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MERCY WARREN AND "FREEDOM'S GENIUS"

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Given the standards of her time and place, Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) was a woman of advanced education. Her father, Colonel James Otis, a merchant conscious of his own lack of formal education in the law, which he practiced in Barnstable and argued often in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, encouraged Mercy to grasp whatever learning she could. Initially this meant being tutored by her uncle, the Reverend Jonathan Russell, and having access to his library where, as biographers duly note, she began the lifelong study of history which culminated in her own History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, completed by 1791 but not published until 1805. The second important educative influence on her life was her beloved but unstable brother, "Firebrand" James Otis, Jr., who willingly shared with his eldest sister what Harvard College was then teaching its young men. More importantly, perhaps, James nurtured the penchant for politics already preoccupying a family who for years had battled the increasing power of the Hutchinson-Oliver enclave. Marriage to James Warren in 1754 brought another dimension to Mercy’s political consciousness, for this James was active in organizing the Committees of Correspondence and served his colony in various capacities that brought the Warrens into contact with many of the patriot leaders. Through each of these contacts, then—local, colonial, and inter-colonial—Mercy Warren began to see politics as history and history’s dependence on public and private virtue. Further, from this identification stem her first writings to warrant the label “Regional” and her earliest public efforts to chart the trajectory of “Freedom’s Genius” from the Old World to the New.

Originally published serially, three political satires in dramatic form titled The Adulatur (1772), The Defeat (1773), and The Group (1775) address what Warren perceives as the systematic co-optation and corruption of Massachusetts politics. Warren’s satire is that of the bludgeon rather than the rapier, and the farces themselves can now largely be appreciated as period pieces, immediate emotional responses to local incidents such as Thomas Hutchinson’s perfidy. Of these early “Dramatic sketches,” Warren later observed that they faithfully describe “a period when America stood trembling for her
invaded liberties,” the result of venal politicians’ publication of “false-
hood until the people as usual were deceived in character, and bullied
into a supineness which frequently sinks beneath the weight of
oppression and there was danger they would remain long insensible
either of their right or power of resistance.”

The history of Servia, her thinly-disguised Boston setting, is thus by implication placed within
an established tradition of liberties abused by faithless rulers and
abandoned by a complacent populace. By her own standards, the
“sketches” thus succeed; although aesthetically crude, they delineate
“the exigencies of the times [that] required the wizard should be
stripped from the face of intrigue” (Adulateur, p. 6).

Of slightly greater interest are two occasional poems (dated 1774)
commissioned by good patriotic friends. The first, bearing the
unwieldy title “To a Gentleman Who Requested a List of the Articles
Which Female Vanity Has Comprized Under the Head of Necessaries,” appeared in the June number of the Royal American Magazine.
The poem is a sprightly rehearsal of Clara, Clarissa, and other colonial ladies’ full hearing on the question of the need to sacrifice not just tea but laces, lawns, “catgut works, and silken hose and shoes,/ And fifty ditto’s that the ladies use.” Gathering “in full convention...for the
debate / To fix a plan to save a sinking state,” Warren’s women express a variety of viewpoints from Lamira’s initial tepid “wishes [that] freedom may succeed” to the more assertive stance represented by Clarissa’s “Spartan” catalog of real necessaries. Climaxing the
poem is an oblique historical overview of the consequences of acceding
to the dictates of fashion cast within a blatantly political framework.
At this point the ladies’ concerns coalesce with an unnamed but “long
list of gen’rous worthy men / Who spurn the yoke and servitude
disdain,” thus confirming the theme, now grown serious: heaven
“sanctifies the deed” by commanding all to “fight for freedom, and
for virtue bleed.”

