

“Authors of Their Being”:  
The Enactment of Elite Southern Motherhood, 1750-1820

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## **Abstract**

KATY SIMPSON SMITH: “Authors of Their Being”: The Enactment of Elite Southern  
Motherhood, 1750-1820  
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This thesis explores the lives of elite white women in Virginia and the Carolinas through their letters and diaries in order to gauge the impact of the Revolution on their methods and conceptions of motherhood. Rather than finding the Revolution to be a rupture and the ideology of “republican motherhood” to mark a sea change in women’s lives, I discover a wealth of commonalities between the attitudes and approaches of mothers on both sides of the Revolutionary moment. I argue that the key changes for mothers which emerged between 1750 and 1820 were related not to the Revolution, but to expanding access to educational tools, changing educational philosophy, and increasing secularization, changes which were inextricably entwined with the Enlightenment. By uncovering women’s words about childhood education, children’s literature, and gendered goals for young sons and daughters, I prove that the gradual spread of the Enlightenment had a greater impact on Southern motherhood than any one political moment.

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## **Introduction**

The American Revolution is a magnetic event. Historians of eighteenth-century America continue to be drawn to its political and social optimism, its lofty ideals and concurrent failures. Placing the Revolution at the center of histories of men and women, blacks and whites, government and domesticity, scholars often privilege the war as a primary impetus for eighteenth-century change. Some women's historians have followed this periodization and located the Revolution as a key turning point in the experiences of American women. One such argument identifies "republican motherhood" as an organizing principle for women's roles in the early republic. Authors such as Linda Kerber have argued that the heightened political rhetoric of the Revolution provided an opening for women's participation in civic life as the new nation assigned its mothers the responsibility of instilling republican virtue in their sons. These studies have illuminated the discourses surrounding gender roles in an era of national formation. But by dominating our understanding of women in the late eighteenth century, "republican motherhood" has emphasized a fundamentally prescriptive process, one which obscures women's daily experiences. This framework locates women's history in the dictates and recommendations of men without delving into the ways these messages were received, manipulated, or rejected by women. As a paradigm for women's history, then, "republican motherhood" is incomplete. Were post-Revolutionary mothers actually the republican mothers that male authors and politicians envisioned? The answer lies in a re-

examination of the evidence, which reminds us that even as the Revolution shaped the course of American history, it probably did not change the daily lives of most eighteenth-century Americans. From the letters and diaries of mothers themselves, we begin to arrive at a different landscape for “Revolutionary” women. Far from embracing new roles as moral guardians of the Republic, eighteenth-century mothers had long been involved in larger patterns of Enlightenment change.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of “republican motherhood” has come to stand in for women’s experience in the late eighteenth century, though its original purpose was to highlight an emerging political discourse. Linda Kerber found evidence for the ideology of republican motherhood in the newspapers and magazines of the 1780s and 1790s, as predominantly male authors proposed a new role for mothers, invoking their duty to help construct an ideal republican society. By safeguarding the morals of their young sons and instilling a responsible patriotism into their families, mothers could have a pseudo-political role that conveniently bound them even more firmly in the home. Male writers intended this rhetoric to reshape gendered expectations for sons and daughters; boys were privileged as proto-citizens, while girls reaped the benefits of expanded education to prepare

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<sup>1</sup>For studies of “republican motherhood,” see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Ruth H. Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815,” *Feminist Studies* 4 (1978): 101-126; and Rosemarie Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 192-215. Recently, some authors have begun to question this model of analysis, attacking the legitimacy of studying prescription alone while offering few concrete historical alternatives. See especially Margaret A. Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (1997): 171-191, and Doris Malkmus, “Female Academies in the Early Republic” (M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1993). Scholarship that has focused on women’s words, however, has often had a highly limited idea of motherhood, as in the medical focus of Sally G. McMillen’s *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

themselves for their futures as mothers. Meanwhile, mothers themselves were expected to use new educational techniques to shape a rational and secular citizenry. The Revolution and the resulting social upheaval certainly provided the impetus for this outpouring of prescriptive literature, as several historians have noted. But the male-generated framework of “republican motherhood” cannot be substituted for the daily experiences of women.<sup>2</sup>

To reveal how women themselves understood their roles as mothers in this historical moment, we must move beyond prescriptive literature and turn to evidence of women’s daily lives.<sup>3</sup> If the ideology of republican motherhood had a significant impact on the ways in which mothers performed their maternal duties, we should find changes in women’s private writings about motherhood in the post-Revolutionary years.

Alternatively, if mothers perpetuated parenting techniques and gendered expectations passed on from previous generations, we should expect a narrative of continuity in which mothers of the mid-eighteenth century could speak to mothers of the early nineteenth century across the rupture of the Revolution. The return to experience is thus necessary for the reconceptualization of early American history called for by women’s historians,

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<sup>2</sup>Kerber argues that “to determine to what extent this role was assigned to women or to what extent they claimed it themselves requires a calculus too precise for the historian” (200). I believe the time has come for women’s historians to start brushing up on their calculus.

<sup>3</sup>The disjunct between prescriptive advice and daily practices is not unique to eighteenth-century mothers. Jay Mechling has discovered that American “trends in child-care advice” in the 1920s “apparently had no direct effect upon those mothers who were most likely hearing and reading the advice.” See Mechling’s “Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers,” *Journal of Social History* 9 (1975): 44.

especially when that experience has the potential to challenge traditional political periodization.<sup>4</sup>

My intention here is to demonstrate how a closer look at women's writings suggests the need for rethinking traditional tropes of women's history and the need for further research. I have focused this inquiry on a handful of elite white mothers in Virginia and the Carolinas from the 1750s to the 1820s. Most of these women were intimately connected to colonial and national politics through their fathers, husbands, and sons, which makes them ideal test cases for gauging the impact of Revolutionary rhetoric on their childrearing techniques. If women like Martha Washington remained unswayed by these nationalistic calls to duty, the effect of this rhetoric on other groups of women becomes suspect.

I begin my investigation in the mid-1700s in recognition of broad structural changes in family relationships that occurred in response to the Enlightenment and to stabilizing colonial populations. Daniel Blake Smith has observed the decline of the restrained, patriarchal family of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and the related rise of the affectionate, privatized family among Chesapeake planters in the 1750s.<sup>5</sup> In this new family model, we begin to witness the extended maternal control over childrearing that characterized most elite mothers' experiences and would masquerade as an innovation in Revolutionary rhetoric.

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<sup>4</sup>My apologies to Joan Scott, who would call for a more rigorous deconstruction of "experience"; for this discussion, I believe the term to be useful and appropriate in distinguishing discourse from daily lives, though of course experience is never independent from constructed systems of knowledge. See Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40.

<sup>5</sup>Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 21-24.

Indeed, a mother in 1750 acted remarkably like a mother in 1820. Members of each generation were incessantly concerned with their children's physical health, complained about the burdens and sorrows of motherhood, and took inexpressible pleasure in the blossoming of their children's intellects and souls. The key changes that emerged in that span of seventy years were related not to the Revolution, but to expanding access to educational tools, changing educational philosophies, and increased secularization. The mother of 1820 was able to send her daughters as well as her sons to Northern boarding schools; she was able to read to her children from a growing number of books published specifically for youth in both Britain and America; she devoted her offspring to state and country in addition to God. These developments cannot be attributed to the Revolution alone; they were inextricably entwined with the spread of the Enlightenment (as was the Revolution itself), the effects of which were felt well before 1776. The secularization of education (and society more broadly) and the explosive growth of print culture in Europe and America had a greater impact on motherhood than any one political conflict.

To illustrate both the broader continuities and the Enlightenment developments that challenge our understanding of republican motherhood, I first examine children's formal education and literature, aspects of children's lives whose regulations and fluctuations extended beyond individual maternal preference to wider transatlantic trends. I also look at the gendered goals and expectations with which mothers raised their children, arguing that the raising of virtuous male citizens was a ongoing maternal concern and not a Revolutionary novelty. Moreover, boys and girls were not so strictly compartmentalized in mothers' minds as we have imagined, given the gender-limited



roles available for young men and women alike in the Republic. By delving into these women's and children's everyday experiences, scholars can uncover a remarkable world, a world in which women controlled the destinies of America's youth, gender retained some small degree of fluidity, and motherhood was as momentous a responsibility as God could bestow.

