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Mercy Otis Warren: Republican Scribe and Defender of Liberties

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Mercy Otis Warren: Republican Scribe and Defender of Liberties

Abstract

An active proponent of republican government, Mercy Otis Warren had a significant role in the revolutionary period. She was a woman who was close to the action, well-acquainted with the central figures, and instrumental in bringing about the monumental changes in America in the late 1700s. Referred to as the “muse of the revolution,”^[1] Mercy Otis Warren used her pen to significantly broaden the colonial understanding of a republican form of government and passionately promote it. From a collection of early poems and political satires written in the years preceding the war to her epic history of the revolution published when she was in her seventies after the Constitution had been ratified, her pen spanned the spectrum of the entire revolutionary period. She corresponded with a broad array of revolutionary figures, and her letters articulately illuminate the political principles of the era. Thus, her writings contributed to the political landscape during the revolutionary movement. She had an extremely influential impact on the American founding process, yet her role has been far too often minimized or even disregarded.

Warren was unable to be a Founding Father herself due to the limitations of her social role at the time, but she certainly exerted an influence over the patriotic leaders and earned their respect. Through her letters, satirical dramas, essays, poems, and most of all her *History of the Revolution*, Mercy was unquestionably a compelling contributor to the history of the nation. Relentlessly pursuing what was right by promoting limited government and maximum liberty in all the ways available to her, Warren encouraged her generation to place their faith in God, not man, and certainly not in any form of government. Deeply committed to making the world a better place, she pursued lofty goals to the best of her ability and trusted God with the result.

Keywords

Mercy Otis Warren, Republic, Liberty, Natural Rights

Cover Page Footnote

[1] Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

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The American Revolution altered not just Britain and the colonies of North America, but the direction of the entire world. Around the globe countless people continue to perceive America as a symbol of freedom based on the principles of limited government that protect its citizens from tyranny. Other countries have staged revolutions in attempts to imitate what the Americans established, but similar achievements are rare. What the Americans achieved in the late 1700s was unique and extraordinary. To accomplish their success required a host of supporters willing to actively endorse the cause.

The Founding Fathers have long been recognized for their efforts and involvement, but they could not have achieved what they did without countless others. Some lesser-recognized participants played significant roles but were too distanced from the actions in the vortex of controversy to be remembered. Others were actually quite close to the central action but their roles in society precluded them from being recognized. For example, many women aided the cause in the rather limited ways their roles allowed. An active proponent of republican government, Mercy Otis Warren was a woman who was close to the action, well-acquainted with the central figures, and instrumental in bringing about the monumental changes in America. Referred to as the “muse of the revolution,”¹ Mercy Otis Warren used her pen to significantly broaden the colonial understanding of a republican form of government. From a collection of early poems and political plays written in the years preceding the war to the history of the revolution published when she was in her seventies after the Constitution had

¹ Nancy Rubin Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

been ratified, her pen spanned the spectrum of the entire revolutionary period. Thus, her writings contributed to the political landscape not only in the years leading up to the revolution, but also in the years afterward as the new government was being formed and a controversial Constitution was being written. She had an extremely influential impact on the American founding process, yet her role has been far too often minimized or even disregarded.

Mercy Otis's early experiences in her family were a fertile training ground for the development of her republican philosophies. Both of her parents had old family ties to colonial America. Her mother, Mary Allyne Otis, was descended from *Mayflower* passenger Edward Dotey, who was a signer of the Mayflower Compact, and her father James's ancestors had arrived in 1631 as part of the Great Migration.² The Otis family was an established family in Massachusetts, proud of their heritage, and naturally they became involved in colonial leadership in Massachusetts. Members of the Otis family had served in a variety of offices in the colony, "reaching as high as the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the Governor's Council."³ Mercy's father had inherited ample lands from his father despite being the youngest son,⁴ and this afforded a comfortable life for Mercy and her siblings, allowing her family to find prominence in Barnstable, a seacoast town about twenty-five miles from Plymouth. Here, "the Otises were large fish in a small pond"⁵ of about eight hundred or so

² Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2015, 5.

³ Lester H. Cohen, "Forward." In *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations, in Two Volumes*, 1805, written by Mercy Otis Warren, edited and annotated by Lester H. Cohen. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1994, xxii.

⁴ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 8.

⁵ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 8.

residents.⁶ And Mercy's father, a self-taught, good-humored man who lacked a formal education,⁷ was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives and became the Speaker of the House.⁸

Growing up in the shadow of wars, Mercy was born the third of thirteen children in September of 1728, arriving in the lull between Queen Anne's War and King George's War.⁹ No one could have anticipated the war that would define her life in later years, yet strain with relations between Britain and the colonies gradually worsened during Mercy's childhood. A memorable event to Mercy in her teen years would have been the victory of Massachusetts soldiers at Fort Louisbourg in 1745. When Britain returned the fort to France at the end of that conflict, some colonists began questioning British policies in colonial America.¹⁰ Tensions would increase as taxation policies and encroachments against liberty after the French and Indian War made life more difficult for the colonists, and Mercy's brother James Otis, Jr. would have an integral role in standing up to the mother country.¹¹

But during her childhood, Mercy's life was focused on other concerns. As the eldest daughter, she was her mother's primary helper in managing the home, and her duties were made more challenging by the death of six children out of the thirteen which her mother bore.¹² Undoubtedly, her mother's multiple pregnancies along with several episodes of profound grief for the whole family added to Mercy's burdens physically and emotionally.

⁶ Zaggarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 6.

⁷ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 11.

⁸ Cohen, "Forward," xxii.

⁹ Zaggarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 4.

¹⁰ Zaggarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 4.

¹¹ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 5.

¹² Zaggarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*: 4.

Historian Nancy Rubin Stuart suggests that “the chain of sibling deaths also left Mercy feeling guilty and wondering if she had been spared for a higher purpose.”¹³ In one of Mercy’s poems from her private collection written in the years after the Revolutionary War, she explored her survival in light of God’s protection. She wrote, “He has preserv’d my early youth, Upheld by his Almighty hand, In midst of death’s relentless power, I yet among the living stand.”¹⁴ She had a keen understanding of her life’s purpose as a function of God’s providence. In her poem “The Prayer,” she wrote, “And may thy grace, direct my will, That all thy laws I may fulfill! ...Assist me Lord in each relation, To act that part in every station, Thy providence has me assign’d, With truth and purity of mind.” Mercy understood that her purpose came from God, and her childhood experiences fueled her devotion to realizing God’s purpose.

Remaining true to their Puritan roots, Mercy’s parents and community cultivated her strong faith. Her hometown, Barnstable, maintained a conservative Congregationalism “virtually untouched by the Great Awakening”¹⁵ and based in traditional Puritan values of “duty, discipline, and rationality.”¹⁶ These religious sensitivities would become an integral part of her republican ideology as she grew older. The emphasis on virtue as a requirement for a republican people required commitment to Christian principles in the eyes of Mercy and her fellow revolutionaries. Republicanism also required an understanding of God’s providence in history.

¹³ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 12.

¹⁴ Edmund M Hayes and Mercy Otis Warren, “The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren,” *The New England Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1981): 210.