More resonant is the revised poem, now simply called “To the
Hon. J. Winthrop, Esq.,” as it appears in the 1790 Poems, Dramatic
and Miscellaneous, where an explicit parallel drawn between the
Israelites under Pharaoh and the colonists under George III lends a
broader historical context to her theme. Perhaps significantly Warren
permits Lamira to introduce the analogue, referring to

...those ancient times
When Pharaoh, harden’d as a G______ in crimes,
Plagu’d Israel’s race, and tax’d them by a law,
Demanding brick, when destitute of straw;
Miraculously led from Egypt's port,
They lov'd the fashion of the tyrant's court;
Sigh'd for the leeks, and waters of the Nile,
As we for geegaws from Britannia's isle; (Poems, p. 209)

The Biblical typology Warren here employs is worthy of note, for this is a rare appearance in poems far more reliant on allusions to history's secular exponents of tyranny, both abettors and resisters. Somewhere between 1774 and 1790, the poet chose to underline her message in terms unmistakably linked to the typological heritage which, while not the exclusive province of Puritan New England, was most pronounced in that region's interpretation of the significance of contemporary events. (Such a context is, for example, altogether absent from her second poem commenting directly on a specific event. "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs," verse composed at John Adams's request, is simply a whimsical commemoration of the "native Americans'" dumping of tea into Boston harbor.)

Beyond these celebrations of local political events, a few elegies for friends and family, and meditations on human temporality, there is little in Warren's poetry, public or private, to reflect the impact of her long residence in Barnstable and Plymouth. She is not, to begin with, a local-color nature poet meticulously recording the terrain she daily views. Typical of this characteristic is "On Winter," a stock eighteenth-century response to the passing seasons. The settlement of "Dread Winter," with its "hov'ring snows" and "Fierce chilling blasts," predictably casts all inhabitants in pallid hues. Yet, "Favorious' genial breath" will mark spring's return as assuredly as "fields of ripening grain" will eventually send forth the reapers. No effort is made to locate the seasonal transitions within any particular locale. Even Warren's "An Invitation to Retirement" addressed to James lacks a firm sense of place. A poem which might paint graphically the allurements of Clifford Farm instead exists as a commonplace contrast between "the noisy smoky town / "Where innocence and cheerful health / With love and virtue reigns." Everywhere Warren makes clear, as surely as did Anne Bradstreet years before, that Nature exists as instructress to the poet whose vocation is to adore that God "Who lends these charms to time!" ("On Winter"); to remind "the upright heart, / Its God is ever nigh" ("From my Window"); or to "Secure and guard the wandering mind / From errors baneful way" ("An Invitation"). Not place but moral is evoked, and that moral extends back-
ward from standard neoclassical didacticism to the messages of American Calvinism. Her moral consistently portrays the pilgrim wending his or her way through the world, noting in passing what is comely and fine, but never forgetting that heaven (or its counterpart) is the destination to be held in view. What Warren advocates is the pathway of moderation and piety long proclaimed by her forebears.5

Consequently, regionalism for Mercy Warren is appropriated not by the eye surveying the landscape around her, but by the mind’s worldview, by a coherent vision of a society deservedly free because it has been made aware of the lessons of a particular reading of history. Rather than sharing with Jefferson, Crèvecoeur and others of her day a conviction of America’s size and the accessibility of land promoting healthy cultivation of soil and soul—the agrarian ideal—Warren looks to her region’s ethical and intellectual heritage as the hope of the nation in gestation or newly born. What gives her writing such power and influence in her own times (and, to some extent, in ours as well), I believe, is this: confronted by conflicting and contentious questions of religious, social, and political theory that pushed many into postures of philosophical relativism, deism, or skepticism, she offered a vibrant re-reading of the bases of American Calvinism as the key to America’s salvation. What she proffers may perhaps be termed the vision of a Calvinist republican.6

A decade ago it would perhaps have been unnecessary either to raise this point of ideological identification or search for a label encapsulating Warren’s mutually-dependent religious and political philosophies. Recent scholarship, however, suggests a trend toward placing Warren outside, beyond, or well in advance of thinking common to New Englanders’ minds. Essentially, the debate focuses on two points: the invasion of deistical perceptions of the universe and its operations and its corollary, the viability of evoking a Providential God as more than a rhetorical strategy. Since these questions have been raised concerning Warren as poet and historian, they require direct attention.

