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## In Pursuit of Possibility, Elizabeth Ellet and the Women of the American Revolution

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IN PURSUIT OF POSSIBILITY  
ELIZABETH ELLET AND  
THE WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by  
Gretchen Ferris Schoel  
1992

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

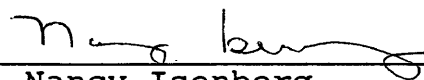
Master of Arts

  
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## ABSTRACT

Through the unconventional life and writing of Elizabeth Ellet (1812-1877), an historian of American women, this paper explores the dynamics of the literary marketplace and the making of authorial careers in mid-nineteenth-century America. It argues that the literary marketplace gave writers the freedom and the fluidity to escape the constraints of middle-class domesticity, an ideology that valued individuals on the basis of gender and prescribed for men and women separate, and unequal, social roles.

A careful inquiry into Ellet's two opposing personalities -- the respectable historian of feminine virtue, on the one hand, and the termagant professional and vicious despoiler of her rivals' reputations, on the other -- presents Ellet as a woman in pursuit of an ideal world where merit and ability, rather than gender, account for social worth. Ellet's search led her away from husband and home and immersed her in the competitive world of the literary marketplace. Though this commercial world imposed its own rules and treated authors as commodities, it did so on an equal opportunity basis. Whether male or female, authors who generated the most profit held the highest value. In such a setting, Ellet's and other women writers' invocation of traditional gender stereotypes served as an instrument of career advancement. The literary marketplace, this essay concludes, empowered women to use the conservative notions of woman's "proper place" as the means to the financial and psychological benefits of independent careers.

Ellet's Women of the American Revolution (1848) became her most effective tool in her strategy to appreciate her value for the market's exchange. The text's conformity to a feminine style, as well as its strict fidelity to the canons of historical writing, targeted particular literary audiences and successfully secured Ellet's place alongside some of America's most celebrated writers. However, while Women of the American Revolution appeared to be a formal tribute to demure, selfless women, it was, in fact, a shrewd depiction of a society where the boundaries between genders were permeable and women could claim public space and autonomous lives. Through this unique representation of the past, Ellet wanted her readers to see that the same fluidity of social roles in Revolutionary America could, indeed, characterize contemporary America.

Both Ellet's text, and her life, then, can be understood best as ambitious attempts to exist outside of the conventional framework of mid-nineteenth-century society.

IN PURSUIT OF POSSIBILITY  
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THE WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

## CHAPTER I

"It appears to me," Elizabeth Ellet announced in the fall of 1847, "that the influence of women in the achievement of our national freedom has not been sufficiently shown. Our country really owes a debt of gratitude to the ladies who ... did so much to inspire the [Revolutionary] army and officers with courage and constancy."<sup>1</sup> To remedy such lack of recognition, Ellet resolved to write two volumes of "biographical notices" about the women of the American Revolution. Her work would feature those ladies most distinguished for "heroic conduct, patriotic sacrifices, [and] humanity to the suffering."<sup>2</sup> Ellet's primary aim, she informed friends among New York City's literary elite, was to "present ... detailed memoirs" of the women whose counsels, prayers, and virtuous deeds successfully "nursed the infancy of [America's] freedom."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>EFE to Mrs. Beck, 24 November 1847, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

<sup>2</sup>EFE to Col. Webb, 21 March 1848, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

<sup>3</sup>EFE to Mrs. Beck, 24 November 1847; Elizabeth F. Ellet, The Women of the American Revolution (New York, 1848), I, 22. Similar statements concerning the purpose of her project appear in letters from EFE to Jared Sparks, 7 December 1847, MS Sparks, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University; EFE to James Fenimore Cooper, 11 March 1848, Beinecke Library, Yale University; EFE to Lydia Huntley Sigourney, 21 March 1848, Hoadley Collection, The Connecticut Historical Society; and EFE to Gulian C.



At the same time, Ellet hoped to disclose and celebrate "the domestic side of the Revolutionary picture." She felt sure that Americans would "never know how to appreciate" their Revolution until they recognized the home-sentiment and familial spirit that filled the public heart and moved the nation to victory.<sup>4</sup>

With tremendous effort and a certain urgency, Ellet set about her task. She "[spent] every morning in the New-York Historical Society" collecting facts and anecdotes illustrative of the domestic traditions, personal appearances and manners, and exemplary qualities of Revolutionary women.<sup>5</sup> In addition to traveling to libraries and historical societies throughout parts of the South and Northeast, she solicited aid from other scholars, writers, and descendants of the Revolution's participants. In deferential, patriotic tones, Ellet petitioned the assistance of Lydia Sigourney, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Jared Sparks, among others, whose devotion to the nation's progress, Ellet thought, might render an invaluable

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Verplanck, 13 May 1848, Verplanck Papers, Box 4 E #6, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup>EFE to Rev. Thomas Robbins, 14 March 1848, Hoadley Collection, The Connecticut Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup>EFE to Mr. Tefft, 10 January 1848, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

service to her work.<sup>6</sup> She assured them that their insights and contributions would augment the meager store of recorded information concerning the feminine virtue, self-denial, and moral rectitude that had bolstered the stamina of the Revolution's heroes. "Because [suitable material] is as scarce as diamonds," Ellet explained to an autograph collector in South Carolina, "and the time when justice can be done to [our foremothers] is fast passing away, ... [I trust] that you will be inclined to give me [any] information" which might "throw light on the subject [of America's past]."<sup>7</sup> Almost everyone to whom she appealed for aid, it seems, responded with anecdotes, advice, or encouragement.<sup>8</sup> Ellet's Women of the Revolution, one

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<sup>6</sup>EFE to Jared Sparks, 7 December 1847. In her letter to L.H. Sigourney, 21 March 1848, Ellet addresses Sigourney as "one so patriotic as yourself" and throughout the letter alludes to Sigourney's ability to comprehend the importance of her endeavor. Ellet writes a similar letter to Professor Longfellow, 26 May 1848, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University, which expresses her hope that his "patriotism will incline [him] to give [her] some assistance."

<sup>7</sup>EFE to Mr. Tefft, 10 January 1848; EFE to Lydia Huntley Sigourney, 21 March 1848; and EFE to Mr. Tefft, 14 December 1847, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

<sup>8</sup>For example, Sparks gave Ellet information on Mary Philipse, an early sweetheart of George Washington's, and invited her to write and "ask [his] advice whenever [she] needed it." EFE to Jared Sparks, 23 May 1848, MS Sparks, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University and EFE to Jared Sparks, 4 November, 1848, MS Sparks, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Longfellow sent Ellet material on Mercy Otis Warren and Mrs. Wadsworth and provided anecdotes from Dwight's Travels. EFE to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 26 May 1848 and EFE to

editor predicted, promised to be an interesting, thoroughly researched, and skillfully written account of the domestic side of the Revolutionary War.<sup>9</sup>

When Ellet's text appeared in September of 1848, readers praised its "delicious ... bits of private history fished up from the vast sea of things forgotten." This "simple record" of "the helpmeet of man,"<sup>10</sup> reviewers approved, "brought directly home to the hearts ... of readers"<sup>11</sup> the "depth and constancy [of] all the domestic affections"<sup>12</sup> at work during the Revolution. Ellet's "lessons from the fireside"<sup>13</sup> were deemed "absolutely necessary"<sup>14</sup> for anyone desiring an accurate, comprehensive

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, n.d. 1848, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Also, in a letter to Mr. Tefft, Ellet revealed that Caroline Kirkland, William B. Reed (of Philadelphia), Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Bogart (a poetess) all sent her useful information.

<sup>9</sup>Caroline May, The American Female Poets: With Biographical and Critical Notices (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1849), 359.

<sup>10</sup>Review of Women of the American Revolution, by Elizabeth F. Ellet (New York, 1848), North American Review, April 1849, 363, 366, 367.

<sup>11</sup>Review of Women of the American Revolution, by Elizabeth F. Ellet (New York, 1848), Graham's Magazine, November 1850, 325.

<sup>12</sup>North American Review, 376.

<sup>13</sup>Review of Women of the American Revolution, by Elizabeth F. Ellet (New York, 1848), Southern Quarterly Review, July 1850, 354.

<sup>14</sup>Graham's, 325.

reading of America's past. Her veneration for women of virtue, common sense, and stoic endurance elicited the attention of popular middlebrow magazines such as Godey's, Graham's, and Peterson's. These periodicals reprinted numerous sketches from her book and honored Ellet with unusually lengthy reviews. Ellet had performed a "high moral duty" with the delicacy, tact, grace, and purity that befit the character of her sex. Her "truly patriotic mind" had resurrected the integrity behind the Revolution. Therefore, the reviews concluded, "Mrs. Ellet ... deserve[d] to be called pious."<sup>15</sup>

Yet those who knew Ellet well would never have called her "pious." For while extolling feminine goodness in her published writings, Ellet was often quite unprincipled in her private life. "Her whole study, throughout life," Edgar Allan Poe avowed, "[had] been the gratification of her malignity."<sup>16</sup> Having once been entangled in a suspiciously prurient relationship with Poe, Ellet exhibited a puerile jealousy when her arch-rival, Frances Sargeant Osgood, charmed away the licentious Poe. Her pride damaged, a

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<sup>15</sup>Review of Women of the American Revolution, by Elizabeth F. Ellet (New York, 1848), Godey's Lady's Book, January 1849, 66. This review headed the book-notices section and was twenty-three lines long -- longer than most other reviews in Godey's.

North American Review 363; Southern Quarterly Review 351; North American Review 364.

<sup>16</sup>Edgar Allen Poe to Sarah Helen Whitman, 24 November 1848, in John Ward Ostrom, ed., The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), II, 407.

vindictive Ellet "devote[d] [all] her energies to vilifying [them] both."<sup>17</sup> Using slander, deceit, and coquetry, Ellet assumed the "self-appointed task of ending Poe's popularity" within the New York literary world.<sup>18</sup> In mid-1846, she "innocently" revealed the Poe-Osgood affair to several New York periodicals. Even worse, she informed Poe's first wife of his dalliance. She then sent her brother, armed with a gun, to demand that Poe return her personal letters. When he did not immediately respond, Ellet initiated the rumor, which circulated in most major newspapers, that Poe was suffering from "brain fever," or temporary insanity.<sup>19</sup> Ellet drove Poe "almost entirely from the social life of the city"<sup>20</sup> and was, according to Poe and his patrons, "the most [invidious] and pertinacious of all fiends."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Sidney P. Moss, Poe's Major Crisis: His Libel Suit and New York's Literary World (Durham: Duke University Press, 1970) 89.

<sup>18</sup>Joy Bayless, Rufus Wilmot Griswold: Poe's Literary Executor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1943) 140.

<sup>19</sup>Moss 92.

<sup>20</sup>Bayless 143.

<sup>21</sup>Poe to Sarah Helen Whitman, 18 October 1848, in Ostrom, Letters, II, 393.

For more information concerning the "Poe-Ellet Affair," as it is commonly referred to, see Bayless, Moss, and Ostrom, as well as: Passages From the Correspondence of Rufus W. Griswold (Cambridge: W.M. Griswold, 1898); Emile Lauvriere, The Strange Life and Loves of Edgar Allan Poe (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1935); Sidney P. Moss, Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963); and John Evangelist Walsh, Plumes in the Dust: The Love Affair of Edgar Allan Poe and Fanny Osgood (Chicago: Nelson-

Such devilishness was not limited to her feud with Poe. While writing Women of the American Revolution, Ellet fell into a similar imbroglio with the prominent New York editor and publisher, Rufus Wilmot Griswold. Perhaps aware of Griswold's reputation as a mentor and patron of aspiring young authors, Ellet diligently begged his favor. She wrote reviews, editorials, poetry, and short stories for Griswold's magazine, Graham's, joined his circle of distinguished literati, and used his private library to research her book.<sup>22</sup> But in December 1848, when Griswold publicly dismissed her poetry as "inferior in execution," Ellet "ended all amicable intimacy" with him. Already angry at Griswold for mistaking her age by some eight years in his book, The Prose and Poetry of America,<sup>23</sup> Ellet proceeded to

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Hall, 1980).

Granted, most of the "facts" that detail the Poe-Ellet Affair come from letters written by Poe, Osgood, or R.W. Griswold and are, therefore, biased by their perspective. However, the subsequent information on Ellet's personal life related in this paper, combined with a letter Ellet wrote to Osgood (8 July 1846, E.F. Ellet folder, #295, Boston Public Library) in which Ellet indirectly admits, discusses, and apologizes for her interference in Poe's affairs, does substantiate my suspicion that Ellet was, indeed, a meddling busybody who would go to even unethical means to get what she wanted.

<sup>22</sup>EFE to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, 31 December 1847, E.F. Ellet folder, #296, Boston Public Library. In this letter, Ellet asks Griswold to accompany her to the New York Historical Society that morning. According to this and other letters, Griswold had initiated the idea and did agree to escort Ellet.

<sup>23</sup>Bayless 151; "Key to Mrs. Ellet's Letters," by Rufus W. Griswold, n.d., Griswold MSS, #458, Boston Public Library. In The Prose and Poetry of America (1842),

slander him before his friends, in letters to his wife, and, Griswold maintained, in a caustic review of The Female Poets.<sup>24</sup> Griswold retaliated, but only succeeded in aggravating Ellet's rage. For the next six years, she maliciously hounded him in order to protect herself from what she called his "unscrupulous and deadly" calumnious attacks.<sup>25</sup> In Griswold's eyes, Elizabeth Ellet was just "a vain, silly, conceited woman."<sup>26</sup> Even so, her machinations compelled him to label her "a creature of the ... most [unprincipled] malevolence ... [whose] falsehood[s] [were] too incredible and absurd for even contempt."<sup>27</sup>

Although Poe and Griswold were Ellet's most prominent

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Griswold recorded Ellet's birthdate as "1810?" after Ellet herself had told him 1818.

<sup>24</sup>In EFE, n.d., Griswold MSS, #298, Boston Public Library, Ellet admits that she has been spreading the word about Griswold's "palpably unfair and incorrect" actions.

EFE to Charlotte Griswold, 1853, Griswold MSS, #300, Boston Public Library.

And "Key to Mrs. Ellet's Letters," n.d.. Griswold's dismissal of Ellet's poetry appeared in his The Female Poets of America. So when a stinging review of Griswold's Female Poets of America came out in late 1848 in Neal's Gazette, Griswold immediately suspected Ellet and threatened to reciprocate her wicked ways. Ellet denied having written it. The truth is not known, but it does seem that Ellet had a hand in the idea, at least, for the review.

<sup>25</sup>EFE to Charlotte Griswold, 1853. Later in this essay, I will provide more information on what Ellet did to "hound" Griswold so.

<sup>26</sup>RWG to Edwin Percy Whipple, November 1848, Griswold MSS, Boston Public Library.

<sup>27</sup>RWG, "Statement," Griswold MSS, #463, Boston Public Library.

adversaries, others stumbled into similar complications with her. South Carolina's William Gilmore Simms complained that he had given Ellet the idea for Women of the American Revolution and had "counselled her in what quarters to seek her materials," but then received virtually no credit for his efforts.<sup>28</sup> Frances Osgood's husband deemed Ellet "a vicious liar."<sup>29</sup> And a rumor circulated within the literary circles that Ellet had plagiarized other writers' work.<sup>30</sup> Ellet threatened her publishers, Carey and Hart, saying that she would switch allegiances if they did not amply compensate her for Women of the American Revolution. She often complained about "the immense labor involved in collecting ... materials" for her book.<sup>31</sup> Ellet also

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<sup>28</sup>William Gilmore Simms to Barton Dawson, 23 April 1859, in Mary C. Simms Oliphant et al., eds., The Letters of William Gilmore Simms (Columbia, 1956), IV, 148.

<sup>29</sup>Walsh 69.

<sup>30</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, "The Literati," in The Works of the late Edgar Allan Poe: The Literati (New York: Redfield, 1858), III, 202. With the original manuscript of Poe's series of six articles entitled "The New York Literati," published in Godey's in 1846, there exists one long paragraph on Ellet in which he alludes to this rumor of her unethical practices. Poe did not publish this article, however, for fear of Ellet's abusive reaction.

In a review of Ellet's translations of Schiller ["The Characters of Schiller," New York Review 5 (July 1839): 233], the writer alludes to Ellet's plagiarism by saying that "in some few instances she has availed herself of a previous version [of translations], but by far the greater part are her own."

<sup>31</sup>EFE to Messrs Carey and Hart, 8 February 1848, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.



capitalized on various charity events as opportunities to give "public readings" of her work.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Ellet was a "sleuthing acquaintance" and a calculating competitor, many of her contemporaries thought.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, they decided, she deserved to be suspect.