¹⁵ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 7.

¹⁶ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 7.

One of the outstanding features of Mercy's childhood was her education. Her father was sensitive about his own lack of education and was determined to provide this opportunity for his two eldest sons, James, Jr. and Joseph.¹⁷ When Joseph abdicated his studies, Mercy was allowed to join "Jemmy"¹⁸ in a "rigorous classical education" under the tutelage of Reverend Jonathan Russell, a Yale-trained minister who was one of the most well-educated men in the county.¹⁹ He was also their uncle. Blessed with a thorough education alongside her brother James who was being prepared to attend Harvard, Mercy immersed herself in her studies while simultaneously learning all the typical domestic arts. She developed the ability to seamlessly move between the intellectual world of men and the domestic realm of women.

Reading Sir Water Raleigh's *History of the World* along with classical sources as directed by her uncle, Mercy formed "a taste for both historical and global thinking."²⁰ Her worldview was being developed, and it was informed by a rich synthesis of history and Christianity. She began to develop her ideas of how governments work to oppress or bring liberty to their citizens. As an interest in political philosophy grew, she observed that history repeats itself with "artful or ambitious men" intent upon enriching themselves at the public expense, enabled by "a game of deception... played over and over."²¹ She began to recognize that ruling authorities sometimes put natural rights in peril, and she formed idealistic views based in her studies that some forms of government could promote liberty. Yet history made it clear, that

¹⁷ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 11.

¹⁸ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 13.

¹⁹ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 12.

²⁰ Jeffrey H. Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995, 3.

²¹ Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 39, no. 3 (July 1982): 423.

there was a persistent force of power and evil that worked against liberty and tried to strip people of their freedoms. Studying history, she learned that liberty was not an effortless circumstance but a condition to be earned, requiring diligent effort.

Mercy received nearly the same high caliber education of her brother James that prepared him for Harvard. When he left for school in 1738, he left her behind, but their relationship remained extremely close.²² James wrote, “This you may depend on, no man ever loved a sister better...”²³ Whenever home on break, he shared his books and knowledge with his former “classmate” and stoked Mercy’s political views by discussing the theories of John Locke with her.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, because of his experience with a gifted, intellectually curious sister, James, Jr. advocated for women’s equality and promoted women’s education.²⁵ Clearly both siblings strongly influenced each other in positive ways. Mercy’s relationship with her brother along with her educational experience uniquely trained her for her role, and “shaped her image of herself.”²⁶

Historians have not been able to determine accurately how Mercy met her husband, James Warren, but scholars surmise that they may have become acquainted through their fathers since James Otis, Sr., a lawyer, would undoubtedly have dealt professionally with James Warren, Sr., who served as high sheriff of Plymouth.²⁷ However, some have suggested that the two met at a commencement picnic at Harvard after Jemmy’s graduation in 1743²⁸ where

²² Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 13.

²³ Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren*, 4.

²⁴ Stuart, *Muse of the Revolution*, 14.

²⁵ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 15.

²⁶ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 13.

²⁷ Stuart, *Muse of the Revolution*, 16.

²⁸ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 16.

James Warren, Jr., a younger Harvard student, was about to enter his third year. The Warren family, descended from *Mayflower* pilgrim Richard Warren, shared the Otis family's strong Puritan heritage with firm ties to Massachusetts. Uniting the families, James married Mercy on November 14, 1754 when he was twenty-eight and she was twenty-six. After they were married, the young couple settled at the family homestead in Plymouth County, which Mercy dubbed "Clifford Farm."²⁹ The young couple was well suited for each other, and the new Mrs. Warren was blessed by a husband who believed in her abilities and encouraged her to use them.

Throughout the years of their marriage, James consistently encouraged Mercy in her "scribblings."³⁰ Fostering her confidence in April of 1775 as hostilities between Massachusetts and England intensified, James wrote, "God has given you great abilities; you have improved them in great Acquirements. You are possessed of eminent Virtues and distinguished Piety. For all these I esteem I love you in a degree that I can't express. They are all now to be called into action for the good of mankind, for the good of your friends, or the promotion of Virtue and Patriotism."³¹ Without men in her life who supported her intellectual development and pursuits, Mercy would not have accomplished what she did. Her father noticed her intellectual promise and allowed her to be educated. Her uncle supplied her with inspiring books and a sterling education. Her brother sparked her intellect through their discussions. And her

²⁹ Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution, Volume I*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1856. Internet Archive.76. Accessed September 9, 2018. <https://archive.org/details/womenofamerican00elle>

³⁰ Cheryl Z. Oreovicz, "Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814)," *Legacy* 13, no. 1 (1996): 55.

³¹ Richards, 5-6.

husband never resented time she spent away from domestic duties to write. Women in particular needed male cheerleaders if they were to accomplish deeds outside the domestic realm. Mrs. Warren's world was filled with men who cheered her on.

As an educated woman with a strong republican worldview, and as the sister and wife of men intimately involved in promoting liberty in Massachusetts, Mrs. Warren was impelled to participate in politics by the 1760s as tensions grew. Certainly, she was now busy raising a family, and between 1757 and 1766, she would have five boys, but it was impossible not to become involved. The issues between Massachusetts and Britain took on a personal quality when her ambitious father, James Otis, Sr., was denied a longed-for seat on the Governor's Council in 1757,³² due to a gossip campaign by Lt. Governor Thomas Hutchinson³³ which created long-term animosity between him and the Otis family. Their conflict came to a head in 1760 when newly appointed Governor Francis Bernard passed over James, Sr. for chief justice of Massachusetts Superior Court and selected Hutchinson instead. The spirit of enmity persisted. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Mercy would eventually make Hutchinson an especially favored target of mockery in her satires.

Meanwhile, in 1760 and 1761, Mercy's brother Jemmy was also fueling hostilities by questioning the "writs of assistance" used by customs officials to search and seize property without probable cause.³⁴ He took the position that "the writs violated fundamental English liberties and were an affront to natural law."³⁵ He questioned the legality of these laws

³² Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 21.

³³ Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 31.

³⁴ Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 33.

³⁵ Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 33.

themselves and “challenged the authority of Parliament to make laws that violated basic individual rights.”³⁶ While Jemmy lost this case, he made a name for himself because of his ability to articulate principles of liberty, and his arguments would later be incorporated into the fourth amendment. And John Adams attested to the fact that “no one dared to execute any more writs of assistance in the city” thanks to Jemmy.³⁷ Later, as minister George Grenville and Parliament plagued the colonists with new tax acts in the mid-1760s, James Otis, Jr. was naturally a leader, and his sister, friend, and confidante, Mercy, was privy to all that happened and intimately involved in the transformational events in Massachusetts that further drove a wedge between the colonies and Britain.

When Massachusetts heard the news of the Stamp Act in 1765, the Otises and Warrens held a meeting at the Warren’s home that contributed to the formation of the Stamp Act Congress.³⁸ The Warren home would become a regular meeting place throughout the revolution, known early on “as a gathering place for those most strongly opposed to the Hutchinson-Oliver clique,” and Mercy was both hostess and participant.³⁹ This connection to the center of political events served to introduce Mercy to key figures of the cause, and she earned their respect. But in those years leading to the separation, even before war broke out, tragedy devastated the Otis and Warren clan in 1769 when Jemmy’s mental health brought an end to his leadership. Indications of a problem had been intermittently evident, but after a

³⁶ Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 34.