In her important and influential study The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945, Emily Stipes Watts, in the process of arguing that Warren ought properly to be viewed as an incipient feminist, identifies Warren as a “traditional Christian Deist,” establishing something of a standard for such an identification by yoking Warren’s religious views with those of Benjamin Franklin.7 This dubious comparision is not drawn by a more recent critic, Edmund M.
Hayes, but the label remains. Hayes's argument in "The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren" is more complex. As partial explication of a poem clearly commenting on young James Otis's derangement, Hayes attributes artistic motivation of "A thought on the inestimable Blessing of Reason..." to "her brother's condition as well as her own Christian Deism..." (213, n 11). His placement of Warren among that diverse group known as Deists is, however, earlier qualified by acknowledgment that "throughout most of [the poems published here] runs the theme that Warren ultimately must place herself in the hands of God. It is clear from the pieces that her Puritan sense of guilt was one troubling aspect of her life" (202). To some extent Hayes's thesis—that the "poetry reveals a quest for truth and faith" (203)—reconciles these seemingly exclusive categories. However, it must be recalled that Puritans, no less than Deists, held reason in the highest regard and that constant searching for what is right, rational, and true was the Puritan's most sacred obligation.

Warren's writing, public and private, makes quite clear her evaluation of anything approaching "a Deistical tincture," as she calls it in a typically admonitory letter to one of her young correspondents. Scripture, "some sudden display...of providence..., conscience, reason, the moral sense, and all the powers of nature" may be brought to bear to "confound the weak cavillings of modern Deism," she counsels her son Henry as corrective to such pernicious ideas as those circulated by the "sarcastic strokes of the philosopher of Fernay" and the "half digested infidelity" propagated by Hume ("Letter-book," MOW to Henry Warren, 20 February 1780). "Pure christianity," she reminds another son, "contains the purest morality;—and strict morality is doubtless enjoined by the christian system ("Letter-book," MOW to George Warren, 29 November 1793). "Yet there are few but will acknowledge that no system of ancient theology, nor the sophistry of modern Deism aided by superior erudition and supported by all the powers of language can furnish a code of equal excellence" ("Letter-book," MOW to Charles Warren, 1 January 1784). As a final example, consider her outburst addressed to John Adams concerning the "vanity, ignorance, and supercilious folly, cloathed with the plumage of sudden acquisition, tinctured with the crude opinions of the mimic Deist," which, by "tak[ing] the lead in the theory of religion and government" threaten to "subvert" the spirit of real republicanism ("Letter-Book," MOW to John Adams, 8 May 1780). Such conviction, however, she later confesses in the same letter, "may be the anti-
quated notions of the last century." Old-fashioned she may be, but nowhere does Warren sound apologetic for her defense of the "old" religion.9

Publicly, she declares antipathy for Deism most plainly in her poem "To Torismond" (her son Winslow), beginning with the epigraph: "My soul is sicken'd when I see the youth, / That sports and trifles with eternal Truth" (Poems, p. 183). No less than it did for John Winthrop and his generation could that "eternal truth" reflect an assurance that individual lives are divinely directed and that this continent was discovered precisely when the Dissenters needed a sanctuary where they might live out their belief. Their reading of history told them this, and in an age which either disbelieved or was fast rejecting this solace, Warren clung to it tenaciously. Without, at this point, specifically connecting her faith in providential guidance to national destiny, Warren indirectly addresses the issue when urging Torismond to eschew his skepticism, an attitude nourished by the likes of Hume, Shaftesbury, and Voltaire. The poem proper begins by sketching England's earliest days when superstition and ignorance led many to lack of faith. Following this, she traces the ascendancy of "Celestial reason," so evident in the thought of Locke, Boyle, and the unmatchable Newton, who "taught philosophy to shine / Own'd and rever'd the oracles divine" (Poems, p. 184), and functioned as illuminator of the moral and intellectual darkness surrounding him. Newton stands as the major exponent of a school of thought advancing human understanding without falling into the error of "Presum[ing] he knows the plenitude of power" (Poems, p. 185). The sneering skeptic, however,

Through nature's system, through her grand design,
...strips the veil from Providence divine;
Sees clearly through the vast mysterious plan,
Can prove that Heaven forgot its creature man. (Poems, p. 185)

For one so steeped in doubt, there is no "friendly beam,/ No intimation of his will supreme." Eventually,

...infidelity's his last resource;
By turns exploding grace, free will, and fate,
Still apprehensive of some future state,
Suspense distracts his oscillating brain,
Till ______ assures him death shall end his pain. (Poems, p. 186)
A message recurrent in Warren’s poetry, thus, is here made plain: Faith and a reliance on Providence hold out the only cure for the sickness of doubt.

