Remembering the Ladies: Trans-Atlantic Influences of Women’s Networks and Correspondence in Britain and Early America.

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the beginnings of women’s education and participation in the public sphere through sociable women’s networks, beginning with the Bluestocking Circle in 1750s England, and moving to link similarities and correspondence in early colonial America, particularly the Revolutionary War. Primarily, the letters of Elizabeth Montagu, Catharine Macaulay, Mercy Otis Warren, and Abigail Adams are examined to demonstrate parallels between England and North America. Questions about women’s participation, and the split between polite society and accepting the status quo in Montagu and Warren’s letters, and the underlying radicalism and germinating feminism in Macaulay and Adams’ letters are also examined. Additionally, several artworks relating to the representation of women in public events, and in particular, Republican Motherhood, are analyzed here.
Introduction and Historiography.

In her introduction to the 2003 work *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, scholar Nicole Pohl discusses how “…the Bluestockings thus occupied a markedly contradictory position within the discourses of eighteenth century femininity.”  It is obvious that the women of the Bluestocking circle were brilliant, and craved intellectual discourse—Elizabeth Montagu, in a 1765 letter to Elizabeth Carter, wrote on how much she wanted there to be “a bluestocking doctrine of radical conversation”—referring to intellectual dialogues in her London home. However, the rise of the Bluestockings also took place at a time when the separation of men’s and women’s spheres was beginning to be embraced, along with dialogues about what marked traditionally feminine behavior. A shift towards more middle class values in mid-18th century Britain also emerged, which Pohl discusses as: “...The first generation of Bluestockings were committed to a ‘progressive-aristocratic’ program which sought to amend traditional cultures of court libertinism and paternalism based on patronage and property, essentially transforming them into gentry and middle class values. This program’s model of a civil society defined by egalitarianism sociability, conversation, and the advancement of civic virtue relied on an essentialist and exclusive understanding of gender.” From the beginning, the creation of the Bluestocking circle was part of a larger discussion about sociability in

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2 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter. 1765. Elizabeth Montagu Papers. Special Collections, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge.
Britain, and how women should correctly participate and display themselves within the public sphere.

In 1998, historian Amanda Vickery devoted an entire book to the lives of upper class Georgian women, entitled The Gentleman’s Daughter. In the chapter on politeness and civility, Vickery states: “Good breeding was intimately linked with education and nurture, conveying a sense of well-rounded personality, a cultivated understanding, and a thorough knowledge of ceremony.” This demonstrates Enlightenment ideas surrounding education ideas coming into practice—a mix of the nature and nurture philosophies discussed by Locke and Rousseau. Vickery also invokes the idea of the highly educated female hostess, both attentive and welcoming to her guests every need, while also being able to converse about everything from the weather to important current events and literature. She writes: “Open-handed hospitality was still crucial to the maintenance of social credit and political power...as mistress of ceremony, the elite hostess might wield considerable practical power from the head of her dining table.” The concept of the elite hostess, especially in the formation of the women’s salon, and in the lives of many Bluestocking women as a whole, is important. Additionally, placing elite women into these parameters of sociability was connected to the commercialization and growth of 18th century society. Pohl and Vickery both point out that creating separate gendered spheres seemed to complement each other in terms of modernization.

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The growing concept of separate spheres for men and women, and a concern about women’s participation in eighteenth century public events is something historian Mary Beth Norton focuses on. In her work Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World, Norton has a chapter entitled “The Invention of the Feminine Private,” which also connects to Amanda Vickery’s theories of manners, propriety, and Britain’s upper class. Norton focuses a great deal on the influence of print culture in the eighteenth century, and how magazines and newspapers began to influence upper class attitudes. Additionally, Norton makes the important point that the turbulence of British history a century before called for strong codes around morals and public participation, as well as personal accountability for one’s behavior. She states:

“In the [seventeenth century] the nation had endured the trauma and austerity of the Civil War and the Commonwealth period, followed by the excuses of the Stuart Restoration and the political uncertainty that led to the Glorious Revolution....Probably because of the unrest revealed by such sentiments and the continuing linkage of familial and political matters, the new monarchs stressed the need for altering English people’s personal behavior.”

However, at the same time that new, more rigid codes of manners that also emphasized Britian’s civility emerged, there were also new dialogues about the role of women in particular, largely thanks to Enlightenment thinkers. Norton goes on to state: “The emphasis on the importance of reason and learning in the work of philosophers such as John Locke affected thinking about women as well, and the

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writings of advocates such as Mary Astell challenged older views of women’s intellectual inferiority. Traditional notions of gendered identities were in flux, the time was right for a reconceptualization of male and female roles.” 6

Norton’s analysis of shifting attitudes around gender is echoed by other academics, especially during the growth of second wave feminism and gender studies in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1979 article “Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,” academic Joan Kinnaird addresses many of the same themes Norton does. Kinnaird also links the growing interest in women’s education to philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), while also specifically examining Astell’s contributions to early dialogues around women and higher learning. Kinnaird also agrees that Restoration England is when attitudes began to shift. “Rebellious daughters and emancipated wives, female virtuosi, she-philosophers—all rebels against male authority—crowd the Restoration stage.” 7 As for Mary Astell in particular, her claim to fame was publishing a 1694 document that is considered to be the first plea for the establishment of a higher institution of learning for women, entitled A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of the True and Greatest Interest. 8 Astell’s document laid down the gauntlet for more dialogues around women’s education, and as a result, made spaces in England—like the woman’s salon—which provided a space exclusively for intellectual women more acceptable. In the same vein as Kinniard and Norton, historian Evelyn Gordon Bodek uses the 1976 article “Salonieres and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism” to trace the rise of

6 Ibid, 146.
8 Ibid, 57.
the Bluestocking circle in particular, and discuss the importance of spaces for and led by women—while also emphasizing the circle’s adherence to traditional British values.

Gordon-Bodek notes that the concept of the salon was actually French, not English. The concept was dreamed up by a noblewoman named Catherine de Vivonne, in 17th Century France, thus cementing its roots in the gentry. Vivonne’s vision was to create an informal university for women, or as Gordon-Bodek states: “The salon was the only place where women were encouraged to sharpen their wits and gather around other educated women and men.” However, from the beginning, there was also an emphasis on the salon being a place exclusively for society women to highlight their hostessing duties and demonstrate their social status. Yet at the same time, the salon was a way for women to actually sharpen their intellectual skills, under the guise of appropriately social activities. It was, in many ways, a step forward for women’s education, and the beginning of women’s networks that would rely on each other for companionship as well as intellectual stimulation. Soon, these networks would move beyond drawing rooms to written letters across regions, and eventually oceans.

The Trans-Atlantic influences of the so-called “woman question,” and the networks that would emerge among women as a result of the dialogues like Mary Astell’s and Catherine de Vivonne’s would span the entire eighteenth century and beyond. It also became apparent that questions surrounding women’s participation was not merely a trend, but would germinate across continents, from France, to England, and eventually North America. Women wanted to take advantages of spaces they could make

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10 Ibid, 188.
their own, as demonstrated with their quickness to organize salons. Additionally, upper class women regularly began to use letters as a way to supplement their in person meetings, corresponding about daily life, to larger topics like raising their children and politics. Due to Britain’s new obsession with correct feminine behavior in public and private spheres, upper class women quickly became hyper-aware of larger dialogues about their participation in such. As a result, they made sure not to appear too radical in public, but their letters were a space in which they could communicate exclusively with each other, and occasionally test boundaries. The fact that letter writing was considered a traditionally feminine activity, and that women historically only used it to communicate trite gossip also allowed their correspondence networks to be more acceptable. Letters were actually the tool that sustained women’s networks, even more than social gatherings. Elizabeth Montagu lived away from London for most of the year, but regularly corresponded with friends like Elizabeth Vesy and Elizabeth Carter, writing on everything from social events to politics and literature. While these letters still fit within the parameters of politeness, they allowed for women to freely discuss ideas and strengthen bonds with each other. The correspondence between Bluestocking women and eventually their American contemporaries gives a window to their most authentic feelings, while also giving a view beyond the wider public understanding that these women were intellectuals, but also mild mannered, delicate, almost symbolic figures to demonstrate the civility of Britain and North America.

Mary Beth Norton, in one of her earliest works (Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women) also discusses the growing dialogues about femininity in the mid eighteenth century, and a new obsession with feminine behavior, that women were well aware of.
Although the female sphere remained unexamined before the 1780s, the feminine behavior. English, French, and American authors often analyzed those traits reputed to be particularly feminine, developing a consistent view of female nature that rested firmly upon a consensus shared with their readers. Women’s diaries and letters make it abundantly clear that to a large extent they acquired in the analysis of feminine characteristics promulgated in print. In addition to the physical limitations imposed on their lives by obligations to home and family, therefore, white women labored as well under a set of mental restrictions that defined the ways they thought about themselves and their sex as a whole.11

Norton’s analysis makes it apparent that these ideas centered on femininity were not just limited to Britain. The mid-18th century was also an age of expansionism, and British ideas would soon migrate to the colonies. Norton emphasizes how two of the most important feminine virtues became modesty and delicacy, both of which were thought to give women a “softer quality.” Additionally, 18th century writings in Britain and the colonies emphasized that women should work to cultivate and improve upon their delicacy throughout their lives. Norton points out that women were constantly expected to follow a list of goals for feminine behavior—they needed to be more “modest, chaste, cheerful, sympathetic, affable, and emotional.” 12

As the Bluestockings were from upper middle class backgrounds, and constantly in the public eye, it was important that they presented themselves as appropriately feminine, and as symbols that would demonstrate Britain’s forwardness in education. This can similarly be said for the women in early America. Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren also operated very much within the public sphere, especially as the wives of prominent politicians, and needed their actions to reflect favorably among their peers. As a result of these constraints, women’s networks were often contradictory, in terms of

