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History

Mercy Otis Warren, The Historiographical Motivation
of an Unlikely Patriot

Michelle Wheeler

It is true there are certain appropriate duties assigned to each sex; and doubtless it is the more peculiar province of masculine strength...to describe the blood-stained field, and relate the story of slaughtered armies. Sensible of this, the trembling heart has recoiled at the magnitude of the undertaking, and the hand shrunk back from the task...

-Mercy Otis Warren¹

For many Americans, today, the American Revolution was a war in which thirteen American colonies broke free from the bondage of Britain's tyrannical rule and became a free and independent nation. Little do Americans know that there was a lesser-known, undeclared gender war being fought on the home front during the revolution. Until the twentieth century, American women typically served as submissive wives to their husbands, caretakers for their children, and were responsible for the daily operations of the household. A woman depended solely on her husband's prosperity for her family's material needs. With limited opportunity for formal education and no political rights, eighteenth century American women appeared to be bound to their traditional domestic roles.

However, during the 1760s and throughout the American Revolutionary War period, some American women, who became active participants in the patriotic movement that broke out across the colonies, sought opportunities that would free them from their traditional domestic roles and allow them to become more independent. In many cases, as their husbands left home to fight, women were provided opportunities to step outside their traditional roles. Wom-

en began making decisions their husbands previously made, they took care of legal matters, and in many cases would become the wage earner for the family. Women evolved beyond their domestic roles. Although, it was not just within their domestic roles that women were evolving. Women of the Revolutionary Era began participating in “civic processions, political salons, and street protests” while cultural influences fused “classical republicanism and Lockean liberalism” together, challenging the “...masculine [nature] of republicanism.”²² The American Revolution provided the impetus for women to envision broader roles for themselves in civic affairs. The Revolution allowed women to “imagine themselves as political beings for the first time and to act on this revelation.”²³ Writing about history and politics allowed women to express themselves in a way that would contribute to the overall well-being of the nation. What was unique was that history, itself, “furnished women with a rhetoric of resistance to many of the master narratives subordinating them politically and intellectually.”²⁴ Change was on the horizon. The American Revolution provided one woman, Mercy Otis Warren, the perfect opportunity to become one of America’s greatest political thinkers and historians in the gender exclusive realm of republican ideology.

In modern history, Warren is commonly revered as the ‘Conscience of the Revolution,’ however history has not always been so kind to America’s first female historian and playwright. Historians and historiographers have often trivialized Warren’s writings of the late eighteenth century as they “tend not to see women as important political thinkers,”²⁵ and therefore, have neglected her poetry, plays and *History of the American Revolution* as important contributions to America’s past. However, historian Judith B. Markowitz noted that the ‘new left’ historians of the late 1960s began to re-envision the American Revolution as a radical movement versus the

‘consensus historians’ of post-World War II who saw the Revolution as anything but revolutionary. As a result of the ‘new left’ and ‘feminist’ movements of the 1960s, Warren’s political writings, history and poetry have been reexamined. She is no longer seen as a peripheral contributor to the Revolution, based on her relationships to certain male political figures of the time, but rather as a revolutionary steeped in republican ideology who sought to unite America based on the principles fought for during the Revolution.

Warren was born on September 9, 1728 to the politically prominent, Puritan Otis family of Barnstable, Massachusetts. In a time when women did not receive much education beyond what modern society would call the elementary level, Warren’s father saw to it that his daughter received a liberal education through individual study where she gained a strong appreciation for history and poetry.⁶ Her brother, James Otis, Jr., introduced his sister to the enlightened philosopher John Locke and his theory on the governments’ duty to serve the ‘natural rights of man.’ The private education she received would be the beginning of her political genius. At the age of twenty-six, she married James Warren, a prosperous Plymouth merchant and long-time friend of her brother James Otis, Jr. James Warren and Mercy Otis were blessed with a deep love for one another. He took “much pride in his wife’s literary talent as he did in her housewifely competence and admired her mind...”⁷ In 1765, James Warren entered the political arena and joined the rebellious cause against England. He became acquainted with John Adams and Samuel Adams, and the three men rounded out their rebellious cabal with Mercy’s brother, James Otis, Jr.

