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RETHINKING REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD: BENJAMIN RUSH AND THE YOUNG LADIES' ACADEMY OF PHILADELPHIA

Margaret A. Nash

When Linda Kerber coined the phrase “republican motherhood,” she altered the historiography of female education. Kerber argued that colonial women seldom received formal education, but that post-revolutionary republican ideology resulted in a surge of educational opportunities. Based largely on an essay by Benjamin Rush, her theory holds that leaders of the new nation wanted women to be educated in order to raise good republican sons. For the last fifteen years historians have used republican motherhood as the primary explanation for the expansion of female education immediately after the Revolutionary War. However, close examination of Rush’s essay and of speeches by trustees and students of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia, co-founded by Rush, all point to the conclusion that historians have overstated the impact of republican motherhood. Other factors that must be taken into account are Enlightenment beliefs regarding women’s intellectual abilities and the absolute value of knowledge, practical needs for literacy and numeracy skills in the new

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republic, and rational approaches to religion.¹

Kerber believes that postrevolutionary women adopted republican motherhood as an ideology that carved out a political niche for themselves. Constrained to the domestic sphere, they imbued that domain with unprecedented significance. When the new republic was in its infancy, many leaders keenly felt the fragility of this experiment in government. The best protection against failure, they believed, was a virtuous citizenry, and virtue was to be instilled by churches, schools, and families. Within families, the mother's role was the most crucial. Motherhood assumed almost the importance of "a fourth branch of government."²

According to Mary Beth Norton, emphasis on virtue led to a new emphasis on households and therefore on women. She argues that prior to the Revolution political leaders viewed the domestic realm as peripheral to public welfare, but afterward they saw the home as pivotal to the fate of the republic. Political virtue became domesticated, and the republican mother became the "custodian of civic morality."³

Sara Evans describes republican motherhood as a solution to the dilemma of the incompatibility of women's revolutionary politicization with postrevolutionary theories relegating women to the home. During the war women boycotted imported goods, increased their workloads by supplying replacements for the boycotted goods, fed and clothed armies, ran farms and businesses while their husbands and fathers were away, and engaged in other efforts outside women's previous domestic scope. Women would not, Evans argues, return happily to a life devoid of a political dimension; republican motherhood offered a way to combine domesticity with political and civic roles.⁴

¹ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1985), 228. For examples of educational historians' reliance on republican motherhood, see Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, 1985), 12, 16; and Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York, 1983).

² Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969); Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 200.

³ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980), 243; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 11.

⁴ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York, 1989), 57-59.

According to these historians, the changed conception of women's roles, which politicized the personal, provided justification for an unprecedented attention to female education after the war. Norton contends that the "very idea" of improved education "was so alien that it never occurred to" prerevolutionary women; not until after the war did they begin to argue for better schooling. Kerber, Norton, and Evans all assert that education for girls increased dramatically after the war, and in a new form. Eschewing the former "education for marriage" with its focus on ornamentals (music, needlework, and modern languages), the new female academies taught grammar, arithmetic, and geography, subjects formerly reserved for males.⁵

Introduction of the republican motherhood thesis ushered in a change in historiography. Prior to Kerber's work, educational historians barely mentioned females. For example, Lawrence Cremin's nearly 700-page volume on colonial education refers to girls only three times, in spite of a footnote in which he acknowledges that this is "a subject that is too often ignored amid airy generalizations from what was happening to males." Thomas Woody is the notable exception to the rule: in 1929 he published a two-volume work on the history of women's education in the United States. Woody found that formal educational opportunities increased for both girls and boys around 1750, well before the Revolution. Pointing to "An Essay on Woman" in a 1753 number of the *New York Gazette* as indicating a shift in views, he claimed that a practical, not ornamental, education for females had many advocates. Newspaper advertisements for academies in New York and Philadelphia also signaled an upsurge of demand for formal education for boys and girls in the decades immediately preceding the Revolution.⁶

Woody's evidence challenges the notion that the Revolution was pivotal in changing attitudes regarding female education, although it may have accelerated trends that began in the colonial period. Following the publication of Kerber's book, however, historians added females to educational histories by adopting the republican motherhood thesis. Employing this ideological framework, and ignoring evidence of earlier

⁵ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 263; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 203, 210; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 261.

⁶ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York, 1970), 186, 440, 507, 609 (quotation); Thomas Woody, *History of Women's Education in the United States* (2 vols., New York, 1929), I, 301-02, 229-33.

changes, they saw dramatic transformations for females in literacy rates and in the growth of formal educational opportunities in the postwar generation.

