“IN THIS ENLIGHTENED AGE”: MARRIAGE AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT

KIRSTEN ANN SMITHERMAN. ‘In this enlightened age’: Marriage and Enlightenment in Revolutionary America. (Under the direction of DR. CHRISTOPHER CAMERON)

This study explores the role of marriage in the lives of women during the formation of the American Republic. It argues that women, despite the constraints of a patriarchal society, used marriage as a tool for both intellectual production and political engagement. The nascent nation’s decision to uphold many English marriage laws, which were largely unfavorable towards wives, paradoxically set a precedent for women’s participation in the nation. This seemingly regressive decision inadvertently provided women with a framework within which they could assert their influence. It posits that while many women may not have been recognized by Enlightenment philosophers, they were nonetheless actively engaging with and discussing Enlightenment ideas. The political and ideological climate of the eighteenth century, characterized by revolution and the struggle for independence, provided an ideal backdrop for women to weave themselves into the revolutionary narrative and explore new dimensions of their lives. Through marriage, women navigated the societal constraints of their time, carving out a space for themselves in the civic sphere. They transformed the institution of marriage from a mere social obligation into a tool for change, using it to assert their rights and make their voices heard. This study suggests that marriage, far from being a symbol of subjugation, became a vehicle for women’s empowerment and political participation in the new republic.

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Lastly, I would like to express my love and gratitude to my family for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my master's journey; this accomplishment would not have been possible without them. This past year has been unlike any other. For every hurdle in

my path and every trial I faced, I could rely on my people. To my parents, who have watched me chase not one, not two, but three careers, I promise I am almost done! Shelley and Fred, I am the woman I am today because *you* gave me every opportunity, encouraged every whim, and *never* underestimated me. I am successful because you made it so, and I am privileged to be your daughter. To my siblings Adam and Shellby, who will never admit that they think I am cool, I love you both and am so thankful for each of you every day. To G, I am grateful you always ask questions and listen to me ramble endlessly. To my Papa, thank you for thinking only the best of me. You wish me to the stars, and I hope to reach them for you every day. And finally, to Maverick. I cannot imagine what the last two years would have been like without you, and I cannot wait to see all the amazing things you will undoubtedly do.

DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad, my biggest champions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GLC	Gilder Lehrman Collection
MHS	Massachusetts Historical Society
NA	National Archives
N-YHS	New York Historical Society
UM-WLCL	University of Michigan, William L. Clements Library

INTRODUCTION

Marriage was much of a concern in the epistolary musings of Esther Edwards Burr and Sarah Prince. "I cant help feeling a tender Concern for new Married people," shared Esther in her letter on June 21, 1757, "because their Happiness much depends on their Conduct to wards each other when first Married."[1] Sarah and Esther were vividly aware of the importance of marriage as a crucial event in any woman's life. Esther, the young wife of minister and college president Aaron Burr Sr., would spend countless pages of her journal devoted to evaluating what was written about courtship and marriage and detailing her own ideas about the essential nature of marriage in secular life. Her marriage to Aaron Burr Sr. afforded her some prominence and, combined with the influence of her own parent's union, likely shaped her perception of marriage as a defining institution in both the domestic and public spheres.

Burr's journal illustrates her understanding of marriage as not only a duty to be held by women but an opportunity to shape and influence the world around them. Though it is clear that these women shared a strong mutual love and respect for one another as individuals and intellectuals, Burr found fault with Prince for her ambivalence to marriage. How could a woman not utilize an institution so clearly designed to elevate her closer to God and position her within society as a respectable and influential person? For Burr, as long as the love between husband and wife was reverent and morally sound, marriage presented women with the opportunity to be dutiful and virtuous people.[2] Though there is "little illusion of choice" given to women in the eighteenth century, Burr finds that even the trials of marriage bring happiness and that it proffers

[1] Esther Edwards Burr, *"*June 21, 1757, Teusday [sic]," in *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 299.
[2] Ibid, "March 2, 1755," 96; "October 21, 1756," 261.

women the correct set of circumstances to lead by example, act with prudence, and seek the betterment of self.[3]

Studies of eighteenth-century America seem to present marriage in one of two ways: as an utterly restrictive institution meant to prevent women from gaining access to predominantly masculine spaces, keeping them within their domestic sphere, and guiding women to their proper role as mothers; or as a freeing institution in which doting husbands would allow their wives to altogether transgress the constraints of an acceptable role within society to insert themselves into the national picture without repercussion. While elements of these two interpretations are correct, they also have their limitations. Marriage as a gendered experience was far more complex than a binary set of arguments can hope to encompass. Eighteenth-century marriages were incredibly nuanced and often varied greatly depending on the individual marriage, geographical region, religious practices, and socio-economic status.

Women understood marriage as an instrument of both companionship and political significance. As America's founding fathers, mothers, and families came of age with the young nation, marriage often defined political and social participation for women in the new republic. In the context of the American Revolution as a political crisis, women used marriage as a tool to create space for personal autonomy through intellectualism, even within the extremely limited confines of America's patriarchal society. By deliberately electing to maintain many outdated English laws pertaining to the establishment of marriage, a young America set a precedent for participation in its beloved nation. Though these laws did not favor wives, women utilized their position and developed unique, women-only ideas. They directly engaged with ideas centered around their role in the budding American republic as people bound by gendered obligations. As

[3] Ibid, "April 24, 1756, Saturday" 219.

a result of these ideas, this thesis argues, that women used their marriages to expand their role as citizens of a new nation who had a right to participate in its political affairs and intellectual life.

Historiography

The exclusion of women from the historical narrative has significantly impacted the scholarship of America's foundational beliefs, its revolutionary birth, and its potential to fulfill its promise of liberty and justice for all. The early antiquarian writings of the nineteenth century focused little on "insignificant" actions of ordinary men and women, opting instead to trace themes of divine providence, patriotism, progress, and pan-democracy.[4] Some historians of the nineteenth century were interested in the workings of small farmers and workingmen but still believed that the American Revolution was a matter of nation-states and not individuals, let alone individuals who were non-white, non-elite, or non-male.[5] However, with the twentieth century, the production of history became professionalized, and a shift from antiquarian and Whig interpretations of the American Revolution took place. The creation of an academic history saw the rise of progressive interpretations that often eschewed the reliance on the power of ideas from previous histories in favor of an interpretation rooted in class struggles and economic interest.[6] Reactionary interpretations shaped the landscape of American historiography, resulting in countless new movements ranging from Neo-Whig and ideological interpretations, such as Bernard Bailyn (1967), to the New-Left or "new social history" of the sixties and seventies.[7]

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[4] George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883).
[5] George Athan Billias, "George Bancroft: Master Historian," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 111 no. 2 (2001), 507–528.
[6] Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States,* First edition (Somerset: Taylor and Francis, 1998); Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).
[7] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

The power of women's words, the expression of their ideas, and their desire for a political role in the early republic have intrigued many historians over the past fifty years. While the *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution (1805)* by Mercy Otis Warren was the first history of the American Revolution authored by a woman, women were not considered primary subjects in early American history. Following the women's liberation movement (WLM) of the 1970s, professional female historians began to step forward and eloquently argue for women and gender as a subject of historical analysis. As a result of their work, the field of women and gender studies expanded, and historians began to reshape the history of the American Revolution by including women of all social, racial, and economic backgrounds. Because of the work of Carol Berkin, Linda K. Kerber, Joan Scott, Lynn Hunt, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Betty Wood, and many more, women have justly become an integral part of the scholarship on the origins of the American experiment.

These scholars are among the many who have challenged the perceived notion of women's intellectual and political inferiority in early America. The historiography of early American women's intellectual history can be divided into two categories: monographs dedicated to the expansion of women's intellectual history facilitated through exploring broad themes like Republican Motherhood, midwifery, race, and politics, and biographies about early American women intellectuals who changed the landscape of intellectualism in America and redefined expectations of gender in the eighteenth century. Each of these historiographic categories provides academics and general audiences alike with a more profound knowledge of the conditions, obligations, beliefs, and desires of a class of historical subjects that had previously been understudied and subsumed into a broader, more expansive historiography.

In "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective" (1976), Linda Kerber coins the term "Republican Motherhood" and defines this as a political role that the newly independent Americans only hesitantly developed for women.[8] Kerber would continue to explore the concept of republican motherhood in her 1980 book *Women of the Republic: Intellectual and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, which argues that the paradoxical relationship between motherhood and citizenship offered no guidance on how women might think about their relationship to liberty or civic virtue.[9] Kerber pioneered early American women's intellectual history, though her analysis has limitations. Understanding that "the general contours of the American past will be more accurate if we assess women's experience as carefully as we do men's," Kerber emphasizes women's obligations to their children and argues that the republic crafted a role that best suited their domestic position.[10] However, as posited by John Locke in his *Second Treatise*, before the mother came the wife. Therefore, this thesis examines women's intellectual history not just through their role as mothers, as Kerber does, but rather through their roles as wives and the possibilities that opened up for them.[11]

Another pioneering scholar of early American women's cultural and intellectual history is Jan Lewis, who examines the patriotic role of the Republican Wife in her 1994 essay "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." Here Lewis argues that marriage was much like a republic in that it was a woman's job to find a compatible mate who was the embodiment of republican ideology.[12] Her use of political framework engages in evidence that

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[8] Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 198-205.
[9] Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Press, 1980).
[10] Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, xi.
[11] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Second Treatises, Chapter 7, §77-78, ed. Ian Shapiro (Yale University Press, 2003), 133.
[12] Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1987): 697-698.

illustrates how a compatible marriage's virtuous, content, and happy rhetoric was used to justify women's limited role in the republic.

Lewis' examination of the production of Anglo-American magazines and fiction throughout the eighteenth century illustrates that women were encouraged to seduce men into being virtuous, republican citizens and to assume responsibility as the producers of moral order in the new republic. Most similar to the research of this thesis, Lewis determines that the "republican wife" was responsible for forming the moral foundations of society, though not by being an intellectual or political being but rather as a seductress. This thesis instead looks at the work produced *by* women who viewed marriage as a tool for political, social, and intellectual opportunity. My focus is less on how women attempted to foster virtue and morality in others, as Lewis argues, but rather how their marriages served as a conduit for becoming virtuous citizens themselves.

Much of the scholarship dedicated to women's intellectual and political history entails filling the gaps in the historical record and understanding women as actors and agents of the narrative. Scholars such as Mary Beth Norton have taken a comparative, social approach to examine how the American Revolutionary War impacted women's lives and acted as a catalyst for change in the patterns of their lives after the war. Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck explore religion, family, personal liberty, and citizenship to argue that achieving freedom in New England was different for Black women than it was for Black men. Additionally, scholars such as Karen Cook Bell have surveyed the vastly understudied role of enslaved women in colonial and revolutionary America to demonstrate that Black women both followed and understood the implications and rhetoric of the revolution and emancipation from the British. Rosemarie Zagarri has examined how the political foundation of America—and its Enlightenment origins—

impacted women's participation in the young democracy and the revolution's role in doing little to change the political status of women. These are all valuable studies on which this thesis builds while adding a new and important dimension, namely the central importance of marriage in crafting a political identity for women.[13]

Unlike the historians of the above monographs, biographers of early American women often situate the intellectual nature of their subjects in either the foreground or the background of their narrative. Widely considered to be the first publication on women of the Revolution, Elizabeth F. Ellet's multi-volume *The Women of the American Revolution* set out to detail the everyday actions and lives of both elite and non-elite women who acted as patriotic mothers raising a new nation by featuring short biographical chapters on well over fifty revolutionary women. These women's intellectualism is not the focus of Ellet's work but is not excluded from her analysis of each woman. Published in 1848, Ellet surveyed those who had direct connections to or anecdotes of the women of the time to provide an unprecedented look at these revolutionary women and their writings, which are now considered lost in most ways. This portrayal of history put women's contributions on the table alongside men, denoting them as vital participants in the tumultuous era as the new nation struggled to define itself with freedom and liberty.