### **“I Have an Excellent Soil to Work Upon”: Formal Schooling in the South**

The “republican motherhood” model suggests that mothers were not awarded the formal power to raise educated, responsible children until the colonies became a nation. This chronology, however, ignores the practical power that women consistently held as mothers within Southern familial governments. Far from being a Revolutionary afterthought, the responsibility for shaping young moral compasses rested with mothers throughout most of the eighteenth century. For these women, the primary preventative for dissipation and loose morals was a sound education. This education occurred informally as mothers read moral tales to their children and voiced expectations for the future, but elite women’s roles in education also encompassed formal lessons. As the eighteenth century progressed, and Europe and the Americas experienced the increased secularization that accompanied Enlightenment philosophies, elite white mothers gradually relinquished a religious model for education and began to trust that the study of geometry, history, Latin, and dancing would ensure a place for their daughters and sons in the drawing rooms and academies of the young Republic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The secularization occurring during the Enlightenment is often vaguely defined and can have multiple meanings. The brand of secularization that most affected these Southern women was the increasing marginalization of religion as a foundation for public life. However, as Jonathan Sheehan has noted, this shift in the role of “external” religion was not necessarily accompanied by a devaluing of “internal” religion, or the personal faith to which eighteenth-century individuals subscribed. As we will see, this “internal” religion remained a vital component of most Southern mothers’ lives. See Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003): 1075.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, religious education was paramount in the Chesapeake colonies because most Christian parents believed their children to be born with the taint of sin. Only through a guarded and devout upbringing could children redeem themselves in the eyes of God. While this belief was far less potent in the Anglican colonies of the Chesapeake than among their Puritan neighbors to the north, a dismal mortality rate combined with preexisting religious ideologies to make the salvation of children a familial priority.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century, a steady colonial population, a burgeoning economy, and a new emphasis on the inherent innocence of children significantly altered the practices of childrearing, as religious learning was subsumed under the larger project of secular education. The secularism of the Enlightenment was ferried across the Atlantic on these rafts of demographic, economic, and religious change, but an influx of books and treatises must be credited for the introduction of secularism to the family. By the late eighteenth century, John Locke's writings on education were outselling his treatises on government, and children's books began emphasizing rational duty over religious responsibility. While some mothers wholeheartedly adopted the Enlightenment strategies they encountered in advice manuals and novels, many chose to incorporate both religious and secular education in their childrearing regimes.<sup>8</sup>

In 1741 on Wappoo Plantation, six miles by water from the bustle of commercial Charlestown, Eliza Lucas was teaching her younger sister French and "a parcel of little

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<sup>7</sup>For an examination of both the strength of religion in the Chesapeake colonies and the influence of Puritanism in the early formation of Virginia, see Kevin Butterfield, "Puritans and Religious Strife in the Early Chesapeake," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 109, no. 1 (2001): 5-36.

<sup>8</sup>Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 20-21, 45-49; Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 40-41.

Negroes” how to read.<sup>9</sup> Only nineteen years old, Eliza had already begun developing the variety of indigo that would resuscitate a sluggish South Carolina economy and ensure her legacy in histories of the South from 1809 to the present. With her father stationed in Antigua and her mother incapacitated by coastal illnesses, Eliza took control of the Lucas plantation, preparing herself for later years in which she would manage her husband’s estate. These girlhood years of familial responsibility were also a rehearsal for the creation of her own family.<sup>10</sup>

As a young mother in the 1740s and 1750s, Eliza Lucas Pinckney was on the cusp of changing ideas about the role of religion in children’s education. As colonial populations increased and improving infant survival rates challenged the specter of disease, elite families turned to Britain for examples of respectable childrearing. In response to their cousins’ stipulations for an appropriately educated gentry, American parents rapidly adopted British programs of classical and rational education in an effort to prove their cosmopolitanism.<sup>11</sup> Reluctant to abandon their religious instincts in the raising of their precious charges, however, Southern mothers made the transition from religious to secular education by way of a heightened discourse of morality. This secularized emphasis on morality and virtue comforted mothers who feared for their children’s souls,

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<sup>9</sup>Eliza Lucas Pinckney, *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762*, ed. Elise Pinckney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>10</sup>The first history to include Eliza’s agricultural innovation was David Ramsay’s *The History of South Carolina* (Charleston: David Longworth, 1809). David was coincidentally the husband of Martha Laurens Ramsay, whom you will meet shortly.

<sup>11</sup>For more on the relationship between Southern planter families and British educational systems, see Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 88-97; and Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home: Family Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: Dominion Books, 1952), 9-10. This relationship would continue into the early nineteenth century, as new academies were also structured on an English model of education; see Catherine Clinton, “Equally Their Due: The Education of the Planter Daughter in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 1 (1982): 42, 49.

but it also allowed children to thrive in a society where the scope of moral duty was widening to encompass colony and country in addition to God.<sup>12</sup>

The letters of Eliza Lucas Pinckney to her children illustrate the tension between an increasingly secular culture and the conviction that God alone could save one's children from certain ruin. Struggling against the "fashionable but shameful vice" among many American youths who joined in the "ridiculeing of religion," Eliza reminded her distant sons that she would disdain a "learned man with every accomplishment" in favor of a "good man without any," thus ranking spiritual virtue above cold rationalism.<sup>13</sup> Reason united with virtue, however, was a combination of which any mother could be proud. In praising the intellectual capacity of her daughter Harriott, Eliza wrote, "I thank God, I have an excellent soil to work upon, and by the Divine Grace hope the fruit will be answerable to my indeavours in the cultivation."<sup>14</sup> Though she continued to use the religious rhetoric of the untutored child as an uncultivated garden, Eliza also allowed for the importance of French and music as fertilizers in that delicate soil.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>For an excellent discussion of how morality became the acceptable middle ground between eighteenth-century evangelicals and the secular rationalists of the Enlightenment, see Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 123-148.

<sup>13</sup>Pinckney, 52 and 159. In the 1850s, a century after Pinckney's injunction, Caroline Clitherall recorded a nearly identical sentiment for her children ("[B]etter grow up in ignorance of accomplishments than receive an education of art & hypocrisy"), proving that this distrust of secular education retained its strength well into the nineteenth century. Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries #158, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, UNC Chapel Hill, Volume 2, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup>Pinckney, 181.

<sup>15</sup>See Julia Briggs for a discussion of John Locke's influence in popularizing the religious child-as-garden metaphor. Julia Briggs, "'Delightful Task!': Women, Children, and Reading in the Mid-Eighteenth Century," in *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers*, ed. Donelle Ruwe (Lanham, MD: The Children's Literature Association, 2005).

The value of formal education continued to rise in the 1770s as colonial elites came to expect rational intelligence and secular accomplishments from their sons and daughters. While seventeenth-century education focused on basic literacy and religious knowledge, the offerings of private tutors and schools in the eighteenth century included instruction in foreign languages, arithmetic, geography, history, music and dancing. The wealthy Virginia planter Robert Carter III teased his sons that he would bequeath the bulk of his estate to the child who “bids fairest to be useful to mankind,” eschewing the conventional birth-order inheritance with the solemn maxim, “with the Learning inherit also the Substance.”<sup>16</sup> An undercurrent of religious duty persisted, however, and Philip Vickers Fithian, the Carter children’s tutor, quickly found himself accountable for his charges’ “moral Conduct” along with their educational progress.<sup>17</sup> Tutors and governesses for elite families embodied the middle-ground discourse of morality, as they were expected to supervise their students’ spiritual health while also overseeing the more progressive requirements of a secular schooling.

In 1796, Martha Washington’s husband made an eloquent attempt to cement religious principle in the pantheon of republican education and rationalism, illustrating both the continued power of spirituality in the national consciousness and the solid success of secularization that provoked his plea. “Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education, on minds of peculiar structure,” he announced in his farewell address as President, “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that

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<sup>16</sup>Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 182. No similar encouragement was offered to his daughters, though one can imagine that limited access to learning made the brief process of education urgent enough for avid female students.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 166.

national morality can prevail, in exclusion of religious principle.”<sup>18</sup> Though morality kept its roots in spirituality, especially in the South, “refined education” was losing its religious veneer.

Religion and rationalism continued to co-exist in planter society into the nineteenth century, but even religious instruction was often couched in the discourse of a more secularized morality.<sup>19</sup> Martha Laurens Ramsay raised eleven children from 1787 to 1811 in Charleston, South Carolina, and perpetually struggled with the tension between her faith in extensive education and her fervent devotion to Christianity. After sending her son to Yale, Martha peppered her letters to the young man with religious injunctions. Between inquiries about his studies, the concerned mother reminded her son that she was “continually addressing the throne of heaven for the welfare of her dear child.”<sup>20</sup> The Enlightenment notion of public virtue offered Martha a tangible solution; she inculcated a sense of rational righteousness in her offspring as a compromise between a cosmopolitan society’s fixation on secularism and many women’s continuing commitment to spirituality. As this moral tug-of-war was occurring in America, English education was

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<sup>18</sup>George Washington, *Address of George Washington, to the People of the United States, Announcing his Resolution to Retire from Public Life* (Providence: Carter and Wilkinson, 1796), 14.

<sup>19</sup>In her recent synthesis, Joan R. Gundersen distinguishes between “republican” and “evangelical” motherhood, but I contend that styles of motherhood were never so neatly compartmentalized. Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 206-209.