³⁷ Katharine Susan Anthony, *First Lady of the Revolution: The Life of Mercy Otis Warren*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1958, 54.

³⁸ Richards, 10.

³⁹ Richards, 11.

head injury from an attack by John Robinson of the customs commission, James, Jr. was never the same. The assault had “sent him over the edge,”⁴⁰ and he dropped out as a central figure in the developing drama. Mercy’s life was tainted from that point forward by the demise of her dear brother who declined steadily until his death in 1783, and she did what she could to pick up where he left off within the constraints of her limitations as a woman.

During these early stages of the revolutionary era, those involved in the cause were largely unified in a spirit of promoting liberty. The colonists who were involved in challenging the British policies had a common enemy, and in this, they were unified. Britain was encroaching upon the natural liberties in a myriad of ways, and the task was clear. The Americans must gain sympathy of Parliament and find relief from the oppression of illegitimate policies by Parliament creating new policies favorable to the colonies, thus making reconciliation possible. That was everyone’s first choice in the early days. But if reconciliation on new terms was rejected, the Americans understood they may eventually be inclined to separate.

Colonists held many shared values. Because certain political philosophers were generally read, there was a basic understanding of republican values. Americans understood that they had inherent rights that were not granted by governments but granted by God at the moment of creation. And they understood these rights to be life, liberty, and property. Because governments were instituted to protect the rights that each person is born with, any attempt by the British authorities to interfere with these rights was considered serious business

⁴⁰ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 53.

indeed. The taxation policies that emerged where colonists were taxed without representation combined with the presence of a standing army in their midst who they were forced to support, irritated the colonists. And this served to embolden many. Differences in specific views toward republicanism were less important at this point when faced with a general feeling of despotism. After the war, the specific differences would become a major point of contention, and Mercy would find herself fighting for a familiar republican cause against her former compatriots in the Constitutional controversy. But that was far in the future, and much had to be accomplished first.

Consistently during all stages of the revolutionary years, Mercy Warren turned to her pen to aid the cause. With passion, she fought for her brand of republican government, and her pen was her greatest tool. Her earliest literacy contributions were letters, and this legacy must not be minimized. Letters were more significant in the past than today, and she was prolific. Her correspondence continued throughout her entire life, providing a fascinating record of the revolutionary era as well as the relationships of the actors involved in the drama. Her collection of letters, gathered and catalogued by the Massachusetts Historical Society, reveals a wide circle of influence. In addition to writing to family and friends, she also corresponded with several prominent men, including Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Eldridge Gerry, and others, all of whom indicated mutual respect for her intellect and abilities.⁴¹ After the war, General Knox responded to a letter she wrote to him, and he encouraged her in continuing to share her perspectives by writing, "I should be happy, Madam, to receive your

⁴¹ Ellet, 76-77.

communications from time to time, particularly on the subject enlarged on in this letter. Your sentiments shall remain with me.”⁴² Years later, referring to Mrs. Warren’s book of plays published in 1791, Alexander Hamilton wrote, “that in the career of dramatic composition at least, female genius in the United States has outstripped the Male. With great consideration and esteem I have the honor to be, Madam, Your most obedt and humble Servant, A. Hamilton.”⁴³

Of singular interest are Mercy Warren’s letters to both John and Abigail Adams with whom she shared a steady friendship. John Adams valued Warren’s political input, and she shared her thoughts on a wide range of topics while providing encouragement to him as a political leader. Adams was an early political ally of her brother Jemmy and her husband James, and Mercy sought his advice and support. He supplied it faithfully. Recognizing her literary abilities, both John and Abigail encouraged Mercy to collect documentation during the revolution for an eventual history that she seemed destined to write.⁴⁴ John encouraged Mercy to articulate her thoughts on political issues by seeking her input. In response to one of his queries, she responded to him in March of 1776, “Your asking my opinion on so momentous a point as the form of government which ought to be preferred by a people, about to shake off the fetters of monarchic and aristocratic tyranny may be designed to ridicule the sex for paying

⁴² Ellet, 77.

⁴³ Alexander Hamilton, “From Alexander Hamilton to Mercy Warren, 1 July 1791,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-08-02-0465>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 8, *February 1791–July 1791*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965, pp. 522–523.]

⁴⁴ Edith B. Gelles, “Bonds of Friendship: The Correspondence of Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series 108 (1996): 63.

any attention to political matters. Yet I shall venture to give you a serious reply.”⁴⁵ She enjoyed sharing her articulate thoughts with male intellectual peers.

While Mercy looked to John as a mentor, Abigail similarly looked to Mercy, sixteen years her senior, as a mentor in the early years of their friendship. Sharing views on everything under the sun, the women wrote about issues both domestic and political, from theories of motherhood and economics to the deprivations of the revolution. Both experiencing life as “war widows,” they lamented the absences of husbands who were actively involved in the political process but bore it faithfully as republican wives.⁴⁶ Edith Gelles, Senior Scholar, Institute for Research of Women and Gender at Stanford University, delves into the ways in which letter-writing served to function in the lives of Mercy and Abigail who both found it to be a “form of intellectual enterprise.”⁴⁷ Sometimes referring to each other by their pen names “Marcia” and “Portia,” they shared their political philosophies as well as their feelings of commitment to the patriot cause. When they felt frustration at the deprivations suffered, they encouraged each other to remember that this was the way for a woman to express patriotism and were further bonded in their common cause.⁴⁸

Mercy enjoyed regular correspondence with a myriad of individuals, and after the collapse of her brother, she developed a very unique and significant relationship. Jemmy had developed a regular correspondence with famed Catherine Sawbridge Macauley, a prominent

⁴⁵ Mercy Otis Warren, “To John Adams, March [10], 1776,” In *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, edited by Richards Jeffrey H. and Harris Sharon M., 69-72. University of Georgia Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46ndwc.33>.

⁴⁶ Gelles, “Bonds of Friendship,” 52.

⁴⁷ Gelles, “Bonds of Friendship,” 50.

⁴⁸ Gelles, “Bonds of Friendship,” 51.

Whig historian in Britain. After her brother's health precluded him from continuing communication, Warren picked up the correspondence, writing, "I thank you for the marks of esteem you have heretofore shown to a brother of mine, a Gentleman eminent for his remarkable exertion of ability in behalf of the expiring liberties of his country. He has not lately been able to make those acknowledgements that are justly in your due; yet I hope he may one day be in a capacity to answer the highest demands that either friendship or society may claim."⁴⁹ Sharing a passion for history and republican, Whig government, Warren found a kindred spirit in Macauley who served to inspire her. Throughout the revolutionary period, their letters continued, and Warren regularly shared vivid and detailed descriptions of American war developments with Macauley, thus sending the colonial perspective of the conflict across the Atlantic to an historian living in Britain. Once again, as long as the war years were proceeding with Britain's oppressive policies as the common enemy, these fellow republican women found a harmony of thought, but after the war ended, things would change. When Macauley journeyed to the new nation in 1785, the women quarreled over an elite weekly tea assembly in Boston. Macauley enjoyed it while Warren felt it "typified the degeneracy of the new republic."⁵⁰ She would come to believe that Macauley's brand of republicanism was too tolerant of elitism. While Mercy's strict perspective of republicanism fit

⁴⁹ Mercy Otis Warren, "To Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay, June 9, 1773," In *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*. Edited by Richards Jeffrey H. and Harris Sharon M., 14-16. University of Georgia Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46ndwc.87>.