Placing intellectualism in the foreground of his research, Vincent Carretta worked with extensive primary research to illustrate that Phillis Wheatley Peters was not only a literary genius and the "indisputable founder of African American literature," but also a savvy political and social genius in *Phillis Wheatley Peters: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* published in 2023.

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[13] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rosemarie Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarter*ly 55, no. 2 (1998); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

Carretta contextualizes Wheatley Peters's intellectual work within the social and political landscape of the places she inhabited, namely Boston and England, to discuss how they informed her writing and the ideas she fostered due to her unique background. Published initially as *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage,* Carretta is among many who, with the help of new and significant discoveries about Wheatley's marriage and husband, continue to recover Wheatley's critical and heroic contributions to America's literary and political history as something not separate from her life as a married woman.

The numerous biographies of Abigail Adams best reflect the multiple approaches biographers take in discussing women's intellectual history and contributions to the Revolutionary War efforts. Bringing to light the intellectual nature of sorority, Diane Jacobs' *Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters* posits Abigail Adams and her two sisters not only as wives, mothers, and sisters but as intellectuals whose lives and letters were remarkably influenced by the historical events to which they were eyewitnesses. Focusing on what she argues is the contradictory nature of Adam's early revolutionary rhetoric and critical opposition to British tyranny and her later advocacy for a strong central government, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* by Lynne Withey presents Adam's intellectualism as a part of her independent mind and character. Edith B. Gelles, the author of three books on Abigail Adams and coiner of the term "The Abigail Industry," offers audiences a close examination of Abigail Adams' letters to paint a portrait of Adams as a writer in her third publication on the subject, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life*. Each biographer mentioned above placed Adams' intellectual character in a different scope. Still, all would agree that her intellectual property and work were crucial to her character and legacy. Biographers detail the lives of their subjects while intrinsically weaving key historiographic

themes into their narratives, which allows these publications to be essential works included in any bibliographic essay or scholarly examination.

This thesis is not a biography; however, it draws on a small pool of women who engaged in the rhetoric of the Enlightenment and defined a cursory role for women's participation in early America. As opposed to articulating an argument within the chronology of these women's lives, this thesis places their intellectual contributions within the political crisis of the American Revolution and the ideological movement of the Enlightenment. Across disciplines, scholars have produced critical work that continually expands the historiography of vast early America.[14] The works of historians who have even more specifically examined the relationships of women to the republic, their husbands, and the nation's men are essential developments in the "subfields" of early American history. A woman's role as wife and mistress of her home determined the fundamental parameters of her life. Therefore, examining how women engaged with the fervor of revolution and the Enlightenment throughout courtship and marriage demonstrates these parameters' impact on women's ability to see themselves as persons capable of reason and virtue. In examining women's lives as wives, this thesis argues that the Enlightenment provided women with both a vocabulary and opportunities to redefine marriage in a way that allowed them to assert their rights and duties as citizens of the new republic.[15]

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[14] Working with the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the National Endowment of the Humanities, many scholars and institutions have taken to studying and promoting the study of a more expansive view on American History. The efforts of these scholars have resituated the understanding of many events across the broad geographic and chronological fields of early American history to better connect a full narrative of pre-colonial, colonial, and the early national periods and establish a lasting and equitable framework for exploring the diverse and people and places in America.

[15] Terri L. Snyder, "Refiguring Women in Early American History" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2012): 434; For further readings and case studies on courtship, marriage, and widowhood see: Melissa M. Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2015); Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Flora Fraser, *The Washingtons: George and Martha, Partners in Friendship and Love* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015); Cassandra A. Good, *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University

Methodology

Learned women were actively engaging with the poetry, novels, and philosophies of the long eighteenth century, and these rich pieces of work and their authors contributed to an early sense of American nationalism and patriotism.[16] While they were not politically recognized citizens, women's expression of and desire for some rights and freedoms within their own private lives indicates that, to an extent, they considered their lives inherently political. Approaching a study of the long eighteenth century and its revolutionary legacy requires understanding the work's prominent intellectual nature at its most basic form. Therefore, intellectual history is best suited to studying identity formation in the early American republic. Nothing is more enlightening than the words, ideas, and philosophies of a person themselves.

The idea of an intellectual history "from below" does not seem to align with a study of Enlightenment thought and philosophy. These "high" intellectual histories are remarkably academic and seemingly inaccessible, much like the period of thought and the ideas they claim to study. As this thesis will demonstrate, there has been a history of hostility in accepting women as intellectuals. The work of women's intellectual history examines what Antonio Gramsci would define as a group of "organic intellectuals." Though not afforded the same academic and educational opportunities as their male relations, women produced a body of intellectual work that spoke to the interests of various women from their own experiences and respective political spheres.

Press, 1998); Timothy Kenslea, *The Sedgwicks in Love: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage in the Early Republic* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2006); and Ellen Kate Rothman, "'Intimate Acquaintance': Courtship and the Transition to Marriage in America, 1770-1900," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1981.

[16] Felix Gilbert, "Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods," *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): 84.

This thesis explores the work of many "elite" women with rational capabilities as members of an "essential" social group.[17] This small sample of women, with the exception of Phillis Wheatley Peters whose history of enslavement complicates the narrative, illustrate that elite women used marriage to foster a political identity for themselves. Of the small selection of seven women explored here, six were informally educated and writing in New England and mid-Atlantic during the revolutionary era. Because of their regional and religious affiliations these women were uniquely situated within the cradle of revolution and Enlightenment in America. They experienced the creation of revolutionary rhetoric firsthand and were then able to reinterpret prose of liberty and declarations of rights to envision themselves as citizens of young nation.

Women's intellectual history facilitates a break from the myth that women were mere bystanders in intellectual life and provides audiences with a rich history that illustrates that there were women of ideas. Women not only consumed the same philosophies and treatises as men, but they actively produced and crafted their own political philosophies in response to the rhetoric of reason and virtue espoused by their male counterparts across the colonies. Their letters, diaries, and publications made it clear that they believed themselves patriots and naturally political persons. In the writings of most women, there was a desire to participate in the national debates and development of the new American polis, which they saw as rooted in democracy, equality, and liberty.

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Featuring a foundational study of women engaging with the Enlightenment, Chapter One explores key pieces of Enlightenment philosophy and ideologies that would inspire a

[17] Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* Trans. and Ed. by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 9.

transatlantic community of women to express their unique ideas of civic participation with like-minded individuals. This chapter seeks to trace the significance and transformation in the positions awarded to women during the eighteenth century in America while providing audiences with the necessary background information to understand the arguments in this thesis. After introducing readers to notions of Liberalism, natural rights, and contract theory, Chapter One examines the gendered duality of these philosophies and their impact on women of the eighteenth century. By reviewing both essential works of the Enlightenment and the personal communications of women, ideas of womanhood and gender in the eighteenth century are brought to light. These ideas illustrate exactly why examining a woman's position as wife and not mother is essential in understanding the implementation and interpretation of Enlightenment philosophy as the underlining ideas of early America's republican identity.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I argue that despite being greatly limited by the patriarchal structure of early America and even within the limited confines of very conventional roles like that of a wife, mother, and daughter, women found ways to secure some freedoms for themselves. Presenting a brief study of courtship and marriage, Chapter Two builds on existing scholarship concerning Republican Motherhood (Kerber), the Republican Wife (Lewis) and the role of women as wives in the early republic. Courtship illustrates that virtue was essential to understand women's conception of citizenship in the eighteenth century. Women crafted intellectual and political roles for themselves using marriage, which was one of the only tools readily available to them. In exploring how women defined marriage as a tool for political engagement and intellectual production, this chapter examines how ideas of virtue infiltrated the language and art of courting and informed women's ideas about their relationship to liberty and the State.

In its final chapter, this thesis considers how women redefined marriage to become something that opened doors for them and how women contested the divine rights of husbands to demonstrate their ability to reason and engage in the vibrant intellectual community of the eighteenth century. First, this chapter looks at how two different women understood their marriages as a tool for the expansion of their agency. Phillis Wheatley Peters and Esther de Berdt Read come from different circumstances, disparate educational and social backgrounds, and would experience marriage in two different ways; however, marriage provided both women with the opportunity to engage in intellectual production in support of liberty. In its final section Chapter Three will explore the writings that inspired Mary Wollstonecraft's work pushing back against the "divine right of husbands" and the way that American women engaged with this idea in works that predate Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.* This chapter largely deals with the different publications and intellectual property that women produced. These publications focused heavily on engaging women with the rhetoric of the revolution, developing unique women-only ideas regarding patriotism, and ultimately detailing the way women shaped their own identity as people bound by the gendered obligations of a wife.

To de-mythologize women's intellectualism it is important to promote a variety of deprivileged voices. While this thesis tends to pull from women of the elite New England set, a vast array of women across the Atlantic world contributed to the recognition of reasonable women. Chapter three uses the work of some of the more pronounced voices of the generation to make some broad sweeping generalizations about American women's understanding of and positioning of marriage as it related to the principals guiding the American Revolution. As Enlightenment progressed through the Long Eighteenth Century women became essential creators of the philosophies that would challenge and determine the parameters of their gender

during a time inherently concerned with defining and redefining human created institutions and concepts like government.

Understanding the way that women conceptualized their lives as a companion is essential in understanding how women engaged with the rhetoric and passion of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. Bound by obligations of their gender and limited within the confines of their relationships to their politically recognized spouses, women believed in, lived by, and acted upon the philosophies of Enlightenment and Revolution, incorporating them into their own lives and greatly changing the landscape of domestic partnerships and women's role in the early American Republic. Each and every woman, no matter her race or social class, complicated the historical narrative associated with the rise, progress and termination of the American Revolution. Their intimate lives shaped their awareness of their public perception and women's own writings and actions have proven their discontent with the prescribed role they were given. Capable of virtue, liberty, and reason, women have always been an intrinsic part of America's coming-of-age narrative and justly deserve to be recognized as such.

CHAPTER ONE: A MAN IS BORN FREE, BUT A WOMAN IN CHAINS

In opening *On The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau presented perhaps the most resounding condemnation of the state of man: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Here, he philosophizes, in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, that man is not naturally subordinate. Instead, man is born with the ability to reason and does not need to submit to a master other than himself.[18] As the seventeenth century ended, acceptance of the "natural" authority of rulers and monarchs began dissipating. In its place, a transatlantic conversation arose that would redefine the social order and enable a series of radical revolutions across Europe and its colonies. Intellectual communities and common folk alike espoused ideas of rationalism, religious tolerance, and political freedom. The Age of Enlightenment was marked by vast developments in politics, science, philosophy, and art, and the same fascination with humanism that drove the Renaissance lent itself to the eighteenth-century's preoccupation with reason.

These developments throughout the eighteenth century helped facilitate conversations about women's position and authority in the new social order through different media and across various communities. In the eyes of Rosseau, who just pages before condemned tyranny and subordination in one sentence, women were the subjects of men because they were naturally subversive of men's political order.[19] In arguing for the social contract, Rousseau presented a second underlying argument for the sexual contract, which legitimized political rights as patriarchal rights.[20] While present in civil societies across the Atlantic, this "legitimized"

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[18] Christopher Bertram, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Rousseau and the Social Contract* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 43.
[19] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter 2, ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 157.
[20] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract, Rev. Ed* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2, 96.

political right did not prevent women from creating space to engage with the poetry, novels, and philosophies of the long eighteenth century. Women were fully capable of the same reason, patriotism, and intellectualism attributed to men of the time. Due to their sex, their thoughts were often nuanced and intersectional, considering aspects of gender, class, and, at times, race.