<sup>20</sup>Martha Laurens Ramsay, *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay*, ed. David Ramsay, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: S.T. Armstrong, 1812), 257. The eighteenth-century history of Yale presents an encapsulation of this gradual trend from religious to more secular education; in the 1740s, head of the college Thomas Clap ushered in a host of reforms that transformed his role from “rector” to “president” and changed the curriculum to include mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Mirroring Martha’s own strong ties to religion, President Clap also instituted compulsory attendance at church services for his young charges, and students continued to study scripture, metaphysics, and ethics. Sheldon S. Cohen, “Benjamin Trumbull, The Years at Yale, 1755-1759,” *History of Education Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1966): 33-48.

grappling with similar issues. Caroline Clitherall of North Carolina was educated in England during the 1790s, and while she pored over her “books & dissected maps,” she also “cou’d repeat fluently our Savior’s Sermon on the Mount” at the tender age of eight.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of morality as the sum of spiritual duty and secular responsibility in the eighteenth century was indeed “modern,” as one biographer termed Martha’s educational balancing act; it was a direct product of Enlightenment ideals, and its effect was felt by mothers on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>22</sup> Mothers wrestled with these issues from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth century, and their application of both religious and secular ideals to the everyday educational experiences of their children proves their significant influence over the practices of childrearing.

The day-to-day elements of children’s education demonstrated the continuing power of maternal prerogative as well as the influence of broader educational trends. White children in elite families encountered similar lesson plans throughout the century, though the formality of their education varied by era. Girls and boys studied different subjects in the classroom, but neither sex had a monopoly on their disciplines; young ladies often studied geometry while their brothers were instructed in dancing.<sup>23</sup> When under the informal tutelage of parents or governesses, children in the classroom had the most gender-blind experience of their education. Only when mothers and fathers expressed their hopes and dreams for their progeny did educational expectations divide sharply between girls and boys. In the course of a single day, however, home-schooled

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<sup>21</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 2, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup>Joanna Bowen Gillespie, *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsay, 1759-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 121.

<sup>23</sup>Morgan, *Virginians at Home*, 18; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 44-5.



sons and daughters were similarly enlightened and frustrated and often made conscious of their class and race more than of their gender.

In the 1760s, Eliza Lucas Pinckney had very distinct ideas about how girls and boys should be instructed. Despite being one of the most financially independent and well-educated women in South Carolina, Eliza was careful to replicate her colony's tradition of distinguishing between the potential of sons and daughters. Eliza retained only her daughter Harriott under her purview while she dutifully sent her two sons to British boarding schools, a decision which was socially appropriate but which provoked constant anxieties in the young mother regarding her sons' health and happiness. In a letter to a friend, Eliza detailed "what I have suffered and do still suffer" in parting with her sons "for 2 or 3 year—and considering the uncertainty of life, perhaps for ever!"<sup>24</sup> Despite this distinction in educational venues, Harriott received training in both geography and music and was openly "fond of learning."<sup>25</sup> With the sons and daughters both being trained beyond mere literacy, the primary differences among the Pinckney children arose not from subject matter, but from the formality and length of their education. While her sons were misbehaving in British public schools, Eliza kept Harriott close by her side.

Later in the century, the picture remained much the same. Both girls and boys were instructed in reading, writing, and "Cyphering," while the teaching of Latin and Greek was usually reserved for the brightest sons. In the large Carter family of Virginia, Philip Fithian was only enjoined to teach one son "Languages"; that son was "seventeen

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<sup>24</sup>Pinckney, 87.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 182 and 142.

years old, and seems to be a Boy of Genius.”<sup>26</sup> The knowledge of Latin was evidence of marital worthiness as well as native intelligence; in a poignant conflation of gender expectations, young Robert Bladen Carter saw Latin as the key to his marriage prospects. Philip Fithian recalled with amusement, “Bob this morning begg’d me to learn him lattin; his Reason he tells me is that yesterday Mrs *Taylor* told him he must not have either of her Daughters unless he learn’d Latin he urged me so strong that I put him some Lessons for leisure hours.”<sup>27</sup> Education did not exclusively prepare girls for marriage and boys for careers; perhaps to their parents’ dismay, many young people found their own uses for learning.<sup>28</sup>

White sons and daughters often had similar experiences in the classroom because their gender was less determinative than their race and class. Mothers throughout the eighteenth century retained control over who could share in their children’s education, and the degree to which African American and Native American children could benefit from formal schooling was often dependent on elite women’s decisions. The interactions of multiple classes and races in the South, whether on an ideological or daily basis, shaped family formation and childhood identity. Especially on large plantations, where

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<sup>26</sup>Fithian, 20-1.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>28</sup>The taboo on Latin for women persisted into the nineteenth century among Southern families; when consulting Maria Edgeworth about a practical system of education for her daughter, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus inquired if “Latin ought to form a part of female education,” since its study would undoubtedly detract from “other more essential branches.” Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth, *The Education of the Heart: The Correspondence of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Edgar E. MacDonald (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 114.

elite and enslaved children could rarely be kept in isolation, the project of motherhood often meant defining children's identity in oppositional terms.<sup>29</sup>

We have already noted that Eliza Lucas taught black children how to read alongside her white sister. A few years later, Eliza devised a plan to educate the rest of the enslaved African Americans on her plantation by training a handful of slave girls as "school mistress's."<sup>30</sup> While a small fraction of white mothers were willing to educate their children alongside black children, the majority saw little reason for enslaved children to receive schooling at all. When education was transmitted from white mistress to black slave, it was typically religious in nature and conveniently ignored the secularism that was influencing the courses of white children.<sup>31</sup> Mothers who dismissed the education of black children were almost always dependent on black labor in order to free time for teaching their own children. When John Dandridge observed that "it is necessary . . . for my Mother to have some negroes to support her in the education of the young Children," he did not intend for slaves to serve as tutors for his young brothers and sisters; rather, his mother's childrearing strategy was directly related to the income derived from slave labor and the accomplishment of other domestic tasks, including nursing, by black women.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese deals with this issue of the interweaving of gender, class, and racial identity in *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 110-113.

<sup>30</sup>Pinckney, 34.

<sup>31</sup>Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 156.

<sup>32</sup>Martha Washington, *Worthy Partner: The Papers of Martha Washington*, compiled by Joseph E. Fields (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 203. Frances Tasker Carter admitted to Philip Fithian that "Wenches have suckled several of her [children]" (Fithian 39).

White women often considered enslaved children to be problematic, if not positively dispensable. For Frances Tasker Carter of Nomini Hall, a principal reason for desiring the end of slavery was that an all-white tenantry would, at the very least, contribute “hardy Offspring to be the strength & the honour of the Colony.”<sup>33</sup> On hearing of a black child’s death in the household of her niece, Martha Washington responded coldly, “Black children are liable to so many accidents and complaints that one is hardly sure of keeping them.”<sup>34</sup> In an era when the smallest maladies of children were amplified by justly concerned mothers, this caustic attitude toward young slaves is especially jarring.

In contrast to their frequently active distaste toward black education, few mothers concerned themselves at all with the education of Native American children, who, when distant, remained non-threatening. In the 1820s, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus saw the establishment of Cherokee schools in North Carolina as evidence that the tribe was “fast advancing in civilisation.”<sup>35</sup> Along with education, Rachel noted that Cherokees were embracing Christianity and the market economy, all of which were crucial to a white conception of civilized behavior. Sixty years earlier, however, Carolinians had very different relations with Cherokees; in the midst of border wars, they saw their native neighbors as “Barbarians” and “extreamly troublesome.” In 1760, Eliza Lucas Pinckney’s daughter Harriott was given a present of a “fann” and “pompon,” and her delight with the trinkets was so great that Eliza declared, “I doubt whether she would part with them to

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<sup>33</sup>Fithian, 92.

<sup>34</sup>Washington, 287.

<sup>35</sup>Lazarus, 62.

purchase a peace with the Cherokees.”<sup>36</sup> In the haven of her Charlestown plantation, the privileged white child seemed immune to the reality of intercultural warfare, and such light-hearted jokes could be made with impunity. Many white mothers understood black and Indian children in relation to their own progeny, but that relationship was never egalitarian. Education among blacks was alternately useless and dangerous, while education among native peoples, at best, merely imitated the “civilisation” of white communities.

The education of elite sons and daughters in the South also perpetuated class divisions that remained important to wealthy Southerners beyond the nineteenth century. A formal, secularized education trained elite boys for prominent roles in Southern society, and for young girls without independent access to wealth, education was the primary means to maintain their social status.<sup>37</sup> In her admiring description of two young ladies in the 1790s, Caroline Clitherall noted that they were “proficient upon the Piano, well advanc’d in English studies, & spoke French fluently,” which, to young Caroline, was “a sure evidence of the position they held in Society.”<sup>38</sup> As a direct result of their display of education, Caroline deduced their class status and praised them accordingly. On rare occasions, education as a determinant of class could even make up for deficiencies of race: one of Caroline’s schoolmates was a “light Mulatto, from Jamaica,” but “as she was accompanied by a young Lady of family and fortune, her shade of

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<sup>36</sup>Pinckney, 155.