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At the same time that Ellet applauded the probity and sterling character of her eighteenth-century foremothers, she designed devious strategies that might stigmatize several of her nineteenth-century peers. While she wrote of female virtue, self-denial, and uncomplaining perseverance, she practiced what many labeled a disreputable, self-centered, even termagant style of living. And although many commended Ellet's noble endeavor to revive the domestic spirit of the past, many more blamed her for disrupting their lives in the present. In a sense, Ellet assumed two different personalities. On the one hand, she played the gracious, self-sacrificing heroine, like those in her text, who would go to any length to motivate the moral consciousness of her contemporaries. This was Ellet the

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<sup>32</sup>EFE to W.R. Lawrence, n.d., Hoadley Collection, Connecticut Historical Society. In this letter Ellet is mentioning that she has been "booked" for a general reading, but hopes that no one in New York will find out.

EFE to John Neal, 7 July n.d., E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Ellet requests that Neal ask several of the ladies to help her book some general readings by advertising that the proceeds will go for charity.

<sup>33</sup>Bayless 144.

author, who earned great respect through her prose. On the other hand, Ellet was the disapproving, intruding tattler whose unethical behavior convinced many of her chicanery. This was Ellet the individual, a mid-nineteenth-century woman of high spirits and soaring aspirations in the world of New York City's literary elite.

Ellet the author and Ellet the individual, together, have seldom been explored. Most scholars focus either on her text or on her life. Charles and Mary Beard, the first historians to investigate Elizabeth Ellet, mention Ellet's work as "'pioneer'" social history and reprint several sketches.<sup>34</sup> In The Feminization of American Culture (1978), Ann Douglas briefly discusses Women of the American Revolution and examines its effort to "redress the balance" between the "masculine" history of action and the "feminine" history of feeling.<sup>35</sup> Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton refer to Ellet as an early figure in the historiography of American women.<sup>36</sup> Most recently, Nina Baym finds Ellet significant for her "compensatory works"

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<sup>34</sup>Clyde N. Wilson, ed., Dictionary of American Historians, 1607-1865 (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1984), vol. 30, 84.

Mary Beard, ed., America Through Women's Eyes (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933) 77-83.

<sup>35</sup>Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978) 184.

<sup>36</sup>Carol R. Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, Women of America: A History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979) 5.

which revised the perceptions of most nineteenth-century historians.<sup>37</sup> Other scholars, namely Mary G. DeJong, Sidney P. Moss, and John Evangelist Walsh, highlight the more sensational aspects of her personal life rather than her literary significance. Their studies portray Ellet as a gossip, a miscreant, and a woman scorned. With no comment on her prose, they understandably classify Ellet as a "social busybod[y]" who has nothing better to do than snoop into everyone else's business.<sup>38</sup>

None of these treatments do justice to the complex fabric of Ellet's life. She emerges from each as either the conscientious, worthy writer or the unconscionable, virtueless woman. Her personae are two, according to the existing scholarship, and they are clearly contradictory. To comprehend one in light of the other poses a significant challenge. How, for example, can an upstanding citizen with a high-minded responsibility at the same time be a vituperative babbler with apparently no moral integrity? It is really much easier to leave Ellet the author and Ellet the individual disassociated. To do this, though, means to

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<sup>37</sup>Nina Baym, "Women and the Republic: Emma Willard's Rhetoric of History," American Quarterly 43 (March 1991): 23(n).

<sup>38</sup>Along with Moss and Walsh (in footnote #21), see Mary G. DeJong, "Lines from a Partly Published Drama: The Romance of Frances Sargent Osgood and Edgar Allan Poe," in Shirley Marchalonis, ed., Patrons and Protegees: Gender, Friendship, and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America (New Brunswick and London, 1988).

forfeit the opportunity to understand the larger significance of Elizabeth Ellet in America's history. To ignore the contradiction between Ellet's text and her life means to bypass the principal avenue to a more sensitive appreciation of Ellet in the context of the nineteenth century. It is necessary, instead, to acknowledge the contradiction and then to confront it, asking how and why it exists. For within this gap between Ellet's scholarship and Ellet's actions -- within the contradiction itself -- lies the key to a more insightful reading of Elizabeth Ellet, her work, and the impression that she has left on America's past.

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The puzzle of Ellet's personality arose during her first thirty years as an upper-middle-class woman. Born in Sodus Bay, New York, in 1812, Elizabeth Fries Lummis became an interesting product of the rapid and often confusing cultural transitions of the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Ellet's father, like many of his contemporaries, took advantage of the country's expanding geographical boundaries and relocated from an eastern city to the shores of Lake Ontario. Once there, Dr. Lummis set

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<sup>39</sup>There is some confusion over Ellet's birth date. She herself insisted (twice, at least, in writing and, based on some of her contemporaries comments, numerous times in person) that she was born in 1818. But because her death record at the N.Y. City Department of Health says 1812, I will stick with this earlier date.

out to "purchase" and "improve" the virgin lands around Sodus Bay. His success as a physician turned landowner earned him recognition as "one of the most highly respected citizens in that portion of the state."<sup>40</sup> Ellet's mother was equally distinguished as the daughter and niece of two revolutionary heroes who, Ellet said, had provided the family with great prestige.<sup>41</sup> Occupying a handsome estate, Ellet and her family lived a fairly comfortable life as prosperous inhabitants of a rapidly developing area in upstate New York.<sup>42</sup>

Ellet experienced what she remembered as a very fulfilling, almost dream-like childhood.<sup>43</sup> Her devout

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<sup>40</sup>EFE, "Biographical Sketch," n.d., Griswold MSS, #301, Boston Public Library.

<sup>41</sup>In two autobiographical sketches (EFE, n.d., Boston Public Library; EFE, "Biographical Sketch," 1854, Duyckinck Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library), Ellet mentions her mother's background and then proceeds to glorify her two heroic ancestors. Many sketches about Ellet, written by her peers, mention this fact and indicate that Ellet took great pride in her mother's heritage.

<sup>42</sup>"Obituary," New York Times, 4 June 1877, 5. Dr. Lummis bought the Pulteney Estate, which was originally owned by the British crown. In The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York: James T. White and Company, 1901), s.v. "Elizabeth Fries (Lummis) Ellet," there is a picture of the Lummis's very large home. I also base this assumption on Ellet's poetry and her biographical statements which both suggest a prosperous past in an as yet undeveloped area of New York.

<sup>43</sup>Elizabeth F. Ellet, "Sodus Bay," in The Female Poets of America, ed. Thomas Buchanan Read (Philadelphia: E.H. Butler and Company, 1850), 139-140. In her poem "Sodus Bay," Ellet rejoices in the memory of her birthplace and seems to want to return there "[where] the heart's fair

parents sought to instill in their daughter the conventional Christian virtues thought essential for any "proper" woman. A morally righteous, self-sacrificing, and deferential attitude, Ellet learned, garnered the family's praise. For most women, growing up in early-nineteenth-century America meant realizing that men and women harbored different strengths and were fit for significantly different offices. While most eighteenth-century homes had been the center of production where the family worked together for its livelihood, in Ellet's generation, more and more men worked outside the home and determined the family's fortune. Women, on the other hand, assumed a more distinctive role within the home and governed the housekeeping, child rearing, and religious activity. Ellet's parents provided her with a similar model. Her father, as a speculator and an influential civic leader, adopted a very public role, one which consigned his wife to the more private domain of the home.<sup>44</sup>

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sunshine, and the dreams of youth ... [are] once again restore[d]!"

<sup>44</sup>Harry Franco [pseudonym], "A Passage From The Trippings of Tom Pepper: or, The Results of Romancing," in Poe's Major Crisis, Moss, 196-197. In The Trippings of Tom Pepper, a satirical novel written by Charles Briggs in 1847, Briggs comments on the great "grief" that "Lizzy" (Ellet) had caused "old Gil" (her father) by becoming one of the literati and neglecting religion and the church. Ellet's father was an elder in the church and a collector "chiefly of Bibles ... the Presbyterian Confession of faith, ... the writings of Hannah More [an eighteenth-century writer who labeled women as intellectually inferior to men], and ...

The economic, political, and social changes that wrought this clearer division between men's and women's lives also produced more definite ideas about women's essential worth. Middle-class women were esteemed as the preservers of the crucial values that had sustained America in the past but that now seemed threatened by the culture's transformation. The best place to nurture the nation's public virtues and moral ideals, the theory went, was under the safe shelter of a Christian home. And the best people to accomplish this task were wives, mothers, or other female helpmates to men. Ellet was probably raised in preparation for this position. As a child, she too was trained to be "soft, subdued, and soothing" so that she could effectively advance in others an elevated set of values. Her temperament was to be "controlled, indirect, and subtle," in no way deliberate or assertive. And she should remain publicly invisible, establishing her identity in the home and through submission to "her father ... and her God."<sup>45</sup>

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'Charles Davis, or the Power of Grace.'

All of the biographical summaries of Ellet emphasize her father's influential position in his community. Her mother is only mentioned in relation to her publicly esteemed father and uncle. This is not uncommon, I'm sure, but it does indicate, at least, that Ellet's father was a very public man, busy outside of his home, and that the family relations gave Ellet ample evidence that men were more suited for public life than women.

<sup>45</sup>Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture; Mary Kelley, Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 100-111; Anne Firor Scott, "Almira Lincoln Phelps: The Self-Made Woman in the Nineteenth Century,"

In spite of these "demands" of domesticity, however, as a daughter in a privileged middle-class family, Ellet did gain access to cultural patterns and practices in the larger society. As a student and friend of the eminent physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Ellet's father had acquired a good education and was a man of "remarkable ability" and "cultivated literary taste." His "studious habits" inspired in Ellet an early devotion to reading and writing and an insatiable eagerness to learn. Before the age of eight, Ellet gave "proof of literary predilections" and wrote several "creditable" poems.<sup>46</sup> Ellet's parents encouraged her intellectual and creative inclinations by sending her to the female seminary at Aurora, New York.

Like many young women of means, Ellet benefited from the broadening educational opportunities afforded America's women. Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, there existed a widespread belief among educated Americans that women, as guardians of public virtue, should be more educated in the ideas and appropriate behavior that would ensure the nation's progress. "With the advantages of education," Rev. Joseph Emerson suggested in 1819, "[women] might embellish and improve society." Rush agreed. By training America's future leaders, he stressed, women would

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Making the Invisible Woman Visible, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 113-125.

<sup>46</sup>The National Cyclopaedia, 37; New York Times, 5.



guarantee the survival of the republic.<sup>47</sup> Buoyed by such assumptions, efforts to provide something closer to higher education for women proliferated during Ellet's generation. Female seminaries offered women occasions to cultivate not only their homemaking and parental skills but their intellectual curiosities as well.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the ultimate aim of most female academies was, indeed, to inculcate a sense of female being and place that was decidedly social and domestic, an education outside of the home allowed women a brief chance to explore their own tastes, abilities, and perspectives. Women learned foreign languages, wrote creative prose, and read works by Plutarch, Rollin, Bunyan, Defoe, Shakespeare, Pope, and Scott.<sup>49</sup> As a result, "a small, but real, fraction of America's [mid-nineteenth-century] women" developed a positive "feistiness and aggressiveness."<sup>50</sup> This was certainly true in Ellet's case. She apparently relished her

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<sup>47</sup>Rev. Joseph Emerson, public announcement for a "Course of Lectures on Astronomy," 1819, quoted in Berkin and Norton, Women of America: A History, 184, 188; Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980), Chapter 7, "Education and Intellect in the Early Republic."

<sup>48</sup>Kelley, Chapter 3, "The Season of Instruction" and Scott, 94.

<sup>49</sup>Kelley, 85-89. This is part of Susan Warner's reading list.

<sup>50</sup>Linda K. Kerber, personal interview, 29 November 1990.

experience at Aurora. In her autobiographical sketches, she praises her "accomplished" and scholarly teacher, Susan Marriott. She also highlights her own intellectual endeavors and achievements while in school, most noticeably her skill in Latin, Italian, German, and French, her love of foreign literature, and her "successful" efforts to write verse. She became a prolific poetess and published a volume of poems before she left Aurora in the fall of 1835. Most of these poems, reprinted numerous times in various magazines, reflect on her childhood, reveal her dreams, or contemplate worldly cares and spiritual peace. In 1834, she translated and published Silvio Pellico's Euphemio of Messina. And her tragic play, "Teresa Contarini," an original based on Venetian history, was so successful that in the spring of 1835 it was performed at the Park Theatre in New York City.<sup>51</sup> These achievements and other translations, poems, and plays that appeared in Godey's Ladies Book and Graham's Magazine gave Ellet considerable public exposure. She had uncovered a part of her self and had volunteered it to society. Her culturally privileged youth had granted her a measure of intellectual independence and self-worth which she used to express her own voice and

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<sup>51</sup>"Biographical Sketch," 1854; Poems, Translated and Original, (Philadelphia: Key and Biddle, 1835); Alma Lutz, "Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet," in Edward T. James, ed., Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 569.

to pursue her literary talents. In a modest but telling way, Ellet had stepped beyond her home and had entered into a larger cultural space with an evolving set of values by which she might live.

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But any claim to intellectual autonomy that Ellet may have made bred contradictory and unsettling implications for her self-identity. For though a culturally advantaged woman, she nevertheless remained subject to the dictates of a social order that labeled women as intellectually inferior to and dependent on men. Her social status may have given, but her gender took away. Middle-class daughters, even the more elite, were tied to a certain value system that precluded any identity separate from others. They were meant to serve, not to explore and cultivate their own selves. Thus, literary women often experienced confusion, frustration, and painful self-doubt when they tried to reconcile intellectual aspirations with domestic duties. Intellectual growth and accomplishment in women were not taken seriously by the public -- they were only symbolic of women's function as guarantors of American virtue. Literary women ran the risk of being seen as deviant or of being rejected by respectable society unless they could disguise their vocational activities as acceptable expressions of their prescribed social roles. Elizabeth Ellet, as an upper-middle-class literary woman, seemed destined for the

trials and tribulations that beset many women who tried to become anything different than wife, mother, or servant to others.<sup>52</sup>

But that is getting ahead of the story. For a while, Ellet continued along the path followed by most of her peers. In 1835, she left the schoolroom to become the wife of William Henry Ellet, a graduate of New York's Columbia College who, after earning a medical degree, taught chemistry at his alma mater.<sup>53</sup> To accommodate her husband's fame as the most "superior [chemist] in the Union," the couple moved in 1836 to Columbia, South Carolina, where Dr. Ellet assumed the Chair of the Columbia College Chemistry Department. As a man of "uncommon ability" and genius, Dr. Ellet soon gained "great prominence among the people of Columbia." His spirited lectures

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<sup>52</sup>Kelley; Throughout Private Women, Public Stage, Kelly discusses the conflict of identity that most mid-nineteenth-century authors had to confront. Kelly focuses on a very specific group of women, whom she called the "literary domestics," who remained in the "privacy" of home but wrote for a public audience. These women, like E.D.E.N. Southworth, Catherine Sedgwick, Susan Warner, Caroline Hentz, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, were primarily from upper-middle-class, educated families, like Ellet. The context in which Ellet wrote before about 1840 and the situations she encountered bear a striking resemblance to these literary domestics. Thus I have used Kelley's analysis as a rough guide for understanding Ellet during the thirty years when her lifestyle did conform to what is called the upper-middle-class. (Ellet was not, however, a literary domestic, as this essay will show.)

<sup>53</sup>James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), s.v. "William Henry Ellet."

attracted sizable crowds, and he developed a healthy following among cultivated gentlemen and admiring ladies.<sup>54</sup> During the early years of their marriage, Ellet accepted and fulfilled the domestic role for which she had been trained. Her letters during this period indicate that she remained at home in South Carolina, except when traveling with her husband. Although she continued to study languages and write both poetry and critical essays, she did not appear preoccupied with the public success of her own work.<sup>55</sup> By every indication, she had had what most of her contemporaries thought to be the "good sense" to marry a man of status and fame with whom she could "automatically rise, ... reflecting whatever glory he might provide."<sup>56</sup>

Yet from about 1838 on, Ellet showed increasing signs of dissatisfaction with her domestic situation in South Carolina. It was almost as if she felt alienated, or forgotten, or even useless in light of her husband's great

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<sup>54</sup>M. LaBorde, History of South Carolina College (Columbia: Peter E. Glass, 1859) 263, 209, 265. LaBorde writes that Dr. Ellet's lectures were sometimes filled "with no contemptible infusion of the beauty of [Columbia]."

