied on the enemy. They had managed farms and shops. They had nursed the wounded and comforted the prisoners. Ellet recognized that including less visible but still decisive contributions entailed a revision in the traditional approach to the past. In measuring an individual's significance, in determining the shape of a narrative, historians had looked only to men's 'workings of the head.' They had neglected the 'heart,' the intangible sentiment of a people engaged in a struggle for independence.⁴² In sketch after sketch, Ellet presented readers with an alternative history that highlighted women's working of the 'heart.' She told her readers that Elizabeth Martin had replicated

41. Elizabeth Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 3 vols., 1: 15, xi, 13. Linda K. Kerber has commented on the larger implications of the dilemma identified by Ellet in "'History Can Do It No Justice': Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution." See Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (eds.), *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 3-42.

42. Ellet, *Women of the American Revolution*, 1: 15.

the role of the Spartan, rallying her sons with the declaration, "Go, boys, fight for your country! fight till death, if you must, but never let your country be dishonored." She honored the mothers of North Carolina who had 'trained their sons to become zealous patriots and efficient statesmen.' And she stressed that women throughout a newly independent United States had engaged in similar enterprises, ranging from 'reclaim[ing] what the ravages of war had laid waste; to weed[ing] from the soil the rank growth it had nourished; to carry[ing] out in practice the principles for which patriots had shed their blood, and to lay[ing] a moral foundation on which the structure of a nation's true greatness might be built.'⁴³

In her representations of learned women, Ellet made the same workings of the 'heart' central to her subjects' contribution to the Revolution and the establishment of the republic. Indeed, she suggested that learning was the key to this act of female patriotism. South Carolinian Sarah Reeve Gibbes served as Ellet's most striking illustration. Mistress of a large plantation, Gibbes took on responsibility for an invalid husband and a large family, which included seven of her sister's children. And yet she had still managed to pursue learning, as Ellet told her readers: 'volumes of her writings remain, filled with well-selected extracts from the many books she read, accompanied by her own comments, with essays on various subjects, copies of letters to her friends, and poetry.'⁴⁴ Ellet based her observation on the many documents that were then extant. Today only one letter survives. Nonetheless, it confirms Ellet's presentation of a woman whose pursuit of learning was integral to the fulfillment of her responsibilities as a social and moral guardian of a newly independent America. Gibbes's engagement with the same authors that occupied learned men in post-Revolutionary America was writ large in a letter to her son John, a student at Princeton in the 1780s. So too was her commitment to placing her well-stocked mind at the service of her family. Telling John that she was pleased he had decided 'to make

43. Ellet, *Women of the American Revolution*, 1: 277, 303; 2: 94.

44. Ellet, *Women of the American Revolution*, 1: 220.

a collection of books,' she proceeded to select the authors for him—Shakespeare's 'force of human genius,' Pope's 'chastity of thought,' and Dryden's stimulation of 'imagination' made them required reading. Swift was problematic, at least on moral grounds. 'Happy sallies of wit' notwithstanding, Gibbes measured him as wanting in 'refinement, in many parts his inelegant expressions hurt the delicate reader.' The antidote was Sterne's Yorick, who would 'correct your feelings.' History, Gibbes insisted, would 'be most substantially usefull, the Roman history particularly will furnish you many noble examples that deserve imitation.'⁴⁵

Writing distinctively female contributions into a newly designed narrative, Ellet offered readers a much more expansive history of the American Revolution. It was also a history that made women signal actors in their nation's quintessential drama. In highlighting the tyrannies practiced, in pointing to the wrongs committed by the British, they had been the 'patriotic mothers [who had] nursed the infancy of freedom.' With the achievement of independence, they had turned to forming 'the character and [shaping] the destinies of the youth of the Republic.' Women, in short, had made all the difference.⁴⁶

Some of the antebellum historians selected a compass smaller than the one chosen by Child, Hale, and Ellet. The essay designed for students at female academies and seminaries, the more concise history, the novel, tale, and sketch all constructed a women's past that was marked by female achievement. Two of antebellum America's influential women of letters chose still other forms. In *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy*, Louisa McCord made drama the site for her recovery of a female past. Selecting the extended essay, Margaret Fuller filled the pages of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* with representations of women drawn from earlier cen-

45. Sarah Reeve Gibbes to John Gibbes, Sept. 30, 1783, Gibbes-Gilchrist Collection, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.

46. Ellet, *Women of the American Revolution*, 1: 14; 2: 95. See also Scott E. Caspar's insightful analysis of Ellet's efforts to resolve the dilemma in 'The Uneasy Marriage of Sentiment and Scholarship: Elizabeth F. Ellet and the Domestic Origins of American Women's History,' *Journal of Women's History* 4 (Fall 1992): 10-35.

turies. Unlikely companions in the pursuit of a female past, Fuller and McCord nonetheless had the same objective as the other antebellum women writing women's history—discovering a past that provided them and their contemporaries with subjects for emulation. What distinguished these two historians was the degree to which they staked their claims for women on the basis of either equality or difference.

