WHEN the American colonists commenced rebellion against the British government and assumed the separate and equal station to which they believed the laws of God and nature both entitled them, they found in marriage—"that SOCIAL UNION, which the beneficent Creator instituted for the happiness of Man"—a metaphor for their ideal of social and political relationships. In the republic envisioned by American writers, citizens were to be bound together not by patriarchy's duty or liberalism's self-interest, but by affection, and it was, they believed, marriage, more than any other institution, that trained citizens in this virtue. Thus "L," writing in the Royal American Magazine in 1774, explained why this "social union is so essential to human happiness." The married man, he wrote, "by giving pleasure...receives it back again with increase. By this endearing intercourse of friendship and communication of pleasure, the tender feelings and soft passions of the soul are awakened with all the ardour of love and benevolence...In this happy state, man feels a growing attachment to human nature, and love to his country." Marriage was the very pattern from which the cloth of republican society was to be cut.

Revolutionary-era writers held up the loving partnership of man and wife in opposition to patriarchal dominion as the republican model for social and political relationships. The essays, stories, poems, and novels

Ms. Lewis is a member of the Department of History at Rutgers University, Newark. She wishes to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Fellowship for Independent Study and Research, and Ruth H. Bloch, Jay Fliegelman, Drew R. McCoy, and, especially, Norma Basch for their advice.

1"Thoughts on Matrimony," Royal American Magazine (Boston), Jan. 1774, 9.

that established this model created in republican marriage an ideal that drew upon recent social trends and infused them with political meaning; in so doing, their authors created for women an important new political role, not so much as a mother, as Linda K. Kerber has suggested, but rather, as a wife. As an indispensable half of the conjugal union that served as the ideal for political as well as familial relationships, the Republican Wife exemplified the strengths and weaknesses of the Revolutionary era's notion of woman's role and, indeed, of republicanism itself; neither can be understood fully except in the context of the other.

Because historians have begun to question whether American political discourse in the period 1775-1815 can be understood in terms of republicanism alone, it is important to note that the adjective "republican" will be used here much as Americans of the period used it—to signify not only classical republicanism but also that fusion of civic humanism and evangelical ardor achieved by Americans at the eve of the Revolution. The key to republicanism is virtue, the self-sacrificial and disinterested quality that was prized in both sacred and secular traditions. The premium that

2Kerber coined the term "Republican Motherhood" to describe the peculiar political mission assigned to American women in the Revolutionary era. In an influential article and book she used the term to characterize the indirect political role that women were to play by "raising sons and disciplining husbands to be virtuous citizens of the republic" ("The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective," American Quarterly, XXVIII [1976], 187-205, quotation on p. 203, and Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America [Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980]. Although Kerber focused upon the domestic rather than the maternal character of woman's political participation, her term has taken on a life of its own and is often assumed to say more about motherhood than Kerber herself ever claimed. (See, for example, Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," American Historical Review, LXXXIX [1984], 616-619; Jane Rendall, The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States, 1780-1860 [New York, 1984], chap. 2, and passim; and Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present, 3d ed. [New York, 1983], 101-104.) Indeed, as Ruth H. Bloch first suggested, comparatively little attention was paid in the period 1785-1815 to the republican dimensions of motherhood, in relation to woman's other roles ("American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1825," Feminist Studies, IV [1978], 125-126, n. 67). More recently Kerber has argued that "republican motherhood was a conceptualization which grafted the language of liberal individualism onto the inherited discourse of civic humanism," which could not, in and of itself, "effectively describe an active role for women in the republic" ("The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation," Am. Qtly., XXXVII [1985], 486, 484). The argument here is that Republicanism offered women a role as wives. It was left to liberalism, as Kerber suggests, to extol the political dimensions of motherhood.

3See especially Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969); his analysis of the meaning of republicanism informs this essay. For a discussion of the meaning of virtue to contemporary Americans see Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, XIII (forthcom-

rhrepublican thought placed upon disinterestedness has obscured the revolutionary nature of its views about women. To be sure, republican theorists were unwilling to think of women, or any other group, as having different and perhaps antagonistic interests; hence, they did not address women as a separate group. Republicanism assumed, however, that America's dawning glory would cast its beneficent rays upon the whole of society, a new and different society in which women would be required to play a new and unprecedented role.

If we would understand the role designed for women in the early national era, we must look to that body of Anglo-American literature that addressed political issues indirectly and found a wide and appreciative audience among the rapidly expanding reading public. Jay Fliegelman has shown that when we read those popular literary, pedagogical, and didactic works for their political meaning, we gain a new perspective on both the development of political thought in the eighteenth century and the intimate connections between family and polity in eighteenth-century thought. Much of the commentary about woman's nature and her proper role can be found in novels and in the fiction and essays of the growing number of popular magazines. In a useful review of the literature of republicanism is provided by Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXXIX (1982), 334-356. Although republicanism can be described as a wholly secular ideology, and the exact contributions of religious thought and feeling to it are certainly debated, its religious dimension must be recognized; as a popular ideology—that is, as one that was expressed in fiction and magazines by writers who reflected more than they shaped its key beliefs—republicanism was an amalgam of secular and sacred elements. Perhaps its ability to tap so many in-some-ways-contradictory roots explains republicanism's broad and enduring appeal.


5See Fliegelman, Prodigals. For the growth of literacy see Kenneth A. Lockridge, Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West (New York, 1974). For the tastes of the American reading public see David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," Am. Qtly., XXVII (1976), 262-293; Garry Wills, Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (Garden City, N.Y., 1978), esp. pt. 4; and Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America, 1780-1860 (Durham, N.C., 1940), esp. chap. 1. The relevance of literature to an understanding of women's history has been explored by Mary Sumner Benson, Women in Eigh-
Americans drew no clear distinctions between that which was "fiction" and that which was not, between works addressed to men and works addressed to women, or even between British literature and original American creations; nor should we. Moreover, what concerns us here is the meaning that American men and women might derive from popular literature. The moral message in what might seem a diverse body of works was remarkably consistent. Magazine editors, for example, aimed both to instruct and to entertain, devoting their periodicals to "knowledge and entertainment," "entertaining knowledge and instructions," and "amusement and instruction." They and their readers could find knowledge entertaining and a properly written piece of fiction instructive. Indeed, fiction served to illustrate the workings of character. In the moral world of the eighteenth century, character was all, and the study of character was an important aspect of moral philosophy, itself a branch of post-Newtonian natural science. Here art and science might fuse.

Similarly, although some periodicals seem to have been addressed primarily to men and others to women, most welcomed both sexes as readers and authors and printed articles that presumably were of interest to both sexes. In fact, no magazines intended exclusively for women were published in America until early in the nineteenth century. The themes of courtship, marriage, and seduction figured to a greater or lesser extent in a wide range of early national publications, not only the Boston Women's Magazine but also, for example, Paine's Pennsylvania Magazine and Webster's American Magazine. The topic of marriage was not reserved to women or their magazines, for it was an issue of public, indeed political, import.

Finally, we must note that much of what was read in America had been written in Britain. Popular British novels were brought out in American editions, and American editors, unable to fill their periodicals with original works, borrowed freely from each other and from their British counterparts. Yet what matters is not only the origin and intent of such works but also the lessons Americans might have derived from them. Bernard Bailyn has shown the special meaning British political writings may have had for Americans immersed in an imperial crisis. So also with the popular literature of marriage.

Indeed, a British work might be edited for the American audience in ways that would make it more applicable to the American situation. In Clarissa, the novel of the patriarchal family par excellence, the heroine is, as Fliegelman has put it, "purely a victim caught between two tyrannies," that of the father and that of the seducer. Although Richardson held the disobedient daughter partly responsible for her sad fate, eighteenth-century American editions of the book removed that assessment of the heroine from both the subtitle and the introduction, making Clarissa instead the innocent victim of male arrogance, imperiousness, and design. Yet Clarissa was more than a seduction story; it was a political parable with particular lessons for Americans, as a fearful John Adams recognized when he observed that "Democracy is Lovelace and the people are Clarissa." Americans who aimed for the separate station of a viable republic would have to learn better than Clarissa how to resist the tyrannies and seductions that republican theorists were certain they faced. Because eighteenth-century thought placed the family and the state on one continuum, that of "society," and did not yet—as the nineteenth century would—erect a barrier between the private sphere of the family and the public one of the world, it could dramatize issues of authority in terms of relationships between members of a family. Accordingly, the young woman's quest for a suitable husband and her attempt to navigate between the eighteenth-century's Scylla of overweening power and its Charybdis of seductive liberty was the nation's plot as well.