⁵⁰ Paul Giles, "Review of 'Catharine Macauley and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender' by Kate Davies," *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2006): 664.

in comfortably with the cause before and during the war, it would unbelievably become a point of contention after independence was won.

Mrs. Warren's plethora of letters are a key to understanding her relationships with prominent individuals of her era as well as illuminating the nuances of her political perspectives. Although her political worldview and commitment to republicanism was a relative constant throughout the revolutionary period, her republican views would become divisive for her after the war. Did her views differ from others? How did Mrs. Warren define republicanism? Her specific brand of republicanism was intimately incorporated into the worldview she had developed from her family, from her brother, from her studies under her uncle's direction, and from her community. It is critical to define terms when discussing governmental and political concepts, yet it seems that many historians neglect to do this, assuming that the definitions of important words are shared across cultures and time periods. This is unfortunate and causes a tremendous amount of confusion.

What was the version of Republicanism that Warren promoted so passionately? Perhaps not anticipating the extent to which the term "republican government" would get tossed around by historians, political scholars, modern media figures, and politicians in ways that sometimes contradict each other, Warren did not specify her brand of republicanism to the extent she could have and used many sweeping generalities. However, many threads emerge. First and foremost, equality of mankind was central to her and to all who declared

themselves republicans.⁵¹ Equally important were natural rights and natural law.⁵² Political philosophers and the British heritage of the Magna Carta and English Bill of Rights had provided a framework for understanding a person's God-given rights to life, liberty, and property. This was uncontested. Perhaps the average citizen did not spend as much time pondering these rights as Mercy did. But with her passion for history, she found her life revolving around efforts to protect these rights. It is clear that Mrs. Warren shared convictions of Thomas Paine in "Common Sense" and John Adams in "The Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" that governments have a long historical pattern of corruption and tyranny that robs people of their liberties, thus enslaving them to the shackles of government. With a background of knowledge formed by reading "Niccolò Machiaveli, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, John Milton, John Locke, and John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon,"⁵³ she shared the republican conviction that governments "were susceptible to degeneracy and corruption."⁵⁴ She had a firm belief that balancing power among separate branches of government was a protection from one branch growing tyrannical as well as frequent elections⁵⁵.

Colonists, like Mercy Warren, were generally "remarkably well-informed students of contemporary social and political theory,"⁵⁶ and were never isolated from developments in

⁵¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Foederal and State Conventions. By a Columbian Patriot.; Sic Transit Gloria Americana*, Boston: 1788, 6. Evans Early American Imprint Collection, accessed September 11, 2018. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno=N16431.0001.001>

⁵² Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*, 8.

⁵³ Zagarrì, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 51.

⁵⁴ Zagarrì, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 51.

⁵⁵ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*, 8-9.

⁵⁶ Bernard Bailyn, "Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (1962): 343.

European thinking. Bernard Bailyn notes that Dissenter perspectives were a critical part of the political philosophies that influenced Americans. For example, *Cato's Letters*, which were "the most frequently cited authority on matters of principle and theory" among revolutionary leaders⁵⁷ were written by Trenchard and Gordon, dissenting Whigs in London. It was from a shared philosophical canon that colonists, including Mercy Warren, developed a mutual vocabulary and worldview about "the nature of liberty and of the institutions needed to achieve it."⁵⁸ These political ideas were already being played out in the colonies long before the revolutionary period due to the nature of colonial social structures. Therefore, the revolution was not a complete overhaul of an existing system, but rather a formalization and completion of a drive toward republicanism that had long been developing.

Most emphatically, Mrs. Warren believed that republican government required civic virtue and perpetual vigilance.⁵⁹ Warren notes that she had "long been an admirer of republican government"⁶⁰ but she expressed concerns that "American virtue has not yet reached that sublime pitch which is necessary to baffle the designs of the artful – to counteract the weakness of the timid, or to resist the pecuniary temptations and ambitious wishes that will arise in the breast of many."⁶¹ She understood that governments were a source of idolatry and temptations. To Warren, "virtue and reason were ... inseparable,"⁶² and they were impossible without a foundation of self-discipline. Republican virtue "was a quality of human character

⁵⁷ Bailyn, 344.

⁵⁸ Bailyn, 344.

⁵⁹ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 51.

⁶⁰ Warren, "To John Adams, March [10], 1776."

⁶¹ Warren, "To John Adams, March [10], 1776."

⁶² Lester H. Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1980): 206.

and conduct that manifested the confluence of personality and public behavior, such that civic values and practices were continuous with individual values and practices.”⁶³ Warren was not alone in emphasizing the relationship between virtue and republicanism. Her priority was shared by the founders and eloquently articulated by enlightenment political philosophers like Locke and Montesquieu.⁶⁴ Virtue was understood to be a commitment to all the positive character qualities such as self-discipline, moderation, patriotism, prudence, and reason, whereas the passions of man’s sin nature were the opposite of virtue, as exemplified in all vices and unholy passions like the lust for wealth and power.⁶⁵

In the language of the day, hegemonic understandings about virtue versus vice made up a language of republicanism. But Mrs. Warren had a particularly astute understanding. Historian Lester Cohen has described the well-developed historical and ethical philosophy that Warren possessed, claiming that she “had the most systematic understanding of the relationship between ideology and ethics, the best-developed interpretation of how corruption operated in history, and the clearest insight into the historian’s role as a social and political critic.”⁶⁶ Less concerned with virtue and avarice as individual character traits, Warren was much more concerned with them as broader traits in society and history as a whole. They “provided Warren an explanatory schema for analyzing not only the American Revolution but all of human history.”⁶⁷ She perceived a never-ending, global tension between vice versus

⁶³ Lester H. Cohen, "Mercy Otis Warren: The Politics of Language and the Aesthetics of Self," *American Quarterly* 35, no. 5 (1983): 481.

⁶⁴ Cohen, "The Politics of Language," 481.

⁶⁵ Cohen, "The Politics of Language," 482.

⁶⁶ Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution," 203.

⁶⁷ Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution," 207.

virtue, tyranny versus liberty, power versus limited government, enslavement versus freedom, and evil versus good. In essence, she saw the epic battle of good versus evil being played out in the battle between tyranny and liberty – between ruling elites and honest citizens.