In a fascinating historiographical essay in 1988, Kerber critiqued heavy reliance on the ideology of separate spheres for men and women as introduced by Barbara Welter and subsequently elaborated by others. Calling it a trope, Kerber suggested that it was an analytic tool that enabled historians to “move the history of women out of the realm of the trivial.” Creation of this analytic category gave credence to women’s history and offered a rubric for examining women’s entry into the political realm. Originators of the separate spheres ideology were so influenced by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* that Welter’s work was “a frank attempt to do for the nineteenth century what Friedan had done for the twentieth.” Welter found the cult of true womanhood as a counterpart of the feminine mystique of her own generation. By 1980 feminist historians, no longer trapped in the 1960s paradigm, questioned the rhetoric and stopped using the word “cult” to describe nineteenth century experience.⁷

Kerber did not apply this critique to her own ideological tool, even though republican motherhood served a function similar to that of the separate spheres thesis: it suddenly heightened the visibility of women in the revolutionary generation. Her own trope gave historians a lens through which to see women. Like Welter, Kerber self-consciously looked for women’s entry into the political sphere, and like Welter she looked for an earlier version of a hallmark of her own time. In *Women of the Republic* she asserted that “[f]rom the time of the Revolution until our own day, the language of Republican Motherhood remains the most readily accepted . . . justification for women’s political behavior” [emphasis mine].⁸

Most historians have not questioned the ideal of republican motherhood, but recently a few scholars have raised challenges to Kerber’s thesis. Ruth Bloch and Jan Lewis argue that motherhood simply was not a primary focus for many writers of the revolutionary era. It might be more accurate to say that there was a prevailing ideal of republican

⁷ Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), 11, 37.

⁸ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 12.

womanhood, of which motherhood was only one piece. Fiction and essays in popular magazines continually spoke of women's capacity for great influence over men—husbands, suitors, brothers, and sons. It is republican womanhood, far more than motherhood, that educational theorists of the time employed as an argument supporting the need for female education.⁹

Doris Malkmus examined evidence of students' reasons for attending academies and concludes that young women sought education that enhanced their intellectual development, religious sensibilities, and social opportunities. Malkmus maintains that none of the teachers, curricula, or students in three prominent female academies in the 1780s and 1790s even referred to republican motherhood, and concludes that there was a gap between ideology and the real experience of women. Thus, she questions the ubiquity of the ideology of republican motherhood in the lives of young women but does not contest it as the main argument that men of the time gave for women's education.¹⁰

Fundamental to Kerber's thesis, and so far largely unquestioned, is the assumption that mothers had primary responsibility for childrearing. She asserts that women created a changed, and politically charged, connotation for motherhood, but nowhere does she assess the validity of her basic assumption. But it simply was not true that Enlightenment thinkers assigned childrearing tasks exclusively to women. From the 1740s through the 1790s physicians and educators summoned "gentlemen-fathers" to take charge of nurseries, warning that "this business has been too long fatally left to the Management of Women." Benjamin Rush's 1786 essay on "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" declared the importance of "nurseries of wise and good men." Men's natural inclinations toward reason and common sense better fitted them for necessary firmness with children than did women's "unlearned" nurturing instincts. To these doctors and educators, parenting was not an unimportant task that could be relegated

⁹ Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies*, 4 (June 1978), 100-26; Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Oct. 1987), 689-721; Karen K. List, "Magazine Portrayals of Women's Role in the New Republic," *Journalism History*, 13 (Summer 1986), 64-70.

¹⁰ Doris Jeanne Malkmus, "Female Academies in the Early Republic" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1993).

safely to women. Therefore, it is possible that women did not need republican ideology to confer value on parenting. This basic challenge to the thesis needs critical attention.¹¹

One way to measure the influence of republican ideology is to examine the essays and speeches of the leading proponents of education. Cremin asserted that no topic was as thoroughly discussed in the first decades of the new nation as the need for universal education. Among the most vocal and well respected advocates for education were Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster. These three, along with many other less well known writers, agreed on the need for a national system of schools that would forge a unique American character and unify the country. They differed on the extent to which education should be a national or state responsibility, but all called for a system that provided at least some free schooling. All the plans reflected a strong belief in the power of education to create a moral, intelligent, and unified citizenry.¹²

Proponents of education continually linked science and virtue, and the Enlightenment belief that rational thought counteracted superstition and bigotry pervaded their literature. Formal education in a new national system ought to inspire the mind to improvement, cultivate a taste for science, teach truth, render knowledge as practical as possible, and inspire youth with a love of mankind. For the most part, essayists applied these ideals of education only to males. Few writers specifically discussed female education. Two of those who did, Rush and Webster, prescribed practical education. Because Rush was the primary basis for Kerber's thesis, his work demands a closer look.¹³

¹¹ William Cadogan, "An Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children from Their Birth to Three Years of Age" [1748], quoted in Jacqueline S. Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child: Attitudes and Practices in Post-Revolutionary Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 (Jan. 1982), 152; Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" [1786], in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 9; Reinier, "Rearing the Republican Child," 152. See also Phyllis Vine, "The Social Function of Eighteenth-Century Higher Education," *History of Education Quarterly*, 16 (Winter 1976), 410-12.