Reason is merely one way to explore the history of gender and gender inequality in eighteenth-century America. This chapter provides the necessary foundation needed to bolster the overall argument of this thesis: learned women were actively engaging with the poetry, novels, and philosophies of the long eighteenth century, and these rich pieces of work and their authors contributed to an early sense of American nationalism and patriotism that women developed through their marriages.[21] Featured in the writings of most women was a desire to participate in the national debates and development of the new American polis, one they saw as rooted in democracy, equality, and liberty. The Enlightenment was not simply an intellectual movement that inspired political revolutions for men; it was also an ideological movement that allowed women to originate ideas of gender equality, social progress, and feminism. Enlightenment philosophy provided the foundation for women's reappropriation of critical arguments. The eighteenth century also fostered a unique community of women that surpassed political boundaries and national divisions. Women's letters to each other, their private musings, publications, and efforts placed women in their own distinct discursive category, in which women became the main subjects of history.[22]

[21] Felix Gilbert, "Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods," *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): 84.
[22] Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 2-3.

Contract Theory, Lockean Liberalism, and Enlightenment Thought

The Enlightenment, which, for this study, will be confined to the years between 1680 and 1815, was an intellectual movement that championed reason, progress, and an expanded understanding of human nature that focused on increasing the well-being of the people.[23] Developments in political and governmental thought resulted from numerous civil wars across Europe, and an emphasis on using intellect and reason instead of mindlessly following authority was a reaction to centuries of religious division. As a movement of social change, the Enlightenment was motivated by common sense, which fundamentally shifted the power from the few to the many and provided the basis for both Revolution and revolutionary action.

This thesis examines the role of marriage and Enlightenment in revolutionary America, but it is essential to recognize the international nature of the Enlightenment. Historically noted as the intellectual home of the Enlightenment, France was largely anti-Church by the end of the eighteenth century. French philosophers argued for a society guided by reason and natural law instead of religious dogma and unwavering faith. Across the European continent, different states and principalities found themselves in their own unique Enlightenments. In Germany, the *Aufklärung* was a uniting force, creating a sense of nationalism and ensuring the proliferation of the German language as a language of philosophy. Catherine the Great strove to modernize Russia through her interpretation of Enlightenment, funding and encouraging developments in the arts, sciences, and education. The Enlightenment varied greatly in Eastern nations like Japan and Korea, depending on isolation laws, imperial status, and location.[24]

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[23] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018), 8; Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680-1790* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), xv.

[24] Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique," *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): xxii, 999-1027; Michael J. Sauter, "The Enlightenment on Trial: State Service and Social Discipline in Eighteenth-Century Germany's Public Sphere," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 2 (2008): 195–223; Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (2006): 523–45.

The Enlightenment did not simply manifest one day and encourage a hemisphere of people to pursue reason, intellectual and educational reform, cultural progress, political change, and religious diversification and tolerance. Instead, the Enlightenment was the result of a series of preconditions. Reformation and civil war were intrinsic to the fabric of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and they fundamentally changed the way that humans thought, prayed, studied, and communicated. These essential preconditions provided the underpinning for people to question authority and superstition. A revival of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy allowed for an investigation into the importance of all people and the power of reason in understanding truth. Authority took on a different meaning, and how one obtained the authority to rule and make decisions shifted dramatically.

Among these revived philosophies were reinterpretations of the social contract theory. Expanding on the works of Plato and Epicurus, the Social Contract proliferated in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, with each philosopher reimagining the theory best to fit their understanding of political and social thought.[25] How these three philosophers thought of the *state of nature*—or the hypothetical way of life before civilization—impacted the development of their social contract theories. Hobbes, who believed life was "nasty, brutish," and that men were greedy and vulnerable, theorized that each man would live for himself and in a constant "condition which is called Warre" in this state of nature. His solution: "a common Power to keep them all in awe."[26] For Hobbes, the social contract ended with the instillation of an absolute

[25] H. D. Lewis, "Plato and the Social Contract," *Mind* 48, no. 189 (1939): 78–81; David G. Ritchie, "Contributions to the History of the Social Contract Theory," *Political Science Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1891): 656–76.
[26] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2006), 909-102.

monarch. In exchange for their natural rights, subjects would owe their allegiance to a sovereign bound only to the laws of nature. [27]

Locke's social contract was not a plain statement in support of absolutism and stemmed from a different understanding of the "state of nature." Locke did not comment on a war-like state of nature. Instead, he noted that man's disposition is ruled by reason. Reason, as proposed by Locke, teaches man that they are born equal and free, and in protecting that equality, they must harm no other man's life, liberty, or property.[28] To Locke, men entered into a social contract to seek "sanctuary under the established laws of government."[29] Man's ability to reason allowed them to remove themselves from the uncertain state of nature from whence they came, thereby consenting to be governed in return for certain protections afforded by the state. Therein lies the primary and substantial difference between Locke and Hobbes. While it might seem that Locke is responding to Hobbes' appropriation of social contract theory, he never mentions him by name. It is Rousseau who is writing in direct opposition to Hobbes.[30] Like Locke, Rousseau believed that humans in the state of nature were neutral, blank slates. In exchange for some of their rights, a better kind of freedom, one in which a "form of association" will defend a person and create a unified society while also allowing an individual to remain master unto himself, would be established.[31]

America's Enlightenment thinkers—namely Jefferson—were drawn expressly to the philosophies of John Locke and his proposed protection of man's inalienable rights. Locke's

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[27] Frederick Pollock, "Hobbes and Locke: The Social Contract in English Political Philosophy," *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation* 9, no. 1 (1908): 109-110
[28] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Second Treatises, Chapter 2, §6, ed. Ian Shapiro (Yale University Press, 2003), 102.
[29] Ibid, Chapter 9, §127, 155.
[30] Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2-7.
[31] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Chapter 6, ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 164.

work echoes through America's foundational documents and can be seen as early as Sam Adam's "The Rights of the Colonist."[32] Jefferson readily disclosed that Locke was a primary force behind early American thought and believed he was among a "trinity of the three greatest men the world had ever produced."[33] Locke's philosophy, though not hegemonic, was a key argument Americans used to justify their resistance to royal rule in the colonies. Locke was often cited among pamphlets promoting resistance to British authority, and while not always explicitly quoted, Locke's ideas acted as a foundation for many American works of political thought.[34] Among these early American ideologies was a division between classical republicanism and liberalism.

The pervasiveness of Locke's work is resounding.[35] In the political tradition of liberalism, of which Locke is considered the father, an emphasis on individualism, natural rights, and liberty became trademarks of American independence. Additionally, Locke and other liberals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed ideas central to America's political philosophy, including constitutionalism, separation of powers, and limited government power. Considering the emphasis on equality of man and natural rights, the contradictory state of women's political and civic recognition is problematic. The work of Locke and America's declaration of self-evident truths of equality made way for the numerous feminist interpretations of Enlightenment ideology that brought women to the forefront, alongside their male equivalents, of the Enlightenment.

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[32] Samuel Adams, *Considerations upon the rights of the colonists to the privileges of British subjects (*New York City: Printed and sold by John Holt, at the Exchange, 1766).
[33] Thomas Jefferson, letter to Benjamin Rush, 16 January 1811, Jefferson Papers, *Founders Online,* National Archives.
[34] Alex Tuckness, "Discourses of Resistance in the American Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 4 (2003): 549-551.
[35] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 27.

A Transatlantic Community of Women in the Age of Revolution

The Enlightenment as a movement was host to the first central transatlantic community of women, all of whom engaged with the same philosophies in defense of their gender and of humankind. Though seen by some as incapable of reason, women immersed themselves in the critical discourse taking place on the equality of gender. As a result of diplomacy, colonialism, and the movement of intellectual material such as magazines, novels, and pamphlets, influential female thinkers could connect and establish a sense of rapport among women that allowed for the exchange and promotion of inherently feminist ideology. Though historically, governments failed to protect the rights of women or to recognize them as citizens, women nonetheless proved to be critical intellectuals. Bringing light to issues of women's labor, marriage, duty, politics, and potential, women inhabited salons, cafés, and intellectual societies to disseminate ideas that pertained specifically to their gender and to the broader improvement of society.[36] However, these spaces were limited, often segregated by gender, and allowed very little interaction between men and women. To navigate these challenges, women created a community of like-minded individuals.

Women engaged with the Enlightenment in the same capacity as men. They understood the language of natural rights, social contracts, consent, and divine rights, among other vital theories. However, unlike most men of the Long Eighteenth Century, women understood these concepts as having dual meanings. This duality is the central concern of women's history of the Enlightenment. Women like Catherine Macaulay, Mary Astell, Phillis Wheatley Peters, and Judith Sargent Murray were proponents of natural rights and gender equality. They recognized the paradox of contesting the divine right of kings and being made to consent to the indefeasible

[36] Kate Egner Gruber, "Woman and the Enlightenment," American Battlefield Trust, Nov. 9, 2023, https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/women-and-enlightenment.

authority of a husband. These paradoxes, dualities, and the binary of their eighteenth-century existence as intellectuals and women filled their correspondences and publications.

As the critical concern of the Enlightenment, gender became an inevitable topic of discussion when considering the broader condition of humanity. Prominent publications of the Enlightenment often disregard women as the subject—merely appropriating their existence but never fully considering them. When discussed by men, they were reduced to generalizations and thought to be less complete versions of men.[37] Women were capable of a "beautiful virtue," whereas the virtue of men "ought to be a noble virtue."[38] For women to be capable of reason, intellect, and learning was often unfathomable to many men. How could a woman be both educated, well-spoken, and a credit to her sex? Kant ridiculed intellectual women, believing "[w]omen will avoid evil not because it is unjust but because it is ugly, and for them virtuous actions mean those that are ethically beautiful."[39] Women's emotions were the limiting factor in their ability to pursue reason. Women, by nature, were sentimental creatures, not creatures of reason.[40] Men were convinced not that women could be equal subjects under the law and in life but rather that they were appendages of their husbands.

Instead of retreating into the role men attempted to assign to them, women not only acted in the way men had assumed them incapable of, but they also used reason and intellect to prove them wrong. They published their own political treatises on both the general concerns of the Enlightenment and the conditions of their sex. Emilie du Châtelet, a mathematician schooled in calculus, reexamined the works of Newton and argued against Locke's criticism of innate

[37] Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, ed. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[38] Ibid, 39.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Rights*, Trans. A. E. Kroeger (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1889), 401-402.

knowledge in favor of empirical evidence and some universally held beliefs.[41] Catherine Macaulay refuted the work of Edmund Burke and commented on the state of women's lack of or miseducation in *Letters on Education (1790)*.[42] Olympe de Gouges, an early feminist and political activist, published the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1791) in response to the French Constitution's preamble. Phillis Wheatley Petters, African-born and formerly enslaved, became the first Black and enslaved person to publish a book of poems. Judith Sargent Murray, an American-born essayist, and women's rights advocate predated Wollstonecraft in her publication "On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790).[43]

While this noncomprehensive list of sources is undoubtedly important, the personal communications of the proposed transatlantic community of women in this chapter are significant. They should be considered influential in translating ideas across countries, continents, and oceans. The letters these women shared helped recover women's agency, presence, and perceptions in a tumultuous social and political climate.[44] Letters between these influential and important women are the key to interpreting ideas of womanhood and gender in the eighteenth century. In their writings to each other, they found time to discuss domestic and married life and favored radical debates of revolution, patriotism, liberalism, and republicanism. Introductions to one another ensured the movement of ideas and the expansion of women's rights advocacy and, at the very least, maintained a record of women's ability to reason and employ intellect.

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[41] Karen Detlefsen and Andrew Janiak, "Émilie du Châtelet", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/emilie-du-chatelet.
[42] See Catherine Macaulay, *Observations on the Reflections of The Right Hon. Edmund Burke on the Revolution in France* (Boston: by I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1791).
[43] Sheila L. Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
[44] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Culture and Consciousness in the Intellectual History of European Women," *Signs* 12, no. 3 (1987): 529.