Again and again Warren’s writings show her turning to the notion of Providence to explain events, to assuage, console, and guide herself and others, in short, to make sense of experience. Rare indeed is the “Letter-book” entry which is devoid of some reference, direct or implied, to the controlling hand of God ordering a world conformative to His will. Nonetheless, in his compelling, though restrictive study The Revolutionary Historians: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution, Lester H. Cohen argues that, for Warren and her fellow historians, Providence ultimately “yielded its once exalted status as a mode of explanation and became a mode of narrative description” or “attractive descriptive metaphor.”

Further, he contends that “unlike the Puritans, who saw the hand of God in all events ‘prosperous and adverse,’ the revolutionary historians used providence in a strictly partisan way.” Cohen’s historians cannot do otherwise because, for them, “providence and chance [have become] mutually exclusive,” a byproduct of the increasing strain between theology on the one hand and ideology on the other.

There is much to recommend such a reading. Warren is, for example, sensitive to language. After quoting extensive passages from the scriptures to “compose my own soul,” as she writes to Winslow, her problem is finding “language...[to] give comfort” amidst his affliction. Capricious fortune she passes over quickly, choosing instead “to write more in the stile of the christian, that a kind providence will direct events to promote your permanent happiness” (“Letter-book,” MOW to Winslow Warren, 22 May 1791). Typically, though, Warren attests to no such options in either “language” or “stile.” Troubled by the ocean passage that will soon separate her from both Winslow and Charles, she finds solace in the recollection that “the same eye of omniscience who can when he sees fit hasten” reunions (though perchance in the hereafter). Warren reflects that human hopes are met or thwarted “not so much by accidents as mortals idly imagine, but by the sovereign direction...of [God’s] providential power” (“Letter-book,” MOW to Winslow Warren, August 1785). To an ailing George she sends praise for “your calm resignation and faith” while feeling “the temporary evils of life” as readily as she beseeches “the arm of heaven may yet preserve to America, those blessings unimpaired, and
guarded against the grasp of any despotic power on earth” (“Letterbook,” MOW to George Warren, 5 February 1800; MOW to A. Adams, May 1798).12

Unless we are to believe that Warren unthinkingly or selectively adopts such professions of belief when it is simply convenient (and I cannot), then her references to Providence must be viewed seriously—even in her account of the Revolution. Crucial to grasping the significance of the way she presents history are the sentiments with which she launches and concludes her study. Prefacing the text appears the obligatory underestimation of her qualifications for the task. And “yet,” she continues, “recollecting that every domestic enjoyment depends on the unimpaired possession of civil and religious liberty,” (emphasis mine) she persisted, “soothed...with the idea that the motives were justifiable in the eye of omniscience.”13 “Providence,” she goes on to observe, “has clearly pointed out the duties of the present generation, particularly the paths which Americans ought to travel. The United States form a young republic, confederacy which ought ever to be cemented by the union of interests and affections under the influence of those principles which obtained their independence” (“History,” 1: 7-8). Many of these principles derive from the New England heritage she will presently review in a far from uncritical manner.14 A rehearsal of the early Puritans’ bigotry moves swiftly to considerations that “universal happiness” is the intention of “the benevolent author of nature” and that “the variety of [religious] opinions among mankind” exist not merely to sharpen human reason by uncovering what is false, but to “learn us to wait in a becoming manner, the full disclosure of the system of divine government” (“History,” 1: 13).