Warren's letters gave her an outlet for expressing her republican views to family members, friends, and prominent men and women, and her tomes display an articulate, intelligent woman who dedicated herself to an unselfish purposeful life. A "passionate friend, advisor to young women, historian, political confidante, mother, wife, philosopher, providentialist, and always stylist,"⁶⁸ Warren shared her heart and her mind on paper. Her husband, James Warren, expressed pride in his wife's ability to compose her thoughts so eloquently. She was so articulate that her readers encouraged her to expand her audience by sharing her thoughts in other avenues and getting her writing published. John Adams, a reliable advocate, assisted her by guiding her through the process of getting published and serving as her literary agent.⁶⁹

After Thomas Hutchinson succeeded Bernard as the Governor of Massachusetts in 1771, Mercy began her life as a published author with *The Adulateur*, a satirical political drama. Intended to be read and not performed, Warren's play was a work of propaganda with exaggerated characters representing real people of her day. Appearing anonymously in the *Massachusetts Spy* in March and April of 1772, her satire features the despicable Rapatio, a blatant caricature of Thomas Hutchinson, who proclaims:

⁶⁸ Richards, 50.

⁶⁹ Martha J. King. "The 'Pen of the Historian': Mercy Otis Warren's History of the American Revolution." *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 72, no. 2 (2011): 515.

“Hail happy day! In which I find my wishes,
My gayest wishes crown’d. Brundo ret’d,
The stage is clear. Whatever gilded prospects
E’er swam before me – Honor, places, pensions –
All at command – oh! My full heart! ‘twill burst!”⁷⁰

Rapatio’s minions, Limpit and Hazelrod, represent Andrew and Peter Oliver, Hutchinson’s associates and loyal lesser officials. The heroes of her play, portrayed as the personas of Roman republicans like Brutus, Cassius, and Marcus, represented her brother James, Jr. and his cohorts in the Sons of Liberty. Brutus declares:

“We’ll rescue freedom – yes, thy wounds my country
Shall soon be clos’d, and from the precious gore,
Which stains thy streets shall spring a glorious harvest.
Now is the crisis; if we lose this moment,
All’s gone for ever – Catch the happy period, us?
And boldly hurl oppression from her basis.”⁷¹

In May and July of the following year, 1773, *The Defeat*, Warren’s second satire, was published reprising roles from the previous play and written in the wake of the discovery of the infamous Hutchinson letters where he advocated “an abridgement of English liberties in

⁷⁰ Mercy Otis Warren, *The Adulateur: A Tragedy, as It Is Now Acted in Upper Servia*, Boston: Printing Office Near Concert Hall, 1773, 8. Evans Early American Imprint Collection. Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2004-2008. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno=N10291.0001.001>

⁷¹ Warren, *The Adulateur*, 18.

colonial administration.”⁷² Published throughout the colonies, the scandal of the Hutchinson letters was intensified by Mercy’s play that was written to “emphasize the gravity of Hutchinson’s crimes and to compound his humiliation.”⁷³ In this production, “the hated Rapatio is hanged, just as Hutchinson himself was hanged in effigy.”⁷⁴ Her third satire in the trilogy is *The Group*. Considered her bleakest satire,⁷⁵ it was published in January of 1775 after Hutchinson had been recalled to London and replaced by General Gage.⁷⁶ First published in both the *Boston Gazette* and *Massachusetts Spy*, it followed soon after in pamphlet form, attesting to its popularity.⁷⁷ The characters belonging to “The Group” were the collection of crown appointees who accepted positions under the Massachusetts Government Act, an Intolerable Act that strengthened the crown’s control of Massachusetts and altered the way in which civic officials were appointed.⁷⁸ A series of sketches featuring main characters making speeches to each other, *The Group* inspired colonists to “realize that active resistance might be the logical consequence of their current position”⁷⁹ on the eve of the Battle of Lexington and Concord which erupted a couple weeks after the publication of the satire in pamphlet form.

Best understood from the perspective of the time in which they were written, Warren’s use of drama effectively “advanced a radical narrative that mobilized support for their cause.”⁸⁰

⁷² Maud Macdonald Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren, 1728-1814 " *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1953): 384.

⁷³ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 61.

⁷⁴ Oreovicz, 55.

⁷⁵ Oreovicz, 55.

⁷⁶ Edmund M. Hayes, "Mercy Otis Warren: The Defeat," *The New England Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1976): 442.

⁷⁷ Oreovicz, 55.

⁷⁸ Hutcheson, 387.

⁷⁹ Zagarrri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 69.

⁸⁰ Sandra J. Sarkela, "Freedom's Call: The Persuasive Power of Mercy Otis Warren's Dramatic Sketches, 1772-1775," *Early American Literature* 44, no. 3 (2009): 542.

According to Sandra Sarkela, Associate Professor and Interim Department Chair of Communication Studies at the University of Memphis, Warren's influence in this satirical arena has often been minimized. While these pieces were never intended to be works of literature, as political rhetoric, they hit the mark. The sketches were intended to resemble actual tragedies with which readers would be familiar. More like modern skits, these vignettes presented short dialogues between fictional characters who symbolized politicians of the time so blatantly that everyone knew precisely who was being mocked. Using this format, Warren was able to satirize her arch-enemy Hutchinson and other political leaders using exaggeration and ridicule. By employing humor, she heightened the emotional response, and this added to the effectiveness of her political message, so much so that "Rapatio" became a nickname for Hutchinson.⁸¹ Warren's sketches were an effective way for her to communicate her political beliefs, and they became very popular.

In the interim between the publication of *The Defeat* and *The Group*, the Boston Tea Party and its aftermath shocked the colonies in December of 1773. John Adams had an idea for a politically oriented poem to reflect the incident, but feeling inept at writing it himself, he called upon Mrs. Warren whose pen, "has no equal that I know of in this country."⁸² After he relayed his ideas, Mercy created a "mock heroic poem" called "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs, or the Sacrifice of the Tuscaroroes" which featured the god Neptune's rival wives

⁸¹ Gerald Weales, "The Quality of Mercy, or Mrs. Warren's Profession," *The Georgia Review* 33, no. 4 (1979): 888.

⁸² Hutcheson, 385.

along with a cast of Greek mythological characters having a royal dispute about varieties of tea.

Characters representing the Boston rebels arrive to mediate the argument as they:

“Pour’d a profusion of delicious teas
Which, wafted by a soft favonian breeze,
Supply’d the watery deities, in spite
Of all the rage of jealous Amphitrite.”⁸³

Adams was pleased with Warren’s creative application of his idea, and their collaboration continued as he encouraged her to keep applying her gift to the revolutionary cause in any way she could.

But as the war began, attentions turned to wartime concerns like inflation and dealing with scarcity. Committed to the pursuit of liberty, Mercy’s family was called upon to participate and was dedicated to doing so. As a member and sometimes president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, James Warren was absent from Plymouth often, and during part of the war, he served as Paymaster General of the Continental Army.⁸⁴ Their eldest son, James, Jr., joined the navy. Tragically, he was wounded in action so severely that a leg was amputated, and he entered a time of depression that required his mother’s time and attention.⁸⁵ The war changed their lives in many ways. During this time, Mercy kept copious notes about the events that were occurring. She recognized that her family was living in unique time of transformation,

⁸³ Mercy Otis Warren, *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*: [Two lines from Pope], Washington, George, 1732-1799, dedicatee. Printed at Boston by I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews. At Faust's Statue, no. 45, Newbury Street., MDCCXC. [1790], 205. Accessed October 16, 2018. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=div2;view=text;idno=N17785.0001.001;node=N17785.0001.001%3A15.7>

⁸⁴ Hutcheson, 390.