12 Ibid, 112.
their messages for women—thus, a question many scholars are still asking is exactly how radical these groups were, in terms of seeking equal rights for women? That answer, like many answers in history, is a complicated one and seems to depend more on individuals than the groups as a whole. Abigail Adams and Catharine Macualay, for example, seemed to be far more radical in terms of asking questions about women’s rights and education, than Elizabeth Montagu and Mercy Otis Warren, who used their power as prominent hostesses to advance in the intellectual world. The most important thing to remember, however, is that despite differences in individual motivations, all of these women seized the woman’s salon and women’s correspondence as way to become active in a world larger than their own. Their involvement in salons, as well as their letters, would raise important questions about women’s participation in public events, while their intellectual discussions within correspondence, and their fervent support of each other would set a precedent for later publications and groups that would contribute directly to the fight for women’s equality. A work that does an excellent job discussing the key differences between individual women these Trans-Atlantic networks is the 2005 book Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender. Historian Kate Davies expertly maps the connections between Britain and North America, and offers a compelling analysis of the relationship between the radical Catharine Macaulay (and her complex feelings surrounding the Bluestocking Circle due to her Whig politics) and the more conservative Mercy Otis Warren, who conformed more to the mold of the intellectual among polite society, making sure to play the perfect hostess for political husband and giving her case for America’s independence through political writings, but also not stepping on any toes by mentioning gender or the future of the women’s role in the new republic. Davies also
makes the important point that even though America wanted independence, the upper classes in the colonies were also firmly immersed in British social customs and ways of life, as a result of Trans-Atlantic networks and easy access to British publications.  

Additionally, Kate Davies discusses the new eighteenth century belief that it was fine for women to display their educational accomplishments, as long as they stayed within the bounds of polite society—ideas similarly explored by Vickery and Norton. Davies does offer a distinctive analysis by exploring artistic representations of women in the eighteenth century, particularly The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain, which reduces the Bluestockings women to nondescript symbols intended to glorify the progressive attitudes of the British empire—an idea that would later take root in the art of early America and Republican Motherhood.  

The following causes and effects discussed so far—the violent nature of 17th century British politics creating a greater obsession with morals and politeness in the 18th century, the growth of the Enlightenment, the rise of pamphlets on women’s education, and the growth of the woman’s salon—all connect to a theory discussed by German historian Helmut Walser Smith in his 2005 essay “The Vanishing Point on German History: An Essay on Perspective.” Vanishing point is actually a term that has roots in art theory and painting. Smith tells us that in paintings, a vanishing point is the lines of a three dimensional object in a painting, that when they converge in a flat plane determine the relative size.  

14 Ibid, 160. 
history, or as Smith states: “A vanishing point is a focus of research that structures the whole image, while a turning point is where history bends in one direction and not the other.”  Smith’s theories can also be applied to the rise of questions surrounding women’s education, and women’s intellectual participation in the public sphere.

In the case of vanishing points, women’s education, and their concurrent participation in intellectual networks, the Enlightenment (and the theories of John Locke in particular) as well as Mary Astell’s 1694 treatise can be considered one. The Enlightenment, and the rise of dialogues concerning education and human rights, made it possible for questions around women’s education and intellectualism to exist at all. The age of exploration and expansion made possible by Enlightenment values spread into European colonies, and, as described by historian David S. Shields in his 1997 book Civil Tongues: Polite Letters in British America, gave Europeans an elevated sense of the world.  Shields discusses how this elevated world began to be known as the “beau monde,” and that an entire culture centered on fashion, conversations, and civility evolved among the upper classes.  This culture was also extremely invested in letters following the same rules of politeness. The creation of polite letters being linked to intellectualism led to the formation of clubs, women’s tables, and coffeehouses, in England and eventually North America.  Without the Enlightenment, and the values that stemmed from it, the creation of literary societies and the Bluestocking circle would not have been possible.

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16 Ibid, 271.
18 Ibid, 28.
19 Shields, 31.
Additionally, if the Enlightenment was the vanishing point, the creation of the woman’s salon and the subsequent growth of women’s networks across countries, was a turning point. The creation of the salon gave intellectual women in England a model upon which to base their own gatherings, which in turn would eventually influence in America through the spread of letters and news based publications. Furthermore, it was not just the salon that had an influence, but the codes of manners for upper middle class women that emerged along with it. The public portrayals of the Bluestocking women as demure symbols representing Britain’s advancement would eventually find their way into the images of Republican motherhood in colonial America.

The term Republican motherhood was coined by historian Linda Kerber, also in the 1980s. Kerber defined Republican Motherhood as “a model femininity that associated women’s virtues with national civic morality.” Additionally, there was an emphasis on women being providers for the family as their main role. Portrayals of women surrounded by their loving children, or participating in public events as a hostess would soon find their way into American art. Like *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, women were also commonly depicted in Roman garb, in classical, elegant poses. The ideas around women’s participation once again centered on the careful lines between enlightenment, sociability, and femininity. These depictions seemed to say that women could participate in the new Republic, as long as they chose activities to emphasize their “softer” qualities, as discussed by Norton. Additionally, if you were a woman in the upper classes of society, or the wife of a prominent figure, the pressure to follow these guidelines was even greater.

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This was the world Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams lived in, and these pressures they faced, as politicians wives. Their correspondence, and their writing remained the most effective outlet for revealing their true views, but even that had to be censored at times. Mercy was always the more careful of the two women, in terms of women’s rights, rarely expressing her views. Abigail, on the other hand, was the one willing to be more radical. Along with her famous “remember the ladies” declaration, she regularly railed against spousal abuse and other gender inequalities. At times, discussing early women’s networks and their contributions to what would later be labeled as feminism is delicate. On the one hand, these women challenged traditional femininity through making their voices heard within intellectual circles, and also created networks through social interactions and correspondence that fully supported each other’s endeavors. On the other, most women in these circles, both in Britain and North America, were hesitant to challenge the status quo around rights women already possessed, and adapted to the rigid codes of manners, morality, and femininity in order not to have their gatherings questioned. It seems apparent that the overall societies were not progressive in terms of wanting women to change their roles in society, but that a few individuals helped make this question more complicated for future historians. In England, British historian Catharine Macaulay (one of the few Whigs in the Bluestocking circle) often spoke passionately on women’s rights and education, while in America, Abigail Adams wrote to Mercy Otis Warren about spousal rights and the fate of women in the new Republic, even when her friend chose to ignore these questions. These outliers would advance questions about women’s rights and participation in the public sphere—Catharine Macaulay’s 1770s treatise on education laid the way for Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous A Vindication of the Rights of Women. The words of Macaulay
and Adams did become turning points for other women, as others answered the call to move forward with their ideas, instead of backwards.

Additionally, the organization of the Bluestocking society, and the relationships women created with each other set a very effective model for later feminist groups. The idea of there being spaces created exclusively for women, as well as regular meetings to discuss a set agenda proved to be a very popular one. The emphasis on writing as a tool to express ideas in between meetings would also continue among women. Despite the desire to rein in Bluestocking women, and the insistence of using art and imagery as a way to insist they would never stray beyond the bounds of traditional femininity, as well as a greater willingness from some women not to challenge these depictions, the formation of a group like this at all proved how effective it could be as a way for women to rely on each other for education and knowledge.
The Doctrine of Radical Conversation: Bluestocking Women and Their World.

The formation of the Bluestocking society would not have been possible without the efforts of Elizabeth Robinson Montagu (1720-1800). Montagu was born into the privileged world inhabited by the “Gentleman’s Daughter” that Amanda Vickery discusses. The daughter of a genteel family in Northern England, Montagu was educated by private tutors as a child and taught Latin, French, and Italian. Her family also regularly traveled to London, where she was introduced to the city’s vibrant literary scene, through her parents’ friends. Thanks to the rise of sociability in Georgian England, London was overcome with new cultural institutions that emphasized gathering and intellectual discussion. In particular, tea salons and coffeehouses proved to be very popular, as detailed in David S. Shields’ work. It was also during Montagu’s adolescence that the concept of the French salon began to migrate to England, and the idea of salons directed by women began to be seen as positive, largely because of the desire to see England as an enlightened nation with intellectual opportunities for all.

In the early 1750s, Montagu began to flirt with the idea of creating a women’s salon at her London home (after marrying Edward Montagu in 1742, who had land in Yorkshire and Northumberland, she traveled back and forth between the North and London, often spending summers in London for the so-called “season” of debutante balls and events). During her time in London, Montagu regularly attended coffeehouse and literary society events, and became acquainted with other intellectual women, including Elizabeth Vessey, Elizabeth Carter, and Frances Boscawen. These women

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1 Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, eds. Reconsidering the Bluestockings. (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 2003), 30-31.
2 Ibid, 32.
would be the original founders of the Bluestocking Society, and would help create the
“the doctrine of radical conversation” Montagu referred to in her letters. However,
despite the society’s founding being a joint effort, it soon became apparent that Montagu
set the agenda. As meetings were held at her home, she was quickly given the nickname
“Queen of the Blues.” This led to occasional conflicts between women like Vessey, who
occasionally held meetings at her own house, and wished for a more informal
atmosphere, but as a whole, Montagu’s methods were accepted and celebrated. Evelyn
Gordon-Bodek does note that the English salons, in comparison to the French, had a
more schoolroom air, with Montagu controlling the conversation, but guests regularly
remarked on the quality of intellectual discourse. As the reputation for her salon grew,
she attracted visitors such as the poet Samuel Johnson, painter Joshua Reynolds, and
writer Horace Walpole.

It should also be noted that Montagu regularly welcome mixed gatherings of men and women, as her main concerns were the intellectual topics themselves. However, there were elements of her salon that were more informal, including the origins of the Bluestocking name. The story goes that when poet Benjamin
Stillingfleet asked if he should attend a meeting in formal white silk stockings, he was
told could come in the more informal blue stockings, as the elevation was about
discourse, not fashion. It then became common to colloquially refer to the meetings at
Montagu’s house, and its members this way.