<sup>37</sup>Clinton, “Equally Their Due,” 41; Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 93.

<sup>38</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 3, p. 1.

complexion passed without remark.”<sup>39</sup> Here, a combination of elite education and connections to “family and fortune” could erase even the stigma of color. The appropriate form of an elite education was often monitored and maintained by mothers who were as class-conscious as young Caroline Clitherall. The failure of most white mothers to mention black, Indian, and lower-class children in their letters and diaries must be read as a choice rather than a mirror of their surrounding landscape. When these mothers chose to ignore other families, they were defining themselves in stark opposition to those on the perceived margins of Southern society.

While they policed class and race boundaries, mothers throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made choices about what constituted a proper setting for their children’s education. Fathers conscious of the necessity of a genteel upbringing often sent sons abroad, but mothers typically controlled the fate of their daughters. Though a small number of men in the early Republic eagerly oversaw their daughters’ schooling (Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, most notably), girls in most planter families were only educated so far as their mothers saw fit.<sup>40</sup> Many of the women in these pages were in unusual positions of power within their families due to distant fathers or deceased husbands, but male absence from elite Southern families in the eighteenth century was far from unusual. Whether on an extended sojourn to England or tied up in the colonial legislature, fathers defined their circle of control in such a way that children, and especially daughters, were of secondary importance. Thus, when women

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel Blake Smith claimed that female education was almost wholly dependent on a father’s whims, but my readings of these Southern women’s diaries have suggested otherwise (Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 63).

took charge of their children's education in the late eighteenth century, they were merely following in their own mothers' footsteps.

In 1742, with her father engaged in the West Indies, Eliza Lucas "prevailed on Mama" to send her younger sister to boarding school.<sup>41</sup> Even if George Lucas had relayed specific desires for his daughter's education, the final decision rested with Eliza and "Mama" in South Carolina. Eliza's experience in making educational decisions proved useful when she was later compelled to relocate her two sons from one English boarding school to another; though her primary motive was concern for her younger son's health, she was also careful to consider the new school's reputation, student-teacher ratio, and proximity to London.<sup>42</sup> When it was time to send her eldest son to a university, Eliza meticulously weighed the merits of a public education and a private one. Her decision to send Charles Cotesworth to Westminster was based on the university's colonial reputation as well as her sense that Charles' natural "sobriety and modesty" could withstand the assault of public schools on "the morals of Youth."<sup>43</sup> No man stepped in to make these difficult decisions for Eliza, and judging by her thoughtfulness and efficiency, she fully recognized her own power in this common maternal process.

In the 1770s and 1780s, elite families had a variety of choices when contemplating the schooling of their children; the Carters of Virginia experimented with public education for their daughters before permitting them to be schooled with the boys under Philip Fithian, while many of their neighbors employed governesses. Within the

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<sup>41</sup>Pinckney, 56.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 158.

Carter family, decisions about schooling were typically made jointly by Robert and Frances. Though Frances was remarkably well-educated and could speak extensively on politics or theology, Robert was more closely tied to his young family than many Virginia planters and so perceived the upbringing of his children as part of his responsibility. Thus, it was Robert who engaged Philip Fithian as a tutor – though it is difficult to imagine the spirited Frances absenting herself from any discussion of her children – and it was Robert who disdained the College of William and Mary as a possibility for his sons. Robert’s reasons for shunning the first college established in the South were markedly similar to Eliza Lucas Pinckney’s concerns regarding Westminster. Robert cited the debauchery and drunkenness of William and Mary professors as the primary deterrent to his sons’ enrollment, implying that the quality of education was no more of a deciding factor for a father than a mother; what was crucial was the threat to children’s morality.<sup>44</sup>

The largest surge in formal education for girls occurred in the 1750s, and female enrollment in boarding schools continued to increase in the 1790s and 1800s as the spread of the Enlightenment emphasis on education met the Revolutionary call for an educated citizenry.<sup>45</sup> Though many hands-off mothers like Martha Washington coolly

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<sup>44</sup>Fithian, 36 and 65. For more on Southern families’ educational options, see Morgan, *Virginians at Home*, 11-14.

<sup>45</sup>Linda Kerber attributes this increase in boarding schools to both “the political revolution” and “the industrial revolution,” as girls were offered the expanded educational opportunities befitting a republicanized society and a widening print culture demanded increased rates of literacy for a fully-functioning populace (Kerber, 199-200). Because of the broader chronology of formal education for girls, Kerber’s “industrial revolution” model – or what I would call an Enlightenment model – is more compelling than her “political revolution” model. For more on the mid-century spike in women’s education, see Thomas Woody, *A History of Women’s Education in the United States* (New York: The Science Press, 1929), Vol. 1, 229-33, 301-2. Also see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 34-111.



concluded that children would learn “much better at school than at home,” other women mourned the loss of their daughters to distant boarding schools.<sup>46</sup> An extreme example is the experience of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, Martha’s own granddaughter. Profoundly attached to her children, Eleanor continually fretted about the health and happiness of her eldest daughter Parke, who was the first to venture from home. In a letter to Elizabeth Bordley, who lived near Parke’s school in Philadelphia, Eleanor peppered her closest friend with advice and injunctions, begging her to watch over Parke, to love her like her own daughter, to quiz her in French and music and to oversee the improvement of her posture. The letter is deeply plaintive, and Eleanor’s maternal anxieties finally overwhelmed her when she declared that she simply must move to Philadelphia to be nearer to her “precious girl,” her “Beloved Child.” For Eleanor, the knowledge that her daughter’s teacher was “unequaled as a maternal Instructress” failed to soften the pain of separation.<sup>47</sup>

Though the sentiments of women like Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis signaled an earnest affection for daughters in the young Republic, such evidence should not obscure the fact that a higher value was generally placed on the education of sons, even when mothers were making the decisions. When criticizing the schools of the nation’s new capital, Martha Washington specifically mentioned their inadequacy for her grandson Wash; no mention is made of her other charge, Eleanor Parke Custis.<sup>48</sup> Caroline

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<sup>46</sup>Washington, 284.

<sup>47</sup>Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 77-80, 82.

<sup>48</sup>Washington, 276.

Clitherall evinced a similar sentiment when she worried about the education of her son Alexander; even “tho’ I cou’d educate my girls, as I had educated their sisters – yet Alexr. was too smart & intelligent a Boy” to be left solely to his mother’s care.<sup>49</sup> In North Carolina, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus also fretted over the value of her maternal wisdom; toward her daughters, she noted that “it is very delightful to me to watch and assist the gradual development of their minds and dispositions,” while her son, who was leaving for college, “has scarcely known any instructor but his mother whose tuition is now insufficient.”<sup>50</sup>

Mothers in the early South certainly had a sense of their own power in shaping the intellects and affections of their children. What caused this modesty in Rachel, then, this belief that her son deserved a higher standard of education than her daughters? Rachel was replicating a gender hierarchy that had been ingrained in mothers’ minds well before the Revolution. Colonial society valued the active promise of boys in war, politics, and the marketplace more than the latent potential of girls with their developing wombs and auxiliary roles in plantation economies. Most mothers gladly embraced their role as social cultivators, and with this responsibility came certain concessions to the gender balance of eighteenth-century society. Concessions imply awareness, however, and if we read the words of these mothers carefully, we begin to see that domestic happiness was often a goal that was worth the occasional compromise. These women were engaged in a quiet battle in which their family was the standard, and the chaotic and uncertain sea of society was the foe.

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<sup>49</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 7, p. 37-8.

<sup>50</sup>Lazarus, 254.

From the 1750s through the 1820s, elite mothers in the South exercised considerable control over their children's education, from the specifics of the curriculum to the race and class of other potential students to the formality and distance of the schooling itself. Though educational opportunities continued to expand in the 1780s and 1790s, mothers were overseeing and structuring their children's education decades before the Revolution and would continue to do so for decades to come. But mothers imparted lessons more informally, too. If we examine the use of children's books in Southern homes, it becomes even more evident that eighteenth-century mothers were deeply engaged in the molding of young minds well before post-Revolutionary authors assigned them this duty.