¹² Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York, 1980), 103.

¹³ Kaestle, *Pillars*, chap. 1; Robert E. Potter, *The Stream of American Education* (New York, 1967), chap. 4; Cremin, *The National Experience*, 192-200.

Benjamin Rush enjoyed a varied and illustrious career. He was a prominent Philadelphia physician who signed the Declaration of Independence, served as surgeon-general of the American army during the war, and lectured on chemistry and medicine at the College of Philadelphia. Henry May terms Rush eclectic both in religion and in his social reform agenda. Rush's ancestors were Quaker, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian; as an adult he became a Calvinist. He opposed slavery, worked for prison reform and the abolition of capital punishment, and he fought for humane treatment of the insane. When he turned his attention to education, he embarked on a "one-man crusade to remake America." The claim of Kerber and others that republican motherhood was the principal justification for female education stems from an essay in which Rush expresses the idea that women should be educated in order "to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government."¹⁴

Cremin defined Rush's curricular views as a mixture of Christianity and Enlightenment liberalism. When Rush laid out his plan for public schools in Pennsylvania in 1786, he began by asserting the essential benefits of education: knowledge of God, liberty, just laws and government, good manners, and modern agricultural and manufacturing techniques. The purpose of free township or district schools for all children was to make homogenous and unified a group of people with different cultures and languages. Cultural homogeneity, in turn, would fit "the masses" for "uniform and peaceable government." The ultimate goal of a republican government, said Rush, was liberty; but there can be no liberty without virtue, and no virtue without religion.¹⁵

Rush discussed female education in two essays, basing his argument both times on the multiple roles and influences of *women*, not on the primacy of motherhood. In "Plans for the Establishment of Public Schools," he suggested that because mothers are the first teachers of children, they could train young patriots if they focused on "the great

¹⁴ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 208-10; Lyman H. Butterfield, quoted in Cremin, *The National Experience*, 116; Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts Upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America" [1787], in Randolph, ed., *Essays*, 28.

¹⁵ Cremin, *The National Experience*, 117; Benjamin Rush, "Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools" [1786], in Rudolph, ed., *Essays*, 3, 4; Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education," *ibid.*, 10.

subjects of liberty and government.” But it was not only women’s roles as mothers that justified their education; their influence over grown men also made education imperative. “The opinions and conduct of men are often regulated by the women,” and female “approbation is frequently the principal reward” for male heroism and patriotic acts. Because women have such influence, they should be instructed in “the principles of liberty and government, and the obligations of patriotism.” Rush’s emphasis on women’s power over the conduct of adult men suggests that republican womanhood, as much or more than republican motherhood, motivated his belief in female education.¹⁶

In “Thoughts upon Female Education,” a speech he gave at the Young Ladies’ Academy in 1787, Rush outlined five aspects of women’s lives to consider in designing an appropriate formal education. Only one of these concerned the quasi-political realm of republican motherhood. First, American women’s tendency to marry early meant that their formal education was abbreviated; therefore, their schooling should be confined to “the more useful branches of literature.” Second, American men depended on “the assistance of the female members of the community;” they therefore needed to be trained to be the “stewards and guardians of their husbands’ property.” Third, because men’s duties necessitated their absence from home so much, instruction of children primarily was the mother’s responsibility. Rush did not imply that qualities necessary for appropriate childrearing were inherent in women’s nature, but that circumstances caused the duties of childrearing to fall on women. Educating children became women’s responsibility only because men’s work rendered men unable to share in it. Also, Rush did not say that motherhood was the most important duty of women, but that education of children was the most important duty of mothers.¹⁷

The fourth aspect of female education outlined by Rush has formed the basis for the republican motherhood thesis. Every citizen, Rush argued, had an equal share in enjoying and preserving the liberty of the new nation, and some might share in governing it. The future of the republic depended on each individual’s virtue. Therefore, “ladies” needed a formal education that prepared them “to concur in instructing

¹⁶ Rush, “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools,” *ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁷ Rush, “Thoughts upon Female Education,” *ibid.*

their sons in the principles of liberty and government.”¹⁸

Finally, Rush offered an explanation that “should have great influence” on the establishment of female education: women’s responsibility for handling servants. In England, employment as a servant was a respectable occupation; but in America, people became servants only as a last resort. Therefore, American servants tended to be so ignorant that they needed “good looking after.” Managing such servants, a duty that fell on women’s shoulders, required education and training.¹⁹