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3 Pohl and Schellenburg, 32.
4 Ibid, 64.
5 Evelyn Gordon Bodek. “Salonnières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and
6 Ibid, 190.
7 Pohl and Schellenburg, 68.
The formation of the Bluestocking Society also took place at a time when representations of women in literature were becoming more common. Interestingly, it was epistolary novels that placed women front and center. The most famous was Samuel Richardson’s 1748 novel *Clarissa*, which features over five hundred pages of letters from his heroine, detailing her tragic marriage to the man Lovelace and her eventual death. Other novels of this nature would soon follow, but the interesting thing to note is that all of these novels centered on the tragedy of women. The letters in novels painted women as meek and powerless, even if they were educated and intelligent. The Bluestocking society would subvert this trope in demonstrating that women’s correspondence and their lives were far more than tragedy. The letters of the Bluestockings are infused with wit and a deep knowledge of the world around them, both with social events, as well as politics and literature. Bluestocking writer Fanny Burney would actually publish satirical works like *Evelina* that while epistolary, made female heroines informed and competent. Additionally, Elizabeth Montagu’s own shrewd knowledge of London’s social scene, as well as her own intellectual prowess, proved that she could create a world that represented women in a positive light. In her world, women were far more than tragic heroines.

Montagu obviously relished her role as a hostess, and used a way to gain power in English society. To be invited to her salon began to be viewed as a way to receive patronage. Her eye for natural talent among other women was also excellent, as she first caused people to draw notice to writer and satirist Fanny Burney, and philosopher and educational advocate Hannah More. Eventually, the group would expand to include women across England, all knitted together through Montagu’s home and correspondence when they were away. The historian Catharine Macaulay, who would
rise to fame in 1763 with her dispute of historian David Hume’s interpretation of
English history, would join the group by way of Elizabeth Carter, and would play an
incredibly important role in both the second wave of the Bluestocking society, and in
creating trans-Atlantic connections with Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams in the
wake of the American Revolution.8

Montagu was also a prolific letter writer, especially when she was in Northern
England. In fact, most of the women were separated by distance for a large portion of
the time. Vessey spent part of her time in Ireland, while Elizabeth Carter, Fanny Burney,
and Catharine Macaulay all regularly resided in Southern England.9 It was through
letters, therefore, that these women were able to update each other not only on their
lives, but continue to discuss intellectual topics. In reading Montagu’s letters (after her
death, she left behind thousands of letters to her nephew, who eventually published
them), it becomes obvious how much she prioritized her friendships with women, and
genuinely enjoyed their company as a way to have authentic intellectual discussions. In
a 1769 letter to Elizabeth Carter, she writes: “...And I hope that the improvement my
mind receives from conversing with you will do so likewise, but alas the hourly delight I
found in your conversation makes me regret my change of situation. I am terribly
awkward without you, and can in no way reconcile myself to this deprivation.10
Montagu’s devotion to her fellow Bluestockings, as well as the mentor/mentee
relationship she would take on through correspondence would later be echoed in the
relationship of Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren. While it would be hasty to label

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8 Ibid, 89.
9 Ibid, 188.
10 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter. 1769. Elizabeth Montagu Papers. Special Collections,
Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge.
the Bluestockings as feminists, especially because the term had not yet been invented, it does seem evident that Montagu created a genuinely supportive network for women to converse with each other, and advance themselves in intellectual matters. Her admiration for her fellow Bluestockings as hostesses also comes through in her letters. Despite her wishes for a formal salon, and some reports that she conflicted with Vessey about conversation styles, a 1772 letter to Elizabeth Carter, complimenting Vessey’s hosting abilities states: “....[her assemblies] indeed in many respects resembles Paradise, for there the Lion sits down by the Lamb, the Tyger dandles the Kid...Beaux espirits and fine Gentlemen all gather together under the downy wing of the Sylph, and are soothed into good humor.”11 For Montagu, these qualities seemed to be the perfect balance—elevated intellectual conversations, mixed with perfect sociability and English civility.

Montagu’s letters also reflect the “beau monde” that David S. Shields refers to, and the belles lettres that follow codes of civility. Even in her letters, Montagu does not forget her role as a hostess and patron. She regularly emphasized politeness and civility in her letters. In the same 1769 letter to Carter, she states: “I intended writing to you from Durham, but the archdeacon came to meet me there and I could not in civility leave himself with his own thoughts.”12 Or, in a 1762 letter to writer Sarah Sloane Stanley: “The rites of hospitality are performed in it with all the sincerity of good graces...I was much mortified that I could not thank you for the grand pleasure your

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12 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter. 1769. Elizabeth Montagu Papers. Special Collections, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge.
letter gave me when I received it. . .in all occasions, I have received great civility...I am obliged to pay in attention a concurrence with whatever is going on.” 13 These letters indicate that Montagu was not only aware of her own status, but also knew that to maintain her reputation as a hostess and patron, she also needed to notice those above her. Her reference to the archdeacon, and making sure that he is also comfortable, is highly telling. Her first priority was cultivating her reputation through being attuned to the needs of others, and making sure to follow proper protocols. As this, in her mind, would cemented her reputation, patronage, and the ability to exercise her intellectual pursuits would follow.

Montagu knew her acceptance as a female intellectual was also conditional in following civil codes set for genteel women. Despite the Bluestocking society being active at a time of great political uncertainty, especially as American colonists began to grow increasingly dissatisfied with British rule, Montagu chose not to regularly interact with politics, other than align with Tory (conservative) politicians. This seemed to be a trend among most Bluestocking women, the greatest exception being Catharine Macaulay, who along with being one of the first famous female historians, was also a noted member of the radical Whig party. Macaulay, despite being accepted into the society by Montagu and Carter, was one of the members Montagu clashed with, and would later distance herself from the most, when Macaulay became more vocal about her stance on women’s education in later years. 14 The differing of ideas between Montagu and Macaulay in terms of where they should fall on the spectrum of advocating

for women, is also highly similar to the separation of values between Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren.

Catharine Macaulay and Abigail Adams had other similarities in their lives as well. Both were denied access to formal education—Macaulay was educated at home by a governess, in direct contrast in Montagu’s more rigid schooling.15 She was however, a voracious reader at an early age, and became interested in history as a teenager after reading several tracts on the history of Britain.16 After marrying George Macaulay—who actually encouraged her studies—she published her dispute of Hume’s work. It was Macaulay who elevated the fame of the Bluestocking society, and made them be well known abroad. It was also Macaulay who made some of the first contacts to intellectual women in America, including Mercy Otis Warren, who had begun to write her own work advocating for the America Revolution. (Macaulay would also be noted for her support of America’s independence, another position that would cause friction within the larger circle).

It was the prominence of Macaulay and other writers that spurred representations of Bluestocking women in the larger British consciousness, particularly in art. Perhaps the most famous painting, featuring a majority of Bluestocking women, is Richard Samuel’s 1779 *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, which still hangs in

16 Ibid, 23.
the London National Gallery. To more easily convey an analysis of this painting, a copy is also included in the body below. 17

The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain portrays, from left to right, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Angelica Kauffmann, Elizabeth Linley, Catharine Macaulay, Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Griffin, Hannah More, and Charlotte Lennox. Samuels’ decision to include a mix of women from the first and second waves of the circle (founding members and those brought on by founding members) was influenced by him wanting to include the women he believed to have made the most significant contributions to certain areas of art. In his title, he wanted to evoke Rome and Greece, where muses were poets who gave divine inspiration in areas such as painting, writing, and music. Therefore, he chose to depict Angelica Kauffmann, a noted painter herself, as

art, and Elizabeth Linley, who poses in the center with her harp, as music. Macaulay, obviously is history herself. Interestingly, Montagu is not at the center of the painting, but the viewer’s eye is drawn to her nevertheless, as she is prominently surrounded by other writers and poets, fulfilling her role as mentor, hostess, and patron.

Samuels’ portrait in relation to intellectual women, sociability, and public participation is important for several reasons. The painting itself is an example of Neoclassical art, which was created in the 1760s and emphasized ornamentation and symmetry, as a way to evoke Ancient Roman art. If Samuels was following these guidelines, it makes sense that he would draw in Roman themes. At the same time, while this painting is very elegant and aesthetically pleasing, there are few distinctions between each woman, aside from choices of dress, or objects held to denote profession. Macaulay, when viewing this portrait for the first time, famously remarked that she could not tell any of them apart, and Samuels also chose to not have each woman sit for him individually before painting them all in. It cannot be denied that this painting is incredibly passive, and is a celebration more of British virtues than the women themselves. Samuels was commissioned to paint The Nine Living Muses for a Royal Academy exhibition, and the instruction was “the contributions to English society and learning.” The work was not necessary about what female intellectuals had accomplished themselves, but what their contributions, and British society’s acceptance of them meant for Britain as an “enlightened” culture. The Enlightenment, and celebrated British philosopher John Locke had advocated education for all, so of course the accomplishments of the Bluestockings should be highlighted. Highlighted, yet

18 Davies, 78.
19 Ibid, 75.
confined to the bounds of respectability, in ornamental and passive poses, rather than actively engaging in any forms of discourse. Note the way Macaulay holds a scroll, but gazes into the distance instead of writing on it, or the way that none of the many intellectuals depicted are holding a single book. Elizabeth Linley and Charlotte Lennox have at least been granted instruments, but their fingers are idle on the strings. Despite Samuels’ claims that this painting celebrates women’s contributions to art, a more accurate description would be a celebration of ornamental sociability, in relation to the civil hostess and the gentleman’s daughter that Amanda Vickery discusses. The painting’s passivity also seems to say that of course women can participate within the public sphere, as long as do not threaten the traditional modes of femininity and civility. Additionally, Samuels’ decision to place the painting in the past—even though this could have also been a stylistic choice—gives the idea that putting women into a time period that has already occurred makes them seem less threatening than if they were depicted in 1770s Britain. It seems to say that Rome has already occurred, so don’t worry about women choosing to participate in the current public sphere—they are obviously rooted within the past.