## **“I Purchased Miss Edgeworth”: The Role of Children’s Literature in the Southern Home**

Mothers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries believed that sons and daughters needed a moral and practical education in order to become valued participants in Southern society; this education was carried out formally in children’s schooling, but it was also instilled informally, as mothers used the burgeoning genre of children’s literature to reinforce their own role as moral guardians and solidify a gendered understanding of the world for their children. Print culture expanded rapidly in the late eighteenth century as literacy spread, and the infant United States continued to take its literary cues from its own discarded mother, Great Britain.<sup>51</sup> Through the books they read and the books they used to instruct their children, mothers were exposed to a particular understanding of gender roles in a well-ordered universe. Though many women had no further recommendation for a book than its general popularity, others discovered texts through close female networks. In this sense, women were choosing which ideologies to perpetuate, both for themselves and the next generation.

Though children’s literature only reached its height of popularity in the 1780s and 1790s, elite Southern women certainly were readers by the 1750s. Publishers rarely

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<sup>51</sup>Cathy Davidson argues that the “reading revolution” of the eighteenth century afforded women an “independence as profound as that negotiated in Independence Hall” (vii). For more on the spread and secularization of print culture and literacy, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 55-79; and Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 154-190. For more on America’s dependence on British literary exports, see Gillian Avery, *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books, 1621-1922* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 36-67.

marketed books to women in the mid-eighteenth century, leaving eager female readers scouring their husbands' and fathers' libraries. In the early 1740s, Eliza Lucas was taking "recommendation of Authors" for her own reading from her neighbor and soon-to-be husband Charles Pinckney.<sup>52</sup> Eliza pored over Charles' copies of Locke, Virgil, and Plutarch, but the text that stirred her most was on the recommendation of Charles' first wife: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*.<sup>53</sup> When Martha Custis Washington's first husband passed away, among the few items she saved from his estate was his entire library.<sup>54</sup> While it may have been George Washington who argued for the books' salvage after their marriage, Martha retained control of most proceedings from her husband's estate, which suggests that it was she who made the final decision about the library. Whether she kept the books out of sentimentality for her deceased husband or because she had fond memories of many of the texts themselves, Martha placed a value on reading when she refused to relinquish her husband's collection.

While many women were introduced to reading by male friends and relatives, they quickly developed their own literary sensibility and adopted reading as a decidedly feminine pursuit.<sup>55</sup> This penchant for reading among mothers would ensure the literacy of the next generation of women. Frances Tasker Carter of Virginia read extensively in theology, provoking her bemused husband to "bet a Guinea that Mrs Carter reads more

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<sup>52</sup>Pinckney, 19.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 19, 33, 47-8.

<sup>54</sup>Washington, 101.

<sup>55</sup>For an excellent study of how popular novels shaped the moral identities of eighteenth-century Southern women, see Catherine Kerrison, "The Novel as Teacher: Learning to be Female in the Early American South," *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 513-548. For Kerrison, novels played an important role in the practice of mothering by serving "as both guides to older women and as vehicles for conveying their own values to the next generation" (537).

than the Parson of the parish.”<sup>56</sup> Martha Washington enjoyed such gothic romances as Regina Maria Roche’s *Children of the Abbey* and was petitioned to serve as a sponsor for *The Ladies’ Magazine*, while her granddaughter Eleanor Custis Lewis relished the popular *Mysteries of Udolpho*.<sup>57</sup> Though many women took pleasure in the emergence of romance novels, others stuck to the educational and philosophical treatises on which they had cut their literary teeth. Martha Laurens Ramsay consulted Locke and Witherspoon well into her motherhood.<sup>58</sup> The religious Caroline Clitherall scornfully declared that “Novels I had been *preserv’d* from,” but she pored over copies of Isaac Watts’ hymns and Samuel Johnson’s *The Rambler*.<sup>59</sup> Taking pleasure in a wide range of literature, women were fully prepared to evaluate the books being produced for their sons and daughters.

As children’s books gradually moved away from religious didacticism in the late eighteenth century, parents began supplementing grammar books and manuals with popular magazines and story collections.<sup>60</sup> Tutor Philip Fithian shared the poems of Phillis Wheatley with his pupil Bob, and both men were “fill’d with pleasure & surprise” at the black poet’s talent.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps her blackness and femininity were rendered less threatening by her distance – Southerners understood that Bostonians had their own way

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<sup>56</sup>Fithian, 61 and 66.

<sup>57</sup>Washington, 319 and 249; Lewis, 43.

<sup>58</sup>Ramsay, 25-6.

<sup>59</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 4, p. 19, 34; Vol. 2, p. 12; Vol. 5, p. 33-4.

<sup>60</sup>Fithian, 35. The Carter children read the *Spectator* in their daily lessons and were also introduced to “Esops Fables” (Fithian 20, 135).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 73.

of doing things – but it seems that Philip and Bob genuinely appreciated her display of learning. As men debated the proper extent of a woman’s education in the late eighteenth century, they applauded female luminaries like Wheatley who patiently worked within an existing system. When a learned woman as radical as Mary Wollstonecraft attacked the hierarchy of gender that defined a society, however, she quickly became an object of scorn.<sup>62</sup>

Whatever literature women chose for their children, they unavoidably encountered gendered educational models, and the sweeping popularity of authors like Maria Edgeworth suggests that American mothers had a certain vision of their world that Edgeworth confirmed. Maria Edgeworth was born into a British literary family in 1768, and began collaborating with her father on treatises of educational philosophy as a young woman. Concurring with such theorists as John Locke, Edgeworth believed that children deserved a practical, even scientific, education removed from a religious foundation.<sup>63</sup> Edgeworth was widely read in America, and her female perspective on childhood and mothering offered Southern mothers a literary world in which young boys and girls had equal potential for moral success.<sup>64</sup> Though she wrote several well-received novels exploring the politics of Irish life, it was her children’s books that earned her a place in

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<sup>62</sup>Even noted British children’s author Maria Edgeworth, who championed female education, satirized Wollstonecraft in several of her works, distancing herself from what she saw as Wollstonecraft’s militancy. See Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, introd. by Gina Lurie (1795; New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), 6, 8. Also see Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 224-225, 282-283.

<sup>63</sup>Edgeworth and her father co-wrote the treatise *Practical Education*, in which they proclaimed that “to make any progress in the art of education, it must be patiently reduced to an experimental science,” also warning that “on religion and politics we have been silent.” Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, vol. 1 (1798; New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), v – vii.

<sup>64</sup>Gillian Avery even claims that Edgeworth was “probably more influential in America than in her own country” (Avery, *Behold the Child*, 65).

the hearts and homes of American women. By examining Edgeworth's works more closely, we can conclude that mothers chose models of moral behavior for their children which presented a remarkably balanced understanding of gender roles. These women were not "republican mothers" who would sharply divide their progeny between future mothers and future citizens.

Both Eleanor Custis Lewis and Rachel Mordecai Lazarus used Maria Edgeworth's books in raising their children, and Eleanor saw Edgeworth's works as a compensation for her own failings as a maternal "instructress." Observing her daughter Parke's "fine genius," Eleanor was worried about how to train her mind correctly. Not knowing how to proceed on her own experience, she "purchased Miss Edgeworth" in the hopes that the British author could provide what was lacking.<sup>65</sup> Rachel Lazarus had a more intimate connection with Edgeworth and remained equally convinced of her power to educate. The two women maintained a correspondence stretching from the shores of North Carolina to the Irish countryside for over twenty years. In fond, rambling letters and frequent packages filled with plant seeds and the occasional ill-fated mockingbird, Rachel and Maria discussed everything from politics to horticulture, but Rachel also benefited from her friend's published stories and moral tales.<sup>66</sup> Raised by her father, the headmaster of a girls' boarding school in North Carolina, Rachel had grown up with an

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<sup>65</sup>Lewis, 69.

<sup>66</sup>Despite Rachel's repeated efforts to share the marvels of American fauna with her British friend, all the birds shipped over met an untimely demise. In 1828, Edgeworth finally protested, "I am so exceedingly sorry that this happy little bird perished and so many of his predecessors in the attempt to reach this country that I cannot bear you should ever try to rear any more for me" (Lazarus, 150). Caroline Clitherall also experienced the joys of the transatlantic avian exchange when she spent her childhood in England; the "little Red-bird" she received from her brother in South Carolina seemed to have more success than Rachel's mockingbirds, though, as it "liv'd till its plumage became grey and its little voice hoarse" (Clitherall, Vol. 3, Pt. 1, p. 6).



understanding of the importance of education in a child's life.<sup>67</sup> Her compliments and criticisms of Edgeworth's stories betrayed a solid understanding of educational philosophy, and while Rachel may have had a greater awareness of Edgeworth's authorial rationale, other mothers of the young Republic welcomed her books into their homes with equal fervor.