<sup>55</sup>Based on Ellet's poems, translations, reviews, and articles and on the letters and manuscripts written by, to, or about Ellet, I can say with confidence that Ellet did remain in South Carolina, at least until around 1840. The mailing address of the letters written before 1840 indicates this. Moreover, these letters suggest no angst, like her later letters do, over publishing, publishers, or other, potentially competitive writers. The tone and subject of her earlier letters in comparison with those written in the 1840s and 1850s suggests Ellet's more settled lifestyle.

<sup>56</sup>Scott, 91.

renown. Almost everything she did appeared designed to enhance her own abilities and establish her own reputation as a capable and influential individual. Perhaps because of the attention and public distinction that she had enjoyed before her marriage, Ellet was not adjusting well to her society's requirement that a woman's sphere was a private one. Moreover, she seemed to chafe at the absence of a true literary community in Columbia. Dr. Ellet admitted in December 1838 that "Mrs. E. [was] so exceedingly anxious to quit [Columbia]" that, despite his success at the college, he had "promised" her to accept "the first good situation" that might arise elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

Instead of embracing her "essential" function as helpmate, Ellet worked diligently to improve her Italian and German, to sharpen her critical skills, and to write poetry, reviews, short stories, and even novels. Her efforts resulted in a ceaseless stream of publications. By 1841, Ellet had authored four books, several translations, some articles on Italian and French dramatic poetry, and many of her own tales and poems.<sup>58</sup> To establish her name more

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<sup>57</sup>William Henry Ellet, 27 December 1838, EFE folder, Manuscripts Department, South Carolina Library.

<sup>58</sup>The books that Ellet wrote by 1841 are Family Pictures From the Bible (1841), Scenes in the Life of Joanna of Sicily (1840), The Characters of Schiller (1841), and Country Rambles (1841). Two of her critical essays were "Modern French Poetry," 1837 (which John Gorham Palfrey edited for her) and "Lamartine's Chute d'un Ange," 1838. She wrote short stories about artists and musicians, all having a moral ring to them. Some of her peers' letters

firmly in the minds of publishers, editors, and other writers, she stopped publishing her work anonymously. Having attracted considerably more public recognition, she conspired to associate herself with successful editors and well-known literary figures. Rufus Wilmot Griswold, the notable editor and publisher of Graham's Magazine in New York, gradually became her literary mentor. Both Caroline Gilman, writer, teacher, and editor of The Southern Rose, and Anne Bache, an aspiring novelist, became her frequent correspondents.<sup>59</sup> William Gilmore Simms, the Charleston editor and novelist, acquainted her with influential writers in the South. Once she began publishing in not only lady's magazines but also literary magazines, like The New York Mirror and The Southern Literary Messenger, Ellet's work and name reached a much wider audience. Her publications were generally well-received. Writers called her "one of the best scholars in the country,"<sup>60</sup> and in 1842, Griswold

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indicate that Ellet tried her hand at a novel or two. I have not found any that Ellet wrote, however. Perhaps they were serial novels.

<sup>59</sup>For example, Anne Bache to EFE, 20 December 1838, Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library; EFE to Mrs. Gilman, 29 November [1841?], Ford Collection. In both of these letters, the women are discussing their own work, other women's work, or the difficulties of finding supportive publishers.

<sup>60</sup>EFE to Mrs. Gilman, 29 November [1841?]. On the envelope of this letter, Mrs. Gilman has written this statement.

anthologized nine of her more popular poems.<sup>61</sup> Ellet had indeed made a name for herself beyond her domestic sphere. She appeared to do everything **but** reflect the glory that her husband could provide.

In Ellet's upper-middle-class world, though, this was not acceptable behavior. In fact, for a woman to transgress her appointed social role and apply her talents to the public arena, as Ellet did, was to encroach upon a conventionally male activity and, therefore, to sacrifice one's femininity. Any "'woman with brains'" who tried to apply them in situations other than domestic, two of Ellet's female friends declared, was, in many people's eyes, a woman with a disease.<sup>62</sup> Females were to be subordinate and dependent. Ellet, though, was attentive to her own desires, independent in her actions, and wholly involved in an endeavor to win some public praise. She remained a diseased and "mannish" woman, and therefore no woman at all, as long as she insisted on asserting her autonomy within such a culture. She was a "lost sheep," one contemporary satirist teased, because she so desperately failed to conform.<sup>63</sup> Ellet felt the sting of such censure, but she did not change

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<sup>61</sup>Rufus W. Griswold, The Poets and Poetry of America (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842) 380-382.

<sup>62</sup>Kelly 181, 101, 254. Sara Parton and Caroline Gilman, both Ellet's acquaintances at one time or another, declared and implied, respectively, that society labeled women who thought or wrote as diseased.

<sup>63</sup>Trippings, in Moss, Poe's Major Crisis, 196.



the trajectory of her ambitions. Instead she pushed beyond the constricted boundaries of her upper-middle-class world and entered into a more flexible, formless world where she could determine the values by which she would live.

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Around 1843 Ellet began making frequent visits to New York City. Although Charleston, South Carolina, boasted the South's largest and most active literary scene, it remained a backwater compared to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. With transportation and communication improvements and the centralization of much of the nation's economic activity, these cities now represented the axis of publishing in America. Any writer who hoped to succeed on a national level, William Charvat explains, eventually gravitated to one of these cities where "the discoverers and interpreters of American literary tastes" circulated. Of the three, New York City guaranteed a writer's work and name the widest possible distribution across the United States.<sup>64</sup> Ellet adopted Manhattan as her conduit to America's literary giants and publishing masters. New York provided opportunities for Ellet to pursue her goals as a writer with as much energy and enthusiasm as she wanted. More importantly, New York offered Ellet an escape from the restrictions of her upper-middle-class society.

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<sup>64</sup>William Charvat, Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959) 17-37.

Almost immediately upon visiting New York, Ellet met and began mingling with the city's literary elite. Edgar Allan Poe, Griswold, and Evert Augustus Duyckinck, as well as Lydia Sigourney, Ann Stephens, and Sarah Hale, were some of the writers and editors whom Ellet befriended. While in New York, Ellet wrote, published, taught, and gave public "readings." She became an intimate of Poe, sought aid and advice from Margaret Fuller and Anne Lynch, and seemed to enjoy the soirees and frivolities of New York cultural life.<sup>65</sup> Ellet gradually moved toward the center of a coterie of the literary greats and commanded attention as an aspiring and very promising young authoress.

As she grew intertwined with New York's literary community, however, Ellet's frustrations with her life in South Carolina increased. She complained repeatedly that she had married too young and mentioned to friends that her husband was "rather unwilling" for her to spend so much time away.<sup>66</sup> Ellet claimed, as if she knew, that "to be

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<sup>65</sup>This is a brief summary of information found in works previously mentioned: Bayless; Griswold; Lauvriere; Moss, Poe's Literary Battles; Moss, Poe's Major Crisis; Ostrom; and Walsh.

<sup>66</sup>In at least five different biographical sketches, Ellet is characterized, or characterizes herself, as having married too young, "at the very young age of seventeen." This is repeated so often that one comes to feel that Ellet is complaining about her marriage or trying to justify why she's left her husband for so many days, months, and weeks at a time alone in South Carolina.

EFE to William Roderick Lawrence, n.d., Hoadley Collection, Connecticut Historical Society.

'unpopular' in South Carolina [was] as fatal as the cry of 'maddog.'"<sup>67</sup> Through her poetry she wove subtle strands of anger, distress, and confusion caused by the "iron bonds" that she thought confined her. To "chain the blithe waves" or "hold the laughing leaves still that are fluttering so free," Ellet declared, was to "do murder" to the "dreams" and "visions" that kept her mind so free.<sup>68</sup>

The "vision" that she held of herself as significant, independently worthy, and potentially influential in relation to others did not abide by most mid-nineteenth-century social norms. Her consequent behavior tore at the seams of a tightly spun web of cultural assumptions that denied her claim to autonomy, her intellectual strivings, and her active participation in a public world. How could she, surrounded by such cultural constraints, shape her life to reflect those values by which she wished to live? How could she search for such differences in a culture where they were not to be found? Only by leaving such a place, Ellet decided, would she have the opportunity to explore the visions and ideals that seemed to motivate her thoughts and actions. And so she did, in 1845, when she moved to New

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<sup>67</sup>EFE to the President of South Carolina College, n.d., Griswold MSS, #293, Boston Public Library.

<sup>68</sup>Elizabeth F. Ellet, "Lines To ---," in Thomas Buchanan Read, The Female Poets of America (Philadelphia: E.H. Butler and Company, 1850) 132.

Ellet, "Stanzas," in Read, Female Poets, 135.

Ellet, "The Old Love," in Read, Female Poets, 137.

York City and virtually abandoned her upper-middle-class world for that of New York's literary elite. It was here, if anywhere, Ellet seemed to think, that she could mold social standards and cultural boundaries to conform to the way **she** wanted to live.

## CHAPTER II

Sexual intrigue, vicious gossip, greed, and petty vengeance characterize the culture into which Ellet moved. Few standards and almost no moral conscience appeared to regulate the ambitions and behavior of New York's literary elite. Dubbed "the literati" by Poe, one of the most wanton of them all, this "select" circle of literary intelligentsia seemed to feed on inflated egos that could only survive through the careful manipulation of the public eye.<sup>69</sup> In magazines, newspapers, novels, and histories, the literati promoted and puffed themselves into a radiant immortality. Through the pages of the Knickerbocker, Lewis Gaylord Clark crowned himself one of the "happy few" who were the only truly sophisticated writers in America capable of dazzling and delighting the reading public.<sup>70</sup> Poe trumpeted his own fame when, as editor of the Broadway Journal, he featured several poems that extolled his name, that appropriated phrases from his old poetry, and that beckoned him into

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<sup>69</sup>Edgar Allan Poe coined this phrase in 1846 when he wrote "The Literati of New-York City." In this work he professed to give "some honest opinions at random respecting [the writers'] autorial merits, with occasional words of personality." These articles were highly satirical and slanderous and invited a barrage of criticism against himself and his work.

<sup>70</sup>Perry Miller, The Raven and the Whale (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1956) 15.

closer "friendships" with his female audience.<sup>71</sup> For his part, Cornelius Mathews spoke of himself only in the third person, while Simms ordained himself the literary ambassador from the South.<sup>72</sup>

When not advertising their own accomplishments, the literati maligned and taunted one another into infamy. Indeed, any writer venturing to succeed among this circle, Perry Miller asserts, was "as a lamb to the slaughter" and must beware that this "literary butcher shop" could easily carve one's reputation into insignificance. Writer-editor Charles Briggs declared that Frances Osgood's poetry resembled "a large quantity of water, with a homeopathic addition of milk" that could only be praised "ad nauseam."<sup>73</sup> Simms called the Knickerbocker "'dishonest and trashy'" and exhorted his allies to depict Clark as "a liar and a skunk" and to treat him as the greatest literary fraud of all times. Clark then sneered at Simms' books as

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<sup>71</sup>I am referring to Frances Sargeant Osgood's many "love" poems to Poe in the early- to mid-1840s. Poe published some of her poems that had not appeared in other magazines. See Walsh, Plumes In the Dust.

<sup>72</sup>Walt Whitman, too, was notorious as a self-booster and even wrote anonymous reviews of his work.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas Dunn English, 1844, or, The Power of the "S.F.", in Moss, Poe's Major Crisis, 103. "S.F." stands for "Startled Falcon," a secret organization whose purpose was to swing the election of 1844 to the Democrats. The locale of this novel is New York City and the episodes depict crime, political intrigue, and love. English uses the novel as political propaganda and, at the same time, as a satire of the literati. He includes Ellet, Fuller, Osgood, Horace Greeley, Simms, and Poe.

"unreadable ... drugs on the market." He also disparaged Poe as an inebriate and a "jaded hack." Poe's much-celebrated "raven" was really a "base [and] treacherous hound," Clark concluded. An enraged Poe dismissed Clark as moronic and "'noticeable for nothing.'" He said, too, that Lydia Child could walk past a dozen times and he probably would not even notice,<sup>74</sup> that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow plagiarized several of his poems, and that Henry Cary was a vile, ugly man. And almost all of the literati assailed any New England transcendentalist as a "compound-gendered" she-man, an "ungrateful eater of bran pudding," and a "galvanized squash.'" New Yorkers, they liked to insist, could not afford to be such prudes when the secret spring of genius lay in the vainglorious pursuit of prestige.<sup>75</sup>

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Such pride was not uncommon in the city that by 1820 was America's fastest growing metropolis and boasted a population of over 200,000 that would quadruple by 1860.<sup>76</sup> During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, New York evolved into the new nation's urban, industrial, and economic center and attracted thousands each year to its activity and opportunity. Every class, race, ethnic group,

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<sup>74</sup>Griswold, ed., Works, "The Literati," 100.

<sup>75</sup>Most of the information in this paragraph was found in Miller, Raven and the Whale, 7-173.

<sup>76</sup>Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (New York: Knopf Publishers, 1986), 43.

and religious preference, it seemed, were evident inside New York's expanding city limits. Not surprisingly, New Yorkers' warring ideals and conflicting social practices generated rather daunting cultural anxieties.<sup>77</sup> George Templeton Strong, a respected New York lawyer with considerable cultural refinement, complained of the poverty, the rampant crime, and the civil unrest that escalated with the increasing diversification of New York's populace. Although he seemed concerned that New York's turbulence and volatility might impede its immediate progress, he appeared certain that his city was destined to assume cultural leadership for the nation.<sup>78</sup> As America's financial and commercial hub, New York had become the arbiter of many of America's tastes, attitudes, and expectations. It served as a fluid channel through which the rest of the nation's ideas and values moved. And as the heart of America's variety and difference, Strong's contemporary implied, New York offered possibility and promise for the nation at large.<sup>79</sup> It was

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<sup>77</sup>Stansell writes at length about this. Although her work focuses primarily on New York's working-class women, she depicts New York as a place where every social class had an equally influential voice in the creation of the city's culture in mid-nineteenth-century America. New York was open for questions and opinions from all sides and, therefore, represented the city of change and opportunity in America.

<sup>78</sup>Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952).

<sup>79</sup>Louis Auchincloss, The Hone and Strong Diaries of Old Manhattan (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).



the place to be, the Broadway Journal declared in 1845, for anyone hoping to influence the development of American society.<sup>80</sup>

The dynamic publishing industry that emerged in New York in the mid-nineteenth century reflected the city's position as a leading cultural center. Publishers, editors, and authors gravitated to New York as a prime location for determining and more carefully directing the nation's literary preferences. Earlier, literary publishing had been provincial and decentralized. High production costs, an inefficient distribution system, poor transportation, and the absence of a foreseeable audience forced writers to depend upon local printing services and accept limited sales. These difficulties gradually subsided, though, with the nation's ferocious economic expansion, technological advancement, and transportation improvements during the first several decades of the nineteenth century. As a result, a new publishing "empire" arose out of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Blessed by their proximity to rivers, oceans, and railroads, publishers in these three cities developed much more sophisticated methods of distribution and promotion and thus could claim for

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<sup>80</sup>Broadway Journal I (January 4, 1845): 1. The Journal's idea that "New York [was] fast becoming, if she be not already, America" seemed common among many New Yorkers in the 1840s.

themselves the attention of a national readership.<sup>81</sup> New York became the leader of this tripartite empire and, by the 1840s, soared above both Boston and Philadelphia in terms of sales, diversity of publications, and number of publishing firms. Thus many writers, like Ellet herself, earnestly working to establish a wider audience of their own, began to adopt New York as their vocational headquarters. To "stand at the confluence of the greatest number of the streams of knowledge," one South Carolinian pronounced, and to be where "all the dealers in intellectual works are ... centered," a New Yorker echoed, writers of every sort were finding their way to New York City.<sup>82</sup>

Aspiring authors brought high expectations that the New York experience might catapult them into national fame. No one, Horace Greeley declared in 1839, "[could] refuse to acknowledge that New York ... towered above [its] sister cities" as the bellwether of America's literary development.<sup>83</sup> New York offered variety to its readers and

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<sup>81</sup>Charvat, Chapter 1, "Publishing Centers," 1-37; Cathy Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), all sections on publishing; Kelly, 7-8.

<sup>82</sup>Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines: 1741-1850, vol. 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1930), 202, 375-77. As a magazine center, New York was three times as large as Philadelphia and Boston in 1830, and as much as five times larger than either by 1850. The South Carolinian was S.C. Carpenter, an editor who eventually moved his publishing house to New York.