As the American patriot cause progressed in the 1760s, Mrs. Warren became politically connected to whom her biographer, Alice Brown, called her intellectual comrades.⁸ Patriot leaders and political thinkers, like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Elbridge Gerry and

occasionally General George Washington, wrote Mrs. Warren to engage her political genius and republican ideologies in the wake of the Revolution. Warren, also, frequently visited General Washington's headquarters near Watertown, Massachusetts, where her husband served as paymaster for the colonial army. With such political connectivity and opportunity, Mrs. Warren began collecting first-hand accounts, letters and other materials on the Revolution "at a period when every manly arm was occupied."⁹ Her desire was to write a history on the American Revolution. Furthermore, being "connected by nature, friendship, and every social tie, with many of the first Patriots,"¹⁰ Mrs. Warren became "active in the 'masculine sphere' – in politics and in the historian's craft."¹¹ As she grew more active and connected in the causes of the American Revolution, she began slowly escaping the bonds of cultural subordination and was well on her way to becoming what John Adams would dub as the "most accomplished lady in America."¹²

By the early 1770s Mercy Otis Warren possessed a "deep knowledge of the political and religious issues of her day and wished to voice her opinions on the changes occurring around her."¹³ After witnessing her brother James Otis Jr.'s mental deterioration after an assault by a British customs officer in 1769, she felt it was now her duty to champion the patriot's cause.¹⁴ Keenly aware of her femininity, she developed the pen-name, "The Columbian Patriot," and began publishing poems and satirical plays about the British and Loyalists, anonymously, in New England newspapers. Her first drama entitled *The Adulateur* was a "satirical play mocking the administration of the newly appointed – and already detested – Governor Thomas Hutchinson."¹⁵ Thomas Hutchinson, the royal governor of Massachusetts, wrote a series of letters, dubbed by history as the Hutchinson-Oliver letters, to British Parliament asking for more troops to be sent to Boston to fight the colonial rebels. In 1772,

Benjamin Franklin anonymously received the Hutchinson letters, and sent them to Boston as a warning to the colonists. Franklin's only stipulation was that the letters not be published or circulated. In June of 1773, the letters were published in the *Boston Gazette* and the people of Boston forced Hutchinson to flee for England. Appearing in the *Massachusetts Spy*, *The Adulateer* told the story of a tyrannical leader named Rapatio (the fictional characterization of Hutchinson), who ruled the fictional country of Upper Servia and vowed to eradicate his rebellious subjects. Fighting against Rapatio's tyranny were the virtuous Patriots. What was remarkable about Mrs. Warren's satire of Governor Hutchinson was that a woman was commenting on the political crisis in 1772, albeit anonymously, and she showed an "analytic and educated mind attempting to solve the moral and social crises of her day."¹⁶ She followed up *The Adulateer* with *The Defeat* in 1773, delivering her final blows to Governor Hutchinson's tyrannical rule over Massachusetts after the Hutchinson-Oliver letters made their public debut. Warren became inherently aware that she was not necessarily writing for the popular audience, but rather for "intellectuals and such leading American figures as Adams, Jefferson, Gerry and Washington. Since she appealed primarily to the minds of her audience, Warren expected her readers to be as intellectually critical as she was."¹⁷ Her intellectual comrades applauded Mrs. Warren for her political genius and deemed her literary talent brilliant.

In November and December 1773, the British East India Company docked three tea ships, the *Dartmouth*, the *Beaver* and the *Eleanor*, in Boston Harbor. Abigail Adams wrote to her close friend, Mercy Warren, to share with her that "the Tea, that bairfull weed, is arrived. Great and...effectual opposition has been made to the landing of it. Our citizens have been united, spirited, and firm. The flame is kindled and like lightning it catches from soul to soul."¹⁸