The heart of Warren’s text—replete with reflections on the actions, inactions, heroes, and anti-heroes of the Revolution—attempts to chart the course of this “disclosure.” Independence secured, she proceeds to project the lessons of history and experience onto the prospects for Americans. This country “may with propriety be stiled a land of promise, ...a fertile vineyard in which its citizens may labor” (“History,” 3: 438-439). The introductory theme is recalled as she observes that “Under the benediction of divine providence Americans may yet long be protected from sanguine projects and undigested measures” of Europe’s despotic governments. Those governments have failed because their foundations fail to insist on the need for “publack virtue, ...general freedom, and that degree of liberty
most productive of the happiness” of a nation. The presence of these principles in America suggests for Warren “indul[ing] the benign hope that America may long stand a favored nation,” immune to civil discord and international conflict (“History,” 3: 434-435). Indeed, her final statement makes an even larger claim: “The western worlds, which for ages have been little known, may arrive to that stage of improvement and perfection, beyond which the limits of human genius cannot reach, and this last civilized quarter of the globe, may exhibit those striking traits of grandeur and magnificence which the divine Economist may have reserved to crown the closing scene” (“History,” 3: 440). Culminating her text with the twin elements of cautious optimism and a sense of divinely-assigned purpose cannot have been a casual act. For many of her contemporaries, Providence may, in fact, have become the rhetorical trope Cohen claims it to be. Warren herself implies this when she admits “reflections” on Providence are currently “not fashionable in the intercourse of polite life” (“Letter-book,” MOW to Janet Montgomery, April 1785). Yet, its prominence in the structure of her text underscores the ironic misconstruction of which John Adams is guilty in “accus[ing Warren] of having written for the nineteenth century: if anything, her belief in virtue and conviction that God or Providence had used the American experiment to further His ultimate plan for humankind seems closer to that of the seventeenth century.”

Providence and what would be described specifically as republican virtue, then, comfortably coexist in Warren’s worldview. Salvation of the individual or the society at large depends mightily on character, private and public. Basic to her vision are assumptions to be made about human nature. If that nature is unalterably depraved, then any kind of effective moral persuasion or social orchestration becomes nigh unto impossible, for the materials are corrupt beyond correction. Warren’s vision, however, admits the possibility of conscience so fostered as to control, if not extinguish, the inclination toward error. A meditation on this subject presented early in her “History” offers this overview:

The study of the human character opens at once a beautiful and a deformed picture of the soul. We there find a noble principle implanted in the nature of man that pants for distinction. This principle operates in every bosom, and when kept under the control of reason, and the influence of humanity, it produces the most benevolent effects. But when the checks of conscience are
thrown aside, or the moral sense weakened by the sudden acquisition of wealth or power, humanity is obscured, and if a favourable coincidence of circumstances permits, this love of distinction often exhibits the most mortifying instances of profligacy, tyranny, and the wanton exercise of arbitrary sway. ("History," 1:1-2)

References to benevolence and "the moral sense" should not obscure or override the impact of "checks of conscience" within this summary statement on human nature. There is a lingering sense here that, for Warren, what best "checks the conscience" may still be the horrifying picture Wigglesworth had painted when showing the damned convicting themselves as they stood at the bar of justice. What checks the collective conscience of Warren's envisioned society might just as well be a bone-deep understanding and acceptance of the causes prompting the flight of "Freedom's Genius" ever westward, as peoples time and time again forfeit their freedom and acquiesce to the bonds of moral and, thus, political slavery. Such coupling of sentiments perhaps sheds new light on the warming penned privately for her sons that the political tracts they "may find in her cabinet" have not been made public because of fears her works "may not be fully understood. ..[because of] changes of opinion" (Adulateur, p. 5). There seems no other way to read such an admission than as Warren's foreboding that her New England way will finally bow to rising folly and skepticism as Federalist thought comes to dominate American minds.