Paintings like *The Nine Living Muses* also evoke Mary Beth Norton’s discussions of femininity, and new obsessions in the late 1700s about what it meant to be feminine. The women in the painting very much connect to Norton’s remarks that women needed to be more “modest, chaste, cheerful, sympathetic, affable, and emotional.” In other words, the women as depicted by Samuels are expected to fit an almost impossible ideal. They were expected to be muses, elevated to an almost ethereal status. As the title also

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suggests, they were meant to be muses for Britain, depicted as patrons of the arts, bearers of an enlightened society, but also compromising their own identities and passions for the sake of Britain’s ideals. This paradox would also soon migrate to America in the forms of Republican Motherhood, as well as the roles Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren sought to fulfill in their participation in the American Revolution.

One thing however, can be certain. The Bluestocking women, were in a sense, muses. Perhaps not the stoic ones depicted in Samuels’ portrait, but the creation of the salon would change women’s participation in the public sphere. Not only this, but their reliance on correspondence as a way to further intellectual discourse, away from the scrutinizing public eye, would set up a model for women’s networks in America. The willingness of the Bluestocking women to act as patrons to each other, and to support their intellectual endeavors through back and forth dialogues in letters, would soon travel to America. Additionally, the model of the women’s salon, and women creating networks to discuss important issues and supplement gaps in their education, would also find its way into upper class American homes. Montagu’s careful planning of the women’s salon, her balance between a hostess and a supporter of women’s arts in order to seek out new talent, and her insistence on regularly corresponding through letters marked a turning point in women creating an active discourse with each other, both in Britain and North America.
Trans-Atlantic Connections and the American Revolution.

Mary Beth Norton, in her work on women in early America, emphasizes the importance of women’s networks and women forming strong bonds with each other. “Since so much of a woman’s life revolved around her household, it is easy to see why feminine companionship held such attractions for her and why young women developed such close ties with their female contemporaries...friendships with other members of their own sex formed a constant backdrop to the otherwise fluctuating rhythms of their existence. A woman’s relationship with men changed as she grew older and married, but she often retained throughout her life her attachments with the same female friends.”

Whether this was an influence from women’s networks in Britain, or simply a pattern that colonial women developed as a way to reach out in their communities, groups of this nature shaped the lives of Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, and made their friendship possible. According to Norton, friendships like these—long lasting, and often sustained by correspondence—were essential to women’s happiness. Additionally, it seems important to add that the literary relationship between Mercy and Abigail would not have been possible without the influence of the women’s salon, and trans-Atlantic correspondence from English contemporaries.

The 1760s marked the beginning of conflict with Britain and its American colonies, beginning with tax acts by British Parliament in 1765. While many of the Bluestocking women were apolitical, and chose to remain this way throughout the Revolution, Catharine Macaulay actually supported American Independence, and was very vocal about her views. In the 1775 Address to the people of England, Scotland and

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Ireland on the present important crisis of affairs, she asked the British people to support the rights of Americans, and to join with them to protect the encroachment of their own civil liberties. She also stated that supporting the rights of others can in the long run support one’s own rights. Along with making these very radical statements, Macaulay also extended her correspondence to America, writing to figures like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, along with Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams. Kate Davies, in discussing Macaulay’s correspondence with Mercy Otis Warren in particular, states that: “It was correspondence that had allowed Britain and America to imagine itself as a community, correspondence that had forged the political bonds between Britain and London’s cultures of reform.” Letters made the two countries similarities be more apparent than their differences, especially in regard to women’s using letters a way to comment on politics and intellectual topics. Additionally, most of the same conventions around civility and politeness are evident in the letters from both countries. Despite America wanting to distance itself from Britain, elements of British culture had already permeated American life.

Macaulay’s efforts to reach out to women like Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams were also shrewd. They were a way to make other intellectual contacts, and also create important connections among new prominent politicians. Mercy, who was also always concerned with appearances and increasing political capital for her husband, Representative James Warren, understood the urge, and rapidly began to correspond with Macaulay about the fate of America. Abigail Adams also quickly joined their

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3 Ibid, 55.
network, though for her, it was more about feeling a kinship with Macaulay’s intellectualism. Abigail had also been self-taught, and educated by the women in her community, and always had a deep yearning to travel and have the same level of independence as Macaulay. She was delighted then, to exchange ideas with her. In a letter to Macaulay in 1774, she writes: “You express a desire to become acquainted with our American Ladies. To them, Mrs. Macaulay is sufficiently distinguished by her superior abilities. Abigail, following codes of civility and deferring to the older woman’s accomplishments, then immediately jumps into her feelings about the Revolution. Being the wife of a politician, and also intensely observant and well read on her own, Abigail was often consumed by thoughts of the Revolution, but had few to share them with, especially as she was left to manage the household while her husband was away. It was with letters then, and women like Macaulay, that she was able to satisfy some of her intellectual cravings, and also make her voice heard about important political issues.

Macaulay’s Trans-Atlantic correspondences included Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams, and both of them were inspired by her in different ways—Mercy looked to her as inspiration for publishing her own works, while Abigail seemed more inspired by her radical brand of feminism. Over the span of the Revolutionary War and beyond, these women would exert the full power of the trans-Atlantic network, exchanging letters, meeting in salon-like environments, and constantly challenging each other on literature, education, and women’s rights. Each woman’s relationship with each other was slightly different, though what most marks the similarities between Abigail Adams and Catharine Macaulay was their willingness to challenge societal norms and advocate

for greater privileges within their gender. Mercy Otis Warren, on the other hand, established herself as a de facto leader, like Montagu before her, often acting as a sort of benevolent schoolmistress. Like Montagu as well, Warren preferred to stick to societal norms as way of advancing her intellectual agenda, serving as a patron and hostess to other leading figures, but accepted the status quo for women and never called for a personal expansion of legal and educational rights.

Abigail and Mercy’s relationship in particular, and their correspondence needs a lengthy discussion, as they are not only two of the most commonly remembered female figures in the American Revolution, but the literary correspondence they had could not have existed without the influence of the women’s salon, and their separate relationships with Catharine Macaulay. Interestingly, their lives in politics, their personal values, and the roles they played in American society also mirror those of Macaulay and Montagu. The two women were first introduced in 1773, at a gathering in Mercy’s Barnstable home. Abigail always looked for women who she believed to be intellectual equals, and active correspondents, something she had first developed in her teenage years, when she would take books from her father’s library and discuss them with her sisters. Additionally, Abigail also began to exchange letters as a teenager, which would also nurture her love for writing and expressing ideas. Her understanding of the power of women’s networks from a young age would influence her entire life, as she had no qualms about cultivating a relationship with Mercy through letters, or women like Macaulay for that matter.

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When Abigail first met Mercy in 1773, the older woman was already a published author, having already written several poems about the beginning of the American Revolution. Like Elizabeth Montagu, Mercy was able to balance the line between the non-traditional and the conventional. As the wife of an important politician, she was expected to fulfill hostess duties and present herself as an informed conversationalist, within the bounds of propriety. As Elizabeth Montagu did before her, Mercy excelled at balancing the two roles, presenting herself as both the elegant politician’s wife, and an accomplished intellectual in her own right. Her earliest works were anonymous, which helped with balancing each each, but her 1772 play *The Adulutor* was one of the earliest works advocating for independence from British rule. Abigail, at their time of their introduction, was the less accomplished of the two women, though her natural talent for letter writing, and her eagerness to sharpen her intellectual skills made her a willing correspondent. It was Abigail who would pen the first letter to Mercy, shortly after their 1773 stay in Barnstable. There was an ulterior motive as well—Abigail was obviously looking for a mentor.

The influences of the belle lettres, and British codes of politeness and manners are evident in Abigail’s first letter. Despite America’s desire to distinguish themselves as a nation unique from their rulers, the fact that so many cultural customs had already seeped themselves in day to day colonial is obvious in Abigail’s correspondence. She addresses Warren with all the courtesy deserved to a woman sixteen years her senior, and more importantly a woman she was hoping to learn from. The letter begins: “The kind reception with which I met at your House, and the Hospitality with which you

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entertained me, demands my grateful acknowledgment... By requesting a correspondence, you have kindly given me an opportunity to thank you for the Happy Hours I enjoyed whilst at your house." Abigail’s praise of Mercy as a hostess, and of her home as a whole, evoke the idea of the gentleman’s daughter, and the hostess as a model of civility and politeness. Furthermore, Abigail’s praise her home demonstrates her knowledge of these conventions, and her deferment to Mercy. From the beginning, Abigail’s letters have a far more humble tone than her friend’s—Mercy was more than willing to take on the role of the wiser, more critical professor. Abigail even states in her first letter than she hopes her discussions with Mercy about politics and literature will lead to intellectual improvement.

Mercy, in turn, also employs common practices of civility in her reply. “It gives me no small satisfaction to be assured by you that your Late Visit was agreeable and sincerely wish it may be in such a degree as to induce to you on repeat in what will always give me pleasure.” Then, taking a turn: It gives me no small satisfaction to be assured by you that your Late Visit was agreeable and sincerely wish it may be in such a degree as to induce you to repeat in what will always give me pleasure.” After acknowledging Abigail’s graciousness, she then sets the tone for their next few years of correspondence, taking the upper hand and critiquing Abigail’s writing style. “I shall pass over in silence the Complementary introduction to your letter, not because these Expressions of Esteem are frequently words of Course without any other design but to Convey and Idea.