⁸⁵ Hutcheson, 390.

and her passion for history caused her to see her time period in terms of the broad overarching pattern that it represented. She felt called to write a history of these events when they were resolved, and thus, she was wise to do her research as the events were occurring.

Life was not easy in their personal lives as the war eventually came to an end in 1781. Mercy's health and issues with her sons caused pain and heartbreak. First of all, her eyesight began to fail her, and the gradual decline of her vision would plague her the rest of her life. Most tragically, in 1785, their son Charles died while traveling to Spain.⁸⁶ Not long after this, James and Mercy were saddened to hear that their son Winslow was plagued by debt and shocked to hear that he had scandalously attacked a creditor in revenge.⁸⁷ He would eventually join the army and die during an Indian attack in 1791.⁸⁸ To add to their woes, the Warrens were the focus of social criticism. James had been elected to serve in the Massachusetts Congress, and he had declined the honor. His refusal to respond to the call of duty resulted in judgment and gossip⁸⁹ even from their friends John and Abigail Adams. While his wife claimed an "attachment to private life"⁹⁰ as his excuse, James declared that he found the prospect of leaving home to save "a new-formed Republic from the consequences of their own folly" to be an "irksome" thought, indeed. Once a Massachusetts representative and a key member of the Sons of Liberty, James could have achieved the same prominence and influence as his fellow founders in the new governmental systems. But he chose not to get as involved after the

⁸⁶ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 181.

⁸⁷ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 185.

⁸⁸ Weales, 886.

⁸⁹ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 185.

⁹⁰ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 173.

revolution as his compatriots did, and this was increasingly due to a divergence in political sentiments. Now that the common enemy – Britain – was out of the picture, and republican government was being established for the new nation, the conflict began over what form the republican government should take. The harmony of thought about the nature of republics that had guided the revolutionaries during the struggle was now gone.

Mercy shared her husband's concerns. However, despite her husband's waning involvement, she still had contributions to make. Her satirical dramas and productive correspondence continued after the war as her writing took on a new purpose. Understanding the power of drama to illuminate political issues and influence people's sentiments, Mercy penned *The Ladies of Castile* in which she included women in key roles for the first time. The story of a soldier during the time of Charles V in Spain⁹¹, this play addresses issues of duty to one's country, but ends in tragedy.⁹² Not long after, Warren wrote *The Sack of Rome*, a play covering the fall of Rome to the Vandals and "drawing upon events described in Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*."⁹³ Both plays were modeled on the fashionable drama *Cato* by Addison, which was highly popular in the colonies.⁹⁴ In both dramas, parallels to her present time period were made clear to illustrate the historical truth that Mercy knew so well – that history repeats itself and governments often institute policies that make life difficult for people. These plays reinforced the principles that inspired the patriots, in her hopes that these

⁹¹ Oreovicz, 58.

⁹² Hutcheson, 392.

⁹³ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 179.

⁹⁴ Oreovicz, 58.

hard-won liberties would be maintained. *The Sack of Rome* and *The Ladies of Castile* would eventually be published in 1790 in a book with a collection of her poems.

Now that liberty had been won, Mercy developed grave concerns about the direction the government was taking, and she “became increasingly concerned with what appeared to be the subversion of American republicanism.”⁹⁵ After Shay’s Rebellion of 1786, concerns about the stability of the new nation under the Article of Confederation caused leaders to speak of creating a more stable government which, to Mercy and her husband, meant a strong central consolidated government. To them, this countered everything they had fought for and seemed to circumvent the essence of republican government. Believing in the superiority of a republican form of government, Mercy believed the new government should be most concerned with limiting the power of the central government, not expanding it. As leaders met to replace the Articles of Confederation with the Constitution, she was uneasy and once again turned to her pen.⁹⁶

Her letter to Catherine Macauley in September of 1787 reveals her concerns. “Our situation is truly delicate and critical. On the one hand, we stand in need of a strong Federal Government founded on principles that will support the prosperity and union of the colonies. On the other we have struggled for liberty and made lofty sacrifices at her shrine: and there are still many among us who revere her name too much to relinquish (beyond a certain medium)

⁹⁵ Cohen, “Politics of Language,” 490.

⁹⁶ Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, 87.

the rights of man for the Dignity of Government.”⁹⁷ In December of the same year, Mercy wrote to Macauley again. “If you madam have seen the publications we must appear to you a very divided people. Those who stile themselves *Federalists* are perhaps less fond of harmony than the class stigmatized with the appellation of Anti-Federalists. The last wish for a union of the states on the free principles of the late confederation; while the first are for the consolidation of a strong government on any or no principles: - and are for supporting it by force at the risque of distorting the fairest features in the political face of America.”⁹⁸ While lamenting the loss of free principles to a consolidated government, Mercy was also hinting at the idea that the term “Antifederalist” may have been a misnomer for those who were engaged in the struggle to protect limited government.

In early spring of 1788, she published “Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions, by a Columbian Patriot.” Once thought to have been written by Elbridge Gerry, this work addressed her Antifederalist anxieties⁹⁹ and expressed concern that the new Constitution “might even prove to be a new way of enslaving the people.”¹⁰⁰ Published during the ratification debates in the states, Warren attempted to discourage ratification by exposing the dangers of expanding the power of a central government. As a central theme, she sought to inspire the people to re-embrace their revolutionary principles. According to Herbert Storing, Warren made the Antifederalist case in a way that is “more philosophical than most of

⁹⁷ Kate Davies, *Catherine Macauley and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 290.

⁹⁸ Mercy Otis Warren, “To Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, December 18, 1787,” In *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, edited by Richards Jeffrey H. and Harris Sharon M., 216. University of Georgia Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46ndwc.91>.

⁹⁹ Oreovicz, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution,” 202.

her fellows.”¹⁰¹ She incorporates an august suite of political philosophers into her argument, including Blackstone, Locke, Abbe Mable, Helvetius, and Rousseau.¹⁰² In evidence of her profound historical perspective, Warren “evokes the designs of Julius Caesar, Ximenes, Sejanus, Machiavelli, and Thomas Hutchinson as examples of despotism.”¹⁰³ She advocates emphatically for a Bill of Rights¹⁰⁴ and systematically counters provisions in the proposed Constitution in eighteen well-articulated points.¹⁰⁵ Almost prophetically, Warren warns the nation against the “consolidated fabric of aristocratic tyranny”¹⁰⁶ that could result from an acceptance of the new arrangement. Warning that a “complete revolution of government throughout the Union” is not a proper response to the “dangerous insurrection” that occurred in one state, she impresses upon the nation that it is up to the people to choose, and she hopes they choose wisely.¹⁰⁷ Her historical context is evident throughout as she attempts to inspire the Americans to understand what is at stake. She wrote:

“Though the virtues of a Cato could not save Rome, nor the abilities of a Padilla defend the citizens of Castile from falling under the yoke of Charles, yet a *Tell* once suddenly rose from a little obscure city, and boldly rescued the liberties of his country. Every age has its Bruti and its Decii, as well as its Caesars and Sejani. The happiness of mankind depends much on the modes of government and the virtues of the governors; and America may yet produce characters who have genius and capacity sufficient to form

¹⁰¹ Oreovicz, 59.