Edgeworth's works on education and women's abilities were not as popular as her children's tales, but a reading of their gender implications can give us a glimpse into the atmosphere of political and educational philosophy in the 1790s, when, in the midst of social upheavals, men and women in both Britain and America were compelled to declare their sentiments about the direction the future should take. Edgeworth's political essays reveal a moderate liberalism toward gender roles that was predictably appealing to women who dismissed what they saw as the shrill radicalism of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>68</sup> Wollstonecraft may have been too much too soon, but her lack of support from American women did not necessarily signal complacency or an acceptance of the gendered status quo. In *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), Edgeworth staged a mock exchange between a "gentleman" who found women's education to be a preposterous waste of time and a more sympathetic father who urged the extension of women's opportunities. The first gentleman's letter is filled with the standard complaints against women's learning, from the distraction from their domestic duties to the development of an insupportable female vanity. Edgeworth also allowed him a few insights, however; he wisely and realistically observed that the success of a woman's education was largely dependent on the expectations and prejudices of her society. "If the world be not educated exactly at the

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<sup>67</sup>Lazarus, ix-x.

<sup>68</sup>Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*, 8.

right time to judge of her perfections, to admire and love them,” then a woman’s learning would go to waste for lack of appreciation.<sup>69</sup> This was certainly the case with Wollstonecraft’s polemics, and Edgeworth cautiously sought a middle ground in which women might improve at the same rate as their society’s gradual enlightenment.

In Edgeworth’s stories for children, this complicated middle ground was inhabited by girls and boys alike who shunned the fantastical realm of sprites and fairies for the practical problems and concerns that prepared them for an adult world: Should one ever lie? How could one win the affection of schoolmates and playfellows? What respect and deference was due to one’s parents and elders? How could one cure a fiery temper or a lazy disposition? Couched in the logic of everyday situations, Edgeworth’s tales instructed young readers in rational morality, while their mothers learned a few lessons about good parenting. One reader in the late nineteenth century, speaking to the lasting power of Edgeworth’s moral landscape, waxed fondly, “So much virtue, so much reward; so much work, so many plums.”<sup>70</sup> What can we glean from the moral tales of Maria Edgeworth that were so roundly praised by elite Southern women? What messages did they hold about gender conventions and maternal expectations? Though children’s tales, like Edgeworth’s didactic “Waste Not, Want Not” and “Forgive and Forget,” were a form of prescriptive literature, they were deliberately selected and brought into the home by female patrons.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>70</sup>Anne Thackeray Ritchie, introduction to *Popular Tales* by Maria Edgeworth (1804; London: MacMillan and Co., 1895), vii.

<sup>71</sup>Maria Edgeworth, *The Parent’s Assistant; Or, Stories for Children* (1796; New York: MacMillan, 1907).

Through pointed comparisons of well-raised children with children run wild, Edgeworth offered concrete advice to mothers who yearned for the angelic girls and boys that Edgeworth excelled at portraying. To succeed in the education of the young, a woman must display an “accurate understanding, benevolent heart, and steady temper.”<sup>72</sup> She must focus on training a good child rather than an accomplished one, and she should instill in her children a sense of their position in an unwavering class hierarchy.<sup>73</sup> A concern for the balance between being good and being accomplished was certainly no novelty, as we saw earlier in the letters of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, a mother who clearly stated her preference for a pious morality above all. The distinction of class, however, was largely peculiar to British texts; American children’s books tended to trumpet the endless possibilities for upward mobility that came to define, however disingenuously, America’s national ideology.<sup>74</sup> To elite Southern mothers, though, the British focus on social status would likely have been a familiar refrain in a landscape dotted with plantations and populated by enslaved Africans and African Americans.

It was the parents’ duty within these tales to provide a role model for their children, whether it was acting within class boundaries or showing temperance and humility in times of crisis, and Edgeworth made one thing very clear: governesses simply would not do. While Edgeworth’s characters included several female teachers, they always fit within the context of a country day school; the formative moments at home must be supervised by a parent or the child was sure to fall into ruin. All of Edgeworth’s

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<sup>72</sup>Maria Edgeworth, “The Bracelets,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 1 (1796; 1865; New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), 3.

<sup>73</sup>Edgeworth, “Mademoiselle Panache,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 2 (1796; 1865; New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), 187.

<sup>74</sup>Avery, *Behold the Child*, 104-5.

governesses are foolish stereotypes, from absurd foreigners to ignorant working-class girls. Within the tale of a particularly caricatured Frenchwoman, Edgeworth vented, “So much mischief may be done by a silly governess in a single quarter of an hour!”<sup>75</sup>

Caroline Clitherall understood this hierarchy even as a young child, when she formed a “School for about twenty or more rag Dolls – whom I arrang’d at the head of the great-stair case, where I kept my school. The wax & wooden dolls, being the Governess & teacher – Myself the Mamma.”<sup>76</sup>

Maria Edgeworth had a very clear understanding of the superiority of mothers in the parenting process, which her female readership must have appreciated. Though she wrote about several enlightened couples who shared parenting duties, her single fathers always managed to go astray, particularly where their daughters were concerned. In the story of “Simple Susan,” Susan is a young country girl who is cruelly treated by Barbara, a wealthy neighbor whose mischief knows no bounds. In introducing her characters, Edgeworth noted that Barbara and her brother were motherless and raised by a father who “had not time to attend” to their education, and thus “suffered [them] to run wild in the village” while he sought to increase his fortune. Susan, on the other hand, a paragon of virtue unrivalled in children’s literature, was educated by both parents. Having been “taught to work neatly by her good mother” and instructed in a smattering of arithmetic by her father, Susan acquired knowledge of reading and writing on her own, teaching her younger brothers in turn to relieve her devoted but sickly mother’s duties.<sup>77</sup> Many of

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<sup>75</sup>Edgeworth, “Mademoiselle Panache,” 171.

<sup>76</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 2, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup>Edgeworth, “Simple Susan,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 1., 49-51, 216.

Barbara's failings were attributed to her unsatisfactory education, while praise for Susan invariably included mention of her mother.

One key problem for single fathers was their ignorance of feminine propriety; just as Barbara's father allowed her to "run wild," the father of Cecilia, another ill-bred girl, "insensibly infused into his daughter's mind a portion of that enterprising, independent spirit, which he justly deemed essential to the character of her brother." The meek and humble girl that served as Cecilia's foil, "on the contrary, . . . had been educated by her mother in a manner more suited to her sex." Thus, the good Leonora won the affection of her schoolmates through her "judgment," "good sense," and "restraint," while Cecilia alienated her friends with her masculine impatience and brusqueness. Edgeworth, always a defender of her sex, was quick to note that Leonora, "notwithstanding the gentleness of her temper, . . . was in reality more independent than Cecilia." To Edgeworth, mothers were clearly superior to either fathers or governesses at raising children, and distinctions in childhood education explained distinctions in moral behavior.<sup>78</sup>

Daughters faced very different expectations than sons in Edgeworth's work, but girls were always more knowledgeable, versatile, and moral than their brothers and male schoolfellows. One particularly heated exchange between Sophy and her brother Frederick illustrates the superiority of feminine reasoning and the emptiness of male posturing. When Sophy criticizes Frederick for mixing up grammatical tenses in English, the boy retorts that they are "all the same thing in Latin grammar," hoping to silence his sister by brandishing his masculine education. The sober Sophy stares him down, though, and wryly comments that even if those words were identical in Latin, "they meant perfectly different things in real life." By designating a woman's knowledge as "real

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<sup>78</sup>Edgeworth, "The Bracelets," 41-3.

life,” Sophy negates the importance of dead languages and bolsters her own practical understanding. Frederick refuses to let her get away with this manipulation and claims that women “have no business” interfering in logic or reasoning. After Sophy flushes in anger, her younger sister Marianne comes to her defense, reminding Frederick that Sophy was also more gifted in mathematics and knot-tying than he. At a loss for a retort, the incensed boy impugns Sophy’s domestic skills. “Let her reason away, . . . she’ll never be able to make a pudding,” Frederick spits out. After calmly explaining to her brother that puddings are not such hard things after all, Marianne concludes the conversation by interjecting, “O, brother, she can do anything!”<sup>79</sup>

Edgeworth’s confidence in her female characters counterbalanced the discursive emphasis on raising sons in the South, and her portraits of heroic mothers reinforced the power that Southern women wielded in the home. Though Edgeworth’s tales arrived in America after the Revolution, their rendering of gender roles mirrored a longstanding pattern of gender expectations that Southern mothers had maintained since the middle of the century. These mothers embraced Edgeworth precisely because she validated an already well-developed understanding of children’s roles. The proponents of “republican motherhood,” in declaring the necessity for differentiated educational experiences for girls and boys, overlooked pre-existing systems of education. While they remained under their mothers’ oversight, girls and boys enjoyed relatively equal access to education, but mothers understood that their adult lives would be divided along gendered lines. In the subtext of their praise and condemnation, mothers revealed distinct sets of expectations and goals for their children, exposing their awareness of and complicity in a highly gendered world.

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<sup>79</sup>Edgeworth, “The Mimic,” in *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 2, 58-67.