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of politeness as the Characteristick [sic] of the person most Lavish therein. But in you I consider anything of the kind as the Natural result of a Friendly heart dispose’d to think well of all those who have not been Guilty of any remarkable instance of depravity to create Disgust.”

Mercy’s acknowledgement of the culture of politeness, and how these profusions could be somewhat insincere is interesting here, as she seems to briefly acknowledge the confines of polite conventions—and her willingness to call Abigail out on using them is even more so. Mercy’s casual way of pointing out what she believed to be issues in Abigail’s correspondence again would set the tone for their letters, which would become a mix of the formal conventions of the Bluestocking Society, and their own ideas concerning the future of their nation.

Mercy’s contrast with fake profusions of politeness and “Natural result,” should also be noted here. On the one hand, she could be make a small jab at what she considered to be Abigail’s inexperience and naiveté around certain customs, but her use of “Natural” as a positive word could also be indicative of the late 18th century genre of sentimentalism, which were another product of the Enlightenment. Sentimentalism and letters often went hand in hand, as a great deal of epistolary novels produced fit into the sentimentalist genre. In sentimental literature, the plot was often arranged to advance emotions rather than action, and characters were often displayed as a model for refined, moral, or emotional effect. Works like Lawrence Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey would often feature “natural” displays of emotion, where characters would be inspired to express their intense feelings or passions for one another. Platonic friendships, and the feelings they produced were often very much emphasized in sentimental literature as

10 Ibid.
well. “Natural” in sentimentalism was more often than not used as a complimentary term, and close friends were regularly encouraged to express their feelings to each other through long, passionate letters and speeches. As Mercy was highly educated and well read, she was more than likely evoking the sentimental novels herself and Abigail would have both read, and complimenting Abigail’s willingness to be so fresh and host with her from the beginning—even if the compliment was slightly backhanded and instantly established a relationship where Mercy was the authoritative voice of knowledge—though this was the standard that seemed to be set in women’s correspondence, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Montagu and her contemporaries before Mercy and Abigail. Abigail’s early willingness to defer to Mercy’s knowledge should also be noted. At their first meeting, the two women discussed the education of children, by means of book by the author Juliana Seymour entitled On the Management and Education of Children: A Series of Letters Written to a Niece, written in 1754. Mercy had asked Abigail to send it to her, and Abigail quickly complied. She also asks for Mercy’s advice in raising children—Abigail was a young mother at the time, while Mercy’s children were all older and practically on their own—writing: “May the Natural Benevolence of your Heart prompt you to assist a young and almost inexperienced Mother in this arduous business, that the tender twigs allotted to my care, may be so cultivated to do honor to their parents and prove blessings to a rising generation.” Abigail’s praise of Mercy’s family, and her willingness to seek Mercy’s advice on motherhood once again show the two conflicting sides of women’s lives in the eighteenth century, and the divides between family and tradition, and more radical intellectualism. At the same time however, it

should be noted that education is a common link within these opposing sides—Abigail and Mercy regularly dialogued about the best way to raise children through the different authors they read, which were often similar to the ones written by Juliana Seymour. It was education in many forms—both in educating their children and themselves—that these two women connected the most with in their early years of correspondence.

Education was a larger debate as the American Revolution progressed—the question of how America was going to establish its intellectual identity—if it would continue to be influenced by Britain, or create its own cultural knowledge was a question various scholars in America and Britain seemed to be asking. Additionally, many seemed to wonder if women were going to be given a place in American education—continuing the cycle that Mary Astell and John Locke had asked a century ago. Throughout their letters, Mercy and Abigail regularly dialogued about education, and the privileges a woman should be allowed. Consider this letter from 1773, from Abigail to Mercy, with Abigail once again taking on the role of the dutiful pupil. “Incorrect and unpolished as this letter is, I will not suffer a mistaken pride so far as to lead me astray as to omit the present opportunity of improvement, and should I prove a tractable scholar, you will not find me tardy.”12 The irony is that Abigail was far from in need of a tutor—her easy, conversational style and deep observations on the Revolution and her surroundings prove this—but Abigail was also self-conscious about her lack of formal education and eager to prove herself.

There is also a telling letter from Mercy to Abigail, written in January 1775, on the difference between the education of men and women.

I believe I must own we are on an Equal footing with Regard to the one quality which the other sex so Generously Consigns over to us, though for no other Reason but because they have the opportunities of indulging their inquisitive Humour to the utmost in the Great school of the World, while we are Confined to the Narrower Circle of Domestic Care. But we have yet one Advantage peculiar to ourselves. If the Mental Faculties of the Female are not improved it may be Concealed in the Obscure Retreats of the Bed Chamber or the kitchen which she is not often Necessitated to Leave. Whereas Man is Generally Called out to the full display of his Abilities but how often do they Exhibit the most Mortifying instances of Neglected Opportunities and their Minds appear Not with standing the Advantages of what is Called a Liberal Education, as Barren of Culture and as Void of Every useful acquirement as the most Trifling untutored Girl.13

Here, some of the key differences between Mercy and Abigail, not only in their styles of writing, but in their views of how women should be educated in the new Republic are illuminated. Again, this is an area of many contradictions—Mercy, after all became a published author, which was very much outside of a woman’s traditional role—but in her private correspondence, she appears more resigned to challenge gender roles. In an earlier letter to Abigail, she refers to women as “the fair and weaker sex”14, while in this letter, she seems to be saying that the fact women can conceal gaps in their education is beneficial to them, as they can hide and suppress it better than men. Her emphasis on the “domestic sphere”—the traditional and appropriate place for a colonial woman at this time—is also telling. The irony of Mercy’s letter, and her stating that woman can more easily hide their lack of knowledge on literature and the world, is actually one of the things Abigail was most self-conscious of. It was Abigail who longed to travel to Europe and experience the cities her brothers had, and Abigail who had wanted a formal education. Perhaps Mercy was more content because she had been

allowed to study with private tutors, but Abigail’s early childhood, and her longing to have something more made her the more radical of the two women. Rather like Catharine Macaulay, who had also been self-taught, Abigail was the one who pushed for, and regularly considered the impact universal access to education could have on women.

In general, Abigail’s letters were tinged with more radicalism—both in education and politics alike. Her eye for noticing, and commenting on key events in the Revolution are some of the most valuable primary sources historians have, and some of the best remembered. In 1773, she wrote to Mercy: “The Tea that bainfull weed is arrived. Great and I hope Effectual opposition has been made to the landing of it...You will there find that the proceedings of our Citizens have been United, Spirited and firm. The flame is kindled and like Lightning it catches from Soul to Soul. Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more Lenient Measures.”

Perhaps Mercy was the older, published author, who viewed Abigail as her more ignorant student, but here, Abigail’s ability to aptly judge the feelings of her fellow citizens, and accurately predict events to come, showcase her ability to analyze and think like a historian. Additionally, her call for Revolution, and her discussion of the people wanting change—change that would catch the entire city—demonstrates her more radical views. In some ways, Abigail’s views on the Revolution, and commentary on the people wanting and fighting for change reflect her own inner conflict of wanting a greater life of her own. If she could not seek it out, as a result of being bound to her own duties as a wife and mother, she

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could at least write on the actions of others, and reflect on ideas for a better future to come.

Abigail’s underlying radicalism and desire for change is also conveyed in a letter to Mercy from April 1776, where she writes about influencing John Adams to discuss women’s rights in Congress. “He is very sausy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress. I thought it was very probable our wise Statesmen would erect a New Government and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife Ill.” Abigail was thinking towards the future, rather than Mercy, who was more fixated on documenting key present events for her later history on the American Revolution. Abigail’s letters also demonstrate that she was thinking far beyond her time, in raising issues with marriage laws and alluding to spousal abuse. Her philosophies seem far more in line with women of the nineteenth century, but these letters and ideas, along with her famous claim to “remember the ladies,” cemented Abigail’s place as one of the most famous women in the American Revolution. Mercy, though talented with her histories, was more constrained within the bounds of propriety and traditionalism, and less willing to see where women could be, if granted the same privileges as men.

Naturally, these letters also raise questions of feminism. At the time Mercy and Abigail were writing, the term had not yet been invented, and Abigail would have defended her role as a wife and mother. The Bluestockings would also have not claimed

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the term, due to their insistence on being accepted in traditional English society, but their support of women’s education would raise large questions in years to come. Abigail would be one of the first women to follow suit on the other side of the Atlantic. Catharine Macaulay would challenge the status quo by following up her histories with a treatise on women’s education. The philosophies put forth by Adams and Macaulay would challenge previously established norms of women’s circles, and mark them—especially Macaulay—as radicals outside the distinct sphere of tradition and politeness.

*Warren and Montagu, Adams and Macaulay.*

Elizabeth Montagu’s letters were distinguished by a mix of intellectual thoughts, along with observations on the places she was visiting, and the people she met along the way. Her correspondence is every bit a reflection of the ideal genteel hostess, as it mentions parties, what people were wearing, what they ate, and the gossip they discussed. As a result, Montagu was able to easily move between spheres, moving back and forth between the intellectual woman of the salon, and a fashionable wife and host. Mercy Otis Warren approached her life and letters in a very similar way. The parallels between the two women can be best illuminated in a letter from Mercy to Abigail (April, 1776), discussing a visit to Martha Washington’s.