¹⁰² Oreovicz, 59.

¹⁰³ Oreovicz, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*,” 12.

¹⁰⁵ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*,” 8-13.

¹⁰⁶ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*,” 17.

¹⁰⁷ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*,” 21.

the manners and correct the morals of the people, and virtue enough to lead their country to freedom.”¹⁰⁸

She had concerns about the direction of the nation and harbored doubts that the people possessed the wisdom to choose a wise course, but she remained hopeful.

The Antifederalists, like Mrs. Warren, who spoke out against the Constitution, have suffered from bad press through the years. According to Robert Middlekauff, the Antifederalists themselves “failed...to appropriate the one word to describe themselves which might have strengthened their arguments. The word was ‘Federalist.’”¹⁰⁹ The so-called Antifederalists themselves were in actuality the champions of the way in which Federalism was intended to work, with powers separated between states as individual political units and the central government, given power only by mutual consent. Since the side promoting the Constitution grabbed the term for themselves, their opponents were left “to be almost inevitably branded as the Antifederalists.”¹¹⁰ Thus, those who were advocating for limited government were defined by being *against* something, and this undoubtedly harmed their message. If they had captured the position of being *for* limited government, *for* separation of powers, *for* securing liberties, perhaps their message would have been more marketable to the people. It was not true that the Antifederalists wanted to ignore the problems in the nation out of a blind devotion to the Articles of Confederation. Many Antifederalists actually supported the plan of *amending* the Articles of Confederation because they recognized some changes were needed. However, they

¹⁰⁸ Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution*,” 20.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 675.

¹¹⁰ Middlekauff, 675.

were generally uncomfortable when the Articles were completely abandoned, and a new form of government established, because the extent of the changes forfeited essential revolutionary principles. And this was Mercy's position.

Even her magnum opus, a three-volume and 1,300-page book, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, was deeply influenced by her concerns about the Constitution and the threats to limited government that she believed it posed. It seems clear that Mercy considered writing a history as early as 1775, and she labored over this project off and on for almost thirty years. Throughout the years of the revolution, she had collected material and done research while the events were occurring, and the result was "an impressive chronicle of forty years (1761-1801) by someone who personally knew many of the principle actors."¹¹¹ Even though she finished writing most of it by 1791,¹¹² she was seventy-seven years old when it was finally published in 1805. Her great history owes a debt of gratitude to those who encouraged and inspired her, most particularly Reverend John Russell, her tutor¹¹³ who is credited with "launching [Warren] on a lifelong desire to understand the lessons of history,"¹¹⁴ and her insight into the historical patterns of political corruption remain astute to modern readers.¹¹⁵ British historian Catherine McCauley also deserves a nod.¹¹⁶ Iron sharpens iron, and Warren's development as an historian and political writer was honed through years of correspondence they exchanged.¹¹⁷ Some credit must also go to John Adams,

¹¹¹ King, 517.

¹¹² King 517.

¹¹³ Ellet, 75.

¹¹⁴ Oreovicz, 56.

¹¹⁵ Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution," 203.

¹¹⁶ Gelles, "Bonds of Friendship," 37.

¹¹⁷ Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 56.

who prodded Mercy to use her gift. At one point, John Adams had written to James Warren, "Tell your wife that God Almighty has entrusted her with the Powers for the good of the World, which, in the cause of his Providence, he bestows on few of the human race. That instead of being a fault to use them, it would be criminal to neglect them."¹¹⁸

Mrs. Warren wrote a *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, "with the design of transmitting to posterity a faithful portraiture of the most distinguished characters of the day."¹¹⁹ Blessed with strong connections to the key players in the developing nation, Warren was uniquely poised to write a history of the events that had occurred. She had served as hostess to the leading patriots in Massachusetts¹²⁰ and by her fireside in Plymouth "were many political plans originated, discussed, and digested."¹²¹ Correspondence with Founding Fathers and other important figures in the revolution attest to her relationships with many in the inner circle. However, her historical focus was not only on the key players, but on the people – the everyday Americans - who she considered "the real heroes of a republic."¹²² Some scholars quite appropriately characterize her history as an "extended jeremiad"¹²³ that reminds people of their founding ideals, admonishes them for not

¹¹⁸ Katharine Susan Anthony, *First Lady of the Revolution: The Life of Mercy Otis Warren*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1958, 95.

¹¹⁹ Ellet, 85.

¹²⁰ Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution," 203.

¹²¹ Ellet, 81.

¹²² Sylvia Neely, "Mason Locke Weems's 'Life of George Washington' and the Myth of Braddock's Defeat," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 1, The Private George Washington: A Bicentennial Reconsideration (Winter 1999), 45-72.

¹²³ Richards, 128.

“keeping their first principles alive,”¹²⁴ and awakens them to the need for restoration. Her focus always remained on liberty and the importance of working to protect it.

Her history covers the revolutionary period all the way through the ratification of the Constitution, and she included those concluding events in a final chapter she referred to as her “supplementary observations” on the Constitutional controversy. After three volumes describing the entire historical process of achieving a republican government in America, she concludes by expressing discontent at the rapid expansion of federal power and outlines various ways in which the new government was becoming tyrannical. Republicanism was a gift and it was in peril; thus, her history serves as a clarion call to preserve what the revolutionaries had fought for. “If, instead of the independent feelings of ancient republics ... we should see a dereliction of those principles, and the Americans ready to renounce their great advantages, by the imitation of European systems in politics and manners, it would be a melancholy trait in the story of man.”¹²⁵ She clearly understood the persistent pull of governments to grow larger and ever-more encroaching, and she hoped her history could arouse Americans to intercede before it was too late.

Warren wrote her history with the purpose of presenting the virtue of republican values to the next generation because she believed they were already at risk. Using the moral terminology of her time, Warren described the constant tension between virtue and avarice as a thread of conflict stretching back to the beginning of time. According to historian Lester

¹²⁴ Richards, 128.

¹²⁵ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations, in Two Volumes*, 1805, edited and annotated by Lester H. Cohen. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1994, 648.

Cohen, her view of the revolution was simply American virtue versus British avarice, and “since avarice was the cause of corruption, the historian’s proper task was to exhort her countrymen to virtue.”¹²⁶ Thus, she held that “narrative history is an instrument of social and political criticism.”¹²⁷ Her historical focus was thus pointed toward the future as much as to the past. She sought not only to influence future interpretations of the American Revolutionary era, but she attempted to create the classifications for how it would be interpreted. Although warning of the dangers of abandoning republican principles and declaring that some of the freedoms had slipped, her message was hopeful that a resurgence of American virtue would occur. According to Cohen, her approach was one of simplicity. The ideal government is a republic and virtue is “the mainspring of the republic.”¹²⁸ Her historical writings emphasize her conviction that good government requires people to take responsibility for their future.