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2. For the reprinting of British articles in American magazines see Mott, History, 14-15.
4. Fliegelman, Prodigals, 83-88; the quotation is from p. 87 and refers to abridgments only; Adams is quoted on p. 237.
his daughter marry a promising young physician who was too honest to
enrich himself by overcharging his patients.14

So resonant was this anti-patriarchal theme that well after the Revolution
American magazines published articles excoriating “parents...who are
daily offering up the honour and happiness of their children at the
shrine of interest and ambition,”15 much as the British government had
sacrificed its American colonies. Instead, “marriages should be contracted
from motives of affection, rather than of interest.” Fortunately, such
unions were possible in “happy America,” where partible inheritance—
provided our conduct does not render us unworthy—formed “the basis
of equality and the incitement to industry and caution.” If America’s sons
and daughters were educated to “virtue and good morality,” they would
choose to marry for love rather than interest.16 Being capable of exercis-
ing sound judgment, children were not obligated to obey the injunctions
of narrow-minded or rapacious parents.

The rhetoric of marriage bears the same relationship to the prevailing
customs as does republican ideology to the events it sought to shape and
define: in each case, the terms of analysis explained long-range trends by
turning them into dramas enacted by villains and heroes—or, more
commonly, heroine. Historians of the family have shown that parental
control of marriage declined over the course of the eighteenth century,
while children’s autonomy increased.17 That trend had its roots in the

14 Massachusetts Magazine (Boston), Oct. 1791, 619-620. See similarly “The
Unfeeling Father,” ibid., May 1792, 286, and “The Precipitate Lover,” Gentleman
This article may well have originated in Britain, for it speaks of “rich and noble
parents.” See also “On the Treatment of the Fair Sex,” Lady’s Magazine and
Musical Repository (New York), Apr. 1801, 214: “It has been remarked, that the
public affairs of most nations have been conducted with more or less elegance,
dexterity, and success, as they respectively restrain or give freedom to their
women.” Such articles had as their object proving (or bringing about) American
superiority, of which the status of women was deemed a fit measure. See also
16 “Improvements Suggested in Female Education,” N.Y. Mag., N.S., Aug.
1797, 407; “Lindor to Caroline,” Mass. Mag., May 1792, 312, 313. See also “On
Marriage,” Gent. and Lady’s Mag., Mar. 1789, 85-86; “On Parental Authority,”
Ladies Mag. (Philadelphia), Oct. 1792, 239; and “The, Censor,” Christian’s,
Scholar’s, and Farmer’s Magazine (Elizabethtown, N.J.), Apr.-May 1790, 49.
17 See Daniel Scott Smith, “Parental Power and Marriage Patterns: An Analysis
of Historical Trends in Hingham, Massachusetts,” Journal of Marriage and the
Family, XXXV (1973), 419-428; Robert A. Gross, The Minutemen and Their
Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970), 82-99, 150-170; and Edmund
S. Morgan, The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-
Century New England (New York, 1966 [orig. publ. Boston, 1944]), chap. 2. See also
Jean-Louis Flandrin, Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexual-
18 See Stone, Family, 135-142; Steven Ozment, When Fathers Ruled: Family Life
in Reformation Europe (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), chap. 1; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich,
Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England,
1650-1750 (New York, 1982), chap. 6; John Demos, A Little Commonwealth:
Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970), 82-99, 150-170; and Edmund
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Century New England (New York, 1966 [orig. publ. Boston, 1944]), chap. 2. See also
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advice, which they did at great length in numerous tracts and essays. Parents did not abdicate; rather, they refashioned themselves into friendly paternalists who exerted influence in their families by more subtle, psychological means and in the wider world by words of friendly counsel.20 Thus the author of "A Father's Advice to his Daughters" recommended that his own daughters and those of other men "place confidence in those who have shown affection for you in your early days, when you were incapable of making them any return."21 Yet even those dethroned patriarchs who posed as kind advisors believed they best served young men and women by enabling them to choose wisely their own partners.

What sort of man made the ideal husband? He was republican virtue incarnate, moderation personified. He was "devout without superstition, and pious without melancholy, . . . careful without avarice, [manifesting] a kind of unconcernedness without negligence." He should be well educated but not "a pedant." A woman should look for "virtuous conduct, good temper, discretion, regularity and industry," and a "mild and even" disposition.22 Unlike her European sisters, who supposedly married to raise their status, the American maid aimed at—and hoped to maintain—a happy medium, a domestic version of that steadily improving yet never-changing society that Gordon S. Wood has identified as the ideal society of republican dreams. Thus the happily married woman would find that her husband "would always be the same, and always pleasing."23

The good husband was like the good citizen; he wed "not by interest but by choice," and "he treats his wife with delicacy as a woman, with tenderness as a friend." He "ever studied the happiness of the woman he loved more than his own."24 In fact, the ideal husband resembled more than a little the popular portrait of the Revolutionary War officer, which is precisely the occupation Royall Tyler chose for his hero of his play The Contrast. To ensure that the officer/suitor's character could not be mistaken, Tyler dubbed him "Colonel Manly" and gave him such quinte-

sentially republican opinions as that ancient Greece declined because "the common good was lost in the pursuit of private interest" and that "the man who can plant thorns in the bosom of an unsuspecting girl is more detestable than a common robber, in the same proportion as private violence is more despicable than open force, and money of less value than happiness."25 The qualities that made a man honorable in public life, then, distinguished him as a potential husband as well.

Men, likewise, were supposed to select republicans as their life partners. As the author of "On the Choice of a Wife" put it, "virtue, wisdom, presence of mind, patience, vigour, capacity, and application, are not sexual qualities; they belong to all who have duties to perform and evils to endure." Echoing standard Protestant assumptions, Americans and the British writers they chose to republish argued that the most important considerations in the selection of a wife were her "qualifications as a companion and a belp.26 The choice was difficult, for women were not equally qualified. Suitors should be wary of triviality and more physical beauty or what the author of "The Intrinsic Merits of Women" called "the fashionable follies of the age." It was not that all women were suspect but that only certain types—great beauties, heiresses, and coquettes—were likely to be dangerous. Thus "the husbands of beauties are the most miserable of husbands. . . Vexed by the vanity, exhausted by the extravagance, tortured by the inconstancy. . . life, instead of a blessing, becomes to them a purgatory." The republican gloss is equally evident in the simple reminder that "riches. . . will never alone afford happiness to their possessors."27

Men and women both were thus advised to seek for their mates what we can recognize as embodiments of republican ideology. They were warned at even greater length to avoid certain notorious types, those associated with the despicable aspects of European court life: flatterers, deceivers, flirts, fops, coxcombs, coquettes, and all persons lacking in honor and virtue. Indeed, writers devoted so much effort to delineating the characteristics of the coxcomb and coquette that one cannot help suspecting that the type, rather than presenting a bona fide threat to naive American beauties and belles, served as a distillation, much like the tyrannical ruler or the designing minister, of what the age most feared. Flirts and fops, coxcombs and coquettes romp through the pages of republican literature with abandon. Their names are code words that signify luxury, vice, and deceit, their presence in a story points almost without exception to an


21 Christian's Mag., Feb–Mar. 1790, 697. This article is an extract from A Father's Legacy to His Daughters by Dr. John Gregory of Edinburgh. Originally appearing in England in 1774, it proved one of the most popular books published in this era in America, where it went through at least 15 editions and sold more than 20,000 copies. See Benson, Women in Eighteenth-Century America, 59–60, and Fliegelman, Prodigals, 39.