John Adams' introduction of Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Macaulay was his means of introducing Mrs. Macaulay to "[the nation's] American Ladies."[45] Though Adams held Warren in high regard, believing that an introduction to a like-minded individual like Macaulay would be beneficial, he still presents her interest in life outside of the domestic sphere as "not the less amiable, for being attentive to public affairs, and a Friend to Liberty" and herself as simply an "ornament of her sex."[46] It was not unusual for men to refer to women as objects, part of a whole, as opposed to the whole of a human existence. The most interesting thing about this particular letter between John Adams and Macaulay is how he describes Warren and her interest in patriotism and politics versus how he engages in these matters with Macaulay.

To be a wife, an ornament, or a credit allowed men to include women in the conversation without providing them the fundamental and necessary acknowledgment of women's equality and natural rights. These are not terms he uses when speaking to Macaulay, with whom, without hesitation, he begins to discuss matters of state. While not intending to disrespect Warren, Adams seems to revere Macaulay as a diplomatic partner, not simply a friend who happens to be an intellectual in her own right. In introducing Warren, Adams notes that she is a patriot, but more importantly to him, she is a "Daughter, Wife and Sister of Patriots." He listlessly describes the men with whom Mercy Otis Warren is associated, "The Daughter of Coll. Otis one of the Council, Wife to Coll. Warren, a Member of our House of Governers, and one of the most determined Patriots we ever had, and Sister to your Friend Mr. Otis of Boston who has Sacrificed himself his Fortune & family in the Cause of his Country."[47] Perhaps he does this in hopes that

[45] John Adams, letter to Catherine Macaulay, 28 June 1773, Adams Papers, MHS.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

these associations will impress upon Macaulay the potential of Mercy Otis Warren. However, Warren's intellect, patriotism, and work would capture the attention of Macaulay.

Warren understood that inalienable rights did not merely begin with men and those in a position to argue inherent rights in a public space but that they were genderless and nonconforming to the strictures of eighteenth-century society. "But tho America Stands Armed with Resolution & Virtue," wrote Warren to Macaulay in December of 1774, "She still Recoils at the thought of Drawing the sword against the state from whence she derived her Origen [sic]. Tho [illegible] state like an unnatural parent has plung'd her dagger into the Bosom of her affectionate offspring." [48] In their early letters, Warren communicates a hesitancy common among colonists to move against England, allowing ideas of motherly and parental obligation to come into play. The dissemination of natural rights ideology and republicanism in America was often a conversation between the two women. "Ready to Sacrifice their Devoted lives to preserve inviolate & to convey to their children the inherent Rights of Men Confered on all by the God of Nature and [the privilege of English Men] Claimed by Americans from the Sacred Section of Compact," proclaimed Warren in the same letter as she moved on to describe the economic and political impact that port closures in America had begun to cause.[49] These women discussed greater ideas of natural rights in terms that would be common among women more generally and among themselves as women in tune with the public and political landscape of the time.

In their letters, Warren and Macaulay rarely speak of their gender as a separate entity; their feelings rationally align with the worries and desires of the "age of revolution [they lived in]."[50] Although these private correspondences were not intended to one day be published, their

[48] Mercy Otis Warren, letter to Catherin Macaulay, 29 December 1774, MHS.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 20 September 1789.

publication allows present audiences to see women engaging with life outside of the limited domestic sphere many consider them to be active in solely. As women of letters, their production *and* consumption of Enlightenment works was an inherently political act. Warren illustrates that though Adams may have introduced her as an "ornament of her sex," her intellectual prowess and ability to reason crafted a space in which she could engage with broader themes of the Enlightenment through her own unique American experience and with perhaps one of the foremost female Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century. Her letters, carried over an ocean, illustrate women's understanding of the global impact and interest that the American Revolution held.

The freedoms afforded to women due to advancements in liberty, reason, and progress were still considerably limited and often typically reserved for those from middle and upper-class families who were then allowed to join societies and possessed the education to participate in the more significant debates.[51] Marriage continued to expand these opportunities, allowing women to access their husband's social circles and offering them the chance to develop their own social standing. In France, salons crafted a culture of hostesses and *salonnières*, in which women were society's wave makers and social delegates. These salons were exclusive, and the female leaders played a central role in carefully selecting the participants involved. Women utilized their roles as salonnières and attendees of these salons to illustrate that women were fully capable of being "intelligent, self-educated, and educating women who adopted and implemented the values of the Enlightenment *Republic of Letters* and used them to reshape the salon to their own social, intellectual, and educational needs."[52]

[51] Barbara Cattunar, "Gender Oppression in the Enlightenment era," presented by Gillian Ellis, HSNSW HuVAT 13 July 2014.
[52] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letter: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1-11.

While these salons and debating societies are seemingly very European, American women often engaged with each other under very similar circumstances. Virginian plantation mistresses hosted lively parlors. New Jersey boasted salonnières, who would host the future First Lady Martha Washington. Even some of America's most prominent founding fathers visited salons to engage in intellectually stimulating and enriching discourse.[53] Like their European counterparts, American women played hostesses at these societal gatherings. Responsible for tailoring guest lists, seating charts, and dictating the course of conversations, women like Anne Willing Bingham would desire to emulate French women's ability to "interfere in the politics of the Country, and often give a decided turn to the fate of the empires."[54] Discussions of critical American documents, movements of the Continental Army, and the actions of like-minded women were among the conversation topics approved by the hostesses of these gatherings.

Women not only consumed the same philosophies and treatises as men, but they actively produced and crafted their own political philosophies in response to the rhetoric of reason and virtue espoused by their male counterparts across the Atlantic world. However, due to the limited opportunity for women to publish and to be educated enough to write material worthy of publishing, their private correspondences and musings must be considered as inherently political as men, who had every advantage that women did not. These salons were a place in which women might "understand the Intercourse of society" and engage in ways that would allow them access to changing it.[55] To assume that women were uninterested in the social, economic, and political worlds that impacted their lives daily represents the deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes towards women's history that had dominated studies of the American Revolution and

[53] David S. Shields, "The Early American Salon," *Humanities* 29, no. 1 (2008).
[54] Anne Willing Bingham, letter to Thomas Jefferson, 1 June 1787, National Archives.
[55] Ibid.

the Eighteenth Century. Producing histories, treatises, and works of educational, political, and philosophical discourse was a political act. Then, further pushing against the boundaries prescribed to women to secure for themselves and their posterity the same rights as their husbands and sons was the most political act they could undertake.

The Expansion of Print Culture and the Social Effects of the Enlightenment

The interconnected nature of literacy, print, and revolution cannot be understated in any study of the eighteenth century. Americans saw a vast expansion of print throughout the colonies between the establishment of the first press in New England by Elizabeth Glover in 1639 and the end of the American Revolution in the 1780s. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the press was highly controlled by colonial governments, which determined who printed and what was printed. Licensing laws ensured that mass media was a limited venture in which few could participate. The increase in mass media publications in America illustrates the uniting and revolutionary qualities of the press across the Atlantic world. With the help of the growing print culture, women capitalized on the growth of group consciousness to share their ideas outside of the restrictions placed upon them by society.

The expansion of print culture is mainly responsible for the inability of authority figures (namely the Church and then eventually absolute monarchs) to destroy or impede intellectual and cultural movements like the Enlightenment.[56] With American presses growing from a mere dozen in 1730 to approximately one hundred master printers (those owning their presses) across twenty-five different towns, controlling the press became increasingly difficult. Without the broad expansion of print as an industry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the American Revolution would have been nearly impossible. In 1704, only one colonial newspaper, The

[56] E. L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979),

Boston News-Letter, existed and remained the sole newspaper in the colonies until 1719.[57] The Enlightenment was slow to arrive in the colonies. Still, it quickly took hold as the ideological flurry overtook the press, encouraging varied and mass production facilitated by the growing national identity among American colonists. In the seventy-two years between the first issuance of *The Boston News-Letter* and the Declaration of Independence, the American newspaper industry is estimated to have grown to encompass an average of six hundred circulating newspapers and weeklies across thirteen colonies in both urban and rural areas.[58] The American Revolution was an ideological revolution constituted by pamphlets, newspapers, and printed text. In North America, the production and consumption of the written word increased.[59] The mass production of any literary material, be it pamphlets or imported novels, and promoting literacy across the Atlantic world for both men and some women ensured the conveyance of essential, revolutionary ideas.[60]

As a result of expanding print opportunities, women could publish their work and writings more readily. The expansion and accessibility of the press, more tolerant ideas of women's literary and educational equality in Europe, and intellectual societies allowed for the likes of Mary Astell, Catherine Macaulay, Catherine Trotter Cockburn, Anne Conway, and Mary Wollstonecraft to publish their writings, creating international and mix-gendered conversations about their work and elevating them to the status of "Enlightenment philosopher" and "learned woman." With the expansion of the press, Enlightenment philosophy would reach the courts of

[57] N.A., "Colonial Print Culture" in The News Media and the Making of America, 1730-1865, The American Antiquarian Society.
[58] Todd, Andrlik, *Reporting the Revolutionary War: Before It Was History, It Was News* (Il: Sourcebooks, 2012).
[59] David D. Hall, "Part One: The Atlantic Economy in the Eighteenth Century" in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 1: the Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 153.
[60] David S. Shields, "Chapter Five: The Learned World" in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, eds. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 247.

varying monarchs, furthering the movement of Enlightenment philosophies, as diplomats and courtiers carried the messages of reason, politics, art, and science with them. Colonial connections to Europe, specifically those of America to England and France, allowed for the translation of ideas to occur as a result of both trade and immigration.[61]

In light of the immense political effects of the Enlightenment, it is essential to understand this vast movement's impact on the social and cultural climate of the eighteenth century. As women were primarily removed from the academic and philosophical networks taking shape at the time of Enlightenment, the development of women-only societies and salons allowed for discussions of gender equality and political and social theories to occur in a society otherwise defined by patrilineal conceptions of power. The egalitarian ideas championed during the eighteenth century meant many of the "great men" often associated with the Enlightenment were forced to consider women's equality and, in some cases, conceive that women's subordination was without foundation. These ideas of gender equality, among the other more mainstream philosophies of men, were easily propagated due to the printing press' affordability, productivity, and democratizing effects.

The eighteenth century was characterized by fundamental cultural revolutions, which facilitated literal and ideological revolutions. A literary revolution swept across the American colonies and the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century due to the expanded press and affordable and accessible literature being published. Though extensive and often secondary in production, American presses, beginning with Benjamin Franklin, began producing their own "American Printed" novels in 1742 with the importation and republication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded.* As a result of this shift in the material culture of the

[61] James Raven, "Part Three: The Importation of Books in the Eighteenth Century" in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 1: the Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 183-185.

press, print became much more accessible to women during the Enlightenment.[62] In America, women's literacy rates varied by colonial region but are estimated to have been between 45% and 67% at the end of the colonial period and, in some places, such as New England, nearly 90% by the end of the Revolutionary period.[63] With the sentimental novel almost exclusively directed toward a female audience, growing literacy rates increased women's consumption of fictional and non-fiction literature. In return, there was a growing demand for societies and social circles in which women could rely on each other to grow in their knowledge.[64]

By engaging with literature in social circles, women fostered an intellectual community dedicated to discourse not exclusively about women but by women. American women's consumption of literature from various genres helped to define the intellectual voice that would shape the emerging national identity. America's salonnières sought to enrich American society, share knowledge, entertain, and cultivate a sense of community among women of similar ideas and identities. Margaret Lowther Page, wife of American revolutionary John Page, was hostess to a heterosocial group in which she was charged with guiding conversation and defining social norms as the wife of a political leader. In this group, not entirely defined by their own sources as a salon, Margaret shared a book of poems with her husband and the rest of the society. She crafted poems that interacted with the male-created poems of her husband and his compatriots. However, her writings indicate that exchanges with female friends were far more critical than the involvement of any man.