Declaring that equality 'exists neither in nature or fact, but simply in the mistaken views which men and women have both taken of the subject,' Louisa McCord made difference fundamental.⁴⁷ A staunch defender of the gender and racial hierarchies that prevailed in the antebellum South, she had no truck with women's rights advocates who based their claims on the idea of equality. Labelling them 'moral monsters; things which Nature disclaims,' McCord declared: 'In ceasing to be women, they yet have failed to make themselves men.'⁴⁸ More specifically, they yet had failed to understand the mission of their sex. Exalting a supposedly limitless capacity for self-sacrifice, McCord bluntly stated that women were 'made for duty, not for fame.'⁴⁹ Margaret Fuller counted herself among those 'monsters.' Describing the very equality that McCord had dismissed as the idea, or the 'moral law,' that constituted America's destiny, Fuller insisted that 'every path [be] laid open to woman as freely as to man.'⁵⁰ That, of course, included the 'fame' that McCord had reserved for men. Privileging rights rather than duties, Fuller made the public world a choice for women. She challenged prevailing definitions

47. L. S. M. [Louisa Susanna McCord], 'Woman and Her Needs,' *DeBow's Review* 13 (Sept. 1852), p. 288–9. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's discerning analysis of McCord, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), esp. 281–89. Stephanie McCurry has also explored the significance of the intersection between the sexual and racial hierarchies in 'The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina.' See *The Journal of American History*, 78 (March 1992): 1245–64.

48. L.S.M. [Louisa Susanna McCord], 'Enfranchisement of Woman,' *Southern Quarterly Review* 21 (April 1852), 327.

49. L.S.M. [Louisa Susanna McCord], 'Woman and Her Needs,' 272.

50. Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845), 15, 26. Reprinted in *The Portable Margaret Fuller* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1994), 236, 243. All subsequent citations to this text are taken from the latter edition.

of masculinity and femininity. And she insisted that women be able to develop their potential, not only as wives and mothers whose lives were defined by domesticity, but as individuals, each of whom had particular inclinations, desires, and talents.

Little wonder that these deeply held convictions informed McCord's and Fuller's presentation of women's past. Perhaps most obviously, they shaped the paths they took through that past and the decisions they made about those they included in their histories. Looking to the classical world, McCord chose Cornelia, the Roman counterpart to the Spartan. Nowhere is the translation of this already familiar model of republican womanhood more powerfully achieved than in McCord's Cornelia, the mother of Caius Gracchus. Cornelia's opening words signal the stance that she will take throughout the drama. Directed at her son's wife Licinia, Cornelia's words register virtue's requirements for women: 'Tis meek endurance, quiet fortitude, / That make [woman] life and beauty.' Not that these attributes necessarily came easily to women. Like their male counterparts, they might harbor a desire for worldly achievement, distinction, and power. And yet, as Cornelia reminds Licinia, any such ambition had to be stifled. In an admonition that resonates with McCord's personal struggle with repression of desires she considered masculine, she has Cornelia declare: 'But in our bosoms, if too fierce the flame / That feeds such spirit, struggles, we must check, / Or drive it back, at least, to seeming quiet. / If hard the effort, it is woman's task. / Her passions, if not smothered, must be hid.'⁵¹

The irony here was obvious. The historian who had privileged difference acknowledged that women possessed the same ambitions as men. They also wanted public acclaim. Why, then, did McCord refuse to be explicit? Precisely because her conception of the past was shaped by her commitment to an antebellum South in which hierarchies based on gender and race intersected. Had McCord pressed for equality rather than difference she would have gambled with the stability of those hierarchies. As a member

51. Louisa S. McCord, *Caius Gracchus. A Tragedy* (New York: H. Kernot, 1851), 21.

of the South's planter elite, that was a risk that she was not prepared to take. McCord instead chose to celebrate the republican wife and mother who limited herself to the household and schooled her husband and sons in the practice of virtue. Indeed, it was almost as if males in a family were destined to serve as a woman's surrogate in the public world. Rallying both Caius and Licinia to face virtue's demands, Cornelia tells Licinia: 'Twixt life and honor—I would bid him die, / What though the effort burst my mother-heart! / When virtue's weighed 'gainst vice, good men must die.' As indeed they must, at least in this construction of patriotism. When Caius decides to sacrifice himself for his country, the cost to those devoted to him receives no mention in his mother's farewell. 'Go, my son, / I have no word to stop you,' Cornelia declares as she sends Caius to a certain death.⁵²