26 Boston Weekly Magazine, Dec. 29, 1804, 37; printed also in Lady's Mag. (New York), Mar. 1802, 168, 165. The articles are selections from Letters from a Father to His Son (1794) by John Aiken, an English physician, quoted in James, Changing Ideas, 143–144.

unhappy ending. They promise ruin not only for themselves and their victims but also for the infant nation, for they practice habits that were commonly believed to spell the death of republics. So reasoned the author of "The Philosophy of Coquetry": "So long as the sensuality and pride of one sex shall delight in luxurious habits and ostentatious living; so long as the vanities of the other shall be gratified by splendid personal decorations, costly refinements, and glittering equipages—or, more philosophically speaking, so long as we shall be enslaved in a refined state of society, by numerous and factitious wants, we shall look in vain for disinterested alliances, and an union of the sexes resulting from mental attachment." 29

Reform began with the individual; a republican society required virtuous men and women. That belief permeates the purportedly "True Story" of "Eugenia—or the Coquette." The girl of the title had parents who were "dissipated and luxurious.... [They] looked forward to immense wealth.... Pride, pomp, and luxury dazzled their eyes." Indeed, "without a particle of principle, [Eugenia's] father countenanced depredation, at a time when the hirelings of tyranny were not sparing in the arts of devastation." In this republican vision a nation could be no better than the individuals who constitute it. In this story a sad fate for the nation is averted when Eugenia, who has inherited her parents' vices, jilts the decent young man who had courted her, freeing him to marry "a woman, who boasts only those real charms.... which constitute the perfect wife.... [A]s she never experienced the deceit of a fop, so he congratulates himself that he has escaped from the smiles of a coquette." Significantly, Eugenia herself is almost incidental to the story. It is her parents, stand-ins for a corrupt British government, and their ability to thwart a truly affectionate union that are most feared. In such a view, to fall for a coquette is to surrender republican virtue, and to flirt is to commit an act of treason. 29

When courtship and marriage are infused with political meaning, women inevitably and inescapably become political beings. Make no mistake: these first formulations of a feminine political role were not fundamentally feminist. They were not devised by women in particular, nor was their aim primarily to enhance the position of women. The dynamic, rather, was republican and anti-patriarchal: it juxtaposed the virtuous, independent child and the oppressive, corrupting parent, and it found in the union of two virtuous individuals the true end of society and the fit paradigm for political life. Such a conceptualization of the relationship between family and polity represents more a subtle shift than a clean break from earlier models. When Puritans designated the family "a little

commonwealth," they meant it to be "a schoole wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned; whereby men are fitted to greater matters in Church or commonwealth." 30 In such a family the relationship between parent and child was most important.

When anti-patriarchalists in the eighteenth century substituted marriage for priesthood as the fundamental familial relationship, they did not, however, question the assumption that the family was the society in miniature. Society still appeared as the family writ large, with the same sorts of relationships deemed appropriate for both the as-yet-undifferentiated spheres of home and world. Yet in shifting interest from the parent-child nexus to the husband-wife bond, eighteenth-century authors necessarily raised women to a new moral and political stature. When the key relationship in a society is that between father and son or ruler and subject, women may conveniently be ignored; when the most important relationship is between conjugal equals, and when the family is still seen as the correlative of the larger society, then women can no longer be overlooked. If the affectionate union between a man and his wife, freely entered into, without tyrannical interference, is the model for all the relationships in the society and the polity, then the wife, as an indispensable half of the marital union, is a political creature.

To the extent that the success of the republican endeavor rested upon the character of citizens, republicanism demanded virtue of women, not because it numbered them as citizens but because it recognized how intimately women, in consensual unions, were connected to men. A virtuous man required a virtuous mate. Moreover, republicanism called upon every means at its disposal to assure male virtue. That obsession with virtue, deriving its force from the fusion of Protestant and republican notions of character, persisted long after the Revolution had been won and the Constitution ratified. Well into the nineteenth century, Americans linked the fate of their nation to the virtues of its people. 31 Even if, as several historians have suggested, certain thinkers, before the end of the eighteenth century, had embraced liberalism and its premise of the self-interested individual, 32 popular writers and, presumably, their audience had not. One writer put it emphatically: "Private vices are not public

28 N.Y. Mag., N.S., Nov. 1796, 583. The classic example, of course, is Hannah Foster's The Coquette, or The History of Eliza Wharton.... (Boston, 1797).
benefits." That rejection of Bernard Mandeville infused much of the early national literature, and that conceptualization of society—which continued to see the family as the microcosm of the wider world and to insist that "public good must grow out of private virtue"—held out a significant role for women.

"A woman of virtue and prudence is a public good—a public benefactor." She has the power to make "public decency . . . a fashion—and public virtue the only example." And how is woman to accomplish that great end? By her influence over the manners of men. Indeed, "nothing short of a general reformation of manners would take place, were the ladies to use their power in discouraging our licentious manners." Such a role might seem trivial did Americans not consider "the general reformation of manners" one of the young nation's most important goals, and did they not think women fully capable of contributing to it. Women might begin by reforming themselves, for "there is not a more certain test of national depravity, than that which presents itself in the degeneracy of female manners."34

Male manners, however, were of more concern, and in changing them women were to play their most important role. So argued men, such as the essayist who held that women who were the beneficiaries of a "virtuous and refined education" might contribute "no less to public good than to private happiness. A gentleman, who at present must degrade himself into a fop or a coxcomb in order to please the ladies, would soon find that their favor could not be gained but by exerting every manly talent in public and private life." That same view could be expressed by a woman—for example, Miss C. Hutchings, who assured her fellow boarding-school graduates of the influence of "female manners on society in general": "were all women rational, unaffected and virtuous, coxcombs, flatterers and libertines would no longer exist." Such arguments rested on several important new assumptions. First, although the concern with "manners" betokened an upper-class emphasis upon gentility, the insistence that women are—or can be—a moral force transforms manners into mores, into the moral foundation of the society. Thus "it is . . . to the virtues of the fair . . . that society must be indebted for its moral, as well as its natural preservation."35 Second, women play their moral role not by denying their sexuality, by becoming "passionless," but by using it to tempt men to be good.

This conceptualization of female influence seems to have intrigued men and women in the decades just after the Revolution. Magazines printed and reprinted numbers of articles with similar titles and sentiments: "Female Influence," "Scheme for Increasing the Power of the Fair Sex," "The Influence of the Female Sex on the Enjoyments of Social Life," "The Power of Beauty, and the Influence the Fair Sex might have in Reforming the Manners of the World." These, with a host of similar articles, argued that the potential for beneficial female influence was almost unlimited.

The height of a woman's influence was reached during the period of "love and courtship," which "it is universally allowed, invest a lady with more authority than in any other situation that falls to the lot of human beings." A young man who addressed his classmates at Columbia College's commencement elaborated: "She can mold the taste, the manners, and the conduct of her admirers, according to her pleasure." Moreover, "she can, even to a great degree, change their tempers and dispositions, and superinduce habits entirely new." Thus it was not in childhood that a man was most malleable; rather, it was when, grown to maturity, he sought the favors of a young lady that he was most susceptible to influence. "By the judicious management of this noble passion [love], a passion with which the truly accomplished of the fair sex never fail of inspiring men, what almost miraculous reformations may be brought about?"38

Once she had seduced him into virtue, the married woman's task was to preserve her husband in the exalted state to which her influence had raised him. "It rests with her, not only to confirm those virtuous habits which he has already acquired, but also to excite his perseverance in the paths of rectitude."39 The boldness of this formulation is stunning. What earlier

37 "Female Influence," N.Y. Mag., May 1795, 300.
Americans perceived as Eve’s most dangerous characteristic, her seductiveness, is here transformed into her capacity for virtue. Woman was to lead man into rectitude, to lure him to the exercise of manly virtue. What miraculous formations became possible when the attraction between the sexes, which for millennia had been considered the cause of the fall of mankind, could be transformed into the bedrock of the nation! Women indeed had great power—nothing less than the ability, as one magazine implored, “to make our young men, not in empty words, but in deed and in truth, republicans.”