I was Receiv’d with that politness and Respect shewn in a first interveiw among the well bred and with the Ease and Cordiallity of Friendship of a much Earlier date. If you wish to hear more of this Ladys Character I will tell you I think the Complacency of her Manners speaks at once the Benevolence of her Heart, and her affability, Candor and Gentleness Quallify her to soften the hours of private Life or to sweeten the Cares of the Hero and smooth the Rugged scenes of War.17

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The discussions of manners, along with the use of words such as “ease” and “cordiality” all evoke sentimentalism, as well as codes of civility and politeness among genteel women. Mercy’s observations on Martha Washington, and her discussion of her visit, as well as other people she met, all mirror Montagu’s long discussions of London dinners, and who she believed to be the most well-bred through manners and affability. The letter goes on, describing Martha’s daughter-in-law—

A sensible Modest agreeable young Man. His Lady a Daughter of Coll. Calvert of Mariland, appears to be of an Engaging Disposition but of so Extrem Delicate a Constitution that it Deprives her as well as her Friends of part of the pleasure which I am persuwaded would Result from her Conversation did she Enjoy a Greater share of Health. She is pretie, Genteel, Easey and Agreeable, but a kind of Langour about her prevents her being so sociable as some Ladies.18

Letters to friends often reveal people’s innermost thoughts, or what they are most preoccupied with. Mercy’s letters, more than Abigail’s, tend to be more self-centered, as is the case with Elizabeth Montagu’s. Mercy was often preoccupied with wanting critiques on her own writing, or on society itself, noting and making judgements upon the manners of people she met. It also could have been a difference in Mercy and Abigail’s age and points in life—Abigail was preoccupied with running a farm and raising young children while her husband was away—while Mercy had more time to fixate on society events. Despite these differences, it does become apparent that Mercy was interested in the status quo, and regularly remarked upon it, while Abigail was constantly immersed in, and writing on politics, the decisions of Congress, and the future women would have in the Republic.

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18 Ibid.
It also seems that Abigail and Catharine simply had a more natural curiosity about the world around them, perhaps motivated by the years they had to seek out knowledge themselves, finding books that looked interesting in family libraries. Both women still had access to a large amount of the canon of Western literature, and read them with gusto. Abigail tended to gravitate towards authors who favored social critiques, such as Oliver Goldsmith and Jonathan Swift, as well as satirists like Moliere.\(^\text{19}\) While Mercy focused on her own writing, Abigail read voraciously, developing her own opinions, as did Macaulay, who was also noted for her love of meticulous research when developing her histories, and would spend hours in the British Library.\(^\text{20}\) Unlike historians such as Hume, who simply wrote down his own ideas without building on the traditions of past historians (he referred to scholarship as “the dark industry”\(^\text{21}\)), Macaulay stated—

“In this country where luxury has made a great progress, it is not to be supposed that the people of fortune will fathom the depth of politics, or examine the voluminous collections in which can only be found a faithful representation of the important transactions of past ages. It is the business of a historian to digest these and to give a true and accurate sense of them to the public.”\(^\text{22}\) In other words, methodology is everything. Macaulay seemed to understand the importance of history as a profession before it truly developed as such, and rather than writing history as a quest to be noticed as an author, was actually fascinated by the past motivations of humanity. It seems that

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\(^\text{20}\) Davies, 98.

\(^\text{21}\) Ibid, 97.

\(^\text{22}\) Catharine Macaulay to James Burgh, 1773. Taken from Davies, 98.
when Macaulay wrote, there was no obsession with social codes or politeness, but pure learning for learning’s sake. Perhaps this is why she became so passionate about the ideas of universal education for all, posing some of the earliest feminist theories on the subject.

Unfortunately, Macaulay’s emphasis on pure intellectualism and her hope for education in the future was not embraced by all. Her ideas, and her work *On Education* caused some friction in the Bluestocking circle, with some resenting Macaulay for challenging the status quo and bringing a more radical agenda into the group. In particular, Montagu seemed displeased with her friend’s Revolutionary sympathies, as well as her second marriage. Writing to Elizabeth Vesey in 1779, Montagu stated—“All this has happened from her adopting masculine opinions and masculine manners. I hate a woman’s mind in men’s clothes as much as her person...Indeed, she always was a strange fellow.”23 The vitriol here is rather astounding, especially as Montagu was always so willing to support her fellow women writers. However, the most telling sentence has to be “I hate a woman’s mind in men’s clothes as much as her person.” Again, this demonstrates the Bluestocking obsession with keeping women in the bounds of correct social behavior. As long as women were intellectual without challenging the status quo, they could remain in Montagu’s—their patron’s—good graces. The danger was if women dared to challenge the status quo and threaten Montagu’s status within English society. Montagu’s quick dismissal of Macaulay’s work is also similar to Mercy Otis Warren’s willingness to refer to women as “the fair and weaker sex,” as a way to also gain patronage in polite society. Additionally, Montagu’s criticisms of Macaulay are

23 Davies, 175.
Montagu’s tactic was to place Macaulay outside the accepted social sphere she had created. Rather than being intellectually curious, but also feminine and polite, genteel and agreeable, she discusses Macaulay as “masculine,” which in her mind, seems to be one of the worst things a woman can be. Too much knowledge, such as Macaulay’s educational advocacy, seems to be dangerous and places her in a “masculine” or “strange” category. While Mercy never directly spoke ill of Abigail in the way that Montagu did of Macaulay, she also rarely rose to discussion with Abigail in her more radical thoughts, preferring instead to write about education in a more theoretical sense, by discussing existing texts, often relating to the raising of, and education of children, rather than any radical new theories. It also goes back to values. Montagu and Warren were obsessed with the social sphere, politeness, and sociability, as well as the benefits that being a good hostess could give them in terms of connections to prominent intellectuals and politicians. Adams and Macaulay put less store on this world, and instead wanted to use their intellectualism as a way to instigate change.

Even before Montagu’s criticisms of Macaulay, the Bluestocking women were aware of how Macaulay’s radical politics could paint their agenda and intellectual salons in a different light. They attempted to place Macaulay back in the acceptable parameters of their circle, as stated by Kate Davies. “Macaulay’s radical friends spoke of her as if she were a bluestocking hostess who exemplified these conventions of sociability and politeness….her conversation was said to augment both the pleasure and polish of her
company.”24 Here, we see the “genteel, easy, and agreeable” elements that Mercy Otis Warren spoke of in her letter to Abigail. To be an elite woman in the public sphere, it was simpler to appear as a model of civility than a radical, especially as it fit far more into the idealized images of femininity. To challenge established norms too much, to be overly invested in politics or too ambitious in changing education or women’s rights was to be a radical—or worse, a “strange fellow.” Indeed, Montagu’s use of “fellow” seems to be intentional, as she neutralizes Macaulay’s gender, moving her away from the respectable Bluestocking circle into a different category altogether.

This was the contradiction of being a woman in the eighteenth century. Participation in the public sphere was acceptable, but had to fit established codes of civility, otherwise you were at risk of being labeled as an outlier to the group. For Warren and Montagu, these notions of respectability and correct behavior were not only a reflection of their identities as women, but their political ones. Consider this letter that Mercy actually wrote to Macaulay in 1774, which describes the political woman as an observer and commentator, but not a participant. On if ideas were valid—“I think it very immaterial if they flow from a female lip in the soft whispers of private friendship or are thundered in the Senate in the bolder language of the other sex.”25 Warren’s language here is incredibly gendered and traditional, from the “soft whispers,” to the “bolder language”—as if women could not be bold themselves. Mercy, despite noting some of inequalities between men and women, was also more than willing to support them. In her mind, a woman’s place was still in the family sphere, not in the Senate (and indeed,

24 Davies, 81.
it would take another two hundred years before women would find their way to said Senate). Yet again, this goes back to the ideas of being genteel and easy, rather than blurring the spectrum to seem too masculine, and therefore deemed unacceptable to participate in discourse.

The mid to late 1700s were a tumultuous period across Europe, dominated by Revolutions and social change. Yet these changes and events also emphasized the importance of networks and places to discuss politics and changes to the social order, especially among women. In fact, the American Revolution made women’s networks like the Bluestocking Society more active, and gave women like Macaulay a platform and way to more easily make connections with intellectual women in America. In turn, the intellectual model of the Bluestocking Society, and using letters as a way to be directly involved in politics was able to influence American women at a greater rate. Additionally, the connections Macaulay made with Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams, and her sympathies for the American Revolution highlight the similarities with British and American culture. Macaulay’s letters, and the responses she got back, demonstrate the importance of letters as a vehicle for civility and as a way to show one’s place in high society. In turn, these letters and their codes of civility, as well as what women would and would not discuss also carried codes of how women would behave in the social sphere, and what would and would not be discussed. For Mercy Otis Warren and Elizabeth Montagu, being intellectual, but also a model hostess and networker, who did little to provoke perceptions of femininity, while Abigail Adams and Catharine Macaulay became increasingly invested in the future for women, particularly in terms of access to education, and independence from their husbands. Additionally, they yearned for great participation in the public sphere, such as active participation in the political
process—like Abigail’s husband did. Unfortunately, the larger view around how women would be involved in the new Republic were more similar to Mercy Otis Warren’s, or going back a few decades, the way women were presented in *The Nine Living Muses*—visible, but delicate and nonthreatening.

There were some women in early America who wished to challenge the ideas of those with views like Mercy’s, though they were met with a fair share of opposition. An “aged matron” from Connecticut, writing in 1801 described herself as the “female advocate,” and lambasted people would deride “masculine women,” stating—“...the word ‘Masculine’ be meant a person of reading and letters, a person of science and information, one who can properly answer a question without fear and trembling or one who is capable of doing business, with a suitable command over self...”26 This can be read in direct contrast to Mercy warning women not to be too bold, and instead calls for women to be rational, informed, and confident—all traits that Macaulay and Adams would praise. Unfortunately, this view was not widely accepted, as the participation in early America shifted towards a more collective one that once again emphasized feminine virtues, a participant in public affairs but not one of action, and fond of family life.