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[62] Katharine Glover, "The Female Mind: Scottish Enlightenment Femininity and the World of Letters. A Case Study of the Women of the Fletcher of Saltoun Family in the Mid-Eighteenth Century." *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, (2005).
[63] E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Writing the Past: Teaching Reading in Colonial America and the United States, 1640-1940* (International Reading Association, 1999); Jack Lynch, "Every Man Able to Read: Literacy in Early America," Colonial Williamsburg Journal (Winter 2011).
[64] Ibid.

The expansion of the press allowed this multi-authored, heterosocial text to be written and published at a time when women were vividly aware of rhetoric defining their lives and social participation. Learned women were a reality of the Atlantic world. Though politically, they were far from being treated as equal to the men in their lives, the Enlightenment afforded them the opportunity and space to demonstrate their ability to reason and engage with the same intellectual material that ensured the equality of men *and* women. Women's engagement with contract theory, natural rights, liberalism, and expanded access to education and publication defined their understanding of the society in which they lived. It shaped their concepts of marriage and companionship, citizenship, and political participation, and it set a course for a generation of women to illustrate that they were in every way as intellectual and equal as their husbands and partners.

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The impact of Enlightenment ideology and the impression of political means onto the institution of marriage is essential in understanding the way women began to develop a conceptual civic identity for themselves through the institution of marriage. While many women might not be considered Enlightenment philosophers, they were actively engaging and discussing philosophy in their own musings, whether in private or public. The political and ideological climate of the eighteenth century produced the ideal conditions in which women could insert themselves into the fabric of revolution and explore the parameters of their lives in new and impactful ways. Liberalism and equality offered women a public language that they could use in their private lives and turned seemingly mundane commitments like marriage into tools of change.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TRUEST FRIENDS OF VIRTUE AND LIBERTY

On May 10th, 1795, as the Revolutionary Era drew to an end, Margaret Davenport Coulter explained to her husband how he "may best please me and make me happy," just as John knew "what to expect from [her]" as she had continually demonstrated the "character of a good wife."[65] Her expectations of what marriage might offer her stemmed from an ideal of marital equality that had developed throughout the eighteenth century. The practice of women using their position as wives to achieve domestic and public equality can be seen as a result of their understanding of crucial Enlightenment philosophies like virtue and reason. Metaphors of marriage and marital ideas permeated American rhetoric as the colonies joined together in a union similar to that of man and wife to declare independence against the British Crown. Because of this, marriage is an essential institution in which to understand the development of women's personal autonomy and national identity as the American Revolution influenced it.

John Locke provided the Founding Fathers with a theory that stated government was at its best when those being governed agreed to the terms of governance, therefore entering a social contract in which citizens sacrificed some individual freedoms in return for protection by the state. Much to the same effect, marriage is a complex social contract between husband and wife that long predates any constitution. The period of courtship was a period of negotiation. In the best of circumstances, this involved a man and woman working together to learn about each other and consider the realities of their future together. In America's early days of courting independence, the social contract was inherently political and invoked much of the rhetoric of

[65] Margaret Davenport Coulter, letter to John Coulter, 10 May 1795, Mss. 65 B85, Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers (I), 1780-1929, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

the marital contract. In their own right, each of these contracts firmly upheld men's rights in their new respective relationships.[66]

The eighteenth century allowed women to aspire to more intellectual and political equality. An American woman's engagement with the intimate arena of her life was indicative of her ideas as they related to her understanding of virtue and liberty. To express these ideas, women used marriage, an experience common among them, to communicate with each other, their husbands, and broader audiences. In much the same way that historians have traced the history of the American Revolution's rise and progress, we can begin to trace women's development as citizens capable of political participation and intellectual production through courtship and marriage.

A young woman's experience courting was her rise to revolution and allowed her to seek and obtain a strong *republican* match. In the courtship phase of her life, advice manuals, literature, and material culture influenced a woman's behaviors. They introduced her to the possibilities of marriage as an essential instrument in achieving her desired liberty. Her progress to citizenship and political representation rests in her marriage. Her ability to guide her husband and family to be virtuous, strong republican citizens starts with her desire for liberty. In marriage, a woman could set expectations and navigate the public world in a way she could not as a single woman under her father's influence. Women's understanding of their role in revolutionary America was fostered through and by their marriages. In exploring how women defined marriage as a tool for political engagement and intellectual production, this chapter argues that virtue and liberty infiltrated the language and art of courting and informed women's ideas about their roles as wives and citizens in the young American Republic.

[66] Pateman, *The Sexual Contract,* 3.

Virtue: A Moral Courtship

Virtue, in its many forms, has one thing in common: it is a prescribed notion of moral goodness that emphasizes duty for the well-being of the whole. This ubiquitous term is a central theme throughout the eighteenth century and was a vital characteristic of enlightened men and women. Virtue in its eighteenth-century political usage is essential to understanding the American Revolution, conceptions of citizenship, and the nature of women's intimate relationships. Its root in classical republicanism only furthers the understanding of its critical place in Enlightenment philosophy and society, which emphasized the teachings of ancient Greeks and Romans.[67] Virtue has historically been considered a masculine trait, the civic duty of soldiers and statesmen. Rousseau championed the same virtue demonstrated by Spartans, deeming them a "Republic of demi-Gods rather than of men" for their rejection of frivolous learning and emphasis on the strength and vigor of the soul.[68]

The use of "virtue" is also gendered, usually proffered to describe the sexual prudence and chastity of a woman or young girl, which was an important quality when considering marriage eligibility. Even the most Enlightened of women, such as Phillis Wheatley Peters, were prone to characterizing virtue as an "Auspicious queen" responsible for "lead[ing] celestial *Chastity* along."[69] Wheatley's work demonstrates that women understood their greatest virtue to be purity, which would have been known to women seeking a strong, companionate match. Virtue was a "bright jewel" women could wear proudly to embody their quality and desirability.[70] Virtue as a feminine symbol infiltrated the rhetoric of the eighteenth century's

[67] Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 137, 141.
[68] Jean-Jacque Rousseau, *A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (International Relations and Security Network), 6. Retrieved from the Online Library of Liberty.
[69] Phillis Wheatley, "On Virtue" in *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* (London: Grey House Publishing, 1773.)
[70] Ibid.

intellectual, social, and political arenas. Personified, virtue was the guardian of a young woman's soul and the guide that offered women entry into the establishment that would extend the opportunity to situate themselves within marriage as political and intellectual beings.

Illustrated in poetry and featured among the letters of young women as they navigated courtship and marriage, virtue held a stronghold over the intellectual and material culture of revolutionary America. As part of their dress, a young women's ensemble was incomplete without a hand fan. Outwardly, they were symbolic of coquetry and women used them to maintain their position as the gentle sex.[71] However, they reminded women of how to behave in polite society. As young women navigated courtship, advice on conduct took many forms. The fan was an incredibly effective form because they were often decorated with scenes that included necessary lessons and faithful reminders of important information kept close at hand. The moral compass was a popular way of encouraging women to be honest, courteous, modest, respectful, virtuous, patient, and diligent.

As marriage was assumed to be the "sole method of procuring for [women] an establishment," the moral compass, featured in print illustrations and hand fans, represented a set of boundaries or standards and reminded young women to remain within the bounds and not be led astray.[72] Approaches to the establishment of marriage varied. Still, overwhelmingly, women saw the procuration of marriage during the revolutionary era as an opportunity to establish themselves as equal partners in a union, something they were barred from politically. As a popular source of examination, the early letters of Abigail and John Adams provide a loving look into a young woman's engagement with courtship and illustrate the interwoven texture of

[71] Michele Majer, "Fashion History Timeline: 1730-1739," Fashion History, Fashion Institute of Technology NYC, Revised July 26, 2021, https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1730-1739/; Jean-François de Troy, *The Declaration of Love*, 1731, Oil on Canvs, 71 x91 cm, Brandenburg: Brandenburg Museum.
[72] M.H., *The Monthly Magazine and British Register* (London: Printed for R. Phillips, 1797), 194.

virtuous, eighteenth-century rhetoric into the everyday life of Americans touched by the Enlightenment. As Ellen Rothman notes in her study of nineteenth-century courtship, "Letters are more than the artifacts of a relationship; in many cases, they were, for a time, the relationship itself."[73]

As an illustration of companionship and virtuous, republican ideals, John and Abigail Adams' courtship provides the pretext for their great marital love. In nine of the thirty letters written during the courtship of Abigail and John Adams presently housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society, John refers to Abigail as *Diana*, the Roman goddess of chastity, and she refers to him as *Lysander*, Spartan military leader and politician. "Here am I all alone, in my Chamber, a mere Nun I assure you, after professing myself thus will it not be out of Character to confess that my thoughts are often emply'd about Lysander, 'out of the abundance of the Heart, the mouth speaketh,' and why Not the Mind thinketh," wrote Abigail in a letter to John.[74] From the beginning of their courtship, Abigail and John allow their intellect to play out in their letters as if to guide their developing relationship through to its fruition. Her love of reading helped to bond her to Adams; in her letter, she quoted Cato, concerned herself with issues of virtue and tyranny, and described her battle with the temptation of being with him.[75] Abigail never gave way to ideas of intellectual or moral submission to one's intended husband. She did not capitulate to John, rendering herself incapable of reason, but rather enjoyed his encouragement of her saucy wit. Her letters, in part, detail the way that women were beginning to conceptualize marriage as a place for equals, both intellectually and politically.

[73] Ellen Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 9-11.
[74] Abigail Smith, letter to John Adams, 13 April 1764, Adams Papers, MHS.
[75] Ibid.

Sentimental novels, advice manuals, and English publications relating to marriage had begun to make their way to America by the mid-eighteenth century and they had a profound impact on the public and private perceptions of courtships and marriage. Advice for those amid courtship was a genre of its own in early America. Its authors included anonymous "friends" and influential public figures like Benjamin Franklin, who authored and published *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage: in two Letters to a Friend. Wherein a Practicable Plan is laid down for Obtaining and Securing Conjugal Felicity.* Epistolary novels, fiction presented through letter writing, and sentimental novels with virtuous heroines often encouraged and prompted women to write themselves. Women's letters were littered with references to the heroines of the books they were reading. They featured pages of ideas about virtue and their roles within the developing courtships to their intendeds and America in its infancy.