Not wanting the tea unloaded, stored or sold in Massachusetts, the Bostonians demanded the tea be returned to England. Governor Hutchinson refused. On December 16, one hundred and fifty-five members of the Sons of Liberty, a secret society of patriot men that formed in 1765 to protest British authority and taxes in the colonies, disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians. The group proceeded to Griffin's Wharf, boarded the three British vessels, and threw 342 chests of tea overboard into Boston Harbor, protesting the Tea Act of 1773, a law that provided the British East India Company a monopoly on the tea trade in the American colonies. John Adams found the act of defiance magnificent, bold and daring, and "so lasting that I cannot but consider it an epoch in history."¹⁹ Adams would have liked to have written about the event himself, however, he felt he lacked the poetical talent to do so and called upon the talent of Mercy Warren, whom he said had no equal in the country that he knew.²⁰ As a result, Warren penned the satirical poem, "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs - The Sacrifice of the Tuscaroroës." Published on the front page of the *Boston Gazette* in March of 1774, the poem once again attacked Governor Hutchinson. Sticking with the suggested subject of sea nymphs, hinted at by John Adams, Warren's poem depicted Neptune's rival wives fighting over tea. As in the Boston Tea Party, disguised Bostonians assist the sea nymphs in their decision and cast the tea into the water in act of defiance. The public admired the patriotism the poem exuded and became aware that the "Columbian Patriot" was Mercy Otis Warren. She was praised for her talent, and she confessed that "she had never dreamed it in her power to amuse, much less benefit, the world by the unstudied composition of her leisure hours. If her pen gave pleasure to her little circle of friends, she would be happy."²¹

Where some of her literary contemporaries commented on the mediocrity of her satires and poems, it should be noted that

“timeliness was an important factor.”²² Literature Professor Sandra J. Sarkela of the University of Memphis stated that “if we read them [her satirical sketches] from the perspective of her intended audience within the specific context of their newspaper publication, we begin to understand how Warren’s appropriation of the dramatic form advanced a radical narrative that mobilized support for a public cause.”²³ Warren’s writings in the 1770s indulged the popular sentiment of the period. She served as an effective propagandist and in essence became the voice of the Massachusetts’s patriots.

As the war came to its conclusion, Mercy Otis Warren became more focused on the republican principles that the war had been founded on. As she took up her pen and began writing her *History of the Revolution*, she became engrossed in “the times” and saw that the republican ideals of liberty and virtue that began the Revolution were being corrupted by avarice and greed in the development of the post-war government system. She boldly broke away from writing propaganda and now began writing for a partisan cause, democratic republicanism. Never far from her mind, however, was her Puritan background. Warren was a product of the eighteenth century. The historian’s function was to record, not interpret, and to “trace the hand of God in events instead of the working of natural laws.”²⁴ However, as a disciple of the Lockean theory of natural rights, she fused her New England Puritanism with democratic republicanism, “a view of human nature derived from her religious beliefs combined with the ideal of individual equality and freedom. History revealed both the nature of human beings and the existence of a divinely ordained plan for the achievement of human happiness.”²⁵ Even though religion played a central role in her thoughts on the formation of a good society, according to historian Markowitz, it did not overshadow the other object of Warren’s desire, the secular government. For Warren, “religion keeps alive in the com-

munity those values which will allow for a just and humane government,"²⁶ in which man is born free and possesses certain unalienable rights and a government protects those rights. Therefore, teaching morals in the course of writing of her history became another goal, while trying to recapture the republican ideologies that America seemed to be falling away from post-Revolution.

Now that America had won her freedom and independence from Britain, Mercy Warren noted that the real test of American freedom would be the ability of the people to protect their individual rights from the greed that was running amuck post-Revolution. She saw Americans in danger of losing their newfound liberty to a new class of men, an aristocracy that arose out of the Revolution. She found American society was in a state of decay post-war, and it was sectionally divided between the North where property was divided more equally and education was available versus the South where slavery and wealth created an aristocracy.²⁷ As she began writing her *History of the American Revolution*, she focused on two fundamental categories of historical explanation, virtue and avarice. As a result, she "self-consciously wrote in the tradition of exemplary history both because she was convinced philosophically that historical models instructed youth and because tradition provided a framework for developing her ideological commitments."²⁸ Mercy felt it was her duty as a historian to teach morality and ethics, while using her writings to comment on the political and social criticisms of her day. She was less concerned about the past and more concerned about the present state of decay of the nation and a future where the Federalists, who desired a strong, centralized government, run by the wealthy, corrupted American society to the point that America would fall like other great Republics in history. The goal of her *History* was to generate a vision of an American future that would fulfill the promise of the Revolution's republican ideologies and "instruct

on the principles of personal morality and public virtue.”²⁹ Ultimately, the people were in control of their future, but it was her role as an historian to instruct the people to be ethically responsible for the future of the nation by showing how republicanism was the greatest form of liberty that would ensure individual rights.