Rush detailed exactly what women should be taught, thereby providing further insight into his reasons for female education. First on his list of subjects was a solid knowledge of English, and the ability to read, speak, and write English correctly. Next came handwriting. Here Rush discussed the importance in business of legibility and neatness. He opined that few things were “more rude or illiberal than to obtrude a letter upon a person of rank or business which cannot be easily read.” Third, knowledge of figures and bookkeeping was “absolutely necessary” so that a woman could assist her husband or serve as executrix of his estate should she outlive him. All three of these subjects—English, writing, and bookkeeping—were relevant to a woman helping her husband succeed; Rush did not suggest that these skills were necessary for mothers.²⁰

Rush also recommended that women study geography and history, and allowed that some might benefit from studying astronomy and natural philosophy. The purpose of these studies was to prevent superstition, to fit a woman for social intercourse, and to make her an “agreeable companion for a sensible man.” With these subjects, Rush’s Enlightenment beliefs in science drumming out superstition, as well as prevailing ideas of women’s relationship to men, are at the forefront. Motherhood was not particularly at issue.²¹

Rush suggested that female education include singing and dancing. He discouraged instrumental music because instruments were too expensive and because playing them well required too much time for practice, time that “could be better spent acquiring useful ideas.” But vocal music was accessible to all and had several salutary effects. Singing pre-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

pared a woman for public worship and helped her “soothe the cares of domestic life.” He did not necessarily mean that women should sing in order to soothe and nurture their husbands, a sentiment that might better fit in the early nineteenth century. Rather, a woman might nurture herself through singing, alleviating the “sorrows that will sometimes intrude into her own bosom.” A third reason for vocal music was health; Rush believed that robust singing could defend the lungs from disease. Nor did he view singing as a form of “ornamental” education befitting only women. In another essay he advocated singing for boys, asserting that singing civilizes the mind and prepares it for the influence of religion and government. Dancing, too, he viewed as promoting health, and not as a frivolous exercise.²²

Finally, Rush expected that women’s education would include regular instruction in Christian religion and principles. He thought Christianity was “the most effectual means of promoting knowledge.” It exerted a “friendly influence” on science, morals and manners, all of which were essential for a smooth-running republic. Rush was chauvinistically Christian, but liberally nondenominational; in his essay on public schools he urged instruction in the tenets of any Christian sect on which parents in the community could agree.²³

When he detailed the subjects that young women should study, Rush justified each subject in terms of its potential use. He related none of those uses to motherhood (except for one comment that singing would quiet a nursery). Although it is true that he included some discussion of republican motherhood in his rationale for female education, it did not in any way dominate his views. Instead, he expected that women would put their education to use in helping to manage their husbands’ businesses, running efficient homes, contributing thoughtful conversation to social groups, and improving their health and happiness.

Regardless of what educational leaders such as Rush said *about* education for young women, what did trustees of female academies say *to* them? Were there differences in the rhetoric? Were the philosophies espoused by national leaders repeated in the female academies of the day?

²² *Ibid.*, 34, 30. Rush, “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools,” *ibid.*, 16.

²³ Rush, “Thoughts upon Female Education,” *ibid.*, 32-33; Rush, “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools,” *ibid.*, 12.

Mary Beth Norton claims that the “founders of the academies sought to train republican wives and mothers, and this task they unquestionably accomplished.” Speeches made by trustees of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia indicate otherwise.²⁴

Although the Young Ladies’ Academy is not representative of all female academies across the new nation, an examination of it is revealing. If the ideology of republican motherhood were the primary rationale for female education in this era, it would be likely to surface at the Young Ladies’ Academy. Not only was this the first incorporated female academy, it also was co-founded by Benjamin Rush. Because the Academy was a new project, in “the capital, not only of the American Enlightenment, but also of American culture,” we would expect rhetoric surrounding the Academy to reflect the most current thought on female education. Finally, if female education were highly controversial—so much so that Samuel Smith, a prize-winning essayist, remarked in 1797 that no national plan for education could be agreed upon if it included girls—then we also would expect the new Academy to couch its image in the most acceptable terms. If republican motherhood were the concept around which people rallied, surely it should be commonplace in the records of the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia.²⁵

John Poor opened the Young Ladies’ Academy sometime between 1780 and 1787, and when incorporated under Pennsylvania law in 1792, it became the first incorporated institution for female education in the country. The school was an immediate success, enrolling one hundred students in 1787. The trustees were prominent Philadelphia doctors, lawyers, and ministers, many of whom had achieved national recognition. All were male, and most had earned one or more college degrees. Rush had served in the Continental Congress, and Jared Ingersoll had sat in the Constitutional Convention. Four of them also were trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, and four others taught there. The school was decidedly nondenominational, and ministers on the Board of Trustees represented a range of Protestant sects.²⁶

²⁴ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 287.