That was why so much importance was attached to the education of women. Passion could and must be tempered by reason. If Eve’s daughters could deserve, as one young woman put it, to be “eulogized for the beauties of their minds instead of their persons . . ., then would mankind enjoy that happiness which was first intended for the happy pair in Paradise.” Were women properly educated, “then will the halcyon days dawn, and human nature appear in its highest beauty and perfection.” Few topics excited more interest in the early national period than education, for it seemed to hold the key to making “our women virtuous and respectable; our men brave, honest, and honorable—and the American People in general an EXAMPLE OF HONOUR and VIRTUE to the rest of the world.” Writers were not always clear or certain about whether the American people were naturally virtuous or whether, instead, they merely had unusual potential to be so; hence the extremes of millennial hope and overwhelming fear, as men and women envisioned both the prospect of paradise on earth and the potential for disastrous failure.

Unless we recognize how grandiose American expectations could be and how terrifying was the possibility that they might not be realized, we cannot fully appreciate how central female education was to the republican agenda. While it is true that some reformers advocated educating women so that they, in turn, could teach their children, the more important


consideration, always, was to make women into fit companions for republican men and, especially, reliable guarantors of masculine virtue. Hence, as one man put it, “would the females keep in view the influence they possess over our education, they would not fail to perceive an attention to their own as nearly connected with the welfare of mankind . . . Do they admire and respect the man of sense, and treat with contempt the coxcomb and the fop, [a young man] will, to recommend himself to their esteem, form himself to usefulness and virtue.” No one argued that women were naturally more virtuous or pure than men; rather, they had the capacity to overcome weakness and become good.

Nor, certainly, were all women natural republicans; the books and magazines of the age are populated with as many coquettes and flirts as coxcombs and fops. Human nature was malleable, and if it could be bent toward the good, to make a republican, it might also be warped toward evil, creating a coxcomb or coquette. Obviously, those who believed in the malleability of character rejected Calvinistic assumptions about innate depravity, and nowhere is their departure from the older orthodoxy more clear than in their expectations of feminine virtue. Thus one essayist advised women of the enormous power they had at their disposal: “as Milton says, The world lies all before them, and it is theirs to mould into what shape they please.”

That paraphrase and application of the penultimate lines of Paradise Lost are a good deal more sanguine than the original. So optimistic a reading of Milton, with its suggestion that the world was Eve’s to make, even into a new paradise, drew upon millennial hopes that had become an integral part of American culture. To be sure, such expectations did not always express a literal belief in the imminence of Christ’s thousand-year reign, and they were often dampened by a lurking fear that they might not be realized. Still, the Revolution unleashed a flood of optimism—so much, in fact, that some Americans could begin to think of themselves as “new” men, veritable American Adams, given the opportunity to make the world and themselves anew. As Paine put it, America “has it in her choice to do, and to live as she pleases. The world is in her hands.” This persistent strain in American thought is well known to students of American culture. Yet there could be no Adam without an Eve; in the garden, as described in Genesis and by Milton, Adam had a companion who sinned first. Without Eve, Adam presumably would have remained in Paradise; that reminder of
woman's unhappy role in effecting human destiny had never been far from the minds of Puritan ministers such as Cotton Mather. To the extent that the Fall was the most compelling of all biblical episodes for Puritans, woman played a central, and unenviable, role in the central drama of mankind. Milton's version of the Fall achieved wide popularity in America at the end of the eighteenth century, and not just among the heirs of the Puritans, his Eve, although more sympathetic than the stock Puritan version, still bore primary responsibility for the great calamity.

Thus, to move to a more helpful view of human potential, it was necessary first to come to terms with the Fall. Several avenues were available. One was to shift the focus of religion from Fall to Redemption; that path was taken, particularly in the nineteenth century, as American Protestantism became more Christocentric. Another option was for Adam, in effect, to go his own way, without Eve, remaking the world as an all-male paradise; classic American literature, written by men, followed that route in the nineteenth century. But Americans of the late eighteenth century, steeped as they were in orthodox readings of the Bible, and reminded of them by Milton, could not remake Adam and give the story of the Fall a happier ending without first remaking the woman who had been first in sin. And that is precisely what they did.

Some revamped Eve clearly and consciously, offering new exegeses of Genesis, as did the author of "The Nobility of Woman Kind," who reasoned that "the man gave us death; not the woman. The woman did amiss ignobly and from deception: But the man knew, that he did amiss." Judith Sargent Murray, writing in the Massachusetts Magazine under the pen name "Constantia," offered an even more positive assessment of Eve's brief residence in Eden. Eve's motive in eating the forbidden fruit, Murray suggested, was admirable; she hungered for knowledge. Even though Adam could see that his mate had grown no wiser, he nonetheless tasted the fruit himself. His motive? "A base pusillanimous attachment to a woman! Thus it should seem, that all the arts of the grand deceiver . . . were requisite to mislead our general mother, while the father of mankind forfeited his own, and relinquant the happiness of posterity, merely in compliance with the blandishments of a female." Thus could common assumptions about feminine moral weakness and masculine intellectual strength be turned cleverly on their heads.

Still, most writers who wished to revise popular evaluations of Eve did not take so assertively feminist a tack as to reinterpret the story of the Fall. For one reason, they might be refuted by traditional readings that kept a culpable sensuality, both feminine and masculine, at the center of the story. Instead, those who were inclined to paint the first mother in more flattering hues tended to focus not so much upon her unhappy departure from Eden as upon her more pleasing qualities when she was still there. Here Americans took their cue from Milton, and in the years just after the Revolution his Eve "began to emerge as a pattern of womanly perfection." Sometimes an author quoted Milton directly, as did Dr. John Gregory, an Edinburgh physician whose Legacy to his daughters was popular in America: "Milton had my idea, when he says of Eve 'Grace was in all her steps.' Heaven in her eye. In every gesture dignity and love." Samuel Low, author of the play The Politician Out-witted, must have assumed that his audience would recognize his source when he quoted the same lines, without attribution, to describe his heroine.

Often Milton's influence was indirect but unmistakable; his "fair angelic Eve," created "for softness . . . and sweet attractive grace," served as model for the ideal woman who would display "softness and delicacy of manners, unaffecting beauty, unassuming worth, modesty happily blended with good humour." The Miltonic influence is also clear in a poem entitled "Female Character," published in 1792:

Queen of every gentle passion,  
Tender sympathy and love;  
Perfect work of Heavenly fashion,  
Miniature of charms above.

Love and grace in rich profusion,  
Soft'ning man's ferocious soul;

49 See, for example, Cotton Mather, Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion; or, The Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman . . . (Cambridge, Mass., 1692), 1. See also Scholten, Childbearing, 12.
50 George F. Sensabaugh details the spread of Milton's works in America. Although his picture of cannibal bliss was occasionally referred to in American publications before the Revolution, it was the final quarter of the century and especially its last decades that brought "American acceptance of Milton's authority on a national scale" (Milton in Early America [Princeton, N.J., 1964], 98, and passim).
52 See Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York, 1960), and Lawrence, Studies.
53 Royal Am. Mag., Mar. 1775, 104; "On the Equality of the Sexes," Mass. Mag., Apr. 1790, 224-225. See also "On Woman," Boston Wkly. Mag., July 21, 1804, 153: "if our first parents were at all to be blamed, Adam was by far the most culpable."
55 Sensabaugh, Milton, 115.
57 Paradise Lost, bk. 5, line 74, bk. 4, line 298.
All creation's fair conclusion,
Form'd to beautify the whole. 58

Woman is the last of God's works, created not, as the pre-Miltonic tradition held it, to bring about man's fall, but rather to remind him, after that event, of the paradise they had once shared and hoped still to regain. 59

Jay Fliegelman has noted that Milton's description of Eve played an important role in "the secularization and feminization of 'grace'" in the eighteenth century as the word took on an aesthetic meaning. 60 By the same token, woman, 'Heav'n's last best gift,' promised salvation; she, like Christ, pointed the way toward redemption. Yet it is redemption with a difference, for when sacred history is rewritten in such a way—as American popular writers would have it—that woman is gracious and man has not yet sinned, then we can imagine the time before the Fall when the world was Paradise and our first parents

In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone . . . 61

It was to this image of prelapsarian godliness that Americans, in the era just after the American Revolution, responded.