The first novel published in America, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, became an important topic of conversation for early America's female intellectuals.[76] Recalling the journals of Esther Edwards Burr, written as a series of letters to her friend Sarah Prince, attention should be paid to Burr's struggle to understand the portrayal of "virtue rewarded" in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela.*[77] More importantly, Burr does not understand how refusing to succumb to rape after an extended period of kidnapping is representative of virtue. "He [Richardson] has degraded our sex most horridly, to go and represent such virtue as Pamela, falling in love with Mr. B in the midst of such foul and abominable actions."[78] However, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* is Samuel Richardson's conduct manual for courting and marriage. Pamela was denied a proper courtship yet was rewarded for her virtuous denial of Mr. B's numerous sexual assaults against her with a

[76] Matthew Willis, "Why the First Novel Created Such a Stir," *JSTOR Daily*, Published January 11, 2018, https://daily.jstor.org/why-the-first-novel-created-such-a-stir/.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid, "April 2, 1755, Wednsday [sic], 108.

marriage to Mr. B. This depiction of virtue does not represent Esther's understanding of a respectable and virtuous courtship, and she rejected Pamela's marriage to Mr. B. In her heavy criticism of such a prominent English novel, she argues her understanding of marriage as a tool in which women should be rewarded for their virtue. She would have preferred Richardson's work to be titled "*Pamela; or, Virtue Tryed* [sic]."[79]

Young women were not alone in musing about the etiquette and place of courtship within their lives and the lives of other women. Courtship and the position of virtue continued to be something that concerned the written work of married and mature women even as they approached their deaths. "Now if you calculate the hours necessary to attain tolerable proficiency in any light accomplishment, and subtract them from the period allotted to female education," wrote a mother to her daughter, "you will see plainly, that those who have most feminine accomplishments, must have been restricted in the opportunity of acquiring solid information."[80] As she pondered the virtues of fashionable society, Virginia Cary developed ideas about the respectability of cultivating accomplishments for young women to display as they navigated the marriage market. Cary reflects on her own youth, determined that "Superiority of mind must be united with great generosity and good temper."[81] She questioned whether education and development of the mind ought to be the accomplishment displayed by young women as they sought out companionable matches, not merely "accomplishments which serve best for exhibition" or "requisite to female elegance" like dance and painting.[82] Cary's letter illustrates the hold that the Enlightenment and its ideological underpinnings had on the role of courtship

[79] Ibid, *"*April 8, 1755, Teusday [sic], 111.
[80] Virginia Cary, *Letters on Female Character, Addressed to A Young Lady on the Death of Her Mother* (Richmond, VA: Ariel Works, 1830), 37-38.
[81] Ibid, 38.
[82] Ibid, 18-19.

and marriage for women in all ages of their lives.[83] Courtship offered women from different generations the opportunity to intermingle with each other.

Mothers understood marriage as a tool to be used by women and wished to impart this knowledge to their daughters. They encouraged their daughters to "be eminent in the practice of this virtue" and hoped that, as their mothers, they might give some instruction on the righteous duties assigned to them as they moved into the next chapter of their lives as wives. In their eighteenth-century understanding of courtship, daughters redefined virtue to mean something more than chastity and prudence. The celebrated intellectual liberalism of the eighteenth-century proffered women the chance to step out of the void they had been placed in due to these long-held beliefs about their abilities and roles. The Enlightenment and Age of Revolution provided women a space to conceive of feminine and political virtue. These vanguards of feminism spoke to virtue as superior to elegance, and in an ideal courtship, virtue *was* superior to elegance. As a virtuous bride—both politically and in its gendered, sexual meaning—women understood marriage as the key to a successful partnership between man and wife and between citizen and nation.[84]

Liberty: A Patriotic Marriage

Marriage was not only a personal union but also a vital thread in the fabric of society, shaping the spirit of American unity and impacting the composition of citizenship. The changing landscape of gender roles and expectations in revolutionary America is nowhere as strongly seen as in the marriages of its diverse population. In their marriages women questioned the exclusion of their sex from the politics shaping the new nation and they challenged their husbands to ensure fair and just opportunity for all. Women, through marriage, established themselves as

[83] Ibid, 224.
[84] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1792).

patriots seeking the betterment of their nation, and in doing so infused marriage with political meaning itself. Women redefined marriage to be a patriotic institution in which enlightened women used their social status to participate in the political realm through their writings and action.

The short-lived beauty of courtship, in which women hold some power over the men with whom they proposed to select as the arbiter of their future, gave way to a life not of subordination to paternal relations but rather as "vicegerents" of their husband's household.[85] Women were made to be representatives of their husbands, not in a political sense, but in a moral and virtuous sense. As wives of the republic, some women believed they were not "justified in withdrawing [their] attention from home, except in some call of plain positive duty."[86] The duties of maintaining her husband's fortunes, attending to domestic affairs, and paying "attention which the bodily wants of a rising family require" often far outweighed the crucial calls of patriotism her husband must attend to.[87] While Jane West describes to young women the successive duties adapted to them from "the cradle to the grave," she also pushes the boundaries of these successive, seemingly private, duties.

West proposes that, like men, women were rational creatures deserving of intellectual cultivation and the opportunity to stimulate those intellectual talents.[88] Women must not forget that in their marriage, they are still members of broader society—not citizens, but members. In *Letters to A Young Lady,* she emphasizes that women's intellectualism is not only commendable but also essential for the well-being of society and not separate from her responsibilities as a

[85] Jane West, *Letters to A Young Lady, in which the Duties and Character of Women are Considered: Letter from Jane West* (New York: I. Riley & Co., 1806), 45.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid, *Letters to A Young Lady,* 46.
[88] Ibid, 47.

wife. West believed that "women have a social responsibility to use their intellectual abilities for the greater good."[89] That they should actively participate in discussions about morality, ethics, and societal issues and by doing so, women contribute to the intellectual fabric of their communities and help shape a more enlightened society. By acquiring knowledge, women could actively engage in conversations, contribute to informed decision-making, and elevate their own lives. West believed that intellectual pursuits contributed to personal growth, moral development, and societal progress.

In their first step towards a redefinition of marriage, women began to actively engage in considerations about the confines of their relationships during this period of social and political turmoil. Questions of consent within marriage permeated the minds of women closely related to powerful men with whom they believed they had entered an equal partnership. Abigail Adams best illustrates how women used marriage to assert themselves in the political sphere, which was typically shut off to them. Abigail notoriously wrote to her husband numerous times to pay "particular care and attention" to the ladies who were "determined to foment a rebellion." She would "not hold [themselves] bound by any laws in which [they] have no voice, or representation."[90] Abigail Adams' status as an elite woman and the wife of a founding father allowed her more freedom to address her husband so brazenly. The norms of their intimate and personal relationship gave her the confidence to speak her mind so freely. Abigail recognized that even within the limited confines of the domestic sphere she was prescribed, she could use her position as John Adams' wife to engage with and advocate for women's political and intellectual rights.

[89] Ibid.
[90] Abigail Adams, letter to John Adams, 31 March 1776, MHS.

Abigail developed her own political thought in tandem with her husband. She shrewdly used her marriage to foster a sense of citizenship and identity that was influenced by their shared intellectual connection. Their marriage was not only one of the heart but also of the mind, and as she developed her arguments for women's equality within her marriage she continued to share them further. In a letter to her sister she wrote, "God and nature designd it so—If man is Lord, woman is Lordess. That is what I contend for, and if a woman does not hold the Reigns of Government, I see no reason for her not judging how they are conducted—."[91] Here, she uses the term "Lordess" to emphasize that women should have their rightful place in governance and decision-making. Abigail asserts that both men and women are equally designed by God and nature. If men can hold positions of power and authority, women should also have the same opportunity. In a letter to Mercy Otis Warren she speaks of the rebellion she threatened to foment and John Adams reaction to it: "So I have help'd the Sex abundantly, but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the Disintresstedness of his Virtue, and when weigh'd in the balance have found it wanting."[92] Her continued expression of desire for liberty influenced her political thought throughout her life and the intellectual stimulation she received through her marriage allowed her to share these ideas outwards, establishing her legacy as a life-long advocate for women's rights.

Other letters between Abigail and John show that their marriage was beneficial in developing her political identity and activism. For example, there are multiple letters in which Abigail is interested in her husband's travels, advances of the patriots, and discussions of revolutionary rhetoric. In a letter from John Adams, he notes that she has asked "what is thought

[91] Abigail Adams, letter to Elizabeth Smith Shaw Peabody, 19 July 1799. Shaw Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
[92] Abigail Adams, letter to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776. Adams Papers, MHS.

of Common sense [Paine's pamphlet]."[93] This indicates that not only had she read and made her own judgments of this essential, revolutionary work but that she was curious about its received perception broadly. In engaging in this conversation with John she uses her marriage to help form her own intellectual thought about the evolving political turmoil faced across the country. "You justly complain of my short Letters, but the critical State of Things and the Multiplicity of Avocations must plead my Excuse," writes John to Abigail in April of 1776, "You ask where the Fleet is. The inclosed Papers will inform you. You ask what Sort of Defence Virginia can make. I believe they will make an able Defence." [94] Abigail used her marriage to a well-known politician to educate herself about matters of political and military policy. In these instances, her questions of John, whether political or philosophical, clearly influenced her political identity and development, and are essential in understanding how women redefined marriage to be a non-confining and public-facing institution.

Other examples of women who were able to creatively and effectively use their marriages to develop their political identities are Hannah Winthrop and Mercy Otis Warren. In their correspondences, Winthrop and Warren spoke often about their husbands, the impact that the progressing revolution had on themselves, and the role that marriage played in ensuring that their political ideas reached past the domestic sphere.[95] Hannah Winthrop and Mercy Otis Warren shared a sense of gratitude because they had both married men committed to "not only pursuing the happiness of Mankind in general but making happy Domestic life," and that these men "delight in forming our Ideas & in communicating Intellectual Pleasure."[96] Their marriages

[93] John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 19 March 1776. Adams Papers, MHS.
[94] John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776. Adams Papers, MHS.
[95] Hannah Winthrop, letter to Mercy Otis Warren, 29 April 1769; 14 August 1772; 1 April 1774; Mercy Otis Warren, letter to Hannah Winthrop, February 1775, Correspondence of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Winthrop, MHS.
[96] Hannah Winthrop, letter to Mercy Otis Warren, 23 June 1775, Correspondence of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Winthrop, MHS.

allotted them with countless opportunities to pursue their own intellectual and philosophical musings and proved that they should not have to be confined within one sphere of domesticity.

Politics were not unfamiliar territory for Warren and her husband was her most ardent supporter. Though on January 1st, 1774, Warren "took up [her] pen" determined "to leave the field of politicks to those whose proper busines it is to speculate and to act at this impor-tant crisis."[97] However, she determined this was not possible as the politics were "so interwoven with the enjoyments of social and domestic life as to command the attention of the mother and the wife who before the con-test is decided may be called to weep over the manes of her beloved sons, slain by the same sword that deprived of life their intrepid and heroic Father."[98] Warren, in this one sentence, highlights the tragic impact that the conflict of the American Revolutionary War had on wives, families and loved ones, and how these harsh realities can become intertwined with the more mundane aspects of social and domestic life.

The unprecedented political and social crisis conceived in the wake of the American Revolution gave women a unique opportunity to illustrate their ability to reason and their absolute desire for the same liberties afforded to their husbands. The letters shared between these women illustrate that even those of their sex who revered their husbands could also employ reason and examine the impact of liberty and patriotism as virtues essential in the tumultuous landscape of revolution in America. The Enlightenment and its philosophers helped to craft a language married women could use to argue for their acceptance as political people deserving of liberty. As women refuted the divine right of husbands, they recognized that their unions were microcosmic representations of the ideological progress of the American Revolution. Yet, there

[97] Mercy Otis Warren, letter to Hannah Winthrop, 1 January 1774, Mercy Otis Warren papers, letterbook, 1770-1800, MHS,
[98] Ibid.

was no reconciliation of liberty and political recognition for women in eighteenth-century America.[99]

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While marital contracts allowed men to govern their wives following courtship and a social contract allowed them to rule the country, defining a political role for women was not on their to-do list. Since men did not define a political role for women directly, women had the opportunity to do so themselves, and courtship was a starting place for them to do so. Women were directed to fulfill certain expectations and uphold rigorous standards while maintaining a certain level of sophistication and grace. As they fulfilled the expectations prescribed to them, women developed their expectations and ideas regarding their roles as wives and citizens in the young American Republic.

[99] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 32.