<sup>83</sup>Mott 376.

enticed authors by remaining open to innovative endeavors and fresh approaches. Every subject and every style seemed represented. Criminal, erotic, and demonic prose satisfied a hunger for the sensational and shocking. Seamy adventures, political satire, and romantic intimacy prospered alongside moral instruction, religious prescriptions, and domestic concerns in mass produced novels, poems, essays, editorials, reviews, and histories.<sup>84</sup> Periodical publishing burgeoned as the quickest way to disseminate information and ideas. Magazines and newspapers as dissimilar as The Lady's Companion, the American Agriculturalist, the Christian Parlor Magazine, the farcical John-Donkey, and the Democratic Review, all inaugurated in the 1830s, reflected New York's heterogeneous society. This fecund literary diversity resulted, in part, from the dramatic improvements in print technology and marketing procedures. In addition, broadened opportunities for education substantially increased the literacy rate by the 1840s and in turn sparked a higher and more varied demand for literature of all kinds.

Yet the fundamental reason for the assortment and plenty that New York produced was the burgeoning number of

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<sup>84</sup>See David S. Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), especially chapters 6 and 7.

writers who enjoyed the chance to market their work. Prior to the 1820s, the precarious relationship between publishers and authors precluded many writers from doing so. Lacking capital and having few stable business practices, publishing firms repeatedly failed, formed new combinations, or arbitrarily altered operating procedures. They had little incentive to share their earnings with an author, to pay for a copyright, or, for that matter, to shoulder the expense and irritation of manufacturing when they could simply reprint cheap British imports. Hence, writers assumed all or most of the risk of publication. But with a limited audience and, probably, limited funds, the untried author could hardly hope for a substantial profit. So only those with sufficient prominence, wealth, leisure, or nerve sought to publish, and writing remained, more or less, a "gentleman's" calling.

In the second quarter of the century, however, as the industry advanced with the nation, publishers began to accept more responsibility for cultivating America's literature. They produced more books each season, advertised them in magazines, and offered attractive discounts to booksellers as an inducement to boost sales. By 1850, many had enough capital to complete the entire job of publishing with little financial assistance from authors. Some, in fact, began to **pay** writers for their work. George Graham, for example, awarded up to twelve dollars for a page

of prose and fifty dollars for a poem printed in Graham's Magazine.<sup>85</sup> Other publishers and editors, like Griswold, Briggs, Simms, and Mathews, encouraged American authors by refusing to publish any foreign literature in their periodicals. Concerned that the extensive circulation and popularity of foreign literature was impeding the progress of America's own writers, these "literary nationalists" grew determined to introduce as many different kinds of American writing as often as they could. Some even pushed for an international copyright in order to hasten the advent of a native literature.<sup>86</sup> In their search for the American voice and form, they welcomed any piece of work, from almost any writer, that was "'in tone, in character, [and] in power, purely and decidedly American.'"<sup>87</sup>

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This enthusiasm among publishers for a national expression and style, combined with fewer commercial hassles and pecuniary strains for authors, meant many more publishing opportunities for a greater variety of people. Elizabeth Ellet, for one, gained a license to speak and an

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<sup>85</sup>Kelly 19.

<sup>86</sup>Miller 98. The desire for a national literature also reflected a general concern that the country had no unique "identity" and still remained dependent for its "character" on England. I will expand on this idea in Chapter Three.

<sup>87</sup>Mott 391; the information in the previous two paragraphs comes from Charvat, 38-60; Chapter Two, entitled "Author and Publisher" and Kelly 8-12.

admission to fame as a result of the progressive changes in the publishing industry. From the time she began her "career" as an author in 1833 to the time of her death in 1877, Ellet published over 700 articles, poems, translations, stories, and biographical sketches in as many as fifteen different periodicals.<sup>88</sup> Listed as a "'Principal Contributor'" to Graham's and a "valuable" asset to Godey's, Ellet won prestige through her association with the two most broadly circulated magazines of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>89</sup> By the early 1840s, she had become known as "a superior linguist" and a writer of "no ordinary courage."<sup>90</sup> She wrote at least fourteen books and saw ten reprinted several times to meet an impressive demand.<sup>91</sup> Her poetry appeared in three anthologies. Numerous magazines featured passages from her books, and reviewers gave her work considerable attention.

Ellet acquired so much clout among her publishers that by the time Women of the American Revolution appeared in 1848, she was able to negotiate "a larger than usual"

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<sup>88</sup>Clyde N. Wilson, ed. Dictionary of Literary Biography (University of South Carolina: Gale Research Company, 1984), vol. 30, American Historians, 1607-1865, s.v. "Elizabeth F. Ellet."

<sup>89</sup>Mott 546 and Godey's Lady's Book, January 1849, 66.

<sup>90</sup>May 359; Review of "The Characters of Schiller," 232.

<sup>91</sup>National Union Catalogue, Pre-1956 Imprints, (London: Mansell, 1968-1981).

royalty for her work.<sup>92</sup> A few years later, during the mid-1850s, the New York Express hired Ellet as its literary editor, a position which she held simultaneously with two other editing jobs.<sup>93</sup> Ellet's success carried her to England in the 1860s, where "[her] reputation [was] so well-known," Jared Sparks observed, that she would have no trouble "attract[ing] notice" and "gain[ing] ... friends."<sup>94</sup> Such distinction in the literary community and popularity as a writer would not have been possible twenty or thirty years earlier, when the conditions of publishing enabled few but the eminent or affluent the opportunity to author their work and reach a sizable audience.

In many respects, Elizabeth Ellet exemplified successful mid-nineteenth-century women writers. Most had privileged childhoods and received as much education, whether formal or informal, as women could have reasonably expected in their time. Many were quite precocious as

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<sup>92</sup>EFE to Messrs Carey and Hart, 8 February 1848.

<sup>93</sup>Office of the New York Express, 21 June 1858, Stauffer Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library. This document is, in part, an announcement of Ellet's position as Literary Editor.

EFE to Mr. Balmannos, 15 August [1858?], Ford Collection. In this letter, Ellet says that she is busy editing another small newspaper and writing a housekeeping book at the same time as her Express job. This housekeeping book must be The Practical Housekeeper (1857), which, sources record, Ellet edited.

<sup>94</sup>Jared Sparks to EFE, 15 March 1862, Sparks Manuscripts, E.F. Ellet folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

poets, playwrights, or storytellers and, like Ellet, used their early work as introductions into the literary world.<sup>95</sup> Starting with Catherine Sedgwick and Lydia Child in the 1820s, women became eager contributors to a broad array of magazines and newspapers in which they wrote tales, sketches, and essays. They were the nation's most prolific poets by the mid-1830s and, thirty years after that, were writing nearly three-fourths of America's novels.<sup>96</sup> Many women writers grew so popular that they could demand from publishers broader circulation or higher royalties for their books. Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, "Fanny Fern," and several others wrote colossal best-sellers. Lydia Sigourney and Frances Osgood wrote poetry that won the acclaim of some of New York's most reputable critics. Women's periodicals, too, enjoyed tremendous success. A few of them claimed higher subscription rates and earnings than any of their male competitors and set standards for the signing of articles, the use of copyright, and the promotion of advertising.<sup>97</sup> Male writers, editors, and publishers acknowledged the active participation of females in the literary community and gradually came to view them as likely rivals for national renown. Though many men

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<sup>95</sup>Kelley and Scott, in "Almira Lincoln Phelps."

<sup>96</sup>Emily Stipes Watts, The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) 67; Kelley 26.

<sup>97</sup>Douglas 229.



grouched with Hawthorne about the "d---d mob of scribbling women" spewing forth literary "trash," they all recognized that publishing had offered women the chance to express their opinions, secure public notice, and mold the attitudes and perspectives of a large reading audience.<sup>98</sup>

Nevertheless, most women writers could not easily assume new roles as public actors with a public voice. They felt uncomfortable and insecure with the position that authorship awarded them in the larger society. As middle- or upper-middle-class women, they remained subject to powerful cultural directives that limited them to deferential, domestic roles. Society had taught them that to step into the public arena was to edge toward disgrace as eccentrics in a highly conventional world. So not surprisingly, the majority of women writers were extremely apprehensive about publishing their work, for it represented a "will or desire ... to test or resist" the limitations imposed upon their lives.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, it symbolized, for many, a search for themselves as autonomous and intellectually legitimate individuals. But this was not an acceptable endeavor for middle-class women. Realizing this, most women writers tried to cloak their "assertiveness" behind a screen of conformity to middle-class norms. They

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<sup>98</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne's statement in 1855. Quoted from: Watts 68.

<sup>99</sup>Kelley 125.

worked behind closed doors or in secluded spots. They claimed to write out of "'feeling for others'" and "the good of humanity."<sup>100</sup> Some of them published anonymously or used male pseudonyms and, in a sense, labeled themselves as non-writers by denying any connection with their work. And almost all women writers tried to lead very "private" lives, "committed to [a] woman's realm."<sup>101</sup> When fame came their way, then, as it often did, they seldom knew how to respond. Prestige, many discovered, was a dangerously seductive fantasy which threatened to disrupt their identity as women. It exposed them before the public eye, "'intoxicated [them] with flattery,'" and marked them as important. Yet at the same time, Catherine Sedgwick thought, if they partook in its pleasures, they would likely be lured into the "'vanity'" of the masculine world and soon be rejected by their middle-class peers. To avoid or ignore the fame, therefore, and remain inconspicuous was what most women writers decided to do.<sup>102</sup>

Elizabeth Ellet, however, indulged in her distinction, and decided, instead, to invite and pursue public notice. She rarely published anonymously and was, in fact, notorious

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<sup>100</sup>Kelley 287.

<sup>101</sup>Kelley 220.

<sup>102</sup>Kelley, 29-31.

for signing her compositions with her full name.<sup>103</sup> She announced her projects and completed them, literally, under the eyes of some of the country's greatest scholars. Furthermore, she felt confident as a public writer and deemed her work essential for a "truthful picture" of American life.<sup>104</sup> Ellet thus rebelled against the very notion of a separate woman's sphere. The more popular she became, the more frequently she left her home in South Carolina. For three years, until December 1848, Ellet abandoned Columbia for a life of her own in New York City.<sup>105</sup> Although she remained financially dependent on

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<sup>103</sup>In The Trippings, page 196, Charles Briggs writes that "Lizzy, [who] had a passion for literature, ... greatly [grieved] ... her parents ... [by sending] her compositions to the magazines signed with her full name." Ellet published her first volume of poems anonymously and occasionally signed her articles "C.M.." But for the most part, her "Obituary" recalls, Ellet presented herself as "Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet."

<sup>104</sup>EFE to James Fenimore Cooper, 11 March 1848, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

<sup>105</sup>South Carolina College Board of Trustees Report, 3 May 1848, Department of Archives, McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina. At this meeting, Dr. Ellet's upcoming resignation is discussed.

Other "Ellet scholars" disagree. In fact, Alma Lutz states in Notable American Women that Ellet began living in New York after 1848, when she and her husband moved there together. Before that time, Lutz and others say, Ellet only "visited" New York City. Ellet's permanent residence during this time was, actually, Columbia. She lived with different friends and her brother when in New York. But the postmarks on her letters indicate that Ellet spent the great majority of her time in New York during these three years and only visited Columbia. She came and went whenever she pleased. Moreover, one source implies that the reason for Dr. Ellet's resignation in 1848 was that he was needed in New York to help Ellet out of an embarrassing quarrel she had fallen in

her husband, she believed and declared that she was as "free as a bird on the spray" and could be "fettered" by no one.<sup>106</sup> Ellet was eager for a significant position and an audible voice beyond the boundaries of home. So when the opportunity arose, she readily moved from a private to a public world. She did not advance to the public of the upper-middle-class, though, because there, she knew, few women would be approved. She went, rather, to the public of the literary marketplace, where neither women nor men chose to live within a social framework that set absolute rules, dictated functions, or limited the possibility for growth.

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The literary marketplace, centered in New York City, controlled the exchange of printed ideas and information among authors and regulated the flow of this material to the American public. It evolved, in part, out of the need for a more fluid and less haphazard reciprocity between American writers and their readers. Before the advent of mass-produced books and a literate middle class in the 1820s, people wrote for limited constituencies whose literary tastes and expectations they understood. Reading remained an activity for a differentiated elite who often enjoyed direct communication with authors. The familiarity and

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with Griswold, which resulted in a rather unpleasant libel suit against her.

<sup>106</sup>"Coquette's Song," Broadway Journal II (December 13, 1845): 349.

reliability of such a narrow following assured most writers that their work would receive an audience. The economic, technological, and social transitions during the first half of the nineteenth century, however, generated a democratization of American literature. A greater variety of individuals published for a larger, more diverse, and less consistent readership. Both men and women now produced for an audience of men, women, and children from every region and class.<sup>107</sup> The public that writers tried to target had become an elusive, amorphous "mass" that seemed "unknown, anonymous, and distant." Most authors had few ideas about what subjects and styles might satisfy the literary demands of this heterogenous mass and they had no effective way to determine this for themselves. Consequently, writers and readers grew asunder and there was no guarantee that a writer's work would gain an audience.<sup>108</sup>

Acutely aware of the vanity in venturing to foretell the inclinations of the "fickle" public and highly sensitive to the financial risks involved if their predictions proved

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<sup>107</sup>According to Mary Kelley, 90% of the adult white population, male and female, became literate during the first part of the nineteenth century. This translated into a \$10,000,000 rise in gross income derived from trade in books from 1820 to 1850. Kelley 10-11.

<sup>108</sup>R. Jackson Wilson, Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) 14, 242; Charvat 37; Davidson, Revolution and the Word.

incorrect, authors turned to publishers for support.<sup>109</sup> Publishing had matured into a profession in which every aspect, from manufacturing to distribution, was managed by specialists and funded, almost entirely, with its own profits. Writers grew dependent on this burgeoning expertise and looked to publishers as their conduit to a reading audience.<sup>110</sup> As intermediaries between the creators and consumers of American literature, publishers developed a keen appreciation for the interests and objectives of both parties. They interpreted public preferences according to the sales and circulation of their products and then informed writers of the genre, content, and even length that would most likely appeal to their particular audiences. John Wiley, of Wiley and Putnam Publishers, for example, held samples of Ellet's work in his library and notified her when the demand for the subject or style of her writing increased.<sup>111</sup> Publishers' efforts to

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<sup>109</sup>Wilson 14; "fickle" is the term that many nineteenth-century writers used to describe the American public.

<sup>110</sup>When I use the term "publishers," I refer to not only the individuals but also to all of the "experts" that made the publishing "empire" possible. Editors, for example, actually had a much closer relationship to readers and writers than did publishers. But they worked under the instruction of publishers and, therefore, reflected publishers' opinions and perspectives. I use the term quite loosely and assume that anything printed by a publisher does reflect his or her general views.

<sup>111</sup>EFE to Evert A. Duyckinck, 22 November [18??], Duyckinck Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library. In this letter, Ellet writes to Duyckinck, one of the

nourish America's literary appetite inspired a steady stream of popular literature. By mediating the exchange of information for goods, publishers established a central market where readers and writers could meet to discover and satisfy their respective needs. This broadening literary marketplace reduced the anonymous mass of American readers to clearly recognizable consumers and pointed writers in the direction of prosperity.<sup>112</sup>

Yet the price for this service was high. As the middlemen between readers and writers, publishers gained greater control over the literary flow. They could steer the public demand and adjust the authors' supply in accord with what they believed the nation's literature should be. Many employed "puffers" to write exaggerated and deliberately flattering reviews of their favored books.<sup>113</sup> Others appended columns of "gossip, chit-chat, ... and light sagacity" to magazines and newspapers as a roundabout way of

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editors for Wiley and Putnam, and asks him to put three volumes of German tales on "remarkable crimes" in Wiley's library so that he can look over them and decide if Ellet should spend the time translating them for publication.

<sup>112</sup>The analyses that Charvat, Reynolds, Wilson, and Kelley make of the nineteenth-century literary market and the evidence that I have found in Miller's Raven and the Whale and Ellet's letters all support this idea.

<sup>113</sup>Kelley 9.

wheedling attention toward particular writers.<sup>114</sup> And almost all publishers tried to shape their authors' creative output to fit the specific needs of consumers. In doing so, they often assumed a dictatorial stance over writers. George Putnam, the publisher of Herman Melville's Pierre, dismissed his book as "inexcusable" and supersensuous "insanity" that belonged only "[in] a school-boy's copy-book." Such a vehement reaction coerced Melville to promise Putnam that his next novel would "contain nothing to shock the fastidious."<sup>115</sup> In a similarly overbearing manner, publisher James T. Fields compelled Nathaniel Hawthorne to prepare one novel every five months for almost four straight years. As a result, perhaps, Hawthorne's art "suffered a crackup" and he declared, quite prophetically, that "'too great an effort ... [would] be [his] death.'"<sup>116</sup> In the process, though, Fields had rendered the nation a supply of good literature and had earned for himself an illustrious name.