The Republican Wife, then, was Eve, and republican marriage represented Paradise, a veritable "heaven on earth." Taking their model from Milton's hymn to wedded love in Book IV of Paradise Lost, American publications described marriage in unabashedly Edenic terms. "The house of the married man is his paradise... In the existence of a married man, there is no termination[,] when death overtakes him, he is only translated from one heaven to another." 62 Marriage is "the highest state of human felicity, and resembles that of the beneficent beings above." For this reason the choice of a marriage partner was so important. A correspondent to the Christian's, Scholar's, and Farmer's Magazine put it simply: "The Choice of a Wife" was one "on which not only [mankind's] present welfare, but even their everlasting felicity may depend." 63

59 See Diane Kelsey McColley, Milton's Eve (Urbana, Ill., 1983).
60 Fliegelman, Prodigals, 130. See also "On the Difference between Grace and Beauty," Royal Am. Mag., Feb. 1775, 43-45.
61 Paradise Lost, bk. 5, line 19, bk. 4, lines 290-293.

The Edenic vision of marriage, then, served to bridge the anti-patriarchalism of the eighteenth century and the domesticity of the nineteenth. If the patriarchal model of familial relationships was suited to a hierarchically organized society, and if, as Nancy F. Cott has suggested, 64 domesticity went hand in hand with mid-nineteenth-century democratic liberalism, the Edenic vision fit just as nicely with the canons of republicanism. Like republicanism itself, Edenic republican marriage presented itself as egalitarian. Republican characterizations of marriage echoed with the words equal, mutual, and reciprocal, and marriage was described as a friendship between equals. An essay "Addressed to the Ladies," for example, urged "every young married woman to seek the friend of her heart in the husband of her affection. There, and there only, is that true equality, both of rank and fortune, and cemented by mutual interests, and mutual . . . pledges to be found. . . . There and there only will she be sure to meet with reciprocal confidence, unfregned attachment and tender solicitude to soothe every care." Indeed, no word better summarizes republican notions of marriage than friendship. "Marriage is, or should be, the most perfect state of friendship. Mutual interest produces mutual assistance." Another writer defined the good marriage in almost the same words as "the highest instance of human friendship." In fact, "love" was nothing more than "friendship raised to its highest pitch." 65

Marriage, quite simply, was friendship exalted. Its pleasures derived from "mutual return of conjugal love... When two minds are . . . engaged by the ties of reciprocal sincerity, each alternately receives and communicates a transport that is inconceivable to all, but those that are in this situation." Marriage was intended, another writer concluded, "to be the basis and the cement of those numberless tender sympathies, mutual endearments and interchanges of love between the mutual parties themselves, which make up not the morality only, but even the chief happiness of conjugal life." Marriage was moral because it fused "virtuous love and friendship; the one supplying it with a constant rapture, the other regulating it by the rules of reason." True marriage was quite unlike "those unnatural and disproportionate matches that are daily made upon worldly views, where interest or lust are the only motives." 66 True marriage was

proportionate; put another way, it was symmetrical. Indeed, the mutuality and reciprocity that republicans so prized were inconceivable in an asymmetrical union—the "slavery" of so-called barbaric cultures, in which women were thoroughly subordinated to men. 

That republican marriage was symmetrical does not mean that it was fully egalitarian; rather, men and women were opposite sides of the same coin or, as a popular fable had it, two halves of a being that had once been sundered. Neither could be whole until it found its other half. Nor could the halves be fully moral when separate, for Eve's love and Adam's reason were equally necessary to the prelapsarian vision. As heirs to the Enlightenment, American republicans sought the happy medium between—or, more precisely, a fusion of—passion and intellect, head and heart. Eighteenth-century moral philosophy, as it was popularized in American magazines, taught both that passion must be regulated by reason and that "no real felicity can exist independent of susceptibility and affection, and the heart of him who is cold to the soothing voice of friendship, dead to the melting strains of love, and senseless to the plaintive pleadings of distress, is a mansion only calculated for demoniac spirits, or a cheerless dwelling for disgust and spleen." Adam and Eve, reason and love, are each indispensable, and the symmetrical marriage brings them together.

For the assertion that the subordination or "slavery" of women was characteristic of barbaric cultures see, for example, "On the Treatment of the Fair Sex," *Lady's Mag.* (New York), Apr. 1801, 214-215; "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex," *Penn. Mag.*, Aug. 1775, 362-364; "Domestic Life of the Arabs," *General Mag. and Review*, July 1798, 34-36; and "The Influence of the Female Sex on the Enjoyments of Social Life," *Columbian Mag.*, Mar. 1790, 153-154. "Marriage, among savages, having no object but propagation and slavery, is a very humbling state for the female sex." On the other hand, the position of women in societies characterized by commerce, large cities, and an advanced, complex civilization was not necessarily more enviable. See, for example, "Marriage Ceremonies of different Countries Compared," *ibid.*, June 1787, 491: "The trade of fortune-hunting... seem[s] to be confined to the old crowded cities, while the tedious peculiarities of European settlements of fortunes, &c are scarcely understood by the inhabitants of America." Americans saw their society—and its women—poised somewhere between barbarity and excessive economic and cultural development with its attendant corruptions. See McCoy, *Elusive Republic*, chap. 1. See also "Education," *Am. Mag.*, Dec. 1787, 22-26. To be sure, the cyclical view of the rise and fall of civilizations, which McCoy illuminates, and the linear Christian eschatology are inconsistent; nonetheless, both sorts of cultural analysis appeared side by side in the era's magazines. Perhaps the pessimistic cyclical paradigm only made the more hopeful Christian one more appealing.

For this reason—that in checking passion and socializing reason the conjugal union made mankind truly virtuous—marriage was the model for society. The single life, according to John Witherspoon, writing as "Epaminondas" in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* on the eve of the Revolution, "narrows the mind and closes the heart." He asserted unequivocally the "absolute necessity of marriage for the service of the state."" The pure love of marriage formed the basis for "social virtue," for "while other passions concentrate man on himself, love makes him live in another, subdues selfishness, and reveals to him the pleasure of ministering to the object of his love... The lover becomes a husband, a parent, a citizen." The "marriage institution," then, "is the first to produce moral order." For that reason, "marriage has ever been considered by every wise state the sinew of its strength and the foundation of its true greatness." Marriage formed the basis of all other relationships, both in the family, because it led to parenthood, and in the society, because it schooled men in the disinterested benevolence that was supposed by republican ideologues to constitute virtue. In sum, as an essayist in the *Key* put it, "nothing is so honourable as MARRIAGE, nothing so comfortable both to body and mind... It is marriage alone that knits and binds all the sinews of society together and makes the life of man honourable to himself, useful to others, and grateful to the God of nature... Is there anything on earth nearer heaven?" Lest that promise of heaven-on-earth be insufficient to persuade his readers, the writer continued: "That MAN who resolvesto live without WOMAN, or that WOMAN who resolvesto live without MAN, are [sic] ENEMIES TO THE COMMUNITY in which they dwell, INJURIOUS TO THEMSELVES, DESTRUCTIVE TO THE WORLD, APOSTATES TO NATURE, and REBELS AGAINST HEAVEN AND EARTH." The man or woman who proposed to live alone, then, was heretic and traitor both.