Women in early America were influenced greatly by the ideals of the Roman Republic—as previously discussed with the painting *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*—and the ideals of the Roman Republic, as well as the “Republican Mother” would permeate Warren and Adams’ identities in their correspondence, while the larger philosophies surrounding Republicanism would set the tone for early America, and

26 Kerber, 68.
further advocate “correct” and “genteel” behaviors around women’s participation, putting boldness (with some exceptions) on the back burner once more.
Republican Motherhood and Women’s Participation.

Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams’ letters are intriguing in more ways than one. While their content is fascinating, so is the actual form of the letters, and the stylistic choices these two women make. One of the most intriguing decisions was that as Mercy and Abigail continued to correspond, they chose to adopt Roman names to sign their letters with. Mercy was “Marcia,” while Abigail was “Portia.” Their pick of these names could be related to the theories of “Republican Motherhood,” which historian Linda Kerber described as “a model of femininity that associated women’s virtues with national civic morality.” Additionally, ideas of sentimentality and traditional femininity united the public and private sphere for women—their feminine virtues assuring society that they would not enter the larger world of politics reserved for men, but still play a vital role in the Republic.

The idea of “Republican Motherhood” has roots in the public sphere, which was another concept first embraced by Bluestocking women. Social theorist Jurgen Habermas popularized the idea of the public sphere in his 1962 work on the subject. Habermas notes that women were regularly excluded from the public sphere until the eighteenth century—especially the political realm—but that they took an active part in the literary public sphere. However, he also notes that there was a change in the late eighteenth century concerning more female participation in the public sphere, as more elite classes converged in vacation spots such as Bath, where it was acceptable for women to participate in various public events, from teas in the pump room, to dances.

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Bath, one of the leading society towns in eighteenth century England, was where many Bluestocking gatherings took place, and where they were able to hold public intellectual conversations without scrutiny. Women’s participation in towns like Bath, was the first step in giving them an acceptable role in the public sphere. The more they began to be seen in public events, the more acceptable it appeared. After the American Revolution, when women began to be encouraged to participate at fashionable events, it was hardly questioned, especially when classical elements were incorporated.

The obsession of placing women in the roles of Roman muses occurred even before the Revolution, beginning in England with portraits like The Nine Living Muses. The style of Samuel’s portrait was not uncommon in this era. Portrait artists, along with sculptors, regularly incorporated classical elements when depicting prominent women. It was a kind of early form of media, used to stage reputations, especially with more radical and potentially controversial Bluestocking women, like Macaulay. Many times, Macaulay was painted as the figure “History” itself, standing imposingly with her quill, books, and numbered volumes of her work. Additionally, she was compared by British contemporaries to the Roman figure Cornelia, who was the famous widow of Tiberius and the mother of the Gracchi. Cornelia was known as having a great devotion to the Republic, along with an “exemplary feminine privacy.” Kate Davies writes—

“Like Cornelia, Macaulay seemed to many a figure of Republican reproach: a private voice that when corruption reigned and virtue seemed untenable spoke publicly to

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remind men of the patriotic ties binding them to their country.” 4 Several portraits of painted of Macaulay also depicted her as a figure similar to Cornelia, or the Roman Matrona, garbed in classical attire and contemplating the future of her country. With the figure of Cornelia as well, there is the idea that the virtues for the good of the public are great than private passions and desires, which was essentially the goal of Republican Motherhood. Women in early America were expected to unite to extoll the virtues of their new nation, working as a collective voice to advance morality and ethics. It was, in many ways, simply a new code of politeness passed down from earlier notions of British civility.

Warren constantly described herself as a Roman matron, and allusions to Ancient Rome are common in all of her letters. The grandiosity of it appealed to Warren’s nature. Their references to Rome are also infused with more sentimentality—consider this sign off of Warren’s in September 1775—“...I hope for the happiness of seeing this before it reaches the hand of the agreeable Portia, from one who will Indulge so far in the Romantic stile as to subscribe once more by the Name of Your affectionate Marcia.” By adopting this style of writing, and their Roman identities, Mercy and Abigail were able to adopt the ideals of Republican Motherhood into correspondence, and create a new code of appropriate greetings and politeness in their letters to each other. Additionally, the adaptation of their Roman alter egos made their writings more performative, and demonstrated that they were not writing directly as themselves, but as agents for a new cause—the good of the Republic. The two woman were also constantly worried about their letters being intercepted, as they were the wives of two

4 Davies, 83.
prominent figures, so this could have been an extra precaution to preserve their identities as well—but the additional symbolism, and the stylistic elements of their writing that build upon civility and sentimentalism do not go unnoticed.

The visual campaigns around Republican Motherhood that began with earlier works like *The Nine Living Muses*, and depicting women as passive participants began to flourish even more as American independence became a definite. As the American Republic began to form, questions concerning women’s participation naturally began to arise. Some, like Abigail Adams, yearned for women to have a more active role, and be directly involved in shaping policy, but others feared this would disrupt the social order. What occurred therefore, was a previously seen technique of taking Enlightenment values centered on “participation” for all citizens, or all people playing in a role in the shaping of an effective Democracy, and emphasizing women’s participation being around the public sphere and family. Republican Motherhood was first and foremost about mothers training children—particularly daughters—to uphold so-called Republican values and pass them on to the next generation.5 This was, in short, a re-shaping of the debates around femininity Norton discussed a decade earlier. Women were once again encouraged to be open, modest, kind, and engaged, especially when acting as hostesses or mentors to their children. This sort of participation was also considered to be a great privilege in the new Republic, which women should openly embrace and prioritize.

Women prioritizing their roles as mothers and educators for the family also became a dominant theme in early American art. Portraits depicting women lovingly

5 Kerber, 90.
surrounded by their family, or educating their children in the confines of the drawing room began to crop up by the dozens. The 1795 work by American portrait artist James Peale aptly conveys the themes of Republican Motherhood. Entitled The Artist and His Family, and painted in soft pastels, Peale depicts his children surrounded by his wife in a loving embrace at their family home, as depicted here.⁶

This is an ideal scene of domestic tranquility, with all the key values of Republican Motherhood highlighted. Note the way Peale’s wife directly focuses her attention on the oldest daughter, as if imparting important wisdom to her. The two of them are engaged in active conversation, but within the confines of the home, and not the public sphere. What they are discussing has to be imagined, but advocates of Republican Motherhood would probably tell themselves that she is giving advice about domesticity and values. Peale himself looks off into the distance, occupied with weightier matters, while their younger children play around them. This scene is meant to convey a sense of calm, the feeling that all is right in the social order of the new America. Paintings like Peale’s emerged in many different variations, but most of them did limit women’s participation to drawings room and the home, when depicting scenes in present day, as a way to emphasize that the domestic sphere was the woman’s domain. When women were depicted as participants in public events, it was often in scenes from the past—Rome in particular.

Interestingly, one of the more famous paintings of women’s participation in Ancient Rome was done by Angelica Kauffmann, one of the subjects in *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*. Kauffmann was born in Switzerland, and eventually settled in England, becoming one of the only founding female members of Britain’s Royal Academy, and was depicted as the muse of art in Samuels’ painting. 7Kauffmann was also the one who criticized Samuels for not doing individual sittings of each woman for

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7 Davies, 83.
his work. In 1785, around the height of the Republican Motherhood craze, she painted

*Cornelia: Mother of the Gracchi, Pointing to her Children as her Treasures.*

Kauffman’s decision to paint this subject, and her links to the Bluestocking Circle are intriguing. Despite her criticisms of Samuels, there are some similar themes in *Cornelia*, which could be a result of the Neoclassical style. However, the story behind this painting also directly corresponds to themes of Republican Motherhood. A visitor arrives at Cornelia’s home, and shows off an array of jewelry, then asks Cornelia to also display her own treasures—so Cornelia brings her own children forward. There is an almost saintly expression on her face as she points her children to the visitor, who appears chagrined in response. The message of the painting is clear—having children to impart wisdom to is the greatest gift of all. The softness of this work, as also evidenced in Peale’s and Samuels’ paintings, should also be noted. Cornelia, in contrast to the visitor, who is garbed in bright red, is dressed in pastels—pink accented with white, colors that often correlate to femininity and purity. Red, on the other hand, often suggests passion and vanity. The moral message here is clear. Cornelia is in the right, and the visitor is in the wrong. Women should not focus

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on frivolity and their own desires, but on wisdom and giving this wisdom to the next generation. There is also something about Cornelia’s downcast eyes, delicate expression, and the way she is framed that is almost saintly. Everything about her seems to be saying “I have made the correct choices, and you have not.” This was the moralizing message Republican Motherhood wanted to convey—that there were indeed rights and wrongs in being a woman, and being feminine—and wouldn’t it better to find the right choice?

The right choice was something intellectual women struggled with since the Enlightenment first ushered in dialogues about the extent of women’s education. Elizabeth Montagu was aware of this delicate balance as soon as she arranged her society, and knew that as much as she craved “the doctrine of radical conversation,” she would also have to operate within the parameters of polite British society to gain respect and acceptance. Additionally, Mercy Otis Warren knew that her role as a politician’s wife was one where she had to cultivate her role as both a hostess and an intellectual very carefully. In order to gain patronage from other intellectuals, she knew she needed to follow the rules of polite conversation and respectability—even if that required being more silent on issues around women’s rights. Even Abigail Adams, despite being more open in her letters, cultivated a respectable public image as a politician’s wife—though she did try and use her influence as her husband’s confidante as a way for him to emphasize the roles of women in shaping policy. However, all of these women were immensely aware of the shades of grey that came with women’s participation, and understood that if they were ever too active or radical, questions around their femininity could be at stake—as evidenced by Macaulay and the reactions to her treatise on
Education. It was better to be viewed as one of Samuels’ muses than an outcast in society.