²⁵ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 198; Samuel Harrison Smith, “Remarks on Education: Illustrating the Close Connection Between Virtue and Wisdom. To Which Is Annexed a System of Liberal Education” [1797], in Rudolph, ed., *Essays*, 217.

²⁶ Woody, *History of Women’s Education*, 334-36; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*,

The young women studied reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, composition, rhetoric, and geography. The curriculum mirrored that of the Academy of Philadelphia for boys that Benjamin Franklin had helped establish in 1749. Not only was the curriculum similar, but both academies encouraged competition among students, a strategy referred to as emulation. Each half year the Young Ladies' Academy held public examinations and awarded prizes for best performance in each subject. At the close of this event, a trustee and one or more students gave speeches. Trustees delightedly described the competition in combative terms: "You have nobly contended for the prize with very formidable and determined opponents, who disputed the ground with you, inch by inch, with praiseworthy perseverance and undaunted fortitude." In both coursework and teaching style, instructors, all of whom were male, treated girls and boys in these gender-segregated academies very much the same.²⁷

The trustees' speeches do not focus on motherhood as the primary justification for girls' education. Instead, they refer to the pleasure that comes from learning, heightened relationships with God, the ever-present injunction to lead useful and virtuous lives, and the ability to perform business functions. Trustee Reverend Joseph Pilmore, for example, congratulated the students on their noble actions in pursuing education, which he delineated as "your delight in learning—your diligence in acquiring mental improvements, and your love of virtue." These things "must necessarily be highly pleasing unto all," he said, dismissing the notion that anyone objected to such education for girls. He drew lines clearly connecting Christianity, education, and Enlightenment thought. Pilmore declared that students at the academy were blessed to "live in an age of light and refinement," and that their education was "calculated for opening the understanding, enriching the mind, and the promotion of virtue." Understanding God and His plan

211; Ann D. Gordon, "The Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia," in *Women of America: A History*, ed. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, (Boston, 1979), 70-72.

²⁷ *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia: Containing an Account of a Number of Public Examinations & Commencements; The Charter and Bye-Laws; Likewise, A Number of Orations delivered By the Young Ladies, And several by the Trustees of said Institution* (Philadelphia, 1794), 5. In 1794 the academy published a collection of trustee and student speeches made from 1788 through 1792. A second volume of speeches given in 1793-94 was published in 1795. *Ibid.*, 34, 17, 19.

for the world was a principal reward of schooling: "Education and religion disperse the clouds that hide the glory from us . . . and urge us forward in pursuit of knowledge and supreme felicity." Another trustee, Dr. Benjamin Say, encouraged the study of geography, which induced students with "grateful, enlightened mind[s] . . . to admire the wonderful works of an Almighty hand."²⁸

Trustees repeated the theme of usefulness. John Andrews, who taught at the University of Philadelphia, congratulated the young ladies on their accomplishments but cautioned against attaching too much importance to any praise they received. The ultimate test of their education, he said, was "that you might be the better qualified to obtain the favour of God, by a life that is useful to mankind." James Sproat, who also served as trustee for the University, echoed this theme. He hoped that education laid "a foundation for a life of usefulness and happiness here, and . . . for a blessed immortality hereafter." Neither man gave examples of ways that young women could be useful, so it is difficult to know exactly what they had in mind. Yet neither made any reference to marriage or motherhood.²⁹

Benjamin Say offered a more precise understanding of the practical nature of education. In 1789 he reminded students of the great opportunity they had of pursuing formal education at all, and contrasted them with other young women who, "in a state of ignorance," could not "even read their own native language with propriety. Observe them, how unenlightened their minds—clouded with errors and superstitious notions." Students at the academy, on the other hand, had great advantages over those who remained uneducated and unenlightened. Spelling, grammar, and composition enabled students to trace out errors in language, and helped young women "to read with judgment." Arithmetic had such practical benefits as enabling women to buy or sell advantageously, cast up accounts, and transact business. Say urged students not to let their "talents . . . be obscured or buried in oblivion." Rather, they "ought to exert" themselves toward the good of all, and especially in adoration of God.³⁰

None of the trustees mentioned the students' future roles as mothers, and none discussed the importance of women educating their sons

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10, 11, 8, 9, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31, 32, 34, 36.

for citizenship. Instead, trustees focused on the students' relationship to God first, and repeated that science enhanced their knowledge of God. The school founders evidently revered science. The seal of the academy, for instance, depicted a stack of books partially encircled by a line on which was written "the Path of Science." This path led to a picture of the "Eye of Science emitting its rays over the whole." Science, said the trustees, eradicated superstition and enriched minds.³¹

In addition to fostering an improved relationship with God, trustees voiced other advantages of education. On a practical, everyday level, they were confident that students at the Academy would be prepared for business dealings. Through study and discipline, students acquired and refined the characteristics of perseverance, fortitude, and exertion toward a noble end. These elements combined to render graduates virtuous, capable, and happy.