Like republicanism, the doctrine of symmetrical marriage subordinated individual interest to the greater good of the whole. Accordingly, marriages based upon interest were to be loathed; true marriage was the model for disinterested benevolence. Unlike the canon of domesticity, in which "women's self-renunciation was called upon to remedy men's
self-alienation,”75 idealized republican marriage required men and women both to display virtue. Male and female were two halves of one whole whose name was concord; the ideal marriage was a scene of prelapsarian harmony. As the author of “On the Necessity of Domestic Concord” noted, “peace” was more important even than “plenty.”76 In order for “harmony” and “concord” to prevail, husband and wife were to be of one mind; they could not disagree.77 To prevent a conflict-filled marriage, one must choose one’s mate wisely; probably no consideration was more important than “a similarity of sentiments and dispositions,” for where there is “an union of souls, and a consistent harmony of mental ideas . . . discord will keep at an awful distance, and an universal sympathy, productive of an ineffable bliss, will ever attend them . . . O happiness divine! source of concordant minds!”78 An essayist in New York Magazine expressed the same idea more matter-of-factly: “There cannot be too near an equality, too exact a harmony, betwixt a married couple.” Indeed, “the idea of power on either side should be totally banished.”79

Conjugal affection, then, was not coercive. Nor did it admit of any “selfish or sensual alloy.” Marriage was the republic in miniature; it was chaste, disinterested, and free from the exercise of arbitrary power. And, like republican citizens, husband and wife were most likely to find happiness when, as Witherspoon suggested, they shared the same rank, the same education, and the same habits of life.79

It is tempting to suppose that the ideology of the republican marriage was but the rhetorical manifestation of the newly affectionate conjugal union, and that both rhetoric and reality represented positive and progressive change.80 Yet we must remember that republicanism, like Janus, looked to the past as well as to the future; it focused more upon the welfare of the society than the well-being of the individual. Thus it had an “implicitly anti-individualistic dimension,”81 one that was exposed whenever conflict arose. We can see that tendency in the ideal of marital concord, which could be—and was—used to legitimate both coverture and the exclusion of women from direct participation in politics. Indeed, the rhetoric of harmony seems almost a gloss upon the doctrine of marital unity—the English common law fiction that in marriage the husband and wife are one, and the husband is the one.82 It has puzzled some historians that American Revolutionaries did not jettison coverture along with other pieces of undemocratic British baggage such as primogeniture and entail.83 Yet republican theorists prized harmony above all else; they created the ideal of the affectionate marriage not so much to liberate the individual as to assure concord in the family, the building-block of society.

Republicanism aimed to avoid conflict. Hence, using the same principle that predicted that small republics would be the most harmonious,84 those who applied the theory to the family suggested that husband and wife should share similar dispositions, beliefs, and interests, that they should be as one. Even so, conflict might arise, and the recommendations republicans made to restore harmony in such unfortunate cases expose the limitations of the republican model for family and polity alike.

The ideal, of course, was equality; no good republican would have disagreed with the egalitarian sentiments expressed by the woman who styled herself “A Matrimonial Republican.” “The obedience between man and wife,” she wrote, “is, or ought to be mutual.”85 The catch was in the “ought to be,” for here the weaknesses in the republican ideal show through. What, for example, was a wife with an errant husband to do? Although it was certainly true that “man has no more right to sin with impunity than woman,” husbands seemed to fall more often, and it became a wife's duty to lure her errant mate back to rectitude with “the charm of good humour and uncomplaining sweetness.” In other words, only heightened expectations of marriage may have worked against the end they sought to secure; see Lewis, Pursuit of Happiness, 187-204, and Cott, Bonds, 76-85.

80 See, for example, D. B. Smith, Great House, chap. 4; Trumbach, Egalitarian Family, chap. 2; Stone, Family, chap. 8; D. S. Smith, “Parental Power,” Jour. Marriage and Family, XXXV (1973), 419-428; and Ellen K. Rothman, Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America (New York, 1984), chap. 1. Of course,
redoubled feminine virtue could reclaim a husband from masculine vice. "Dispute not with him, be the occasion what it will," advised one writer.66 Better to let errors go unremarked, warned another, than to "strike too often the unharmonious string." Indeed, "the best way of a married woman to carry her points is to yield sometimes."67 Harmony, then, took precedence over equality; in the interest of concord a woman would sometimes have to forbear.

But why not the husband? In a truly reciprocal marriage would not the two parties compromise? Almost all essayists who addressed the issue of conflict in marriage argued that it was the wife who had to bend. The responsibility for anchoring marriage fell disproportionately to women because they were, supposedly, more compliant than men,68 or, at least, they would find it "necessary, for political purposes, to consider man as the superior authority."69 The symmetrical marriage thus gave way, under


69 "An Address to the Ladies," Am. Mag., Mar. 1788, 245. There was no consensus on whether those differences between men and women that led to the expectation that women would defer to male authority were innate or merely convenient. Some writers were themselves uncertain, as was "The Gentleman at Large," who concluded that women were morally equal to men; that their minds had a "nice and delicate texture," which proved that "the situation for which Heaven designed them in this world is of a nature the most benevolent and engaging," while "the more rugged and invidious offices of life were appropriated to man, as being better suited to his firm and sturdily disposition"; and that women should "voluntarily" adopt certain responsibilities in the home (Columbian Phœnix, May 1800, 266-269). Most writers, however, seem to have adopted a symmetrical, different-but-equal model of gender, which could manifest itself—as early as 1788—as a fully articulated version of "separate spheres." (See "An Address to the Ladies," Am. Mag., Mar. 1788, 245; Miss M. Warner, "Rights of Woman," Boston Wkly. Mag., Oct. 30, 1802, 2; Miss P. W. Jackson, "Concluding Address, at exhibition at Mrs. Rowson's Academy," ibid., Oct. 29, 1803, 2-3; and "Gentleman

very little pressure, to a disproportionate one in which the wife, in order to maintain domestic tranquility, was expected to defer.

Deference, of course, was the solution republicans offered for the problem of conflict in the polity; persons deficient in judgment or inferior in status, they believed, should simply yield to those of superior wisdom. Yet although, as Wood has shown, Federalists offered the Constitution as a "republican remedy" for the republican vice of disharmony, no similar rearrangement was forthcoming for the family. Indeed, as Americans showed increasing acceptance of conflict in the market and the polity, they became less willing to tolerate it at home.90

The insistence upon feminine deference revealed fears about conflict in the society and nation, and not merely concern about unhappy marriages. Indeed, very few of the essays that enjoined women to complaisance mentioned those character flaws we might expect women to have confronted most frequently in their mates: irritability, distasteful habits, slovenliness, insensitivity, an inability to earn an adequate income, or even the arbitrary exercise of power. Rather, the single failing that drew the most censure—and also the most extravagant claims for the power of female influence—was infidelity. Stories with titles like "The Way to Reclaim Him. A Moral Tale" purported to show how supreme feminine virtue could recall an errant husband to the path of rectitude. In that story, as in such another as "Conjugal Prudence," the wronged wife won back her wayward husband by embracing, literally, his mistress and illegitimate offspring, and by insisting upon an education for the children and an annuity (and, implicitly, banishment) for the mistress. Such acts of generosity never failed. The husband in the former story clasped his wife to his breast, "murmured out . . . 'Excellent woman! matchless wife!'" and promised "to remain immutably attached to her alone to the last moment of his existence." Similarly, the husband in the latter exclaimed, "Thou heavenly woman! . . . is it thus thou upbraidest me for my infidelity to the most amiable woman that ever existed! O, my love, forgive!—but that's impossible! I am, I will be only yours.'91

The authors of such stories seem to be exploring the farthest reaches of

at Large," Columbian Phœnix, May 1800, 266-269.) But because these distinctions were grounded in a religio-cultural metaphor of the first parents, rather than in science, they were quite flexible, could be put to any number of uses, and were quite inconsistent. For an analysis of the "paradoxes and contradictions" in late eighteenth-century depictions of femininity, see Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen (Chicago, 1984), chap. 1, quotation on p. 15.


self-abasing virtue; they imagine the most extreme instances of domestic cruelty a wife might endure in order to see whether the depths of depravity may be exceeded by the heights of virtue. When the answer is yes, the resolution takes the form of a conversion, with the husband confessing his sins and the wife playing the part, in the words of another contrite fictional husband, of “my guardian angel sent by heaven to prevent my ruin.”