It was also around this time that a dialogue surrounding the dangers of women being too masculine began to emerge. A term originally coined in 1780s France was the *femme homme*, or the man/woman hybrid. A great deal of literature warning against the femme homme began to emerge—the greatest danger after all, was a woman who failed in her feminine roles and duties, and wanted to be more masculine. These women were viewed as a threat to the accepted views of Republican Motherhood, as everything about them was classified as unruly and unacceptable for polite society. The anxieties around the femme home even echo Montagu’s criticisms of Macaulay, and calling her a “strange fellow” after *On Education* was published. Additionally, the Bluestockings larger efforts as a whole to place Macaulay back in the circle of respectability by emphasizing her “genteel nature” and elegant conversational skills demonstrate a large amount of fear over the entire society being labeled as overtly masculine, and therefore not acceptable in polite society. These worries among the upper classes would continue to play out through the end of the eighteenth century, as women’s overt participation in the public sphere was not quite ready to be embraced as a whole, and those who did faced backlash.

However, around the time of the American Revolution, and in the years shortly after, there was a new interest in educating women, and a great many dialogues centered on institutions supporting this. Abigail’s earlier reflections, and her hopes that women would have easier access to learning, were being paid attention to. Linda Kerber

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Davies, 92.
also notes the spread of women’s education in cosmopolitan cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. The Young Ladies Academy, founded in Philadelphia in the 1780s, was one of the first American institutions to offer a comprehensive education.\textsuperscript{10} There was also a spread in magazines and journals specifically for women, and works such as America Magazine that specifically called for women’s contributions. Like the Bluestockings a few decades earlier, these institutions and journals helped create a culture of intellectually curious women, who used traditional femininity as a way to promote patriotism amid various influential, upper class social circles. However, virtues like rationality also began to be revered—which fits into the vision of the stoic Roman matron, always weighing out the options that would best advance a larger agenda, rather than falling into selfish desires.

It should also be noted that even though Republican Motherhood was rooted in ideas surrounding civility and virtue, and did box women more into the domestic sphere, it did allow for women’s participation in public events, as well as the organization of additional women’s networks. Linda Kerber notes that women regularly participated in festivals dressed in Roman garb or patriotic colors, as a way to celebrate America’s independence and emphasize public participation and civic morality. \textsuperscript{11}Seeing women in these festivals did normalize their participation in the public sphere to an extent—again, as long as they followed proper codes of civility—and allowed for women to organize and make connections with each other. Once again, the idea of turning points, and history bending in one direction and not the other can be brought up. The woman’s salon, and the growth of women’s networks in England allowed there to be a

\textsuperscript{10} Kerber, 67.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 71.
platform for women’s participation in America, even if it was a constrained one. In turn, the allowance of there being women represented in parades and public events, as well as published works such as Mercy Otis Warren’s history of the American Revolution, laid the seeds for there to be more spaces for women, in terms of dialogues around education and the aforementioned women’s magazines and literature. Finally, the way that women were able to collaborate and organize together eventually paved the way for women’s groups that did center entirely around the advancement of women’s rights, and women having a political platform—though that would have to take another century. Yet despite the slow movement towards equality, very important seeds surrounding Enlightenment values, women’s participation, and the collaboration of women had been planted.
Conclusion.

In the 1790s, the so-called radical ideas of feminism planted by women like Abigail Adams and Catharine Macaulay began to spread. More women writers who took a direct stance on women’s rights began to emerge. The most notable was Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1790 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Wollstonecraft responded directly to eighteenth century critics who said that women should be denied an education, maintaining (the radical notion) that women were human beings worthy of the same rights as men. This trend would continue throughout the nineteenth century—with a great deal of opposition, of course—but various women writers and thinkers would build upon what Abigail Adams and Catharine Macaulay first dialogued about, in terms of women having identities distinct from their husbands and family life, and having easier access to education. It cannot be denied that the women’s salon, despite being rooted in traditional notions of femininity, paved the way for works like Wollstonecraft’s, and for the larger feminist movements of the nineteenth century.

History is always filled with contradictions, especially in cases like the Bluestocking Society, and in debates concerning women’s participation in society. Take the case of the Republican Mother—on one hand, it validated women’s participation in the political process—while on the limited, it limited them exclusively to participation in the domestic sphere. The question as well, as what constitutes as feminine, or correct behaviors, goes between many shades of grey. The greatest question, as it seems to be seeped in so many paradoxes, is where the legacies of the Bluestocking society—and its individual members—fit on a feminist spectrum. It should also be remembered that history is cyclical, and constantly influenced by various small acts and events over a period of years. History is the vanishing points and turning points, and bending itself in
one direction, and not the other. In the case of women in the public sphere, history bent itself toward their side, allowing for their voices to be heard and accepted—sometimes confined to certain spheres—but still given a place to be heard, which influenced generations to come.

The women’s salon was the first step, and the Bluestocking Society, along with the enthusiasm of the women who participation in the circle was the next. Perhaps Elizabeth Montagu was fixated on propriety, and appearing as acceptable even in creating spaces for women, but she also wanted a space where she could feel equal, and among fellow women, she found it. Though she criticized Catharine Macaulay’s radical stances on women’s education, it cannot be denied that Elizabeth Montagu was a champion for women in her own right, especially in her patronage and her support of women authors. Evelyn Gordon Bodek notes that Montagu financed the initial careers of, and sponsored prominent female authors such as Fanny Burney.\(^1\) Other women in the circle reciprocated Montagu’s actions—Elizabeth Carter taught her Greek, while other women regularly dedicated literary works to each other and acknowledged their support.\(^2\) In short, the Bluestockings were the basis of women’s networks and movements, even if they did not realize it yet. Additionally, their regular appearances within the public sphere made it more acceptable for women to participate in public activities, which also established a precedent for the next century.

The same can be said of women’s networks in early America, and the growing interest in women’s education within various Northeastern cities. The circles of colonial

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\(^2\) Ibid, 193.
women like Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren demonstrated how much correspondence could influence women, and how effectively it could be used as a way to further one’s intellectual ambitions. Though Mercy and Abigail ultimately used these ambitions in very different ways, and had opposite opinions concerning the participation of women in the political process, their commentary to each other, and the chance to debate with an intellectual equal proved to be invaluable. Furthermore, the trans-Atlantic link provided by Britain allowed for them to model their correspondence after, and be influenced by women like Elizabeth Montagu and Catharine Macaulay. Being able to have this link allowed for the spread of ideas, greater dialogues about women’s education and their participation in politics, and ultimately, the growth of women’s networks and feminism in America. Without the influence from Europe, first from the salons, and then from the Bluestockings, the acceptance of women within the public sphere would not have caught on nearly as quickly.

As a collective, the actions of the Bluestockings and Colonial Women pushed history towards a decidedly more feminist bent, even if it would take hundreds more years to move towards a fuller definition of equality. As individuals, their legacies are more debatable, particularly in the case of Mercy Otis Warren. Abigail Adams was decidedly proto-feminist in many of her writings—her advocacy against issues such as spousal abuse, and her push for women to be more fully involved in politics besides simply being passive participants all illustrate this—not to mention her famous “remember the ladies” quote, which can still be seen at marches for women’s rights today. Mercy Otis Warren, on the other hand, is more complicated. Her work as a historian is admirable, but she did not seem to encourage women to actively participate in politics, nor did she challenge established gender norms. At the same time however,
her involvement in networks with many women, and her support of their writing, could be argued as a sort of feminist participation. Yet again, there are many shades of grey in Mercy’s life, as even her quest for publication seems to be in her own self-interest and glory, rather than a desire to be seen as challenging questions of women’s participation in the literary world. Mercy was very much more a model of conventionality, though her loyalty towards her other female friends, and the fact that her participation within these networks provided a model for others makes the conclusion more complicated.

Furthermore, whatever her motivations in authorship, the fact that a woman could be published and celebrated as a historian inspired other women to pick up their pens. It should be pointed out however, that Abigail, despite never publishing an actual book, is remembered far more in America’s history books for the letters she left behind, and her philosophies on women and independence. In terms of legacy, Abigail’s willingness to push the envelope eventually worked in her favor.

However, in the overarching legacies of these women, this observation by Evelyn Gordon Bodek should be remembered. “Though there were many differences between the Blues, one of the most decisive was the relationships among the Blues themselves. It is this caring of women for women that distinguishes feminists and unites them throughout the centuries. It seems hasty to label these women feminists, but the networks they created, and the support they offered to each other created places where they could not only advance their own learning, with people they felt supported and understood by, but would inspire others to create the same spaces for decades to come. In present day dialogue surrounding feminism, and in marches for women’s rights

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3 Gordon Bodek, 196.
(because our work is never finished) Abigail’s urge to “remember the ladies” is frequently seen on signs, t-shirts, and pamphlets. Her words, written two hundred years before, still have might.

If the initial turning point was the women’s salon, and women creating networks to support each other’s intellectual endeavors, the next turning point, over the course of the 19th Century, was the rejection of women operating within the confines of traditionally feminine behavior, and working within the status quo. Instead, there was a group of women, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, who embraced the radical label, and spoke openly of the ways life for women needed to be improved. Initially, feminist groups were met with opposition and derision from society and large, but their efforts—and their abilities to organize in a way that was inherited down from earlier women’s networks—were eventually rewarded. In the end, it was the model more like Abigail Adams and Catharine Macaulay that would improve life for women.

However, the efforts of the Bluestocking Society, and even Republican Motherhood, should not be discounted. Despite being less radical, and not challenging the status quo, they did normalize women’s participation and organization. The Bluestocking Society in particular proved that women could be intellectual as well as elite hostesses, and their exposure in society made it easier for future women authors to receive patronage. The work they did allowed for the eventual radicalization of women’s movement, and for larger dialogues around women’s rights. It was thanks to the Enlightenment, to the urging of thinkers like Mary Astell, and the efforts of women in Europe and North America to create spaces exclusively for women’s intellectual development that allowed for history to bend towards the acceptance of women in the public sphere, and eventually, a place at the table.
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