Warren’s *History* became her expression of the Revolution’s commitment to republicanism. Because of her Lockean beliefs and the ‘nature of man,’ she knew it was in man’s nature to distinguish himself from his fellow citizens and open the door to corruption. However, as an historian she wanted to keep the people informed on the dangers of corruption and tyranny and alert them when their rights were threatened. She stated in Volume III of her *History* that, “they [Americans] have struggled with astonishing success for the rights of mankind, and have emancipated themselves from the shackles of foreign power,” but “Americans are already in too many instances hankering after the sudden accumulation of wealth, and the proud distinctions of fortune and title.”³⁰ She felt that her *History* would serve as an instruction manual on how to avoid the corruption and decay that led to the fall of the great republics in history. If people would understand what was corrupting them and how to avoid those temptations of avarice, then they could finally unite into a great nation and maintain their individual and natural rights they fought for in the Revolution. Her *History* was her way of teaching the younger generation about the ideologies of republicanism by using the old patriots as models of virtue. In essence, she was seeking “to establish hegemony over the future...and establish the very categories in which interpretation [of her *History*] was properly to be conducted.”³¹

Mercy Warren began writing her *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* shortly after the war concluded. She was almost finished writing it by 1791, however, it was not pub-

lished until 1805. There was a roadblock in the completion of her *History*. It was the Constitutional Convention and the rise of party factions that halted the completion of her monograph. She stopped working on her narrative by 1791 because “the virulence of party spirit shuts up the avenues of just information until truth has a chance for fair play.”³² Political partisanship threatened the very core of her beloved republican ideology and opened the door to corruption. Fearing that republicanism was dwindling into theory with the drafting of the Constitution, she launched an attack on the Federalists with an essay written in 1788 entitled, “Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions.” In the essay, she criticized the power of the new federal government and listed eighteen reasons why the Constitution would result in tyranny and establish an aristocracy in America. The federal Constitution provided no protection for man’s individual rights and the people were in danger of losing the freedoms they so valiantly fought for in the Revolution. Warren firmly believed that “the origin of all power is in the people, and that they have an incontestable right to check the creatures of their own creation, vested with certain powers to guard the life, liberty and property of the community...”³³ She also felt that “if certain selected bodies of men, deputed on these principles, determine contrary to the wishes and expectations of their constituents, the people have an undoubted right to reject their decisions.”³⁴ Mercy Warren saw the Constitution as an ambiguous document that adapted to the purposes of immediate aristocratic tyranny.³⁵ It did not provide the very people who fought for independence from a despotic Britain their unalienable rights. She called for a Bill of Rights to safeguard the individual liberties of America’s citizens. Writing with a staunch Antifederalist tone in her essay, she “warned her readers not to be fooled by popular pretence of justice, consolidation, and dignity, for the Constitution would draw the

reins of the government too taught..."³⁶ Warren felt civil liberties must be protected and the power to control the Constitution must be laid in the hands of the people and not in the aristocratic hands of the Federalists.

She continued working on her *History* as the Constitutional Convention concluded. Once published in 1805, it was thought of mainly as political commentary on the era of the Revolution. She was also up against strong literary competition when her book was published. Both David Ramsay and William Gordon published their histories of the Revolution in 1788 and 1789. However, Warren's narrative was different from popular male historians of the day. Her monograph was "devoted to a strongly patriotic theme that had become a staple of a new American nationalism."³⁷ Americans, at the turn of the century, were not used to thinking in 'national' terms. What Warren set out to accomplish in her *History* was setting aside her partisan beliefs and focusing on the success of the union, and what the nation and its inhabitants had in common versus the issues that divided them. She chose not to write for the posterity of her chosen political party, but rather that "the United States form a young republic, a confederacy which ought ever to be cemented by a union of interest and affection, under the influence of those principles which obtained their independence."³⁸ She used her *History* to foster pride in the fledgling nation, while using the actual historical events of the war to unite the American people under republican ideals to prevent the further decay of the union and to promote its welfare.