CHAPTER THREE: CONTESTING THE DIVINE RIGHTS OF HUSBAND

In their letters, Abigail and John Adams often engaged in political discussion, not as a discourse separate from their private correspondences but rather inherently interconnected as pieces of a much larger and more intricate puzzle. By all accounts, the Adams enjoyed a companionate marriage of two intellectual equals who loved each other and maintained their friendship and companionship throughout their lives. The two shared fierce political opinions that were made easier to navigate through their marriage, and to Abigail and John, equality of education stood as a critical component in sustaining the young nation as it came of age. "If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women," mused Abigail in a letter to her husband.[100] "The world perhaps would laugh at me, and accuse me of vanity, but you I know have a mind too enlarged and liberal to disregard the Sentiment."[101] This example was one of the many ways that Abigail and other northern women effectively used their marriages to claim an identity as citizens and influence the politics and social structure of the new nation, even if that influence was often behind the scenes.

Before the eighteenth century, only John could express these ideas publicly, as was socially acceptable for men. Even if he believed, as he would write in response to his wife, that "In reading History you will generally observe, when you light upon a great Character, whether a General, a Statesman, or Philosopher, some female about him either in the Character of a Mother, Wife, or Sister, who has Knowledge and Ambition above the ordinary Level of Women, and that much of his Emminence [sic] is owing to her Precepts, Example, or Instigation, in some shape or other,"[102] the inconvenience of Abigail's sex would prevent her from acting upon her

[100] Abigail Adams, letter to John Adams, 14 August 1776, MHS.
[101] Ibid.
[102] John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, 25 August 1776, MHS.

knowledge and ambition in public. The Revolution and growing belief in equality would allow women to begin stepping into the public arenas they had previously been denied entry to. Women saw their marriages as a bridge to political representation and citizenship, even if the confines of a patriarchal society still limited them.

Throughout the eighteenth century and within the heightened intellectual environment of the American Revolution, women became the agents of change. They redefined the institution of marriage through their intellectual contributions. Through their marriages, they facilitated an understanding of social equality *using* the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Marriage offers a transgenerational, transcultural experience with commonalities across age, race, and loyalties, making it an apt lens to view transforming ideas of wifehood, marriage, and gendered obligations. This chapter looks at how women crafted and reimagined Enlightenment philosophy to explain their understanding of citizenry in America and I argue here that marriage became a tool allowing women to create an intellectual and politically identities as enlightened wives of the Revolution.

Redefining Marriage in Revolutionary America

In an age that saw expanded educational opportunities across the Atlantic world, marriage allowed women to demonstrate that they were the intellectual equals of their husbands. Women voiced their opinions about education, reason, and revolution and acted as agents of change within their circumstances. There was a common belief among women like Judith Sargent Murray that "the minds of women are naturally as susceptible of every improvement, as those of men."[103] Women did not conceive of a gendered application of intellectualism, and through their writings they demonstrated their ability to conceptualize change among their sex.

[103] Judith Sargent Murray as Constantia, *The Gleaner: A Miscellaneous Production* (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1798), vol. III, 191, 197.

Women's Enlightenment in America comes less in the form of extensive political treatises and manifestos and more in the production of broadsides, histories, and poetry. Their words captured their intended messages and provided other women with the necessary platforms to demonstrate their desire and need for equality.

Women's capabilities as intellectuals were intertwined with their lives as wives and they used their marriages to bolster their intellectual lives and goals. Phillis Wheatley—who in the context of her life following her marriage will be called Wheatley Peters—married John Peters in 1778. While often ignored by both her contemporaries and later scholars, Wheatley Peters's marriage was an integral part of reclaiming her personal autonomy as both formally enslaved and as a woman. Wheatley Peters' memoir—published by a relative of her former enslaver Susanna Wheatley in the antebellum period—states that her husband, John Peters, "proved utterly unworthy of the distinguished woman who honored him by her alliance."[104] The apparent omission of her married name by Susanna Wheatley's supposed "collateral descendant" was not one that Wheatley Peters, who published three poems as Phillis Peters before she died in 1784, would have likely made.[105] In choosing to marry John Peters, Phillis chose to realize the messages of freedom and knowledge that she had written about in her early poems.

Wheatley's book of poetry, published in 1773, featured lively discussions of America's most significant contradictions, called on white Christians to recognize the indignity of their actions, and noted that salvation was guaranteed to all of God's people, regardless of the color of their skin.[106] Christianity "Taught my benighted soul to understand," wrote Wheatley, "That

[104] Margaretta Matilda Odell, "Memoir" in *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley,* Electronic ed. (Chapel Hill: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999).
[105] Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley Peters: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2023), Kindle Edition, 9.
[106] Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought From Africa to America" in in *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* (London: Grey House Publishing, 1773).

there's a God--that there's a Saviour too."[107] For Wheatley, her capacity to reason and understand the hypocrisy of American liberty was bestowed upon her by God and not by the family who enslaved and then educated her. In the poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," Wheatley again considers the tyranny and injustices of slavery. "Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung; Whence flow these wishes for the common good," lamented Wheatley before receiving her manumission papers, "And can I then but pray/ Others may never feel tyrannic sway?"[108] Her poetry, published before she was granted her freedom in 1773, often distances her readers from feelings of guilt regarding slavery. This was likely a cautious choice for Wheatley, who, at the time, was sponsored by her enslaver.

Choosing to marry John Peters was one of the few choices Phillis Wheatley made in exercising her personal autonomy. Being subjected to slavery from early childhood and bound to the prominent Wheatley family for much of her young adult life significantly impacted the development of her unique character. The name of the slave ship that brought her, against her will, to America was given to her as a condition of her enslavement, and with her name, she would carry around the memory of her enslavement for a lifetime. While history would not consider John Peters an outstanding man, his life, and her life with him, was typical of freed Black men and women in America. Regardless of the hardship Mrs. Wheatley Peters faced, it was a life she chose, a marriage she chose, a name she chose, and by publishing not as Phillis Wheatley but as Phillis Peters, she reclaimed some of the autonomy that early American slavery had stripped from her.

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Phillis Wheatley, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," in *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* (London: Grey House Publishing, 1773).

Though women were assumed merely to be an extension of their husbands after marriage, Wheatley Peters never stopped writing. Her work did not turn to domestic affairs and homemaking; she remained steadfast in her pursuit of liberty. Unfortunately, Wheatley Peters was unable to garner the support of subscribers for her second manuscript; what was written is now lost to history. The three poems she published as Phillis Peters during the year of her death in 1784 do, however, demonstrate her continued capacity for reason and intellect. Wheatley Peters notably shares the story of "Columbia's" victory over Britain in "Liberty and Peace, a poem." She is proud of the struggle for freedom demonstrated by "The generous Spirit that *Columbia* fires."[109] Her clear understanding of the importance of freedom and agency is beautifully penned as she continues her prose: "Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales, / Where e'er Columbia spreads her swelling Sails: / To every Realm shall Peace her Charms display, / And Heavenly Freedom spread her gold Ray."[110] Following her marriage, Wheatley Peter's continued use of political themes in her poetry to express a hopeful vision for the future that lead to peace and freedom spreading across all realms allows audiences to recognize that even though marriage afforded some women a semblance of freedom, there was still work to be done.

The rhetoric of an independent America found its way into women's private and intimate lives, who then used their marriages to illustrate their patriotism. Through their writings, married women could express their ideas in ways relatable to the broad group of women whose similar identity as "wife" provided them with a common background and the experience needed to understand the specific call to patriotism put toward them. The American Revolution did little to change the inequalities faced by women within their marriages. Esther De Berdt Reed, the First

[109] Phillis (Wheatley) Peters, "Liberty and Peace, A Poem" (Boston: Warden and Russell, 1784).
[110] Ibid.

Lady of Philadelphia and wife of Governor Joseph Reed was intimately familiar with the War of Independence as the English-born wife of an American patriot and politician. Their courtship was riddled with Joseph's financial struggles and the loyalty and love Esther felt for her home country of England.[111] Regardless of the difficulties faced during their courtship, including Joseph's initial proposal of marriage being rejected by Esther's father, Esther conceived their match as one of true love. This ideal was a new priority among eighteenth-century matches. Though hesitant to leave her home in London, Reed soon found hope in the patriot cause as she considered the strained relationship between England and America irreconcilable.

Esther de Berdt Reed's unique circumstance ensured that she would use her marriage to understand and participate in the political and ideological climate of the eighteenth century. The Revolution posited itself as "melancholy scenes… engaged in; civil war, with all its horrors" in the eyes of Esther de Berdt Reed.[112] Her dedication to her husband, in whom she had found the companionate ideal, remained steadfast; his well-being and absence while in the service of General Washington were at the forefront of her letters. Her concern for him and the revolutionary cause was common among letters to her brother in London. She sought his understanding of the cause for which "every person [was] willing to sacrifice his private interest."[113] The cause she believed would be victorious for "virtue, honor, unanimity, bravery,—all conspire to carry it on" placed her on a path to rare, public political work that ensured the prosperity of the Continental Army and her husband's legacy.[114]

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[111] Esther De Berdt, letter to Joseph Reed, 8 December 1764, Joseph Reed and Esther DeBerdt Reed Papers, 1757-1874, New York Historical Society.
[112] Esther De Berdt Reed letter to Dennis De Berdt, 24 June 1775, as published in *The Life of Esther de Berdt, Afterwards Esther Reed of Pennsylvania* by William Bradford Reed (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1853), 216.
[113] Esther De Berdt Reed letter to Dennis De Berdt, 22 July 1775, as published in *The Life of Esther de Berdt, Afterwards Esther Reed of Pennsylvania* by William Bradford Reed (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1853), 218-219.
[114] Ibid.

As married women, Mrs. Esther Reed and the women of Philadelphia would not allow their husbands to bear the burden of the Revolution alone. They, too, understood that as people of the eighteenth century, they were deserving of natural rights and a life free of tyranny.

> "Born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic Government, we associate ourselves to the grandeur of those Sovereigns, cherished and revered,…who have extended the empire of liberty, and contented to reign by sweetness and justice, have broken the chains of slavery, forged by tyrants in the times of ignorance and barbarity."[115]

The women of Philadelphia sought to extend the "empire of liberty" and, in doing so, have the nation embrace their contributions to the country as part of an equal partnership for liberty.[116] Esther's marriage to Joseph allowed for perhaps one of the most influential broadsides written by a woman during the Revolutionary War to be drafted and published. Marriage offered Esther the security she needed to put forth her political and intellectual contribution in such a public manner. She was not confined to her home while her husband was away. Instead, she used her position as a wife to engage with the public sphere in a way many women were unfamiliar with in the eighteenth century.

She called upon the "Women of America" to remember their commitment to contribute to the cause in a broadside initially published anonymously in 1780. Her published words ignited a spark of patriotism in the women of Philadelphia, calling for such an "illustrious sex" not to be "at least equal [to men], and sometimes surpass our love for the public good.[117] This broadside, in which Esther boldly signed as being from "An American Woman," decisively pledged her allegiance to the patriot's cause and provided a vital example of the way women engaged with

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Esther De Berdt Reed, *The Sentiments of an American Woman,* (Philadelphia: Printed by John Dunlap, 1780), *Readex: Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*.
[117] Ibid.

the political world in ways that also allowed them to consider the role of equality and liberty for women. In addition, with her words, Esther demonstrates women's understanding of Enlightenment rhetoric and how it applied directly to their lives as American women.

Esther de Berdt Reed gave women across the nation a vehicle in which they could apply Enlightenment philosophy to their domestic sphere. Just as Wheatley Peters recognized the paradox of liberty presented by America's continued practices of enslavement, Reed recognized that tyrannical monarchies did not belong in America either. The intersectionality of race and marriage offers a richer texture to be woven into the fabric of early American history. Esther's marriage allowed her to step out from the domestic sphere in support of the Revolutionary War efforts. She found hope in the patriotic cause of the American Revolution and used her marriage to produce intellectual material that was traitorous and disloyal to her birthright. Phillis Wheatley Peters's marriage illustrates that intellectual production did not stop when "woman" became "wife." The intersection of her race and gender is essential in understanding intellectualism's role in women achieving personal autonomy during the Revolutionary era. Each woman, in their varying circumstances, utilized their agency to change the perception of women in the eighteenth century, redefine marriage as an institution that promoted autonomy, and demonstrate that even in the face of inequality, they were just as capable of participating in the Revolution.