Stripped of her original culpability, Eve is easily transformed into Christ’s surrogate, able to work a sinner’s “reformation.” “Trust me,” the wronged wife says. “I assure you, that search the habitable globe, you will meet with no woman more inclined to serve, love, obey, and oblige you, than your Emilia.” Like Christ, the wife has to suffer, and like him, she redeems.

It was, however, equally possible for women to suffer yet not redeem. That was the sad fate of the heroine of Susanna Rowson’s Sarah; or, The Exemplary Wife, a novel in which “virtue is represented, in all her native simplicity and beauty; and vice . . . is exhibited in her own proper ugliness and deformity.” Although “the story is far from being improbable,” it is really a parable, with virtue pitted against vice. Virtue is represented by Sarah, a lovely young woman who is forced by mercenary relatives to wed a reprobate, somewhat as if Clarissa had been made, against her will, to marry Lovelace. Although her husband kept a mistress, even bringing her into the home he shared with his wife, and although he despised Sarah for her goodness, she never wavered in her patience, charity, or virtue. When her husband bankrupted himself and even her clothing was claimed by his creditors, she entered into service to support him and herself. And when she discovered his illegitimate child, “said she calmly . . . ‘if the child owes its being to you, give orders that it be brought home, and I will see it is properly taken care of; but let me entreat you not to add to the offence already committed against religion and morality, the unpardonable one of leaving your offspring to perish.’” Whereupon the errant husband expiated, “I—n—n—. . . Of all the plagues a man can have, a moralizing, sentimental, canting, hypocritical wife is the worst.” After years of such trials, Sarah died, secure in her conviction that “even in thought she had never dishonoured her husband.” Thereupon he married his mistress.

Here there is no conversion; virtue will not prevail. Nevertheless, “who of

“Conjugal Affection,” Gent. and Lady’s Mag., Feb. 1789, 4. The repentant husband wished “every man blessed with a wife like thee to break his fall whenever he deviated from virtue’s paths.”


As announced in Boston Wkly. Mag., June 16, 1804, 136. The novel was serialized in the magazine in 1804 as “Sincerity, a Novel, by a ‘Lady of Massachusetts’,” but published as Sarah (Boston, 1813).

Boston Wkly. Mag., May 19, 1804, 120, June 30, 1804, 144.

common reflection but would prefer the death of Sarah, resigned as she was, and upheld by faith and hope, to all the splendors, wealth and honors ever heaped upon the heroine in the last pages of a novel” in which a heroine met only an earthly reward. To put it another way, Susanna Rowson expressed doubt about whether feminine virtue could prevail in a corrupt world.

The doctrine of the Republican Wife suggested that a good wife could influence a susceptible man; Sarah raised the question whether she could reclaim, as well, a man who was confirmed in viciousness. The answer was that she could not. Here was a fundamental dilemma for the new nation: how could virtue be exacted from the vicious? Republican ideology offered a number of plausible ways to encourage the good to be more so; chief among them were education, benevolent reform, and female influence. But it faced an insurmountable obstacle when it confronted men who were beyond all hope of reformation. The problem was infidelity, not merely the faithlessness of a spouse but apostasy itself—the unpardonable sin; for it, republicanism had no cure.

Republican advocacy of virtue was powerless before persons who had no conscience. How bedeviling this problem was can be seen when we examine the conventional seduction story. Tales such as Charlotte Temple and The Coquette may be considered as not very subtle warnings to young women without dowries that their value lay in their virginity; if they would be sought after on the marriage market, they must keep that commodity intact. The sentimental tale of seduction thus has been seen as an instrument of bourgeois respectability and middle-class conformity.

Such a view is not untrue, for surely no early nineteenth-century girl enhanced her marriage prospects by squandering her virginity. Chastity was esteemed, but for republican as much as bourgeois reasons. Consider “Reflections on Chastity, or Female Honour,” a brief definition printed in at least three magazines before 1800: “What Bravery is in man, Chastity is in woman. This virtue, by making them triumph over every wicked attempt to dishonour them, bestows on them, as the first reward of

Rowson, Sarah, iii.


victory, an universal esteem."99 Once again we see the symmetrical expectations of men and women; in this case, chastity is the feminine version of the absolute standard of courage expected of Revolutionary War soldiers. For patriots like the Reverend Robert Cooper, cowardice was sin; thus he warned in 1775 that "if... you would escape deep guilt before God, and lasting contempt among men, forward you must go.... 

You have, in a word, no alternative, but either to venture your lives bravely, or attempt to save them ignominiously; to run the hazard of dying like heroes, or be certain of living like cowards."100 Bravery, like chastity, was an absolute; it allowed not the slightest deviation nor tolerated any taint.

Brave men and chaste women were expected to "triumph over every wicked attempt to dishonour them." What Charles Royster has said of this Revolutionary attachment to exacting standards of bravery applies to chastity as well: it reflected an evangelical tendency to establish dichotomies between good and evil, salvation and grace, God and Satan. To waver in one's course was to fall from grace; similarly, to surrender one's chastity was to sin. Americans of the Revolutionary era held out an impossible standard of purity for women and men both. Yet the Continental army, as Royster has shown, would come to a more workable notion of human capability, as would the political theorists who framed the Constitution. Standards of female virtue, however, fully as unrealistic as the expectation that no soldier would ever feel fear or no citizen advance his own interest, only became more rigid.101

In many ways chastity was a fit emblem for republicanism, which, when infused with evangelical ardor, could demand absolute and undeviating virtue from its citizens. Hence we must read the era's popular literature of seduction not merely as cautionary tales addressed to young women but also as political tracts in which men and women explored the possibilities for virtue in a corrupt world. Surely it is significant that the most popular novel of the early national period—indeed, the most popular American novel of all until the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin—was Charlotte

100 Quoted in Royster, Revolutionary People, 225.

Republicar Wife

Temple, Susanna Rowson's classic tale of seduction and abandonment.102 In this novel it takes not one but two designing men to seduce Charlotte from the path of virtue. The work is begun by Montraville, a Lovelace type who is drawn to the innocent young woman he ensnares but is unwilling to make a disadvantageous match; it is completed by his "friend" Belcour, whose only apparent motivation is to destroy both Charlotte and her faithless lover. Under such an assault, Charlotte's innocence stands not a chance.

Like Charlotte and her forerunner Clarissa Harlowe, the heroines of the sentimental tales of seduction are all sympathetic. Eliza Wharton, The Coquette, seemed "to possess both the virtues and the graces," her weaknesses were "an air of gaiety in her appearance and deportment" and a fatal naiveté.103 Indeed, the flaws ascribed to the unfortunate heroines were traits that republicans usually valued: "a heart... formed of sensibility;" "unsuspecting innocence;" "innocent herself, she expected to find others so;" a mind "pure and unsullied;" "innocence and simplicity;" "amiable, ingenuous and sensible."104 Pure, innocent, without guile, such young women are nothing less than contemporary versions of Eve; they are endowed with her attributes and given her signs. The unfortunate Amelia, for example, is "one of the fairest blossoms in the garden of society," while Almira is "as beautiful as the daughters of Paradise, as gentle as the breezes of spring; her mind was spotless, and her manners artless."105 Such innocence fell once from Paradise, and it was destined to fall again and again in countless tales of seduction in the early republic.106

103 As Fliegelman notes, Charlotte's parents—who are cast in the affectionate, post-patriarchal mold—might, in theory, have protected her, and in falling, she broke their hearts; but paternalism, no more than patriarchalism, represented an acceptable option for post-Revolutionary Americans (Prodigals, 261-262).
104 Foster, Coquette, 62.
We have seen that feminine influence had its limits; no wife could expect to triumph over a thoroughly corrupted man on this side of the grave. Likewise, feminine innocence was at the mercy of masculine vice. No matter how many times the story of the Fall was reenacted, it came out the same way, as a correspondent to the Gentleman and Lady's Town and Country Magazine was well aware: "Most angelic and ever-admired blossoms of earthly eminence—how few are the instances of thy pure innocence ever reaching the summit of that bliss, uninjured, for which thy Maker intended it." Why? Because of "the wicked designs of artful men, more ravenous than the hungry lions, which go about seeking whom they may devour." Thus he cautioned "the fair daughters of Eve," but could his warning against the "seducers of female excellence" have any more success than God's to Adam and Eve? 108

How closely the seduction story was modeled upon that of the Fall is even more apparent in a tale entitled "Treachery and Infidelity Punished." Almira, the picture of innocence and "as beautiful as the daughters of Paradise," is seduced by one Lorthario: "Oh! the base dissembler—had ingratiated himself too far in her affections: with fondness she listened to his deceitful tales, and with too great avidity devoured his insinuating discourse." 109 Like her mother Eve, Almira fell, for like Eve, she faced the most artful of deceivers, Satan himself barely disguised.