As early as 1774, for example, writing to Hannah Lincoln, Warren urges contemplation of

the nature of man; consider them as originally on an equal footing, subject to the same feelings, stimulated by the same passions, endowed by the same heavenly spark to point them to what conduces most to the tranquillity of society, and to the happiness of the individual, and then say, is it not astonishing, that by far the greater part of the species, in all ages of the world, should become the willing dupes of a few who claim an indefeasible right to seize on the property and destroy the liberty and lives of their fellow men? ("Letter-book," MOW to Hannah Lincoln, 3 September 1774)

The record of avarice—virtue's contrasting quality—triumphing over the virtuous few serves as a constant threat. Current strife, Warren can write in 1775, is but natural to "the genius of liberty
arising] to assert her rights in opposition to the ghost of tyranny.” Once despotism, the inevitable outgrowth of avarice, is banished, “then may the Western skies behold virtue (which is generally the attendant of freedom) seated on a throne of peace, where she may preside over the rising commonwealth of America” (“Letter-book,” MOW to E. Lothrop, 1775).

Uncertainty, even disillusionment, however, progressively comes to dominate Warren’s reading of events. Anxiously explicit in its claims for an intimate tie between adhering to Calvinist precepts and preserving the freedom of a nation is a poem dated 10 October 1778, which Warren entitles “The Genius of America Weeping the Absurd Follies of the Day,” perhaps with justification placed at the end of her volume of poems. It is a poem offered as a dream vision wherein Warren spies “Columbia’s weeping Genius” pensively and “in broken accents” querying “Shall freedom’s cause by vice be thus betray’d?” (Poems, p. 246). She catalogues what is perceived as “the folly of the age”: overattention to pleasure, riotous avarice and selfishness, a heedless love of luxury, particularly—and most treacherously—observable in leaders for whom “gold’s the deity” revered (Poems, p. 246). On a more joyous note, this Genius recollects those days when patriots became willing martyrs to her cause. But now the mode deems it

...heroic to deny his God,
Or to dispute his providential care,
Deride his precepts, or to scoff at prayer.

Discard such antique, odd ideas of truth,
Such musty rules for regulating youth. (Poems, p. 250)

What, Warren muses toward the close of her poem, can one expect of a people for whom “musty rules”—the old Calvinistically-tinged republican virtues—have become a “wanton jest”? Even “The deist blushed at [this] bolder strain” of those “Who rail aloud ’gainst puritanic rules / And learn their morals in deistic schools,” who “prattle nonsense” which bounces them into the lap of folly (Poems, pp. 251-252). Her concern for America is widespread. Perhaps each generation, if it is to remain deserving of liberty, must read anew those works which maintain a right perspective. But looking around her, she finds a literary scene fraught with undesirables. To the list referred to earlier, she here adds Bolingbroke, Mandeville, and Chesterfield, the latter, for Warren, representing a “specious digest of Mischief.” Unde-
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Amerible as well are those writings teeming with "the many temptations of the present day to the puerile study of Romance and knight errantry, instead of those useful lessons of virtue and science which may be drawn from the various pictures of human life, exhibited in the faithful pages of authentic history" ("Letter-book," MOW to Winslow Warren, 24 December 1779).16

Her own account of the Revolution, of course, read aright stands as one type of corrective. But she found close at hand yet another medium for her message, one possibly more attractive to the rising generation's tastes—the heroic drama. She wrote two for her 1790 Poems, "The Sack of Rome" and "The Ladies of Castile." Pointedly stating their function within the volume, Warren contends in her introductory "to the Public" that, in spite of many authors' efforts to explain the lesson derived from the study of a people, such as Rome's, that lesson has consistently gone unheeded:

In tracing the rise, the character, the revolutions, and the fall of the most politic and brave, the most insolent and selfish people, the world ever exhibited, the hero and the moralist may find the most sublime examples of valour and virtue; and the philosopher the most humiliating lessons to the pride of man, in the turpitude of some of their capital characters: While the extensive dominions of that once celebrated nation, their haughty usurpations and splendid crimes, have for ages furnished the historian and the poet with a field of speculation adapted to his own peculiar talents. (Poems, pp. 10-11)

If, then, the new Americans find unpalatable a moral essay on the need to remain true to their mission—providing a fit residence for "Freedom's Genius"—Warren will use her drama to review precedents of backsliding.