## **“Ornaments in Their Family”: Gendered Expectations for Southern Sons and Daughters**

The framework of “republican motherhood” locates a growing division between expectations for girls and boys in the post-Revolutionary years; according to this model, gender roles became more clearly defined in opposition to each other as access to political citizenship separated men from women. Mothers throughout the eighteenth century, however, had desired sons who would uphold the family name and daughters who would find success and happiness in marriage. As we have noted before, the religious overtones of the mid-eighteenth century began to fade as families took advantage of the expanding secular possibilities in an increasingly cosmopolitan colonial society. For example, women began dedicating their male children to colony and country in addition to God. This linguistic shift seems to marginalize daughters, who were almost uniformly excluded from the responsibilities of citizenship, but eighteenth-century mothers had always maintained distinctions between the private duties of daughters and the public callings of sons. The Revolution did not introduce this civic division between boys and girls but rather elaborated on an already established partition. The nature and extent of gendered expectations were rooted in different perceptions of a child’s potential, but mothers often blurred the boundaries between sons and daughters by praising universal virtues. By examining how mothers characterized their charges in gendered terms, we can observe the consistencies between the mid-eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries.

Young boys in the eighteenth-century South were certainly praised for displays of virility, but they were equally commended on their goodness, wisdom, and virtue. Though they were affectionately referred to as “my rough little school boy,” “my dear little man,” and “a sturdy boy,” mothers also sought evidence of intellectual achievement and upright behavior.<sup>80</sup> Martha Washington must have flushed with pride when she received a letter from a dear friend extolling the virtues of her beloved grandson Wash; besides deeming him “a Child of Penetration & Genius,” the female correspondent noted his “sweet conciliating manners like your charming Eleanor.” Good manners and an easy disposition were valued in boys and girls alike because they signaled an appropriate childhood deference and a tractable temper. While this same friend included with her letter a gift of books for Wash and some fine collars for Eleanor, fashion was not exclusively a female concern. Martha Washington delighted in adorning her grandson with fine materials, and though she refrained from advising him about clothes as she did Eleanor, she took pleasure in acquiring “some rufles for my little Boys bosom.”<sup>81</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, attitudes toward young boys remained much the same; the new role of republican citizen had altered few of a son’s desired qualities. Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis admired the “affectionate & generous disposition” of one of her grandsons, while she chided another for being “*too violent* in temper.”<sup>82</sup> Rachel Mordecai Lazarus used nearly identical language when she boasted of her son’s

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<sup>80</sup>Pinckney, 83 and 136; Washington, 273.

<sup>81</sup>Washington, 199 and 231. Martha’s letters to Eleanor often include such gentle reminders as: “I think your chemese will look much better with a handkerchief than without” (Washington 404).

<sup>82</sup>Lewis, 214 and 195.



“affectionate engaging disposition.”<sup>83</sup> Caroline Clitherall doted on her toddler boy, who was “beautiful in appearance,” with an “amiable & affecte. temper.”<sup>84</sup> For mothers with young children, affection was universally desired, and though a beloved son might be described as “sturdy” or “rough,” he was generally praised for mirroring his sisters in virtue and temperament.

Just as mothers looked for sweetness of temper in their sons, parents boasted of their daughters’ physical vitality, a particularly valued trait when childhood mortality remained a concern. Beyond a concentration on a young girl’s beauty, parents recorded their growth spurts much as they did that of their sons. Eliza Lucas Pinckney repeatedly informed her friends that her daughter Harriott “grows tall.” Because these words were always accompanied by an account of her “fine state of health,” one can assume that Eliza was pleased at her daughter’s vigor.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Martha Washington’s son was delighted at the girth of his newborn daughter, whom he termed a “strapping Huzze,” with “double Chinn” and all.<sup>86</sup>

Daughters, granddaughters, and sisters were also consistently lauded for displays of intelligence and independence. Martha Washington’s focus on her granddaughter’s external beauty was balanced with a concern for her intellectual growth. Thus, when Martha sent her a packet of hygienic tooth powder, she also included a book.<sup>87</sup> Though

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<sup>83</sup>Lazarus, 63.

<sup>84</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 6, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup>Pinckney, 119, 133, and 141.

<sup>86</sup>Washington, 170.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 89.

Eleanor Custis Lewis' granddaughter was "ladylike" and "graceful," she was also "fearless & flies along like a Bird." The tutor Philip Fithian was amazed at the accomplished daughters of Frances Tasker Carter, who were equally "beautiful" and "well-instructed."<sup>88</sup> When Caroline Clitherall welcomed two orphaned girls into her North Carolina home, she noted their "fair complexions" but sighed to see them "very backward in knowledge."<sup>89</sup> Mothers' expressions of confidence in their female relatives, and their wish for them to be "as independent as ... circumstances will admit," informed their goals for their future happiness.<sup>90</sup> But the roles a young woman could step into as an adult diverged sharply from her admired qualities as a child. As children aged, they increasingly encountered a society with inflexible gender expectations. With girls and boys alike, mothers attempted to prepare their children for the realities of a divided world.

In the last half of the eighteenth century, mothers attuned to secularization trusted their sons to honor their family, colony, and country in addition to their God. Within the letters from Eliza Lucas Pinckney to her brothers and sons in the 1740s, we can discern that the shift from religious to civic morality as a guideline for young men was in motion well before the Revolution. A deeply religious woman, Eliza was perpetually concerned about her sons' spiritual destiny, but she also recognized that they had an equally strong duty to their family and fellow citizens. Thus, while she urged her brother in 1741 to "be particularly careful of his duty to his Creator," she also reminded him of the importance

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<sup>88</sup>Lewis, 214; Fithian, 40.

<sup>89</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 6, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup>Washington, 275.

of reason and likened his moral influence to the civic responsibility of the Romans.<sup>91</sup>

After Eliza's husband died suddenly in 1758, she invoked his memory to inspire her young sons to behave correctly, and the expectation to uphold the family name filled her letters to young Charles and Tommy.

While she still pushed her children to excel in both religious learning and secular reasoning, by the 1760s, Eliza's stated motives for her sons' success tended more towards the familial than the spiritual. Eliza wrote her son Charles that "the welfair of a whole family depends in a great measure on the progress you make in moral Virtue, Religion, and learning."<sup>92</sup> Perhaps her faith in the immortality of her family line had been shaken by her husband's untimely death, or perhaps her views reflected a growing concern among mothers for their status in an increasingly stratified Southern hierarchy. Whatever her motives for these gentle reminders, Eliza's letters reveal that a concern for familial duty and civic morality among mothers certainly predated the Revolution. Even the rhetoric of public responsibility remained familiar in the years before and after the war that created the United States. Writing in the 1820s, Eleanor Custis Lewis prayed that her son might become "an ornament to his Country," mirroring the language of Philip Vickers Fithian fifty years earlier, who admired his charges as "ornaments in their family."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Pinckney, 17 and 65.

<sup>92</sup>Pinckney, 167.

<sup>93</sup>Lewis, 106; Fithian, 111. Had these elite parents been more aware of other Southern families, they might have heard the praise of one missionary to the Cherokees in 1820, who witnessed Indian children being raised to be "ornaments to their Nation." Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, eds., *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 195.

Over time, an understanding of young boys' duty to uphold family honor by earning regional and national accolades gradually overshadowed the professed concern for their souls in mothers' letters, but civic responsibility never fully supplanted religious duty. Many mothers suppressed spiritual nagging in favor of secular admonition, but they did not hesitate to use any tactic that could lead to their child's salvation or success. When Martha Laurens Ramsay reminded her college-bound son of the family's expectations for him, she carefully distinguished between his father's secular concerns ("to see his son distinguished in life") and her own religious oversight, "continually addressing the throne of heaven for the welfare of her dear child."<sup>94</sup> Caroline Clitherall chided mothers who neglected their children's education and possessed "no ability to train them either for Earth or Heaven."<sup>95</sup> Mothers often conceded that their sons would eventually step into more public roles than their daughters, but they seldom relinquished their rights as mothers, which included, above all else, the right to ensure their child's happiness, both in this life and the hereafter.

Expectations for daughters were invariably more informal and less urgently expressed, since mothers generally had much more direct control over their daughters' lives. For the most part, young girls understood their future roles remarkably well. Philip Fithian caught his female students playing at being grown women several times; one day the young girls were pretending to do housework (from spinning and knitting to washing and scrubbing), and a few days later, Philip stumbled upon two of them, who "by stuffing rags and other Lumber under their Gowns just below their Apron-Strings, were prodigiously charmed at their resemblanc[e] to Pregnant Women!" These "womanish

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<sup>94</sup>Ramsay, 257.

<sup>95</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 3, Pt. 2, p. 14.