What did the students themselves say about their education? Were their convictions regarding the purpose of education similar to the male educators' beliefs? Do the young women's voices support either the narrow construction of republican motherhood or the broader construction of republican womanhood, or did they have different views altogether about the goals of their education?

What selected students said in a formal setting on a public occasion cannot give us the whole picture, of course. The principal or trustees probably chose student speakers carefully, and may have coached them to say what the trustees and parents who gathered for these public events would find appropriate. We might expect that, whatever their private views, these students publicly would espouse socially sanctioned ideas about female education. If republican motherhood were the predominant rationale at this school, surely these students would mention it in their orations. The fact that they did not is critically important.

Student speakers expressed great appreciation of their opportunity to study and learn. They knew that their experience was not common, and urged the continuation and expansion of female education. They saw personal as well as community benefits accruing from their scientific enlightenment. Ann Loxley delivered a valedictory address in June 1790 in which she discussed the progress of female education. In the past, women's education had been neglected, but now, Loxley exulted,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

no one of any age, sex, or denomination was deprived of knowledge of arts and sciences. "The veil of female ignorance" had been laid aside, and she urged teachers at the school to continue "to disseminate the seeds of science in this city, to our sex." Students placed an extraordinary value on knowledge, calling it "the richest of earthly gifts," a jewel that no one could take away: "it shines in ruins; it shines thro' poverty and distress."³²

Students were aware that the academy was an experiment in female capabilities, and that their education was superior, not only to that available to most women but also to that of many men. They worried that the experiment might not succeed, and believed that if it failed, "ignominy and reproach will inevitably be our portion." Therefore they thought it their duty "nobly to exert ourselves," to prove that the female mind could meet any intellectual challenge.³³

Students celebrated both the usefulness and the enjoyment they derived from education. Learning was practical, wrote an anonymous student in 1789, "the source of so much real good, as well as pleasure." Education pulled religion "from the gloomy reign of Paganism and superstition" to full splendor. The essayist listed occupations dependent on education. Each occupation—statesman, physician, philosopher—primarily was associated with men, not women, although the essayist did not say so. Perhaps she saw educated women eventually moving into these roles. She offered no reasons for education specific to women, nor did she mention marriage or motherhood.³⁴

Eliza Shrupp also saluted the role of education in rooting out ignorance and prejudice. Shrupp saw educational enlightenment as a "prize," the attainment of which was a "conquest," and asked "shall not our sex be ambitious of gaining the summit?" She urged younger students to "[l]et no obstacle retard you in your glorious progress;" with a "spirit of enterprize [sic] and emulation," and with "noble exertion" they should "contend for the prize of knowledge." Shrupp did not say to what use students should put this knowledge. Perhaps she saw knowledge as its own reward.³⁵

³² *Ibid.*, 39, 40, 100.

³³ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-52.

Similarly, Molly Wallace, in June 1792, thanked her tutor for helping her find “the path of science” and thereby reach “the ample and spacious field of knowledge: which has been, and I am sensible will always be the reward of the studious.” Learning was so valued that, when one student unexpectedly died, another student depicted heaven as a greater academy. Molly Barker called the deceased young woman a “[h]appy shade, . . . initiated as a scholar in the school of the Almighty.”³⁶

The school did not produce docile women willing to assume subordinate roles in life. Students expressed disinterest in and sometimes revulsion toward marriage, and they used revolutionary language to protest their own oppression. Molly Barker did not see marriage as the obvious choice for herself and her fellow students. She admonished her friends to be diligent in “[w]hatever you pursue, be emulous to excel.” Ann Negus seemed resigned to the fate of marriage, but had nothing good to say about it. She sadly reported that few women were able to be independent; most would have to “resign our liberty” to husbands who “confer in return, hatred and contempt.” She closed her speech by insisting that she had “given no exaggerated picture of what many suffer, . . . what daily occurs on the stage of life.” To her, marriage often resulted in unhappiness. She did not view it or motherhood as an avenue to an exalted role in the republic.³⁷

Ann Harker objected to “the shackles, with which we have been so long fettered,” and explicitly compared white women’s subjugation to that of slaves. She set up a theoretical competition to prove gender equality, not only in academic pursuits, but in “the martial field of glory,” as well; she was confident that Joan of Arc would “defend our honor with amazonian courage.” In this competition she allied herself with women internationally, in contest against American men: “In opposition to *your* immortal Paine, we will exalt *our* Wolstencraft [*sic*], and the female Iberian Cicero” [emphasis mine]. The Revolution was not complete, she implied; nor did she envision the domestic sphere as the primary venue for women’s influence.³⁸