Both of her heroic dramas, modeled closely on Addison’s Cato, focus on the conflict between love and honor or duty typical of their genre. Likewise, both plays possess such rambling plots that I will make no effort here to summarize specific action. Suffice it to say that each drama opens at a time when the respective societies, Valentian’s Rome and Castile’s final days before Charles V’s takeover, have reached the brink of destruction. The dramas themselves document that destruction, frequently in graphic terms, and in each case Warren emphasizes that liberty has been lost because of the citizens' self-indulgences and laxity in insisting their governors act for the good of the commonweal.
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To underline the desperation of the times, Warren provides in each play only one truly heroic figure. AEtius, the moral center of "The Sack" dies early in the drama, but not before admonishing Gaudentius, his son, to "remember that thou liv’st for Rome." As his father’s sword earlier has been wielded to save the commonwealth and as AEtius’s whole life has been dedicated to encouraging virtuous living, so he instructs his son to shun temptations sure to "Contaminate thy patriotick worth" and instead to make of his life an "example [to] teach [Rome] to be free" (Poems, "Sack," I, iv). Significantly, AEtius alone interprets the invasion of those "Routh, naked boors" of the north as "the chosen scourge, by heaven design’d" to chastise Roman profligacy (Poems, "Sack," I, i). Also important, however, is the opportunity open to Gaudentius to demonstrate filial piety in action. But he is so bedazzled by love for Eudocia and so possessed by the idea of freeing her from the conquering Vandals that Gaudentius loses sight of his greater obligation. Consequently, he fails both to uphold his father’s principles and to effect the desired rescue. In all of Warren’s writing, no work equals "The Sack of Rome" in bleakness of outlook.

"The Ladies of Castile," only slightly more optimistic, is a more interesting and, perhaps, more successful play. Aesthetically, for example, Warren here achieves a greater symbolic integration of imagery of unseasonable storms with the social tempest which is her focus. But of greater interest, given the conventional male superiority within such dramas, is the fact that the prime upholder of virtue in "Ladies" is a woman, Dona Maria. Bereft of her husband and fearful for her own safety and that of her child, she still resolves to regroup the remaining patriots and personally lead them in battle. In a speech designed to revive flagging spirits, she challenges someone to slay her child before her eyes if the citizens intend to succumb to cowardice and despair. Dona Maria colorfully depicts "freedom’s genius," under whose "lenient reign" all of Castile has flourished, and she declares that if necessary, rather than herself betray that "genius," she will "light the towers, and perish in the flames, / And smile and triumph in the general wreck" (Poems, "Ladies," V, i). A noble proposal uttered by a demonstratively noble person, but the act never takes place. Instead, taking the prudent course, Maria and her son seek sanctuary in the court of Don Emanuel. This is, however, of little matter. Warren has achieved her purpose, first articulated in the 1774 poem on ladies’ "Necessaries" examined above, though now in more earnest terms:

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first, to display, again, the inevitable enslavement of a society no longer worthy of its freedom; and, second, to declare boldly that both a nation’s men and her women must play active roles in preserving that liberty. Unlike Ardelia, spoken of so often as the epitome of Roman womanhood but never shown to possess the required virtues and spirit, as a character Dona Maria proves herself worthy of the esteem which others within the play—both male and female—invest her. She emerges, finally, as a figure who could quite credibly enmesh the Conde Haro (in most respects her male counterpart) in conflicting loyalties. But it is Maria the playwright selects as poignant, eloquent spokesperson against the aggressively opposing forces bent on robbing her people of their treasured “ancient rights” (Poems, “Ladies,” III, v).

I would agree, in general, with Emily Stipes Watts’s assessment of Mercy Warren’s entire body of writing: “In whatever literary form [she] wrote,” claims Watts, “she had but one theme—liberty” (Watts, p. 39). But I would modify the particular types of liberty Watts goes on to ascribe to the various kinds of writing Warren engaged in. A concentration on political liberty is far from restricted to her political satires and her “History.” It is a theme permeating what she wrote for both private and public edification. Everywhere Warren looks, she discovers some intersection between the immediate subject and the larger theme of freedom, a very special brand of freedom predicated on the values articulated in the creeds of the old New England she knew and regarded so well. What results is a life’s work vibrating with a curious blending of Calvinist and republican thought.