Such prestige, along with its concomitant, money, animated most publishers. With their ability to gauge

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<sup>114</sup>Miller 19; Lewis Gaylord Clark, for example, initiated "The Editor's Table" in the Knickerbocker and used it "to inform the nation about [the] glittering gentlemen" in his exclusive circle of literati.

<sup>115</sup>Miller 319-321; Putnam offered this opinion of Pierre through an article written by Fitz-James O'Brien, one of the frequent contributors to his magazine, Putnam's.

<sup>116</sup>Charvat 57-59; Hawthorne died three months after he made this statement in 1864.



popular literary tastes and, in a sense, select the nation's literature, publishers held highly influential - and competitive - positions in society. On the front pages of periodicals, they quarrelled over whose publications were the most "American," whose contained the fewest grammatical errors, whose promoted the more brilliant writers, and whose were the most likely to fold. Wiley and Putnam called Harper's Monthly Magazine an "ever-living insult to the brains of Americans."<sup>117</sup> The Democratic Review concluded that Louis Godey generated "inanity itself."<sup>118</sup> New York publishers chastised their New England competitors by professing that their writers had nothing to share but mediocre abstractions with only faint shadows of sense. Caught in the crossfire, authors became the crucial pawns in a vicious game for fortune and fame. They were made to do slave labor, Poe griped in several satirical sketches, to feed the ambitions of an "irredeemably corrupt" group of people.<sup>119</sup> Their work was often reviewed "without regard to [its] quality," Griswold admitted, but according to the reputation of its publisher.<sup>120</sup> Authors were, almost literally, bought and sold among publishers as the latters' prosperity rose and fell. In a sense, they had been

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<sup>117</sup>Miller 303.

<sup>118</sup>Mott 348-349.

<sup>119</sup>Reynolds 229-230.

<sup>120</sup>Kelley 9.

commodified for the use of those who, in theory, served only as mediators in their relations with the American public.

This transformation of authors into laborers turned the literary marketplace into an open field of brutal competition. As commodities to be culled at the whim of another, writers knew that the possibility of rejection was as unbounded as the promise of approval.<sup>121</sup> To survive, they had to attract the attention and win the favor of America's publishers. But they could not do so with good literature alone. Through their actions and attitudes, too, they had to present themselves as worthy of a publisher's time and effort. Those writers eager to succeed in the market tried to craft a public personality that would encourage recognition of their work. They fastened themselves to literary cliques, claimed association with the more prestigious writers, or often relocated to be near their publishers. Some held soirees and gave public readings. A few bold spirits published anonymous reviews of their own work.<sup>122</sup> Authors relied on their peers, too, to

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<sup>121</sup>Wilson 13; although this sentence comes almost directly out of Wilson's book, I use it to make a different argument than Wilson's. Wilson says that writers had an unmediated relation-ship with the American public, whereas I think that, in proportion to the size of the nineteenth-century reading audience, there was very little unmediated interaction between American readers and writers.

<sup>122</sup>RWG, "Statement," Griswold MSS, #453, Boston Public Library. According to Griswold, Ellet published a review of his Female Poets even though several of her own poems appeared in it.

help them mold a public image. In fact, many seemed willing to do almost anything in exchange for support. Griswold "puffed" some dreadful writers merely to sustain an alliance with Fields, and Frances Osgood had an affair with Poe in response to his love for her work.<sup>123</sup> Highly protective of any assistance they earned, most authors were quick to assail those who threatened their name. Scribbling gossip, satire, and embarrassing truths, they tried to hold their opponents at bay. Charles Briggs maligned Simms as a "pompous" pest and swore that Poe lacked part of his brain.<sup>124</sup> Margaret Fuller was termed "'an ill-tempered ... old maid'" with an habitual sneer on her face.<sup>125</sup> And the "most tedious, tiresome, and intolerable" mind, Hawthorne believed, belonged to Henry David Thoreau.<sup>126</sup>

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Such a babel of contentious voices and egotistical aims

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<sup>123</sup>Kelley 9; no one really knows if Osgood and Poe had an affair. And if they did, certainly no one knows the motivation behind it (besides the obvious). Most of the Poe scholars, though, do discuss this affair and cite its beginnings with Poe's interest in Osgood's poetry.

<sup>124</sup>Trippings, in Moss, Poe's Major Crisis, 198-199. Briggs describes Poe's head as "very pale, [with a] small face, which terminate[s] at a narrow point in the place of a chin; ... his head [has] the appearance of a balloon, ... [and though] his forehead [has] an intellectual appearance, ... in that part of it which phrenologists appropriate for the home of the moral sentiments, it [is] quite flat."

<sup>125</sup>Bell Gale Chevigny, The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings (The Feminist Press, 1976) 185; Griswold, ed., Works, "The Literati," 79.

<sup>126</sup>Miller 137.

reflects a culture whose members were trapped by the forces of the marketplace. As commodities to be bought by publishers and sold to American readers, authors' work, lifestyles, and personalities had to bow to external controls. These controls often induced a "foul" ambition to be noticed, selected, and sustained.<sup>127</sup> The resulting gossip, intrigue, vengeance, and greed became the standards for survival and the imperatives for success. When Elizabeth Ellet moved into this world, she quickly conformed to its ways and did everything in her power to alert people of her presence. Along with the other "literati" of New York City, she lived inside the eight square blocks that encompassed New York's publishing community. She allied herself with a celebrated group of literary nationalists, the "Young Americans," and adjusted much of her work to mirror their intellectual positions.<sup>128</sup> Ellet emulated

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<sup>127</sup>Wilson 19; he uses this phrase in reference to the literary marketplace.

<sup>128</sup>Moss xvii; Miller 71-87. The "Young Americans" was a group of men, probably no women, who believed that the literature written by Americans should reflect the unique character of the country. Initiated in 1836 under the title "Tetractys Club," this group reflects the concern that many had about the absence of a distinctly "American" literature. They advocated the international copyright and the exclusion of all British literature from American periodicals. The Club's original members were Evert Duyckinck, William Jones, Jedediah Auld, and Russell Trevett.

There is no evidence that Ellet actually joined a group called the "Young Americans." However, because the postmarks on her letters often correspond with the Tetracties' meeting place - 20 Clinton Place, I am quite sure that she associated with them frequently and was meant to be included when writers commented on the "Young

Griswold, Simms, Duyckinck, and Poe and endeavored to interest them in her writing. During the height of Poe's popularity, for example, she "asked an introduction to him and followed him everywhere."<sup>129</sup> She even composed a series of "flirtatious poetic effusions" to him that were meant to excite his critical approval, not his romantic consent.<sup>130</sup> Ellet frequented the salons of the city, wanted to "invite all the literati and famous artists" to her soirees, and tried to present herself as a congenial young author with a tremendous "passion" for life.<sup>131</sup>

More often than not, though, Ellet's passion flared into aggressive assaults against those who obstructed her

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Americans" in their essays or books.

<sup>129</sup>Passages, 256.

<sup>130</sup>"Ellet," Notable, 569; Walsh 134. One of the poems that Ellet wrote to Poe is entitled "The Coquette's Song" and was published in the Broadway Journal in December, 1845. Please enjoy the first stanza:

Ah yes -- gentle sir -- I will own  
 I ne'er saw perfection till now;  
 That I never -- no never -- have known  
 A smile such as yours -- I'll allow.  
 And your eyes -- Oh, they speak to the soul  
 With their glances as bright as the day!  
 But I mean to keep my heart whole --  
 So away with your love-vows -- away.  
 Away -- Away --  
 Away with your love-vows -- away!

This poem apparently had a profound effect on Poe, for he did go away from Ellet and never returned from his more fruitful affair with Frances Osgood.

<sup>131</sup>Trippings, in Moss, Crisis, 196-197.

path to prominence. After Poe rejected her "love" poems, described her as "much inclined to embonpoint," and then accused her of plagiarism, Ellet unleashed a vindictive campaign that hastened his literary demise.<sup>132</sup> In addition to the rumors she spread about his creeping insanity and salacious excess, Ellet wrote anonymous, abusive letters to his wife Virginia "documenting" his debauchery.<sup>133</sup> She acted similarly toward Griswold's third wife, Charlotte. When Griswold censured Ellet's writing as "feeble, sickly, ... [and] splenetic ... twattle" that no one should read, Ellet viciously persecuted Griswold for over three years. With the help of her friend Ann Stephens, she informed Charlotte of her husband's "obscene ... falsehoods" and successfully convinced her not to grant him the divorce that he so earnestly desired.<sup>134</sup> Several years later, in 1861, Ellet pounced again, this time to dispel the rumor that she was the mistress of Dr. Charles A. Phelps. Her reprisal involved two incidents of kidnapping and another plea for

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<sup>132</sup>"The Literati," in Works, 203.

<sup>133</sup>Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 213-214; according to Poe, these letters proved so torturous that on her death-bed Virginia declared that "Mrs. [Ellet] had been her murderer."

<sup>134</sup>Passages 219-229; EFE to Charlotte Griswold, #300, Boston Public Library; RWG, "Statement," #463, Boston Public Library. There is much more to this story, which no one really understands clearly. Ellet and Stephens actively participated in Griswold's divorce trial -- they wrote statements for the court and came to witness the trial everyday. They were wholly determined to destroy Griswold's reputation and to deplete his energy as a man.

divorce.<sup>135</sup> Almost no year passed when Ellet did not feel compelled to defend herself against the slander and abuse of her literary peers. As late as 1868, an acquaintance warned that "[Ellet] would resent anything that looked like a personal attack on her."<sup>136</sup> This behavior, however, was quite common among the New York literary elite. Pushed and pulled by the mercurial literary market, authors were often driven to take ruthlessly competitive measures that might secure their status and name.

In conforming to these market demands, however, Ellet ironically found the independence that she had lacked as a member of the middle class. She found a public which permitted her intellectual curiosity, noticed her capabilities, and paid attention to her opinions and ideas. She also discovered a culture where men and women worked side by side, played similar social roles, and enjoyed the same opportunities to succeed. The marketplace enabled Ellet to transcend the social boundaries of gender that defined her as a wife, a mother, or a daughter, but not as an individual. In the market, Ellet had become a commodity. As such, she was shelved with all the other authors for publishers to buy and sell. Like every writer, she was vulnerable to the shifts in public tastes. But by adjusting

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<sup>135</sup>EFE to Jared Sparks, 21 September 1861, MS Sparks, E.F. Ellet Folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>136</sup>Passages, 193.

her work and her image accordingly, she, like any other author, could be sold to America's capricious readers in return for fortune and fame. This exchangeability was the fundamental criterion for achievement in the literary world. Potentially, at least, every author who remained active in the literary marketplace had the same opportunity to be exchanged because, as commodities, they were all equally susceptible to the forces of the market. Whether male or female, the author who attracted the most attention and promised to generate the most profit would own the greatest success. The middle-class principles that placed men and women in separate spheres and then assigned them value according to the functions they performed were much less significant in the literary marketplace. Such gender regulations were subsumed under more powerful market mechanisms and became of secondary importance in determining the attitudes and actions of the literary elite. Commercialism displaced social ideology and left men and women with a more equal access to fame.<sup>137</sup>

To be sure, socially constructed notions of gender,

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<sup>137</sup>Certainly, not every author was motivated solely by commercialism. Artistic, religious, political, or other personal goals surely played a role in determining some authors' actions within the marketplace and decisions about what to write. To say that the market alone steered writers' work is too simple. However, for this essay, I think it is sufficient to point out that, in its context, the market had such tremendous power that it could override the authority that gender assumed in defining men and women's roles.



which designated women as essentially feminine and therefore "soft, subdued, and soothing" dependents, carried over into the marketplace.<sup>138</sup> In fact, such assumptions remained integral to the ways that men and women authors perceived one another. Griswold voiced the views of many literary men when he insisted that intellectual women were "incapable" of affection and that it was absolutely absurd to deny "the distinctions of [men's and women's] faculties and duties."<sup>139</sup> Male writers derogatorily referred to their female counterparts as a "species" of "'Veryblues'" whose work "inflicted ... cruel and unusual punishment" upon American readers and, thus, by the rights of the Constitution should not have to be endured.<sup>140</sup>

These opinions, however, did not dictate the ways that men and women interacted with one another in the literary marketplace. There, men and women competed on equal terms. The market had transformed the social ideas of gender into tools for authors to use to further ensure their ability to be exchanged. Just as men traduced women by highlighting their femininity as an insurmountable barrier to good writing, women maligned men as consummate liars whose degeneracy was enough to render their work worthless.

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<sup>138</sup>Kelley 111.

<sup>139</sup>Watts 72.

<sup>140</sup>Miller 181; The Power of the S.F., in Moss, Poe's Major Crisis, 101, 104.

Women's repeated claims to spiritual superiority or moral excellence, for example, were often meant to frustrate men's efforts to establish worthy reputations.<sup>141</sup> Like Poe's ugly face, Ellet's provincial background, Margaret Fuller's sneer, Simms's arrogance, or the Transcendentalists' bran pudding, gender became a device to help navigate more smoothly through an unmerciful marketplace. But gender was not **essential** in this literary culture, for any of these instruments, some much more potent than gender, could be used to trip one's literary adversaries or to ally with those who could help one succeed. The market construction of gender, then, loosened the chains that constrained most women to society's prescription that they live quiet, private lives in obeisance to men.<sup>142</sup>

Elizabeth Ellet knew this. She moved into this world understanding that she could leave behind the cultural assumptions that denied her claim to autonomy, her

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<sup>141</sup>Poe's statement that "'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned'" reflects the active influence that women could and often did have over men, in the context of the marketplace. Ostrom 231.

<sup>142</sup>Essential to understanding Ellet -- why she chose to move to New York City and why she wrote Women of the American Revolution in the manner that she did -- is an understanding and acknowledgement that gender has no permanency. It is not a fixed idea that can be defined in a particular way. Its significance depends on its context and it must be considered anew each time this context changes.

See Jean Boydston's Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) for an excellent model of the interactive nature of gender and the marketplace in the early-nineteenth century.

intellectual endeavors, and her active participation in the public sphere. Here she could pursue the vision that she held of herself as an important, worthy, and influential individual. The commodification of authors put Ellet on equal terms with her peers. Her deviant and unethical behavior, a standard for survival among the literati, was a manifestation of her desire for a favorable position and an audible voice outside of the confines of home. Ellet's private ambitions and dreams found expression in the public of the literary marketplace. The private and public thus merged, in a sense, and promised Ellet an opportunity to pursue her vision of possibility.

### CHAPTER III

This collapse of the barrier between private and public worlds signaled Ellet's triumph over the ideological confines of the middle class. She had evaded the systems of belief that labeled men and women in gender specific ways and, in the process, had discovered a social arrangement that was far more conducive to the fulfillment of her ideals. Her venomous personality testifies to her conscious refusal to conform to prevailing norms of feminine behavior. As an upright and respectable author, too, Ellet did everything she could to elude the restrictions of gender. Her first, most acclaimed, and most widely-read book, Women of the American Revolution, represents her studied attempt to maintain her position in the public sphere. Ellet's text arose as a response to the market assertion that if she carefully fashioned her work, as well as her personality, to lure the attention of her literary peers, then her worth and distinction as a writer would substantially increase. Women of the American Revolution became Ellet's most effective tool in her strategy to appreciate her value for the market's exchange. Its subject, patriotic tone, and historical framework targeted particular literary audiences and successfully secured her place alongside some of America's most celebrated writers. Ellet the author

resembled Ellet the individual in that her words and actions aimed to shape her surroundings in accord with her need for recognition.

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Women of the American Revolution represents a marked alteration in the form and content of Ellet's writing. Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, Ellet composed nostalgic, imaginative, or romantic poetry and produced plays, stories, and essays that featured the literature and ideas of popular European artists.<sup>143</sup> Readers, reviewers, and authors categorized Ellet with a host of other poetesses and many labeled her as an "excellent translat[or]" and critic who could "excite [their] desire to know more" about the great European thinkers of their generation.<sup>144</sup> With the publication of Women of the American Revolution in 1848, however, Ellet broke away from these early tendencies. The two-volume history features more than 160 biographical

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<sup>143</sup>In addition to critical essays on several French poets, two of which I mentioned in Chapter 1, Ellet published comparative essays on German and Italian drama, analyzed several Italian novels, and wrote short stories that were set in exotic locations like the bay of Cannes or the banks of the Rhine. See EFE, "Alfieri and Schiller," Southern Literary Messenger 2 (September 1836): 702-703; EFE, "Modern Italian Novels," Godey's 20 (January 1840): 17-18; EFE, "The Broken Pitcher," The Ladies Companion 14 (January 1841): 104; and EFE, "Beethoven: A Tale of Art," The Ladies Companion 16 (March 1842): 265, 269.