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76, 109.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111; J. A. Neal, *An Essay on the Education and Genius of the Female Sex. To Which is Added, An Account, of the Commencement of the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia, Held the 18th Day of December, 1794* (Philadelphia, 1795), 35-36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Priscilla Mason delivered by far the most remarkable student oration. She defended the right of women to speak publicly, scathingly attacked male bigotry against women, and even called the Apostle Paul contemptible for his misogyny. Mason first argued that public speaking was “part of the rights of woman” and must be allowed but then added that this right should be exercised sparingly: it “should rest like the sword in the scabbard, to be used only when occasion requires.” The analogy showed a belief in the power of women’s speech, and Mason also demanded that women, not men, should decide when women should use this powerful tool. Furthermore, occasion apparently required this sword more than was commonly believed, because Mason next advocated women speaking more often on public occasions.

Mason criticized “[o]ur high and mighty Lords” who, thanks to “their arbitrary constitutions have denied us the means of knowledge, and then reproached us for the want of it.” After Mason cataloged a group of women who, “under the cultivating hand of science,” proved women’s intellectual capabilities, she chided men for closing the doors to all the places women might put their knowledge to use. “The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us. Who shut them? *Man*; despotic man.” The church closed its doors to women because Paul, that “[c]ontemptible little body . . . declare[d] war against the whole sex.” After Mason challenged the church, she moved on to challenge the law, arguing “that there is nothing in our laws or constitution, to prohibit the licensure of female Attornies.”³⁹

Mason clearly saw a broad realm of action for educated women. Politics and the ministry should be opened to “equal participation” of both genders. That Mason felt free to make these remarks is telling. We do not know how the audience reacted, but the trustees of the school did nothing to prevent Mason’s speech from being printed in the book they used to celebrate and promote the academy. Apparently the trustees were not worried that Mason’s attitudes would harm the school or frighten away future students. They, too, must have envisioned an expansion of roles for educated women.

Students at the Young Ladies’ Academy found pleasure in intellectual pursuits and enjoyed renewed relationships with God through their increased understanding of the natural world. They did not rhapsodize

³⁹ *Rise and Progress*, 92, 93, 94.

about education preparing them for a desired future as republican mothers and wives. The only student who discussed marriage did so in a negative way, citing it as an institution that wrested away independence. Rather than learning how to be pliant wives, students at the academy boldly articulated critiques of the social conditions of women in a male-dominated culture.

Historians have greatly overstated the extent to which the concept of republican motherhood justified female education in the new nation. Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton largely derived their ideas of republican motherhood from Benjamin Rush. Yet educating sons for responsible citizenship was only one reason Rush gave for female education, and it was the one that he spent the least time discussing. Noah Webster, too, argued that childrearing responsibilities required education for women. But essayists more often mentioned women's responsibility to inspire good behavior and virtue on the parts of men and to improve society. Education for males, too, had as its goals the improvement of society, the inculcation of polite manners, and an infusion of patriotism. Beyond that, said the educational leaders, education for both males and females should be practical. These leaders did name republican motherhood as *one* rationale for female education, but it was not the only reason they gave, and it was not the reason they most emphasized.

Nor did speeches made by trustees and students at one of the pre-eminent female academies of the period include republican motherhood. At the Young Ladies' Academy, the only mention of motherhood made by a trustee was that boarding schools were problematic because they separated children from the care of their mothers. This lack of reference is especially striking at the Young Ladies' Academy because Benjamin Rush helped found the school and was a trustee. If an emphasis on republican motherhood were going to occur at any female academy, surely it would be here.

Several alternative explanations for female education emerge from the essays and speeches. One factor was Enlightenment beliefs that women were as capable of rational thought as were men. Trustees and students repeatedly referred to the pleasure that comes from knowledge. Women enjoyed education for its own sake, and apparently were encouraged in this by parents and teachers. Educators articulated the Enlightenment belief that science abrogated prejudice and superstition. A second factor was the real need of women to be able to fill certain busi-

ness functions. Women needed these practical skills in their daily lives, in running households and aiding their male relatives' business interests. They recognized the vulnerability that could ensue without these abilities, and wanted to be prepared for self-sufficiency should their husbands or fathers die. Finally, a rational approach to religion encouraged female education. Education was a way to admire and praise God; a scientific knowledge of the natural order led to a greater appreciation of God's creations.