NOTES

1 Among the best biographies are those by Maud M. Hutcheson, “Mercy Warren, 1728-1814,” WMQ, 3rd series, 10 (1953), 378-402; Jean Fritz, Cast for a Revolution (Boston, 1972); Katharine Anthony, First Lady of the Revolution: The Life of Mercy Otis Warren (Garden City, 1958). An earlier version of the present study was read as part of the Boston Women Writers panel at NEMA in 1983.

2 Adulateur Manuscript, Houghton Library, Harvard University, p. 1, hereafter cited parenthetically as Adulateur. Permission to quote from this volume is gratefully acknowledged.


4 (Boston, 1790), hereafter cited parenthetically within the text as Poems.
Cheryl Z. Oreovicz

5 Quotations from Warren's verse throughout this paragraph are drawn from the poetry section of the Adulatuer Manuscript. Modern printings of full texts are included in Edmund M. Hayes, "The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren," NEQ, 54 (1981), 199-224, hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

6 Modern literature on American republicanism is too vast to enumerate here. Useful surveys are two studies by Robert Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," WMQ, 3rd series, 29 (1972), 49-80, and "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," WMQ, 3rd series, 39 (1982), 334-356.

Warren's reputation as a prominent republican was widespread, so much so that the anonymous author of Sans Souci, Alias Free and Easy (Boston, 1785) could confidently satirize her views in Act II, scene i, through a character identified simply as "Mrs. W— — —N." One major purpose of the present study is to explore the degree to which Calvinist precepts inform Warren's republicanism, particularly the concept of Divine Providence as she invokes it. My use of the term follows that of John F. Berens in being a shorthand reference to American providential thought, that is, the following cluster of interwoven qualities or characteristics: "(1) the motif of America as God's New Israel; (2) the jeremiad tradition; (3) the deification of America's founding fathers; (4) the blending of national and millennial expectations; and (5) providential history and historiography" (Providence & Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815 [Charlottesville, 1978], p. 2).

7 (Austin, 1977), p. 43, hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

8 "Letter-book", MOW to Sally Sever, 5 January 1780, held and microfilmed by the Massachusetts Historical Society, hereafter cited parenthetically within the text as "Letter-book."


12 Also indicative of her invocations of Providence in the "Letter-book" are letters to John Adams, 15 March 1779 and 29 July 1779; to Winslow Warren, 19 April 1791; to George Warren, 4 December 1796, a fascinating
and lengthy meditation on the book of Job.

13 "History Manuscript," Houghton Library, Harvard University, I, 3, 7. Permission to quote from this document is gratefully acknowledged. Hereafter citations will be parenthetically inserted as "History."

14 For private expressions of pride in this history, see the "Letter-book" correspondence to Samuel A. Otis, 22 December 1772; to Catharine Macaulay, 9 June 1773; to Josiah Quincy's sister, 1774 [1775?].

15 Joan Hoff Wilson and Sharon L. Bollinger, "Mercy Otis Warren: Playwright, Poet, and Historian of the American Revolution (1728-1814)," Female Scholars: A Tradition of Learned Women Before 1800, ed. J. R. Brink (Montreal, 1980), p. 174. Wilson and Bollinger quickly dismiss the longstanding question of attributing authorship of The Blockheads (1776) and The Motley Assembly (1779) to Warren. They correctly assert that Warren would share the political sentiments of both plays. But because I read an utter consistency of style and subject throughout Warren's canon, I cannot agree that the plays' "vocabulary and broad sexual humor afford a glimpse of a considerably less staid and protected homebody than her portraits and private correspondence would lead us to expect" (p. 167).

16 This celebrated opinion attained some popularity and was twice reprinted in full—in The Independent Chronicle and the Advertiser for 18 January 1781, and the January 1790 issue of the Massachusetts Magazine.