<sup>144</sup>May, Read, and Griswold's The Female Poets; EFE to Gilman, November 29, 1841(?), on the envelope of Ellet's letter, Gilman notes Ellet's poetic and linguistic abilities; Review, The Characters of Schiller, 232-233.

sketches of Revolutionary women. Based on letters, notices, petitions, and diaries, each biography is a self-contained record of the trials and triumphs of a particular heroine. Ellet discusses the decisions and actions of the war's famous male leaders only in relation to the war's women, "whose zeal, personal sacrifices, or [valiant] acts, ... contributed to the establishment of American Independence."<sup>145</sup> In the preface, she declares that her "object" is to return to the "realities of that struggle," delineate its feminine character, and foster greater appreciation for the Revolutionary struggle.<sup>146</sup> No longer the parlor poet, Ellet presents herself as a serious historian eager to examine the domestic side of America's Revolutionary War.

Ellet's decision to change both the genre and the subject of her work was quite sudden and came shortly after her imbroglio with Poe and her subsequent censure by many of New York's literati. In mid-1846, when Simms suggested the idea for the book, Ellet had just endured a barrage of disparaging assaults for her raspy personality. Throughout 1845, newspapers warned her to beware of hysterical behavior. One novelist lampooned her as "the smiling little woman" who "belong[ed] [in] South Carolina," while Frances Osgood publicly denounced her as a libelous meddler who had

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<sup>145</sup>Ellet, Women, I, 17.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 31.

"brok[en]" her "gentle heart."<sup>147</sup> Once considered a "valuable" scholar and a "deservedly popular" artist, she now found herself an author of only moderate worth whose articles were "in the rifacimento way, and ... look[ed] as if hashed up for just so much money as they [would] bring."<sup>148</sup> Many called her a plagiarist, too, and cautioned their readers to look out for her shady scholarship.<sup>149</sup> In an anxious defense of her merits, Ellet swore to her peers that few of the accusations were true. She wrote to several publishers and demanded that they print "no attack upon [her]" without first "informing [her]" and allowing her to respond.<sup>150</sup> Realizing that she had lost

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<sup>147</sup>Ellet, "Letter to M.D.S.," Godey's Lady's Book 38 (January 1849), 3. In this "letter," Ellet writes that Simms had first suggested his idea "about three years since."

Thomas Dunn English, 1844; or, The Power of the "S.F.", in Moss, Poe's Major Crisis, 102-103.

Frances Osgood, "Slander," Broadway Journal, II (August 1845), quoted in Moss, Poe's Literary Battles, 214-215. Although it is not absolutely certain that Osgood directed this poem at Ellet, Moss, Walsh, and other critics strongly suggest that it she did.

<sup>148</sup>Review, "The Characters of Schiller," New York Review, 1839; Griswold, Poets and Poetry of America, 380; Griswold, ed., Works, "The Literati," 203.

<sup>149</sup>According to several literati in early 1845, Ellet's article entitled "A Sad Sight," which she claimed was her own original, was really a translation. Walsh 139; Griswold, ed., Works, "Literati," 203.

<sup>150</sup>The letters and comments in Bayless, Moss, Ostrom, Lauvriere, and Walsh strongly suggest that Ellet defended herself by word of mouth, as much as by pen.

EFE to Mr. Bryant, 23 May 1846(?), Ford Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library. Ellet threatened to malign both Bryant, the editor of the Evening

the support of a significant audience and had, therefore, jeopardized her status among the literary elite, Ellet jumped at Simms's suggestion that she write a history about American women.<sup>151</sup> Simms's proposal, Ellet knew, would enable her to seek a new field, with a new set of critics, and, perhaps, step back into favor with her literary peers.<sup>152</sup>

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Post, and Mr. Putnam with published proof of their "fraudulen[cy]" if they continued as the medium for the attacks upon her.

EFE to E.A. Poe, n.d., Griswold MSS, #294, Boston Public Library. Ellet warns Poe to avoid mention of her in his work.

<sup>151</sup>Simms to H.B. Dawson, 23 April [1859], in Oliphant et al., eds., Letters, 148.

<sup>152</sup>Why Ellet elected to change both the form and content of her work cannot be absolutely determined. Though I am convinced that Ellet consciously adopted a different style in order to make up for lost ground among the literati, it is possible, too, that Ellet's decision reflected a genuine interest in exploring her abilities as a writer and broadening her intellectual scope. Ellet's actions followed a career pattern common to many mid-nineteenth-century American writers. During this era, authors often took the opportunity to experiment with various literary modes rather than settling on just one. Some writers even created their own styles by modifying the others or combining aspects of each. Before the 1850s, literature and scholarship had not become professionalized or institutionalized and no clear lines had been drawn between literary genres. With relative ease, many authors could move back and forth from poetry to prose and fact to fiction. Melville's Pierre, Israel Potter, and The Confidence-Man, for example, incorporated some of the experimental devices found in criminal pamphlets, ribald poetry, and adventure stories into his otherwise "conventional" literary style. And many historians fashioned the past with the tropes and tones of the moral sentiments pervasive in popular literature. See, especially, Reynolds' Beneath the American Renaissance and David Levin, History As Romantic Art: Bancroft, Presley, Motley, and Parkman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).



Excited by her new project, Ellet "wrote to a large number of the most [reputable] gentlemen" in South Carolina, New York, and New England to solicit their advice on her "truthful," "patriotic," and thoroughly "useful" project in which they would "no doubt ... take a special interest."<sup>153</sup> From Rev. Thomas Robbins, historian and part founder of the Connecticut Historical Society, Ellet requested accounts of heroines and family traditions that would "do justice" to the "details" of America's past. With Jared Sparks, one of the nation's most preeminent historians, she discussed the need for a record of women's "devotion" and "suffer[ing] for the establishment of national freedom." In addition, Ellet developed an ongoing dialogue with James Fenimore Cooper about the verity of historical "fact" and the difficulty in "separat[ing] truth from error." She corresponded with Duyckinck, William Read, and Cornelius Mathews, all ardent "Young Americans," and begged their counsel on matters of the "American" taste, the "American" style, and the "American" intellect. To many women, too, like Lydia Sigourney, Caroline Kirkland, and Margaret Fuller, Ellet

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<sup>153</sup>"Key to Mrs. Ellet's Letters," 1856(?), in this document, Griswold is referring to a period early in 1847; EFE to Cooper, 11 March 1848; EFE to Cooper, 4 April 1848, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

In every letter that I have read in which Ellet writes to introduce her subject and request advice, she begins by assuring her reader that he or she will, without a doubt, be interested in the idea she is about to unveil. Although she usually "excuse[s]" this assertiveness, she seems to employ it as a tool to attract their attention to an "important" project that "deserves" their assistance.

wrote lengthy applications for "sympathy" in her endeavor to restore the female heritage of the Revolution. Ellet promised all of her correspondents that, with their generous aid, Women of the American Revolution would "render a [great] service to the country." It would constitute a united effort to inspire the patriotic sentiment of "the present generation" and to instruct them in an "original" and entirely accurate interpretation of the nation's birth.<sup>154</sup>

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Writing for or about women, Ellet knew, was one of the most lucrative literary endeavors in the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1820s on, the country's female readership increased so rapidly that by the early 1840s, women had surpassed men as the "prime consumers" of America's literature. They forged a reliable, influential, and insatiable audience that most authors "could hardly afford

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<sup>154</sup>EFE to Robbins, 14 March 1848; EFE to Sparks, 7 December 1847 [as well as EFE to Sparks, 23 May 1848 and 4 November 1848, MSS Sparks, Harvard Houghton Library]; EFE to Cooper, 11 March, 1848 [as well as EFE to Cooper, 21 March, 1848, 4 April 1848, and 6 July 1848, Beinecke Library, Yale University]; Miller 85-87; EFE to Evert Duyckinck, 9 January, 2 March, and 20 September 18[??], Duyckinck Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library; EFE to Sigourney, 21 March 1848 [as well as EFE to Lefft, 10 January 1848 and EFE to Beck, 24 November 1848]; EFE to Lefft, 14 December 1847; and "Biographical Sketch," 1854.

to ignore."<sup>155</sup> The best-selling magazines, novels, poems, and guidebooks of the 1840s and 1850s were, for the most part, those geared to meet the concerns of their feminine patrons. While Melville's metaphysical novels and Thoreau's nature musings went out of print, Catherine Beecher's Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) became a classroom text, Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World (1850) saw fourteen editions in two years, and Louis A. Godey circulated over 70,000 copies of The Ladies Book in six months time.<sup>156</sup> Usually "affectionate and domestic" in tone, most women's literature valorized the home, good works, and Christian virtues and encouraged women's regard for their familial roles, their social positions, and themselves. As far as it remained faithful to a canon of gracious living and moral excellence, such literature was considered a useful way to impress a "proper" definition of womanhood upon its readers.<sup>157</sup> Authors attentive to the instructive content

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<sup>155</sup>Douglas 8. Although Douglas's work limits itself to a rather small group of Northeastern women, her comments concerning the growth of a female readership reflect national trends in the mid-nineteenth century. Nina Baym in Woman's Fiction, Mary Kelley, and Nancy Woloch make similar points.

<sup>156</sup>Woloch 134; Kelley 24-27, 220; Mott 581; and Watts, especially page 68. Maria Cummins's The Lamplighter (1854) "'enter[ed] the recesses of [over 73,000] American homes and hearths,'" she remarked, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin sold more than 300,000 copies in three years and brought Stowe \$10,000 in only three months.

<sup>157</sup>This is a very truncated version of several thorough discussions of the content and style of mid-nineteenth-century women's literature. See Baym, Woman's Fiction,

of their work, as well as its feminine character, might gain the respect of their colleagues and at the same time enjoy a national audience.

A worthy reputation could be achieved, too, by answering the call for a "'union among authors'" whose writing celebrated the singularity of American culture and the energy of the nation's pride. The Young Americans' appeal echoed the country's confusion over what it had become and how it appeared to others. Many worried that America remained merely an extension of Europe, that its people had no "genius," and that the absence of a distinct national character foreshadowed the impotence of its youthful vigor.<sup>158</sup> Such fears bred an anxious need among many of its cultural creators to assert the "exceptionality" of the American people. The time had come, Emerson proclaimed in 1837, for America to scrap its insecurity, "lift its sluggard intellect," and "fill the postponed

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Douglas; Kelley, Scott, Woloch 131-136; Watts; and Laura McCall, "'The Reign of Brute Force Is Now Over': A Content Analysis of Godey's Lady's Book, 1830-1860," Journal of the Early Republic 9 (Summer 1989): 217-26.

<sup>158</sup>Miller 125; in 1842 in Graham's Magazine, Mathews, with the support of other literary nationalists, published "An Appeal to American Authors and the American Press," begging them to neither write nor publish anything that was not distinctly American and, even, subtly contemptuous of England and Germany.

For more information on the political opinions and activities of the Young Americans, see William R. Taylor, Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 270-276.

expectation of the world" with its vision, its brilliance, and its vitality.<sup>159</sup> Mathews agreed that "'the voice of the world [was] at [America's] ear, imploring her'" to become a model of truth and excellence.<sup>160</sup> The best way to do this, many insisted, was through an indigenous literature. If infused with "nationality and true Americanism" and if developed around the study of individuals who embodied the country's ideals, literature could become an "instrument" for the "civilization" of American readers and the advancement of American culture.<sup>161</sup> Cooper's Notions of Americans (1828), Longfellow's national epics, Simms's novels about Revolutionary heroes, and Duyckinck's nationalist journal, Arcturus, inaugurated a campaign to unveil the American "character." These and other works that surveyed the past

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<sup>159</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," Selected Essays, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 83-105. In the "American Scholar," a speech delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, Emerson calls for a native literature that would end America's intellectual dependence on other countries. By educating America's scholars in nature, books, and actions, Emerson concludes, "a nation of men will for the first time exist" which is "inspired by the Divine Soul" and has the power to animate "all men," in every nation.

<sup>160</sup>Miller 133; this is part of "the greatest speech of [Mathews'] life," given in 1845 and entitled "Home Writers, Home Writings, and Home Criticism." Expressing the sentiment of most Young Americans, he advised his audience that they should not "'grow cross-eyed with straining [their] vision on models ... three thousand miles away,'" but should instead look to themselves for direction.

<sup>161</sup>Mott 291; Miller 91.

and present makeup of Americans won acclaim as uplifting evidence of the country's superior cast.<sup>162</sup> To write "American," the literary nationalists believed, was to play an invaluable role in the presentation of the values, attitudes, and actions that had established, and could sustain, America's grandeur.

Though essayists, poets, and novelists contributed immensely to the maintenance of this myth, historians controlled its content and determined its form. As the most authoritative interpreters of the past, historians gave order, cohesion, and meaning to America's heritage. While uncovering facts and affirming "truths," they revealed their belief in American excellence and advanced the principles of an ideal world. The most popular American histories were, in fact, "moral drama[s]" which enacted the "'grand theme'" of the nation's rise and progress.<sup>163</sup> In The History of the United States (1834-74), for example, George Bancroft expanded the Puritan notion of the "chosen people" to include the whole country and, like most other historians, emplotted the past with values and ideas deemed constructive in the present age. Obsessed with finding a "usable past," most historians wrote narratives through which the "story"

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<sup>162</sup>Taylor 18-20. Arcturus, edited by Duyckinck, was the Young Americans' monthly magazine, which ran from 1840 to 1842.

<sup>163</sup>Levin 19, 11.

of the contemporary experience might be told.<sup>164</sup> Not surprisingly, Americans, who "[felt] the want of nationality, and delight[ed] in whatever [disclosed their] ... 'American'" character, "crave[d]" such history. An increasing desire for a "record of Americanism" was evident in the steady growth of historical societies, archives, and government-funded research grants.<sup>165</sup> With the rising fascination for the past, history became, for a time, "the

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<sup>164</sup>Bancroft, George. History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent. 10 vols. (Boston: 1834- 74).

David D. Van Tassel, Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) 111-17.

Emma Willard's History of the United States (1849), Jared Sparks's Library of American Biography, and Sarah Hale's Woman's Record (1853) provide other examples of morally constructive history.

In Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), Hayden White introduces his idea of "emplotment" which, he explains, "is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind." All historians, White continues, arrange selected historical events into a hierarchy of significance according to the **purpose** for which they are writing. Because no historian writes history "for its own sake," **every** history will have a particular message or meaning within it.

Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," The Invention of Tradition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 1-14. Hobsbawm's thoughts about "invented tradition" as a set of practices which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition and, thus, association with the past informed my discussion in this paragraph.

<sup>165</sup>Hone and Strong 156; Van Tassel 95-110; Levin 5. Van Tassel also discusses the mid-century rise of a national obsession, called "documania," to collect local memorabilia and save it for historians.

most remunerative of all the genres." Because it "celebrated actuality" over probability and could instruct readers about their past and present condition, it "held the place of honor in the hierarchy of literary modes."<sup>166</sup>

Writing American history, Americans believed, fulfilled one of the noblest duties of citizenship. Authors who "made alliances with history," then, were, as a group, the most highly respected and socially prestigious literary figures in the country.<sup>167</sup>

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With Women of American Revolution, Ellet establishes this alliance and effectively positions herself within this special group of people who could redeem the American past. As a two-volume contribution to the store of historical knowledge, the text itself announces Ellet's affiliation with history. But more suggestive of her desire to be considered an historian are Ellet's exhaustive efforts within her preface to label her work as conventional history. She admits that, because she has wholly "refrained" from using information that did not originate

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<sup>166</sup>Charvat 74; Baym, "Women and the Republic," 2.

<sup>167</sup>Charvat 75; Other sources for this paragraph include: William H. Goetzmann, "Time's American Adventures: American Historians and Their Writing Since 1776," American Studies International (1980): 15-18; George H. Callcott, History in the United States, 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); and Bert James Loewenberg, American History in American Thought: Christopher Columbus to Henry Adams (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).



from letters, diaries, or "established historical facts," collecting materials for her book proved "almost disheartening."<sup>168</sup> Yet this "deficiency" of accurate details, Ellet continues, "[had] in no case been supplied by fanciful embellishment." Indeed, "no labor of research [and] no pains in investigation ... [had] been spared in establishing the truth of the statements" within this "narrative of real occurrences."<sup>169</sup> As an author of fact, her text proclaims, Ellet had become an authority on the American past.