Women's definitions of wifehood and marriage were significantly impacted by their own unique experiences with an institution that was broadly encountered. As the eighteenth century gave way to ideas of equality and mutual interest, marriage shifted, with each wife redefining how marriage took effect in their lives. Whether marriage allotted security, freedom, companionship, friendship, love, or intellectual stimulation, women within their marriages engaged with the rhetoric that was actively shaping the nation to, in turn, shape their own

engagement within both the public and domestic spheres. In doing so, women proved, in a vast number of ways, that they were fully capable of pushing against the divine right of husbands, the boundaries of outdated gender obligations, and stereotypes of intellectual inferiority.

Contesting the Divine Right of Husbands

As the Seventeenth Century came to a head, a series of civil wars across Europe radically changed how people perceived power and government. Absolutism thrived in this politically challenging time, and monarchs used the divine right of kings as a self-legitimizing doctrine to uphold their authority and power. This form of government found strong backing among the aristocracy and estate owners who benefited from its stronghold. Among these aristocrats was political theorist Sir Robert Filmer, who was "true to the crown" and an ardent supporter of divine right.[118] Filmer's magnum opus, *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings*, promoted the divine right of kings as a natural order of human society. While he does not disallow the idea that all men are born with certain natural freedoms, including that from subjection, Filmer asserts that the "lordship" Adam held over man at *creation* is the natural order of society. To Filmer, the bible is littered with examples of "Patriarchal Power" that best illustrates the use of a patriarchal structure among civil governments.[119] "The first kings were fathers of families," and therefore, in defending the monarchy, Filmer believed it was wholly unnatural for the people to govern or choose their government for themselves.[120]

In refuting Filmer's *Patriarcha*, John Locke believed that the divine right of kings stood on a ground of tyranny, robbing men of their natural freedom and forcing them into a state of "slavery." As women engaged with the Enlightenment as consumers and producers, philosophies

[118] Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings*, ed. Edmund Bohun, 2nd ed. Corrected (London: Printed for R. Chiswel, W. Hensman, M. Gilliflower, and G. Wells, 1685), A3.
[119] Ibid, 2, 10-13, 16-17
[120] Filmer, 1, 25, 78-79.

like “the divine right of kings” were intrinsic to how they understood their relationship to equality and natural freedoms. Most famously, Mary Wollstonecraft reimagined this poli-religious theory to make her own poignant assertion: “The DIVINE RIGHT of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is to be hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger.”[121] Wollstonecraft argues that just as “the divine right of kings” distorts the character of kings, “the divine right of husbands” similarly corrupts husbands' image. Women, as exemplified by Wollstonecraft, reinterpreted the philosophies of the Enlightenment to interject themselves into the larger political portrait being painted by the framers of the American Revolution. “A king is always a king, and a woman always a woman…his authority and her sex, ever stand between them and rational converse,” laments Wollstonecraft. The language of monarchial power shaped her understanding of historical and Eighteenth-Century gender dynamics.[122] Wollstonecraft ascribes the “foundation of weakness” characterized in women as attributed to the distinction between sex and the division of sexual power.[123]

Anticipating the later critiques of Wollstonecraft, women intellectuals in revolutionary America used their writings, public and private, to similarly contest the so-called divine right of husbands and proffer a new political identity for themselves as wives in a new republic. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands,” warned Abigail Adams as she advocated for some recognition of women in the leadup to the Declaration of Independence.[124] Her intentional use of “Husbands” is reminiscent of the marital metaphor’s power in early America. In one sentence, she demonstrated that this metaphor was readily used throughout the

[121] Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Feminist Papers: A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Newburyport: Gibbs Smith, 2019), 55.
[122] Ibid, 68.
[123] Ibid, 68-69.
[124] Abigail Adams, letter to John Adams, 31 March 1776, Adams Papers Digital Edition, ed. MHS.

development of America as an independent polity. Americans argued against the parent-child relationship that was so ingrained into the colonial relationship with England and instead advocated for a political model much more aligned with that of husband and wife.

In their private correspondences, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren often wrote to each other expressing their dissatisfaction with being relegated to subjection and discussed the meaning of their citizenship and political exclusion. Abigail even goes as far as enlisting Warren to "join me in a petition to Congress" because she "thought it was very probable our wise Statesmen would erect a New Goverment and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimitted power to the Husband to use his wife Ill."[125] Women would not be content to act as the subjects of their husbands and elected to use their status to "gain a seat" at the proverbial table. Marriage was not a sentence of confinement, as some have previously interpreted, but rather something that opened doors for women. The marital contract was a proven social arrangement that, as the founding members of America believed, best reflected the republican virtues they envisioned as essential in binding the nation together. The republican marriage of revolutionary America was "infused with political meaning."[126] It was believed that Americans must choose to consent to the new republican government, not for fear of unjust retribution but because of mutual affection for its beliefs and ideologies, just as a man and woman must choose each other as motivated by love and affection. Marriage was a vessel where "man feels a growing attachment to human nature, and love to his country."[127]

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[125] Abigail Adams, letter to Mercy Otis Warren, Adams Papers, *Founders Online,* National Archives.
[126] Jan Lewis "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1987): 689-691.
[127] *Massachusetts Magazine* quoted in Jan Lewis, "Motherhood and the Construction of the Male Citizen in the United States, 1750-1850," in *Construction of Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992),162.

In marriage, wives were able to redirect not only the moral goodness of society but also illustrate that they cared deeply about the political well-being of the country and that they, too, made sacrifices. The "republican wife" was "affectionate, virtuous, chaste, and capable of enormous moral authority over her husband."[128] This assigned, watered-down political identity does not suit many women who engaged with the war's rhetoric and the politics of establishing a new nation. The men of the founding generation made the conscious decision to refuse to address the question of women's citizenship generally.[129] In response, women like Judith Sargant Murray recognized the possibilities of independence determined that a marriage that found a balance between reason and passion was the ideal. A marriage that represented the egalitarian ideas reflected in America's new constitution would be "peaceful and serene" and allow for a woman's continued growth as an individual and intellectual.[130]

The development of a unique American identity was, in part, possible because of the work of married women. Many early Americans deeply involved in the foundation of America's political and civic origins believed that educating specific political beliefs, habits, and morals among their citizens would ensure a lasting government in the aftermath of the Revolution. As this civic education was so important, early American women were naturally assigned to educate their children to become virtuous citizens. The role of the Republican Mother, however, offered no guidance on how women might think about their own relationship to liberty or independence. The intimate nature of marriage and the relationship between husband and wife became more of a political tool in which women could think about their relationship to the state.[131]

[128] Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 720.
[129] Kerber, *No Constitution Right*, 14-15.
[130] Judith Stevens to Mr. Parker, 5 October 1777, as reprinted in Skemp's *First Lady of Letters*.
[131] Anne Laurence, *Women in England, 1500–1760: A Social History* (London, Phoenix Press, 1994).

Weddings, wives, and marriage were cultural phenomena in the eighteenth century. "Marriage Culture" had a hold on novelists, poets, and politicians alike and infiltrated the social and political lives of men and women in various ways. Much of our contemporary understanding of marital unity in heteronormative relationships stems from this fixation on ideas of marriage and companionship that came out of the Eighteenth Century. So, just as the outpour of pamphlets, newspapers, plays, and literature stirred thoughts of liberty among a diverse cast of colonists, it also awakened in women a spirit of curiosity that encouraged them to push against the boundary of their private and intimate lives. Marriage as an institution had long defined women's primary role as wives through social, legal, and economic practices. It fostered stability within the patriarchal tradition of the social and political realms in which colonists lived. In pushing against these boundaries, women redefined marriage to suit better the promises of equality that the revolutionaries had set before them.

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A husband's recognition of his wife as an equal in marriage, yet as a second-class public citizen, presents a complex binary that many women like Abigail Adams found themselves engrossed in. Early American men were unwilling and unequipped to deal with establishing a place for women among them in the public sphere. They were content with practicing divine right within their own homes as long as they could parade around under the façade of fair and just leaders, emphasizing their aspirations for a government dedicated to serving and protecting its constituents. Therefore, the task of creating an identity for American women was left to American women. Their words inspired and organized action, their intellect redefined marriage, and they proved that women were fully capable of conceptualizing the importance of government, the interplay of politics, and the virtue of public participation.

CONCLUSION

The end of the Revolutionary War offered the newly independent and unified America an opportunity to establish itself as a *fair* government that emphasized the rights of man, promoted the general welfare, ensured domestic tranquilly, and secured the blessings of liberty. The United States Constitution represents the vitality of the nation, as it also represents the vitality of its public citizens. To equally ensure the general welfare and to secure the blessings of liberty for *all* of its citizens is, unfortunately, where it fell short. There was no constitutional right to be a woman. Her life fell under the purview of the men who preceded her in all aspects of her life, and in their wake, she would not be recognized as a free and capable citizen of the country in which she resided. During the tumultuous period of the American Revolution, women found a unique avenue for asserting their personal autonomy within the constraints of a predominantly patriarchal society. Marriage, often viewed as an institution of subjection, was repurposed by women as a tool for intellectual growth and fulfillment.

Women, in their roles as wives, engaged in the political discourse and contributed to the intellectual underpinnings of the Revolution. They navigated the narrow confines of societal expectations and emerged as influential actors in a history that has insisted on portraying them as supporting characters. Their intellectual pursuits as wives challenged the traditional gender norms and laid the groundwork for future feminist movements in America and abroad. The exploration of women's intellectual production and political savvy during the American Revolution underscores the importance of viewing historical events through multiple lenses, revealing that personal autonomy can be sought and found in the most unlikely places. The work they left behind is a monument to the resilience of women who, despite being confined by a patriarchal society, used the institution of marriage to demonstrate their fierce intellectualism and

inalienable autonomy. Thus, they not only found a way to reshape the contours of their own lives during the political crisis of the American Revolution but also shaped the course of American history.

By defining marriage as a tool for political engagement and intellectual production, women crafted roles for themselves that transcended the domestic sphere. The exploration of how ideas of virtue permeated the language and art of courtship provides valuable insights into women's understanding of their relationship to liberty and the State. This thesis examines the transformative power of marriage in women's lives during the eighteenth century. The focus on women's various publications and intellectual contributions emphasizes their engagement with revolutionary rhetoric, the development of unique, women-centric ideas of patriotism, and the shaping of their identities within the constraints of their societal roles. Thus, this thesis demonstrates women's pivotal role in challenging and redefining the misguided understanding of women's political and intellectual abilities through their marriages, thereby becoming agents of change in their own right.

During the American Revolution, women cleverly used marriage as a conduit to participate in the political development of the nation. Traditionally seen as separate from politics, the domestic sphere became a political arena where women could exert influence. Women promoted revolutionary ideals within their households, subtly influencing the political landscape. Women redefined the institution of marriage and transformed the traditionally private sphere of marriage into a public platform for political engagement. This redefinition of marriage challenged the existing norms and expectations, enabling women to establish a distinct political identity. They were no longer just wives but also contributors to the political discourse of the early American Republic.

"Contending for the rights of women," Mary Wollstonecraft argued, "is built upon this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue."[132] Women viewed marriage not just as a duty but as an opportunity to influence their surroundings. Despite societal constraints, they used marriage as a platform for intellectual engagement and personal growth. This thesis challenges the binary interpretations of marriage as either restrictive or liberating and proves that endowed with virtue, liberty, and reason, women have always been a fundamental part of America's maturation story and rightfully deserve acknowledgment.

[132] Mary Wollstonecraft to M. Talleyrand Perigord the Late Bishop of Autun, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson, 1792).

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