If republican motherhood is not an adequate explanation for increased education for women in the new republic, perhaps its ubiquity and usefulness need to be questioned in other arenas, as well. One danger of the construct of "republican motherhood" is that it reinforces a tendency to see the Revolution as a watershed event in women's lives. If the Revolution did not mark a critical juncture in educational opportunities for either women or men, if a heightened interest in formal education began in the middle of the eighteenth century, then historians need to reexamine other aspects of women's lives and discover **to what extent** the Revolution really did produce change. It is possible that reliance on "republican motherhood" has **obscured other elements of women's history prior to 1776, rendering it difficult to evaluate what the Revolution really meant for women.**

The paradigm of republican motherhood rests on the assumption that women were constrained to a "domestic sphere," which they then attempted to politicize. Were women's lives, in fact, so thoroughly circumscribed? Historians have challenged the public/private, male/female dichotomy that was presumed to exist in the antebellum period, arguing that the discourse of separate spheres never was an accurate depiction of reality. Similar questions need to be asked of the late eighteenth century. Assumptions that women's arena for action was limited to the home have prevented historians from drawing an accurate picture of women's involvement in public realms. Recent scholarship suggests that boundaries between male and female spheres, public and private realms, was far from absolute in the late eighteenth century. Barbara Clark Smith has shown that women had participated in street protests and mob actions at least since the late seventeenth century and continued to do so throughout the Revolutionary War. Lisa Wilson Waciega demonstrates the business acumen of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as the apparent confidence many men had in women's economic competence. Gloria L. Main provides

evidence that there was a growth in numbers of women in the paid labor force in the middle of the eighteenth century, and that the increase in young women working outside the home at the end of the colonial era was encouraged by the rising wages paid them. Jeanne Boydston argues that women's work was not constrained to the private realm as the market economy grew, but that women were an integral part of commercial exchanges at the end of the century. Jean Lee points out the choice of singleness made by some colonial women who managed estates, ran ferries and mills, lent money, and invested in land.⁴⁰

The paradigm of republican motherhood focuses our attention on women as mothers. This focus, which fosters an expectation of limited

⁴⁰ For examples of critiques of antebellum domesticity, see Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th-Century United States* (New Haven, 1990); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Balloons, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990); Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women & Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill, 1990); and Barbara L. Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, 1981). For studies of women in the colonial era and late eighteenth century, see Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (Jan. 1994), 3-38; Lisa Wilson Waciega, "A 'Man of Business': The Widow of Means in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1750-1850," *ibid.*, 44 (Jan. 1987), 40-64; Gloria L. Main, "Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England," *ibid.*, 51 (Jan. 1994), 39-66; Jean B. Lee, *The Price of Nationhood: The American Revolution in Charles County* (New York, 1994), 58-63; and Jeanne Boydston, "The Woman Who Wasn't There: Women's Market Labor and the Transition to Capitalism in the United States," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (Summer 1996), 183-206. See also Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, 1982); Margaret Morris Haviland, "Beyond Women's Sphere: Young Quaker Women and the Veil of Charity in Philadelphia, 1790-1810," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (July 1994), 419-46; Joan M. Jensen, "Cloth, Butter and Boards: Women's Household Production for the Market," *The Review of Radical Political Economy*, 12 (Summer 1980), 14-24; Joan M. Jensen, "Butter Making and Economic Development in Mid-Atlantic America from 1750-1850," *Signs*, 13 (Summer 1988), 13-29; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990); Linda Kerber, "'I have Don . . . much to Carrey on the Warr': Women and the Shaping of Republican Ideology after the American Revolution," in *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, ed. Harriet B. Applewhite and Darline G. Levy, (Ann Arbor, 1990), 227-58; Rosemarie Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL, 1995); Susan Branson, "The Invisible Woman: The Family Economy in the Early Republic—The Case of Elizabeth Meredith," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (Spring 1996), 47-71; and Carole Shammas, "Early American Women and Control over Capital," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1989), 134-54.

roles for women, keeps us from seeing the full range of women's actions, attitudes, and opportunities. Education again provides an illuminating example. The assumption that formal education for women primarily revolved around their future roles as mothers obscures other purposes for women's education. Those other purposes, in turn, indicate women's activities beyond mothering. The Young Ladies' Academy taught women the literacy and numeracy skills they needed to manage estates and businesses or run schools. We know that there were self-sufficient teachers and businesswomen, as well as daughters, wives, and sisters who played significant roles in the business and political ventures of the men in their lives. Most women in the early republic were mothers, but neither they nor the general civic discourse defined women only or primarily in terms of their motherhood.

Historians need to incorporate a broader scope of activities into their analyses of women's lives. The goal is not to replace "republican motherhood" with a new paradigm, but to remove the blinders that have limited our vision of women in the early republic. Those blinders have forced us to overemphasize one aspect of women's lives at the expense of other aspects. Constructs such as "republican motherhood" give us a comfortably ordered perspective, but they also erase richness and complexity. New analytical frameworks need to restore depth to our understandings of women's lives in the early republic.