Along with this emphasis on the character of her work as "authentic" history, Ellet strives to attract historians as part of her audience. Her introductory appeals for more protection against the perversion of reality and her empathy for the professional difficulties that previous historians had faced bring Ellet and her work into a dialogue with noted historians. She addresses Sparks, Robbins, William Prescott, and George Bancroft, in particular, by acknowledging their prestige and attributing her proficiency to their commendable examples. She reminds them that history is apt to be "distorted or discolored by the imperfect knowledge, the prejudices, or the fancy" of most

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<sup>168</sup>Ellet, Women, I, 15, 16.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 18. Throughout her text, Ellet continues to emphasize her fidelity to fact. She names the sources for all of her letters and anecdotes and precedes most of her explanations by reminding her readers that she had not decorated them with her imagination.

narrators. Hence, Ellet implies, it is the responsibility of historians "to distrust ... traditionary information" until they can substantiate its truth.<sup>170</sup> She adds that "none but those who [are] similarly engaged" in historical research can recover an honest past. Only a unified effort will remove history from the yoke of the imagination.<sup>171</sup> By seeking the cooperation of other historians in the preservation of fact and by equating their duties with her own, Ellet has declared herself a member of the most reputable association of American writers.

Of all the ways to record history, biography garnered the highest respect among mid-nineteenth-century readers. The contemporary belief that exemplary individuals "spread a shadow of [their] own likeness over" the masses meant that "the History of the world" could be understood best through "the Biograph[ies] of great men."<sup>172</sup> Because it created national heroes that might inspire honorable behavior in others, biography was considered a powerfully instructive

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<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 18, 17.

<sup>172</sup>Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, On Heroes and Hero Worship (New York: Everyman's Library, 1964) 270, 266. Carlyle, writing in 1840, believed that "society is founded on hero-worship" because it is human nature to fashion our behavior according to those who are "greater" than ourselves. "Great Men" in our presence, Carlyle believed, will effect in us positive change. Carlyle's "Great Man" theory was advanced in America most especially by Emerson, whose Representative Men (1844) explained that great men were "useful" because they were lenses through which we could read our own minds.

style of history, one that offered readers specific models by which to pattern their own lives.<sup>173</sup> With Jared Sparks's enormous series, The Library of American Biography, published between 1833 and 1849, biography became, Sparks said, the literary food to suit the "'present reading taste.'"<sup>174</sup> Ellet followed Sparks's lead by presenting America's history through the experiences of representative women. She turns Mary and Martha Washington into paragons of motherhood and "housewifely ... happiness" that "teach impressively" the "gentle dignity" and "true greatness of soul" which should reside in any well-bred woman.<sup>175</sup> Lucy Knox, Elizabeth Clay, and Abigail Adams express "the perfection of female character" by "submitting with patience to the difficulties of the times" and by "diffus[ing] a beneficial influence" over Americans, then and now.<sup>176</sup> In almost all of her heroines, Ellet unites fortitude and enthusiasm with tenderness and poise, qualities, she

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<sup>173</sup>See Callcott 97-101 and, especially, Van Tassel 66-76 for very thorough discussions of the significance of biography in the nineteenth century.

<sup>174</sup>Van Tassel 76.

<sup>175</sup>Ellet, Women, II, 28; Ibid., I, 33; Ibid., II, 29; Ibid., I, 44.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., II, 41; Ibid., 33; Ibid., I, 131. Although "then and now" is not expressly stated, Ellet's use of the first-person plural, "we" and "our," to modify the subjects in many of her sentences indicates that she did intend for the heroines of the past to become like living models for readers in the present.

repeatedly states, "worthy" of emulation.<sup>177</sup> Brash, selfish, or vain women, Ellet clearly demonstrates, could seldom endure the trials and sufferings of the war. "In our days of tranquility and luxury," Ellet cautions, readers would be wise to heed the examples that these heroines set.<sup>178</sup>

Ellet effectively uses her biographical sketches to isolate "great women" who epitomize "proper womanhood." Biography enables her to write history while at the same time exalting the home, Christian virtue, and refined living. It also gives Ellet a useful medium through which to examine the American "character," extol the country's values, and inspire national allegiance. Ellet's "Daughters of America" embody the "love of freedom" considered essential to the welfare of the nation. As "disinterested patriot[s]" with no greater delight than to witness the rise of America's might, Ellet informs, these heroines went to great lengths to aid their allies and harass their foe.<sup>179</sup> Jane Thomas, for example, traveled sixty miles in one night to alert the American generals of an impending Tory attack. Declaring that she was "'gratified with the opportunity of contributing to the good of her country,'" Rebecca Motte contributed to the surrender of a British garrison by

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<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., I, 30.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., II, 35, 47, 139.

agreeing to the destruction of her home.<sup>180</sup> Those who chose to serve themselves before serving the country, Ellet's heroines reveal, were doomed to die "unnoticed" and "dishonored." Margaret Arnold, "the fugitive wife" of an American traitor, had associated with the "inhuman monster[s]" from across the sea and, thus, "sank into [a] grave" of ignominy.<sup>181</sup> In every sketch, Ellet lauds those who sacrifice for the strength of the nation. Individuals like them, she promises, have "the hope of a blessed immortality." Throughout her text, Ellet employs patriotic language and, by focusing on great deeds and selfless actions, asserts the exceptionality of the American people.<sup>182</sup>

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This nationalistic tone, combined with its feminine

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<sup>180</sup>Ibid., I, 289-291; Ibid., II, 82.

<sup>181</sup>Ibid., I, 69-70; Ibid., II, 259.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., I, 45. Sketches of George Washington's mother, Mary Washington, and of his wife, Martha Washington, begin Volume I and Volume II, respectively. This organization is surely intentional. In the 1840s there was tremendous reverence for both mother and wife because they were thought to embody all the virtues that could make America a great nation. Washington's mother, especially, became an exemplary figure which many nineteenth-century women were urged to emulate. Her influence was so pervasive that a "Cult of Mary Washington" arose.

Though the patriotic language and sentiment within Ellet's text was integral to good American history during the mid-nineteenth century, the text's subject itself - the American Revolution - was quite respectable, too. An examination of the Revolution, it was thought, was the very best way to get at the source of America's ideals.

style and historical base, made Women of the American Revolution one of the most popular books of its day. To supply an overwhelming demand, New York's Baker and Scribner Publishing Company had to reprint the first edition eight times from 1848 to 1850. Godey's thanked Ellet for "a work that confer[red] honor on her sex" and acknowledged that the enormous "task" of preparing it could "hardly be appreciated."<sup>183</sup> This "humble piece of domesticity," other reviewers commended, introduced a subject that "[had] been too long neglected." The "loving patriotism" and skillful eye with which she examined the past, they recognized, made Ellet's work "truly national and unique."<sup>184</sup> Most agreed that Ellet had "proved herself an accomplished historian" whose work provided "so many keys and clues to the history of the nation" that it could not be ignored.<sup>185</sup> Her "truthful" pen and comprehensive research attracted the attention of some of the most scholarly journals in the country. The North American Review complimented Ellet for her "scrupulous fidelity" in transmitting the "facts," and the Southern Quarterly devoted forty pages to a discussion

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<sup>183</sup>Godey's, 66.

<sup>184</sup>North American Review, 363; Review, Southern Literary Messenger 10 (October 1848), 640; Southern Quarterly Review, 354; North American Review, 387.

<sup>185</sup>Godey's, 66; Southern Quarterly Review, 325. Graham's, for example, said that Ellet's history was so "important" that it was "necessary" for "all who wish[ed] to understand the American Revolution."

of her work as it related to larger issues about history and domesticity.<sup>186</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's, published numerous excerpts from Ellet's text. Sparks advised Ellet on possible revisions and agreed that many of the details in her history had been overlooked in his own.<sup>187</sup> Cooper, too, "promise[d] to communicate" whatever new information he might find.<sup>188</sup> Clearly, Ellet's subject and style had attracted a wide and diverse audience. In producing work that satisfied current literary demands, Ellet had "made for herself a niche ... in the enduring temple of American literature."<sup>189</sup>

Women of the American Revolution thus revived Ellet's reputation and status in the literary marketplace. At a time when she was losing the support of an influential group of literati, it gave Ellet the opportunity to contact new audiences and attract fresh interest in her work. Its conformity to certain literary formulas and market pressures

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<sup>186</sup>North American Review, 387. That Caroline Kirkland wrote this review may indicate that the editors categorized Ellet's work as "woman's" literature. But the lack of Kirkland's name on the piece placed the review of Women of the Revolution into the same "public" category as any other book the magazine reviewed.

<sup>187</sup>I derive this assertion not from anything that Sparks may have actually said, but from the five letters from Ellet to Sparks in which a dialogue about history and its popularity is easily perceived.

<sup>188</sup>EFE to Cooper, 4 April 1848.

<sup>189</sup>Review, Sartain's Union Magazine of Art and Literature 6 (June 1850), 435.

enabled Ellet to rejuvenate her career. As the primary authority about the women of the Revolution, Ellet was bombarded with requests to share her knowledge, materials, and ideas. Godey's, Graham's, and Peterson's solicited Ellet's aid when running series on the "Heroines of America" or when desirous of short anecdotal pieces.<sup>190</sup> Several schools asked her to organize courses on "national legends and traditions." She was invited to give public "Readings," advise other authors, and write a third volume of her text.<sup>191</sup> Having established friendships with Duyckinck, Cooper, Sparks, Sigourney, and Hale, Ellet now stood firmly within an elite circle of literati, a group quite separate

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<sup>190</sup>EFE to Sarah J. Hale, 1850, Ford Collection, New York Public Library. In this letter, Ellet assures Hale that she "[has] not forgotten [her] promise of the first number of 'Heroines of America' for the January number of Lady's Book."

I do not have direct evidence that Graham's and Peterson's solicited Ellet's assistance and information. However, based on what secondary sources say (especially Mott, Moss, and Bayless), these magazines seemed to have considered Ellet a great asset as an authority on the nation's foremothers.

<sup>191</sup>EFE to William Roderick Lawrence, n.d., Hoadley Collection, Connecticut Historical Society; EFE to Duyckinck, n.d., Duyckinck Collection, New York Public Library.

Ellet published a third volume of her text, in 1850, called The Domestic History of the American Revolution. Ellet designed it, she said, "expressly for the use of classes in schools." She exerted much energy in petitioning the South Carolina House and Senate to accept her book in all the Free Schools of the state. See: "For the House of Representatives," 1852, General Assembly Petitions, South Carolina Department of Archives and History and "For the Senate," 1852, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.



from and more genteel than the coterie she had first coveted.<sup>192</sup> Ellet's rising acclaim continued for over fifteen years. During that time, she wrote six more histories, edited three magazines, and gained a substantial reading audience.<sup>193</sup> By playing the role of a conscientious, self-sacrificing historian interested in the origins of female virtue in America, Ellet severed herself from an embattled situation with Poe and his circle and attached herself to some of America's most celebrated authors. With Women of the American Revolution, she found a format that was acceptable to a large and varied group of publishers, editors, and readers. Conforming to this formula allowed Ellet to shape others' attitudes about her worth and significance as an author. Her text became the

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<sup>192</sup>With Sparks, especially, Ellet developed a fairly close professional relationship and often discussed with him her ideas for ensuing histories. She was very conscious of the respect that he afforded her work and tried to maintain his good friendship. See, for example: EFE to Sparks, 4 November 1848 and EFE to Sparks, 6 May 1850, MS Sparks, E.F.E. folder, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Ellet's letters reveal that she was in high favor with all of these individuals, and with some of their peers. Her letters to Duyckinck and her apparent contacts with 20 Clinton Avenue indicate, too, that with Women of the Revolution, Ellet became associated with the Young Americans, who were at that time in their heyday of popularity.

<sup>193</sup> Ellet's later histories include: Domestic History of the Revolution (1850), Pioneer Women of the West (1852), Summer Rambles in the West (1853), Women Artists In All Ages and Countries (1861), Queens of American Society (1867) and Court Circles of the Republic (1869). For a time, Ellet edited The Practical Housekeeper, The New York Express, and a third to which she refers in a letter but does not name.

tool with which she advanced her marketability and recovered her value as a member of New York's literati.

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Ellet the author resembled Ellet the individual in that she recognized the need to court a profitable market position. Ellet's noble, upstanding attitude as an author and her unseemly behavior as an individual were both calculated responses to the possibilities and demands of the literary marketplace. As shrewd plays of force that maintained her position in the public sphere, these two disparate temperaments freed Ellet from the disabling bonds of womanhood and empowered her in a culture where one's merit depended more on one's literary appeal than on one's gender. Ellet's pursuit of a way to live life as her own agent, independent of social prescriptions that defined her through husband and home, motivated the oppositions within her personality. Her vision of a world in which her talents and value might be both noticed and praised inspired the actions that eventually won her a public space.

Though at times Ellet moved rather clumsily within this space, she did manage to become one of its most authoritative figures. As an historical consultant and a successful competitor among those who determined the shape of America's past, Ellet enjoyed an unusual degree of power for a nineteenth-century woman. While many women ventured into the male-run world, few survived to gain status and

fame. That Ellet **did** makes her one of the more peculiar mid-nineteenth-century females. But that she would also use this power to dissolve the distinctions between the public and private spheres and to revise the configuration of both makes Ellet extraordinary. Indeed, her steady pursuit and ultimate discovery of a reality in which men and women related with no preconceptions about "proper" gender roles reveals the singularity of Elizabeth Ellet.

#### CHAPTER IV

Although claiming to be "a truthful picture of the times," Women of the American Revolution renders a past heavily colored by the prejudices, values, and beliefs of its author.<sup>194</sup> Ellet's history, like most of the time, tells a story of American excellence and enacts the drama of an heroic age. It offers a "usable" past, one stippled with moral lessons and filled with exemplary women. Its facts are, as other historians', "not so much found as constructed" around problems and concerns of her present day.<sup>195</sup> But while most "romantic" historians developed themes of conquest, liberty, or national origins, Ellet wrote a book about gender. She never articulates this emphasis directly, but her selection and presentation of evidence reveals that her primary interest is in the organization of social relationships as illustrations of male and female power.<sup>196</sup> Examining the past through

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<sup>194</sup>EFE to Cooper, 11 March 1848.

<sup>195</sup>Hayden White, "The Burden of History," Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 43.

<sup>196</sup>According to Joan Wallach Scott, gender "is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and [it] is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." When I say that Ellet wrote about "gender," I mean that she wrote about social relationships of power, primarily between men and women.

women's eyes, Ellet thought, would give her the opportunity to explore the foundation of social roles, responsibilities, and stereotypes in America in a fresh and provocative way. "So long as [Americans] are ignorant of what the women did" during the Revolutionary War, she concludes in an autobiographical sketch, they "will never know how to appreciate" the development and configuration of their society. Ellet suggests in several letters that studying "the influence of women in the achievement of ... national freedom" would elucidate the relations between America's domestic and civic spheres. Moreover, she implies, the activities and attitudes of women in the past might clarify the way in which social power had been won and assigned at the outset of America's independence.<sup>197</sup>

Ellet's investigation uncovers a past discussed by no previous historian. Where others found men and a patriarchal social structure in the past, Ellet discovers women and a more fluid organization of social roles. While most attributed "vigor," "courage," and "intelligence" to men, Ellet ascribes such virtues to women. Instead of veiling women in the shadows of superior men, Ellet depicts ~~them~~ as active participants in the struggle for freedom and

See: Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 28-50.

<sup>197</sup>"Biographical Sketch," 1848; EFE to Robbins, 14 March 1848; EFE to Beck, 24 November 18[??]; and EFE to Sigourney, 21 March 1848.

exposes them as the "force" that secured the nation's victory.<sup>198</sup> She presents wives as warriors and generals as fathers and successfully obscures traditional relationships of power. Her image of human society portrays men and women, together, in both public and private realms, interacting in a system that allows every person an autonomous voice and an influential role. As far as it displays ability as more indicative than gender of an individual's social worth, Ellet's image of the past mirrors her vision of an ideal world. The multiplicity of gender roles, the flexibility of cultural rules, and the interdependence of the private and public spheres in Women of the American Revolution reflect the social standards by which Ellet sought to live. The historical facts she presents are governed by the same notions that motivated her desertion of the middle class and her involvement in the literary marketplace. As an interpretive framework for Women of the American Revolution, Ellet's vision directs her to a past that ignores cultural boundaries which threaten to limit human potential on the basis of gender.<sup>199</sup> In the

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<sup>198</sup>Ellet, Women, II, 243, 207, 91; Ibid., I, 21.