Fribbles” that Fithian observed served as rituals by which the plantation daughters prepared for unavoidable futures. As wives and mothers, young Fanny and Harriott Carter would be judged by their skill at plantation management and their fecundity as childbearers. Not unlike their brothers and cousins, then, Fanny and Harriott were preparing to uphold their family’s reputation, though they would relinquish the family name; marriage and childbirth were the civic duties available to young women, and their mothers were canny enough to recognize both this expectation and the possibilities beyond it.<sup>96</sup>

Marriage was a top priority in settling daughters in the world, and mothers were well aware of how disastrous a poor match could be. When Eleanor Custis Lewis advised her beloved daughter Parke, she encouraged marriage only because she imagined Parke would be “happier than if single.” Once this conclusion was reached, Eleanor tore apart Parke’s potential suitors, criticizing one for lack of grace, another for lack of beauty, and a third for a volatile temper. Eleanor’s standards were certainly high, but they confirm that she was invested in Parke’s happiness rather than merely resigned to a social inevitability. Though Eleanor undoubtedly recognized the limitations on female choice in the 1820s, she also understood women’s power in maximizing those choices that were available. Even after Parke was married, Eleanor lamented her husband’s “*inferiority* in talents”; indeed, she claimed that “every one is forcibly struck with his inferiority, & surprised at her choice (with her high notions of intellectual superiority).” Even beyond marriage, mothers fought for their daughters’ happiness within a system that allowed few

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<sup>96</sup>Fithian, 189 and 193. Caroline Clitherall also praised her daughter Frances for controlling “the entire management of the House at 14 years of age. Her cake – her rolls, were the nicest I ever ate” (Clitherall, Vol. 7, p. 34). For more on the household expectations of elite Southern women, which included both washing and cake-making, see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

options. Though elite white women well understood their marital role, they also looked for ways to manipulate it. Martha Washington spoke for many women of her class when she sighed that “dependence is I think a wrached state.”<sup>97</sup>

Unlike the imagined “republican mothers” who were called to newly reify gender divisions, most elite mothers in the early South had been engaged in a more subtle process of gender distinction long before the Revolution. To these women, home was a realm largely controlled by their own childrearing choices. So while the larger world offered increasingly gender-defined opportunities for young adults, mothers still chose to perpetuate a hazier boundary between their sons and daughters, finding universal merit in intelligence, beauty, vitality, and affection. Judging by the extensive continuities between mothers’ attitudes toward childrearing in the 1750s and the 1820s, the Revolution and its resulting ideology of “republican motherhood” meant little for the daily realities of Southern mothers.

If “republican motherhood” affords us no direct window onto eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s experiences, how do we begin the process of rewriting the stories of early American mothers? The first step is to consider the voices of women themselves. How did actual mothers conceive of motherhood? It is impossible to gauge the emotional fluctuations of mothers as they watched their children grow before their eyes, but in their letters to female friends and relatives, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women spoke of motherhood as exhausting, draining, and yet deeply pleasurable. Motherhood not only confirmed their entry into a fertile elite; it also elicited passion in the midst of failed marriages and accorded responsibility and self-respect when women

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<sup>97</sup>Lewis, 99-100 and 171; Washington, 275.

were expected to remain passive and vulnerable. For an eager mother, children could “make her amends for all her cares and answer all her hopes,” while being a “comfort to her as they grow up.”<sup>98</sup> Mothers also left lasting impressions on their children, male and female alike. In a rare moment of nostalgia, Philip Vickers Fithian mournfully recalled, “Once I too had a fond indulgent Mother; . . . But oh! She has gone & left me, & Friendship seems to have been buried with her!”<sup>99</sup>

Motherhood was as terrifying as it was satisfying. Rachel Mordecai Lazarus felt the importance of “training” herself as a mother while simultaneously raising her infant son. Nervous about her ability to form his mind properly, she confessed to already experiencing “a mother’s hopes, her fears, and her solicitude!”<sup>100</sup> Eleanor Custis Lewis took pleasure in regaling her childless friend Elizabeth with tales of motherhood, from its joys to its distresses. “You know not indeed how many heartachs a mother is heir to,” she wrote in 1823. A few years later, as Eleanor nervously anticipated the pregnancy of her eldest daughter, she reminded Elizabeth that “you know not how much pain you escape by your exemption from maternal feelings.” Less than a year before her death, Eleanor wrote Elizabeth one final time: “in never having been a *Mother*, you cannot conceive a Mothers trials.” Though the married Elizabeth may truly have rejoiced in her childlessness, the likelihood is that Eleanor’s repeated comments tortured a woman unable to have children. For Eleanor and many of her contemporaries, children were “precious objects of devoted affection which bind our hearts to earth, & altho sources of

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<sup>98</sup>Pinckney, 78; Washington, 284.

<sup>99</sup>Fithian, 181.

<sup>100</sup>Lazarus, 30-1.

happiness, are also sources of most heartrending anxiety & overwhelming affliction.”<sup>101</sup>

Both sides of this painful duality gave direction to mothers’ lives in a society that offered limited public or private roles to women.

Motherhood was a perpetual job; it extended beyond the death of individual children, and it persisted in the face of unending tragedy. But to many mothers, the joy of “watching over their opening prospects—of nursing them when sick, & working for them when well” was a woman’s greatest reward. To them, this was not socially imposed drudgery; this was “the most important ingredient in happiness.”<sup>102</sup> A young Eleanor Custis Lewis best expressed the transformative powers of motherhood as she anticipated her first child:

The idea of being a Mother, of watching over & forming the mind of Our little infant is a source of delight which none but those in similar situations can experience. ... You will smile I am sure when you read the foregoing, & recollect the *writer*, is the once rattlepated, lazy Eleanor P Custis who was generally stiled a thoughtless giddy mortal extremely fond of going to Balls; --now a sedate matron attending to domestic duties, & providing for a young stripling who will call her Mother. ‘Tis she, the same person, & instead of saying with Hamlet! “But oh! how *fallen*” I may say with truth that she is by the late circumstances, *exalted* & converted into a rational being.<sup>103</sup>

Though men like Philip Fithian may have spoken of “the difficulties of being a Mother” in contrast to the “Pleasures of being a Wife,” the writings of women like Eleanor Custis Lewis illuminate a socially encouraged role by which women often found themselves “exalted.”<sup>104</sup> In the early 1800s, Caroline Clitherall spoke for many women when, in portraying mothers’ relationships with their children, she deemed these parents “Authors

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<sup>101</sup>Lewis, 142, 165, 263 and 231.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>104</sup>Fithian, 133.



of their being.”<sup>105</sup> Mothers were not mere caregivers; to Clitherall and others, they held an ultimate power over shaping, “authoring,” the next generation.

Motherhood is not just a way to talk about children or families in early America; it serves as a window on the inner lives of the women themselves, a role they could mold to their own sense of responsibility and righteousness, an opportunity to shape America’s future according to their own values. Yet for all the upheaval the young country endured in the late eighteenth century, the methods and emotions of motherhood remained remarkably familiar, passed down from mother to daughter and largely sailing through the political storms that gave rise to the prescriptive rhetoric of republican motherhood. Though motherhood was rarely subversive in its demands and constructions, it was fundamentally controlled by women, a fact which in itself declares its historical value, presenting scholars with a rare glimpse into a feminine universe.

Listening to women’s voices is a crucial part of recovering the history of early American motherhood, but a shift in sources alone cannot upset traditional narratives unless we validate those sources, and their interpretation, as half of the American story. If we value domestic lives as much as military moments, how might our understanding of the march of history change? By recovering women’s words about childhood education, children’s literature, and gendered goals for young sons and daughters, we arrive at an understanding of early America that defies the traditional Revolutionary periodization. The steady changes we have observed within the institution of motherhood align neatly with our current understanding of the Enlightenment’s spread, while the more fundamental continuities across generations of mothers undermine the explanatory power

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<sup>105</sup>Clitherall, Vol. 6, p. 39.

of “republican motherhood” for women’s lives. What prevents us from recognizing these trends is our stubborn devotion to the idea of the American Revolution as a massive historical rupture. Certainly, the war altered much about American society, including many aspects of women’s lives, but we must be careful not to afford it greater power than it had.

Martha Washington was married to a man who has survived through history as the “father of our country.” Yet in her many letters to friends and relatives, Martha scarcely mentioned the political turmoil that haunted her husband and threatened her way of life, instead devoting page after page to stories about her children and solicitous queries about those of her correspondents. To say that the Revolution was insignificant would be misguided, but to attribute all eighteenth-century American change to its heady politics may be even more so. When we begin to recognize the larger, transatlantic patterns influencing American women’s lives, the necessity of amending our historical periodization becomes obvious. These alternate stories of continuity can only be revealed by turning to the self-understandings of women themselves; a diet of prescriptive literature, ideology, and public discourse merely confirms a male vision of appropriate female behavior. To revolutionize American history, it is essential to take seriously those experiences that women themselves most valued.

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