One thing that Mercy Warren was never capable of shedding was her womanhood. Her own credibility rested on men's willingness to tolerate her in a male dominated society.³⁹ She often apologized for being a woman and writing on topics that historically only men were allowed to write about. In her introductory comments to

her *History of the American Revolution*, she asked readers to look upon her *History* with kindness and “in consideration of her sex.”⁴⁰ While she desired intellectual equality between the genders, she still believed in the appointed subordination of women for the sake of the family unit, and oftentimes chose to avoid public criticism by falling back on her femininity. Warren believed in placing domestic duties above intellectual endeavors. She was also aware that she could not be too critical about the topics on which she wrote, as it could “openly challenge the existing ‘order in families’ in the ‘promised land.’”⁴¹ Therefore, she carefully worked within traditional gender roles, while teaching the virtues of republicanism to her own children and the future generations of America. Where she wrote about and preached on the theories and application of republicanism in a virtuous society, in practice, she never broke free from the traditional role that society defined for women and could not practice republicanism, herself.

The American Revolution not only provided America with a war to win its freedom and independence from Britain, but it provided female patriots, like Mercy Otis Warren, the opportunity to wage war on gender roles and become politically active in a male dominated society. Not having the ability to be directly involved in the Revolution and post-war events, Mercy “took up the pen as an alternative to the sword or the ballot.”⁴² She created literary masterpieces that not only drew attention to the vices that threatened the republican spirit of the Revolution and the infancy of the new nation, but she evolved from strictly being a Revolutionary era propagandist to post-Revolutionary historian and radical political activist who sought to unite the nation on the principles of republicanism. Her talent and genius allowed her to creatively portray the virtue she sought to engrain throughout her *History*, plays and poems. Where she was never able to break free from the bonds of womanhood, she did

break free from the conventional state of gender subordination and ennobled women to believe that they had a significant political function in the cause of the Revolution.⁴³ Warren fused the roles of republican, woman, writer, intellectual and political analyzer into one, while using the spirit of the past as a means to create hegemony over the future and to engrain the principles of virtue and patriotism into the youth of post-Revolutionary America.

Notes

¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805), iv.

² Philip Hicks, "Portia and Marcia: Female Political Identity and Historical Imagination, 1770-1800," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third series, 62, no. 2 (April 2005): 266.

³ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵ Judith B. Markowitz, "Radical and Feminist: Mercy Otis Warren and the Historiographers," *Peace and Change* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Maud Macdonald Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren, 1728-1814," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July 1953): 380.

⁸ Alice Brown, *Mercy Warren* (Cambridge: University Press, 1896), 56.

⁹ Mercy Otis Warren, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805): iii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lawrence J. Friedman and Arthur H. Shaffer, "Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism," *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (June 1975): 210.

¹² Rosemarie Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1995): xv.

¹³ Edmund Hayes and Mercy Otis Warren, "The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren," *The New England Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (June 1981): 200.

¹⁴ Nancy Rubin Stuart, "Conscience of the Revolution," *American History* 43, no. 3 (August 2008), 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Hayes and Warren, "Private Poems," 200.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁸ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008): 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ Maud Macdonald Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren," 385.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 386.

²² *Ibid.*, 389.

²³ Sandra J. Sarkela, "Freedom's Call: The Persuasive Power of Mercy Otis Warren's Dramatic Sketches, 1772-1775," *Early American Literature* 44, no. 3 (November 2009): 542.

²⁴ Hutcheson, 397.

²⁵ Markowitz, "Radical and Feminist," 11.

²⁶ Markowitz, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ Lester H. Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 37, no. 2 (April 1980): 205.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁰ Warren, *History*, 333.

³¹ Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution," 214.

³² Friedman and Shaffer, "Politics of Historical Nationalism," 194.

³³ Mercy Warren, "Observations on the New Constitution, and the Federal and State Conventions," (Boston 1788), 6. Note that the original publication was thought to be authored by Elbridge Gerry until it was traced to Mercy Warren in the 1930s, as the *Columbian Patriot*. <http://archive.org/stream/cu31924020874099#page/n21/mode/2up> (accessed September 2, 2013).

³⁴ Warren, "Observations on the New Constitution," *Ibid.*

³⁵ Markowitz, "Radical and Feminism," 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁷ Friedman and Shaffer, "Politics of Historical Nationalism," 197.

³⁸ Warren, *History*, vii.

³⁹ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, xvi.

⁴⁰ Warren, *History*, viii.

⁴¹ Friedman and Shaffer, "Historical Nationalism," 214.

⁴² Cohen, "Politics of Language," 494.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 495.

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