<sup>199</sup>This idea was shaped, in part, by Hayden White's discussion of the personal "metaphor," or interpretive framework, which, he says, every historian brings to their work. He insists that historians should recognize that "what constitutes the facts themselves is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of metaphor by which he [or she] orders his [or her] world, past, present, and future." White's idea provides a useful tool for my interpretation of Ellet. I realize,

history of the Revolutionary War, Ellet finds the reality for which she had searched since her youth.

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The process by which Ellet unveils this reality is remarkably and consciously subtle. Clearly, Women of the American Revolution satisfies the structural, stylistic, and thematic demands of the mid-nineteenth-century literary marketplace. Yet Ellet's conformity to the rules of the market serves as the very medium through which she conveys her unique interpretation of American history. By constructing her narrative around beliefs, assumptions, and conceptual categories intimately familiar to mid-nineteenth-century Americans, Ellet feeds the expectations of her readers and tries to lure them into a world that parallels their own experiences.<sup>200</sup>

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however, that his thesis, while provocative, is absolutist and lacks credibility in many historians' eyes.

White, "The Burden of History," Tropics, 47 and Davidson, 11-13, 256-259.

<sup>200</sup>There is no concrete evidence that indicates who Ellet's readers were. I have suggested that her main audience consisted of historians, middle-class women, and various literary critics. One of her letters indicates that some middle-class men, especially relatives of her heroines, were reading her text as well. [EFE to Jared Sparks, 2 October 1848, Sparks Manuscripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University.] Since I cannot be sure of Ellet's readers, when I refer to them, I refer to the "implied" readers within Ellet's text. I think that her implied readers were primarily two -- historians and middle- to upper-middle-class women like herself.

Also, I can not be sure of her readers' reactions to her text. I have found only two letters which hint at the responses her readers might have had. [EFE to Sparks, 2 October 1848 and EFE to Sparks, 4 November 1848] When I

While patriotism, moral drama, and historical fact all contribute to this endeavor, Ellet's conventional demonstration of gender roles functions as her primary tool. To introduce each volume, Ellet presents the sketches of her most domestic, matronly, and benevolent heroines, like Mary and Martha Washington or Catharine Schuyler. The biographies usually begin by highlighting the heroines' relationships with their fathers, husbands, or sons and end by reiterating their "unaffected piety" or "faithful" domestic "performance." Terms like "blessed," "gracious," or "dignified," lessons on the "perfection of female character," and stories of "ardent spirits pour[ing] out ... the genuine language of emotion" appear throughout Ellet's text as descriptive evidence that her heroines are, indeed, "proper" female figures.<sup>201</sup> Yet such common literary tropes and techniques, while embracing traditional ideas about gender roles, operate only as a protective coloring in Ellet's text. For lurking beneath this deceptively simple facade of conformity lies a powerful objection to the cultural practices that assign men and women to separate social spheres.

Having enticed her readers in with the pleasure of

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suggest reactions, then, I am presenting those that I think Ellet hoped her readers would have. This "conjecture" is based on a what I think is a fairly good understanding of her personality and ways of thinking.

<sup>201</sup>Ellet, Women, II, 123, 42, 220; Ibid., I, 74, 101, and elsewhere throughout both volumes.



familiarity, Ellet begins to involve them in contradiction by denying them information, disrupting social patterns, and revising behavioral expectations. Although her early sketches emphasize the role of the Revolution's heroes as well as its heroines, as each volume progresses, the males in Ellet's history are displaced from center stage and relocated on the periphery of the main action. Their positions as public figures and their valiant deeds as soldiers are all but forgotten in many of Ellet's biographies. General Nathanael Greene is discussed dimly in relation to his vital contribution to the patriots' victory in the South. Paul Revere, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, individuals who figure prominently in most American histories of Ellet's day, are not mentioned. And "leading events" like the battles at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Yorktown are only briefly reviewed.<sup>202</sup>

Many of the males who do assume public roles in Women of the American Revolution blunder in their duties, are lazy or indecisive, and have to depend on others, especially women, for assistance. Mr. Graydon escapes jail with his mother's help; a group of soldiers in North Carolina, having

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<sup>202</sup>Ellet, Women, I, 77-89. General Greene's significance in Women of the American Revolution revolves around his impatience with the absence of his wife [81], his letters of "confidence and affection" to his wife [83], and the disease which "closed his brilliant career" [84].

In EFE to Sparks, 6 May 1850, Sparks Manuscripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Ellet admits that she would "exclude military details which form the bulk of other works" but would give a "brief outline of leading events."

barely survived an Indian attack, admit that "without [the aid of the brave housewife] we should have been all lost!"<sup>203</sup> More often than not, though, Ellet's heroes are depicted in domestic settings, acting in conventionally feminine ways. Inside his closet, Colonel Johnston cries over the death of his wife. Captain M'Donald considers dressing as a "waiting-maid" to break out of bondage. And Robert Shirtliffe's life suggests that any man can acquire skill with a needle and thread.<sup>204</sup> Though all of these examples are embedded in the interstices of Ellet's text and seem of little significance in light of her innocuous veneer, their combined effect presents a past in which men have waived some of their rights to the public sphere and have willingly engaged in more private affairs.

While not entirely abandoned by men, positions that require intelligence, leadership ability, and selfless heroism in Ellet's history, are either filled by women or shared between the sexes. Almost every one of Ellet's heroines unite "highly cultivated intellectual powers [with] ... the most winning feminine grace." Martha Wilson, for example, "a woman of strong and polished intellect,"

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<sup>203</sup>Ibid., II, 274-280, 191-192.

<sup>204</sup>Ibid., 59, 168, 150. Robert Shirtliffe was Deborah Samson in disguise. For the duration of the war, Samson dressed as a man and continually surprised those around her with an expertise in various feminine tasks. I will return to a discussion of the significance of "disguise" in Ellet's text.

associates "with the intelligent and wise" so that she will not lose the "rich stores of general information and ... practical knowledge" that she had gained in early womanhood. Other intellectually "superior" women "[seize] every opportunity for acquiring knowledge" and use it to rise above "political maneuvers" and competently assist "in matters of state."<sup>205</sup> A few women decode ciphers, uncover enemy plans, and determine the winning strategies for war. Many have "power over the minds [they have] trained" and most employ language as their medium of control. Cornelia Beekman humiliates an aggressive Tory colonel through her more witty way with words. And Frances Allen compensates for her husband's unwillingness to submit to "the slow process of ratiocination" by "reason[ing] out" the issues that "sorely puzzle him."<sup>206</sup>

Because the Revolution's women are often rational and reflective, they become primary figures of authority and control both in and out of the home. Even Mary Washington, a paragon of femininity, receives credit for George Washington's success. "As the author of his being" and the "presiding genius" in their home, Ellet writes, she "planted the seed, ... lay the foundation, ... and cherished the growth" of his "greatness."<sup>207</sup> Just as George Washington

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<sup>205</sup>Ibid., 38, 46, 146; Ibid. I, 377.

<sup>206</sup>Ibid., 126, 227, 242.

<sup>207</sup>Ibid., I, 41, 37, 34.

bows to his mother in thanks, Major Knox "defer[s]" to his wife's judgement and "[regards] her as a superior being."<sup>208</sup> Ellet's heroines provide advice, give orders, and make decisions that become essential to the patriots' survival. Without Mary Slocumb's command over her slave "Big George," her husband's life would have been lost to the Tories. Later, when she arrives at the scene of a bloody battle, she takes charge of an entire field of wounded soldiers and brings many of them back to health.<sup>209</sup> Rebecca Motte, Harriet Ackland, and Susannah Philipse, too, exert tremendous control over their own and others' lives to effectively decrease the destruction of war.<sup>210</sup> Deborah Samson, especially, disguised as a man for over three years, enjoys the right to fight with the men and directly influence the outcome of the war.<sup>211</sup> Truly, Ellet comments, these experiences "teach" on "every page of ... history" that "the fate of a nation may have been suspended

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<sup>208</sup>Ibid., 128.

<sup>209</sup>Ibid., I, 354-356, 364. Mary Slocumb becomes aware of a British plan to surround her house, which then serves as a Tory campground, and kill her husband, her brother, and two of her neighbors upon their return later in the day. So she commands her slave, "Big George," to meet her husband far ahead along the road to warn him.

<sup>210</sup>Ibid., II, 79-89; Ibid., I, 171-179, 237-238. Rebecca Motte actually builds a house for her slaves, buys a rice field, and runs her own plantation.

<sup>211</sup>Ibid., II, 143-158.

upon a woman's judgement."<sup>212</sup>

If it did, then America would surely prosper, for the heroines of Ellet's Revolution, at least, use both their intelligence and authority to become the most zealous and active agents for the achievement of American independence. They make clothes and food for the soldiers, they boycott British goods, they sacrifice their homes for the troops, and they nurse the wounded back to health. But more noticeably, women engage in some of the most perilous aspects of the war. "Tearing down the road at full speed" during the darkest hours of the night, Mary Slocumb risks her life to save the life of her husband, who is embattled in a nasty campaign. When offered a ride back to her home, Slocumb refuses, knowing that the generals "could send no party who could keep up with [her]."<sup>213</sup> Mrs. Dillard, too, desiring to warn Colonel Clarke of an impending Tory attack, "mount[s] and [rides]" bareback "with all possible speed" through the blackness of the night to an American camp. Rachel Caldwell wanders over the fields in search for the dead. Mrs. Jackson dies along the roadside while carrying clothes to some colonial prisoners. To retrieve gunpowder for an embattled group of soldiers, Elizabeth Zane runs across a field with bullets "whistl[ing] past her." And for her part, Lydia Darrah suspends her

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<sup>212</sup>Ibid., II, 230.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid., I, 362, 366.

Quaker principles long enough to travel to George Washington with news of a new British strategy.<sup>214</sup> Through the behavior of these and other heroine, Ellet offers a portrait of women engaged in the world continuously, actively, and aggressively and wholly willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of the American peopl.<sup>215</sup>

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Using conformity as an avenue to difference, Ellet creates a past that advances a new and radically altered set of cultural assumptions. It is a past in which men can sew and clean and women can enter battles. It unveils the sentiment in men and the reason in women. And it is a past in which women and men share responsibilities and roles. Together they work toward a common goal. Together they

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<sup>214</sup>Ibid., 331-334; Ibid., II, 181; Ibid., I, 345; Ibid., II, 322; Ibid., I, 199-206.

<sup>215</sup>In a sense, Ellet has presented her heroines as Christ-like figures. Their selflessly heroic actions are the actions of saviors. Ellet's heroines save men, women, and the nation. Throughout both volumes of Women of the American Revolution, images of Christ or His disciples appear. For example, Ellet depicts women feeding bread to the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, healing wounds, taking strangers into their homes, and hiding enemy soldiers from their captors. By paralleling women with Christ, Ellet is elevating them to a higher and more respectable position than either men or others who do not appear Christlike. Sarah J. Hale's Woman's Record (1853) makes such a statement much more deliberately by conflating the progress of Christianity with that of women. See "Onward Christian Women: Sarah J. Hale's History of the World," The New England Quarterly 63 (June 1990): 249-270.

I had hoped to elaborate on this point within my text, but due to time and the need for limitation, I have decided to pursue this idea in another paper.

protect their homes. And together they celebrate success. By uprooting men from their traditional positions of power and authority in American society and appointing women to fill some of their empty spots, Ellet challenges the common notions of "proper" gender roles. Moreover, by depicting men and women in both public and private realms and by revealing the ease with which they move back and forth, Ellet erases the line that separates these easily-recognizable worlds. As a result, these worlds begin to mix and merge into a more amorphous whole and the traditional organization of gender relationships disappears. As women begin to perform some of men's activities and men begin to perform those of women, gender loses its strength as social determinant. Consequently, few guidelines regulate male and female roles or dictate appropriate personalities. In place of gender, individual ability and merit serve to govern opportunities and assign social functions. So the public and private spheres, as conventionally understood, collapse in Women of the American Revolution. Ellet revises them, however, as two interacting systems that differentiate between social and personal concerns but bar no one from access to either.

The multiplicity of gender roles and the interdependence of the private and public spheres in Women of the American Revolution mirror the cultural standards by which Ellet sought to live. As an interpretive guide to her

work, Ellet's vision had directed her to a moment in the past where a fluid social framework disrupted traditional norms and gender roles. The Revolution unsettles the notion that gender determines one's utility, one's function, and one's inherent worth. Through a screen of conformity to market demands, Ellet unmaskes the truths and assumptions that sustained the conventional notions of gender in America. Gradually, she transforms these into new truths and assumptions more suitable to her idea of the way that society should be. In doing so, she offers a powerful moral alternative to the traditional understanding of the past. Her vision of a culture in which men and women freely interact and assume social roles according to individual skill becomes the reality of the past. As a reality that places few limitations on the possibility for personal change and growth, it is quite unlike Ellet's mid-nineteenth-century society in which every individual wore predetermined labels about who they were and what they should become.

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That the world presented in Women of the American Revolution is the past that actually existed during the Revolutionary War reveals the larger significance of Ellet's work. Recorded and read as history, Women of the American Revolution was considered a non-fictional account of the past and, thus, one of the most accurate representations of



America's history. Like Sparks's biographies or Bancroft's narratives, Ellet's history was taken seriously as an authentic and predominantly factual record of the past. But the past reality that Ellet presents differed radically from most other histories of her day. The prevailing interpretation of America's history displayed it as a male-centered, male-dominated, and male-controlled world. These were pasts where women, if not ignored, were almost completely insignificant. In these pasts, too, there existed little evidence that men and women interacted or shared responsibility for the nation's future. Ellet's interpretation of the past, then, reverses the most fundamental historical norms. Her world is female-centered and often female-dominated and female-controlled, as well. It is a past where male and female interaction is the norm and shared responsibility is the expectation. Ellet's choice of a different interpretive framework around which to view and examine the past, enabled her to redefine the American past and recreate the society within it.

In her redefinition of the past, Ellet presented a significant challenge to every historian who had written before her. The very fact that she was a woman writing history contradicted the conventions of most historians. History was considered a male genre. Women did not, and could not, write authentic history. Historians had the power to uncover and recreate the past and with this went

the privilege of controlling their readers' understanding of the past. Such power was not meant for a woman. So announcing and introducing herself as an historian was a remarkably bold move on Ellet's part. By taking this action, Ellet had designated herself as an authority. She had assigned herself the right to control her society's interpretation and perception of the past. And the past that she chose to impose on her readers defied almost every historical norm.

Even more challenging to historians was Ellet's decision to use biography as her organizing form. By writing biography, especially, Ellet had taken a style designated for "great men" only and had employed it for the use and praise of America's "great women." By offering women a public arena, biography, in which to perform, Ellet had entered a traditionally male space and had removed its barriers to women. With her presentation of the "great women" of the past, Ellet had questioned the exclusive ownership that males had over biography. Men and women now shared this arena and thus shared the public sphere.

By demonstrating in Women of the American Revolution that the private and public spheres did not really exist in their conventional forms and instead were interdependent systems functioning only to differentiate between social and personal concerns, Ellet brought much of America's previous historical scholarship under question. She reveals in her

letters to James Fenimore Cooper, Jared Sparks, and, especially, Thomas Robbins, that her intention was, indeed, to challenge historians and bring common interpretations into doubt.<sup>216</sup> Ellet wholeheartedly believed that the existing scholarship on the past did not present an accurate picture of history. The existence of her text and her revision of a past world constitute powerful statements that women, too, could be cultural creators. Both men and women, Ellet declared through the pages of her text, must be seen as capable of determining and creating their past.

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In recreating the past, Ellet had changed the nature of history. As much as history represents reality, Ellet had changed the nature of reality, as well. In revising the past, Ellet enjoyed the privilege of revising her readers' views of the past. So, Ellet had revised contemporary notions of past reality. Because the past on which she focused was the Revolutionary period, Ellet's revision of the past transformed the foundations of American society. Having transformed the very foundations upon which her present society existed, she changed the nature of social reality in the present.

This elucidates the significance that Ellet's text potentially had for her mid-nineteenth-century readers. In effect, Ellet suggested to her readers very real

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<sup>216</sup>Evidence forthcoming.

alternatives to the condition and structure of their present society. She revealed to them that the foundation upon which the present society was based was one in which men and women interacted freely and gender did not determine individual worth. Because this kind of social structure represents the origins of America society, Ellet's text implies, then mid-nineteenth-century society should be revised accordingly.

The possibility that Ellet pursued was that of a world in which she would be valued as an individual first and as a woman second. She ultimately found this world through her unique analysis of the American Revolution.

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