Margaret Fuller also included a model of republican womanhood in the pages of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. However, both the individual and the historical context in which she was situated were decidedly different from McCord's Roman matron. The Manon Roland honored in the pages of Lydia Maria Child's biography was likened to the Spartan wife and mother of the classical world. Roland in this translation represented the 'Spartan matron, brought by the culture of the age of Books to intellectual consciousness and expansion.' The classical world's wife and mother had been translated into the modern learned woman. The culture that had made this possible had also brought her into the world beyond the household, a modification that McCord would have found dissonant. That, however, was exactly what Fuller sought. She did not ask that all women claim the public world for themselves. She did ask that they have that choice.⁵³

Like McCord, Fuller presented her readers with a women's history designed to stir their imagination. It was also a history that highlighted learned women. Casting a wide net, Fuller selected

52. McCord, *Caius Gracchus. A Tragedy*, 47, 112. Little more than a decade after she had published *Caius Gracchus*, McCord dispatched her son to serve the Confederacy. With his death, McCord experienced the tragedy she had described in the pages of her drama.

53. Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 267.

examples from folklore, literature, mythology, and history. Those from the last source were the most arresting. During her adolescence, Fuller had been introduced to Germaine de Staël by none other than Lydia Maria Child. Little wonder, then, that the woman portrayed in the pages of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* resembled Child's de Staël. Fuller herself recalled that de Staël's brilliant intellect had made 'the obscurest school-house in New England warmer and lighter to the little rugged girls, who [were] gathered on its wooden bench.' Mary Somerville had provided another model. In describing her accomplishments, Fuller asked her readers that if this acclaimed English scientist 'has achieved so much, will any young girl be prevented from seeking a knowledge of the physical sciences, if she wishes it?'⁵⁴

Turning to contemporary society, Fuller paid tribute to two novelists who shared her concern with developing women's intellectual potential. She commended Maria Edgeworth for stressing the need for 'cultivation of a clear, independent judgment, and adherence to its dictates; habits of various and liberal study and employment, and a capacity for friendship.' Fuller reserved special acclaim for Catharine Maria Sedgwick, one of antebellum America's prominent novelists. It is not surprising that she did so. Embodying the conviction 'that intellect need not absorb or weaken, but rather will refine and invigorate the affections,' the Sedgwick honored by Fuller mediated gender conventions with female learning.⁵⁵

However different their narratives, women writing about women shared a basic conviction. The past had the power to shape the present. All of them also began with the premise that they had a claim on that past. Young women establishing a literary society, a defender of the antebellum South's hierarchies, editors of women's magazines, a radical abolitionist, teachers at female academies and seminaries, and an advocate of women's rights all placed the past

54. Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 280.

55. Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 302, 322.

in service to their aspirations. They constituted their historical subjects for a variety of ends, sometimes highlighting the Spartan, other times the learned woman. Whichever they privileged, they always registered female achievement. Typically, they made intellectual achievement central.

In highlighting the power of their subjects' minds, these historians claimed women's intellectual equality with men. Simultaneously, they marked that claim with difference. They did not anticipate that the women whose history they wrote would pursue learning for personal ends. Instead, they expected that their subjects' remarkable talents would be placed in the service of others, be they husbands or children. This mediation of nineteenth-century gender conventions both increased and circumscribed women's possibilities for self-determination. The claims made on behalf of intellectual equality were freighted with the premise that women had the same potential as men for an expansive life of the mind. And yet the simultaneous emphasis upon difference suggested that there were limits on what women ought to do with that more expansive life. That this mediation was marked by ambiguity, by tension, and by contradiction is perhaps the most striking testimony to the challenge of reconciling equality and difference.⁵⁶

56. Feminist scholars have begun to explore the implications of these hegemonic categories. I am particularly indebted to Joan Wallach Scott's analysis. Ann Snitnow's subtly nuanced commentary has also been helpful. See Scott, 'The Sears Case,' in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 167-77; Snitnow, 'Pages from a Gender Diary: Basic Divisions in Feminism,' *Dissent* (Spring 1989): 205-24. Legal scholars have addressed the constitutional and statutory implications of the juxtaposition established between equality and difference. Highlighting what she has aptly described as the 'sameness/difference conundrum,' Martha Minow has noted that 'if women claim they are the same as men in order to secure rights, any sign of difference can be used to deny those rights; and if women claim they are different from men in order to secure rights, those very differences can be cited to exclude women from the rights that men enjoy.' Catharine MacKinnon has also noted that either men or masculinity become the referent in defining the meaning of both equality and difference. See Minow, 'Adjudicating Conflicts Among Feminist Lawyers,' in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 149-63; and MacKinnon, 'Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination,' in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 32-45.

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