Without question, most of the fictional seducers are satanic; they are described in terms that leave no doubt about their true nature. Seducers are "those reptiles, those anamules [sic], who really come under the class of non-descripts in creation." Even when the deceiver is not a snake, he is animal-like, "a lordly brute [who] fixed his cruel fangs" on one who was "gay . . . lovely . . . innocent . . . happy." 110 The seducer "stalks through the polite world like a sated tiger, who wants only the impulse of hunger to sacrifice another victim." The "vile seducer" is indeed subhuman, for he lacks the ability to love. Instead, he perverts affection, preying upon the credulity of the innocent; "falsehood guides [his] tongue, whilst an infamous baseness, under a plausible appearance of love or friendship conceals a heart destitute of every feeling." 111 Indeed, the seducer is the enemy of love, and much like the Devil who envied Adam and Eve their innocent bliss, he plots its destruction.

Hannah Foster modeled Eliza Wharton's seducer at least as much on Satan as on Lovelace. Jealous of the minister Eliza seems to prefer and angered by her virtuous friends, Sanford sets out to trap the lovely girl who has caught his eye. The responsibility is hers, he claims: "If she will

108 "Advice to the Unguarded Fair of this Metropolis," Gent. and Lady's Mag., Nov. 1789, 547-548.

play with a lion, let her beware of his paw, I say." 112 Charlotte Temple's Belcourt is cut from the same cloth, as are Sidney in "Charles and Amelia, or the Unfortunate Lovers," and Orlando, who contrives Narcissa's fall. In each case, most of the plot is devoted to the stratagems used to "ensnare" the heroine's virtue. 113 Such men, surely, are beyond the compass of normal experience. Each is attracted only to the most singularly virtuous of girls and is not satisfied until he has succeeded in ruining her. Judith Sargent Murray wrote that it was hard to "conceive of turpitude so enormous, as that which must excite a being, deliberately to perpetrate the murder of the peace of a fellow creature, without a single apparent motive to stimulate a deed of such atrocity." 114 But it should not have been difficult at all; loathsome as the creature was, his prototype could be found in Genesis.

For this reason—that seduction tales essentially reenact the Fall, with the victim cast as Eve and the seducer as Satan himself—we should not read such tales too literally. While they certainly reinforced emerging Victorian standards of sexuality, it is doubtful that this was the primary objective. Rather, they represent another chapter in the early nineteenth century's secularization of religion. In them, the seducer is a secularized—

112 Foster, Coquette, 82.
115 See also Wood, "Conspiracy and Paranoid Style," WMQ, 3d Ser., XXXIX (1982), 420-421.
To the list of republicanism's stock villains, to the tyrannical ruler and the designing courtier, we thus must add several other names: those of the coxcomb, the coquette, and—most of all—the vile seducer. All threatened the consensual union that served as the metaphor of what republicans wanted their society to be. Yet if republicanism found ways to vanquish the tyrant and banish the sycophant, it was powerless when confronted by this most insinuating and devilish seducer. He put republicanism, as a system of belief, on trial—and he won. He revealed republicanism's fatal flaw; although it could imagine ways by which reasonably virtuous men and women could make each other more so and might live with each other in harmony, it was utterly baffled by confirmed depravity. In some ways, republicanism represented a quarrel with Genesis. So long as republic-minded men and women could rewrite sacred history in such a way that the Fall never took place and Eve was never tempted, they could imagine themselves inhabiting an earthly paradise, living with their mates in a prelapsarian bliss. But the men and women who were the heirs of the Reformation could never fully forget the Fall; they knew that, when tempted by a deceiver of satanic proportions, humankind would fall and fall again.

The best solution they could devise for the inevitability of sin was the metaphor of republican marriage, in which like-minded and virtuous men and women would guide each other's steps along the paths of rectitude. Yet in their fiction they were drawn irresistibly to the seduction story, and there virtue—and the republic—fell. Most of this discourse, naturally, was expressed in codes; because it was so metaphorical, we cannot read it literally. Clearly, it was not merely sexual lust that republicans found so threatening, but immoderate desires of all kinds, ambition and self-interest chief among them. The vile seducer represented republicanism's inability to come to terms with power, which it tended to equate with evil.

Still, because women figured so prominently in it, we must ask what bearing the literature of republican marriage had for actual republican women. We see embedded in these works many of the themes that historians have already exposed: a growing acceptance of affection as the only proper basis of marriage, increasing respect for feminine virtue, the feminization of religion, the idealization of chastity, and, finally, a growing interest in the possibilities for feminine influence. These themes are all compressed into the person of the Republican Wife: affectionate, virtuous, chaste, and capable of enormous moral authority over her husband. The Republican Wife represented, in the ideology at least, a real and important role. Yet even as an image, she was limited. Indeed, she led to a dead end, for her capability always depended upon masculine susceptibility. She had no more power than man allowed, and even if republican doctrine suggested that men ought to welcome feminine influence, that doctrine held no sway over those who did not subscribe to its credo. That generalization, of course, describes the fundamental weakness in republicanism; it had no power over those who were not or did not want to be virtuous.

In that sense republicanism served women no more poorly than it did men: all were baffled by unalloyed vice. Even though republicanism enhanced woman's status and legitimated improvements in her education as well as her entry into benevolent reform movements, it also placed implicit checks upon her power. And it confronted her with the image of the seduced maid, condemned to fall repeatedly in tale after tale, seemingly incapable of learning from her experience. Women who wanted more status, influence, or power would have to look for another model. Thus the ideal of the wife would give way, by perhaps 1830, to that of the mother. Men might not be malleable, but children were, and they seemed to offer a more promising opportunity for the exercise of influence. Yet before that transition could be effected, the many elements that brought it about would have to fall into place: not merely a sentimental conception of motherhood—already widely shared by the end of the eighteenth century, as Ruth Bloch has shown—but also the removal of the father's place of work from the home, new views on the nature of childhood and child rearing, and, perhaps most important of all, an acceptance of childhood conversion. This shifting of emphasis from woman-as-wife to that of woman-as-mother had important implications for reform, for it rested upon the assumption that women had a special role to play as mothers and that, consequently, they represented a separate interest.

This transition in the conceptualization of woman's nature and her role would have parallels in other aspects of early national life. The 1820s and 1830s may represent a watershed, for not only would the Republican Wife be replaced by the Victorian mother, but in other ways as well the republican synthesis would dissolve, yielding to a more fragmented social vision. In politics, the semblance of an era of good feelings would give way to the second party system. Reform, also, would pass on to a new and more militant phase, beyond benevolence; vague plans for colonization or the eventual abolition of slavery would yield to immediatism, and hopeful schemes to "civilize" the Indian tribes would be replaced by the reality of the reservation. The republic of harmony proved ephemeral; it simply could not work, for it faltered in the face of intransigent slaveholders, Indians who did not want to be white, drunkards who would not give up the bottle, and, most simply, men who would not reform. When confronted by such enormous obstacles, the Republican Wife, like the theory that begot her and like the original woman in whose image she was cast, tasted of the fruit of knowledge and, inevitably, fell.

117 See n. 97, above.