Warren found hope in the Jefferson administration. She believed that his election in 1800 “represented a victory for the true revolutionary legacy.”¹²⁹ Even though her lengthy history had been finished prior to his presidency, she waited until 1805 to publish her volumes because it was well into Jefferson’s first term and a more politically accepting climate for her book’s release. Jefferson thoroughly embraced her history and was thrilled that she had subjected the revolutionary years to a republican lens. “The last thirty years will furnish a more instructive lesson to mankind than any equal period in history,” he wrote.¹³⁰ He was so

¹²⁶ Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution,” 212.

¹²⁷ Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution,” 213.

¹²⁸ Cohen, “Explaining the Revolution,” 218.

¹²⁹ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 87.

¹³⁰ King, 522.

enthusiastic that he distributed copies of Mercy's history to his cabinet members.¹³¹ Jefferson's approval was undoubtedly bolstered by Mercy's favorable portrayal of him in her historical record.

Not everyone was so fortunate in receiving universal praise in Warren's history. Intent on maintaining accuracy in reporting the events of the revolutionary years and committed to doing so through a republican lens, Mercy shared her honest assessments even when it was difficult. She did not even shield George Washington from censure but criticized him for "his 'partiality for monarchy' and aristocratic elitism."¹³² Her dear friend John Adams received her most severe rebuke. Mercy subjected him to the same scrutiny as the other players in the revolutionary drama, and "her pronouncements on him led to a serious quarrel."¹³³

Even before John read Mercy's history, the relationships between the Adams and the Warrens had cooled. In the years after the revolution, when John and Abigail eclipsed the Warrens politically, Abigail had grown gradually less communicative with Mercy¹³⁴ until significant political differences during John's presidency caused a serious break in their friendships. Initially divided over the Constitution, Mercy became distressed by what she saw as John Adams' attachment to a central government and an abandonment of her version of republican values. In his *Defense of the Constitution of the Government of the United States*, Adams seemed to "celebrate monarchy."¹³⁵ The Alien and Sedition Act during John's presidency

¹³¹ King, 522.

¹³² Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 87.

¹³³ Hutcheson, 397.

¹³⁴ Gelles, "Bonds of Friendship", 62.

¹³⁵ Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 155.

would solidify Mercy's assessment that John had been transformed by power and had become more like the foe they had fought in the revolution.¹³⁶ In her history, she was not shy in describing how Adams had broken from the principles of the revolution. "After Mr. Adams's return from England, he was implicated by a large portion of his countrymen, as having relinquished the republican system, and forgotten the principles of the American revolution, which he had advocated for near twenty years," she wrote.¹³⁷ She assessed his character in ways that he objected to. "Mr. Adams was undoubtedly a statesman of penetration and ability; but his prejudices and his passions were sometimes too strong for his sagacity and judgment."¹³⁸

Adams's response was to go on the defensive. Beginning in July of 1807, he wrote a series of protests, "and his efforts at vindication fill ten voluminous letters."¹³⁹ Enraged, he felt that Mercy had misquoted and misrepresented him in many instances. He countered her assertions systematically, and some of his scathing missives are as lengthy as twenty pages.¹⁴⁰ Not merely critiquing her content, Adams assigned "the harshest, most insidious motives to Mercy,"¹⁴¹ and "each of Adams's successive letters became more personal, hysterical, and vituperative than the last."¹⁴² At first, Mercy attempted to be conciliatory. As she responded to his attacks, she was forced into the impossible position of having to defend herself while

¹³⁶ Nancy Rubin Stuart. "Muse of the Revolution." *Book TV - C-Span 2*. November 18, 2008. Accessed September 15, 2018. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?282704-1/the-muse-revolution>

¹³⁷ Warren, *History of the Revolution*, 675.

¹³⁸ Warren, *History of the Revolution*, 675.

¹³⁹ Hutcheson, 400.

¹⁴⁰ Mercy Warren, "To John Adams from Mercy Otis Warren, 28 July 1807," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5198>

¹⁴¹ Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 155.

¹⁴² Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 156.

trying to mend the breach in the relationship to the best extent possible without backing down on what she perceived to be the historical truth. Finally, on August 27, 1807, she wrote, "I now forbear further remarks. The lines with which you concluded your late correspondence cap the climax of rancor, indecency, and vulgarism. Yet, as an old friend, I pity you, and as a Christian, I forgive you; but there must be some acknowledgement of your injurious treatment or some advances to conciliation, to which my mind is ever open, before I can feel that respect and affection towards Mr. Adams which once existed in the bosom of Mercy Warren."¹⁴³ And thus, Mercy suspended contact for four years.

Mercy's history had caused this deep rift, yet ironically, it was largely due to John's encouragement and mentorship that she had even written it in the first place. Like many of the founders, John was ever-sensitive to how he would be remembered to posterity, and so he had encouraged Mercy to pen her version of the revolution expecting that her portrayal would make him a hero. Her portrayal astonished and humiliated him, causing grave disappointment. In another twist of irony, according to Edith Gelles, Senior Scholar at Stanford University, it was because of Mercy's portrayal of John that he ultimately earned the caricatured image of a self-promoting and defensive man with aristocratic tendencies. "The John of the John Adams/Mercy Otis Warren correspondence has been the defining statement of his persona in American history, a character of little patience and large resentments, of small-mindedness and self-promotion and savagely defensive language."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Mercy Warren, "To John Adams from Mercy Otis Warren, 27 August 1807," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5210>.

¹⁴⁴ Gelles, "Bonds of Friendship," 70.

Finally abandoning all hope of receiving an apology from John, in November of 1811, Mercy reached out to the Adams in conciliation with the assistance of Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry.¹⁴⁵ Abigail responded first, and before long, the two women were exchanging locks of hair as tokens of friendship according to the custom of the time.¹⁴⁶ Eventually John and Mercy were reconciled as well. After the death of John and Abigail's beloved daughter Nabby to cancer, John "was moved to forgive old wounds,"¹⁴⁷ and he finally renewed contact with his old friend.

Grief and loss have a way of softening a person's rough edges and bringing clarity to one's priorities, and Mercy Warrens had certainly experienced her share of loss. Early in her life, she had lost many beloved siblings. Through the years, three of her own children had died. Her beloved husband James, "the first friend of her heart,"¹⁴⁸ died in 1808. Despite these agonies, Mercy continued to promote liberty in any way she could. Never abandoning her republican zeal, she continued to share her opinions through letters into her eighties.¹⁴⁹ Her eldest son lived with her to assist her due to her failing eyesight. When the muse of the revolution died October 19, 1814, "she expired with great calmness and perfect recollection of mind."¹⁵⁰ She was eighty-six years old and the War of 1812 was threatening Massachusetts; thus, her life came to a close in the midst of war.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ King, 528.

¹⁴⁶ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 262.

¹⁴⁷ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 264.

¹⁴⁸ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 258.

¹⁴⁹ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 258-259.

¹⁵⁰ Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*, 268.

¹⁵¹ Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 162.

In a letter to John Adams years earlier, Mercy had quoted James Burgh, Scottish political philosopher, who said, “almost all political establishments are the creatures of chance rather than of wisdom: - and that there are a few instances of a people forming for themselves a constitution from the foundation.”¹⁵² Mercy believed that America could be one of those few instances that Burgh spoke of - a new nation uniquely enabled to design a system of government from the very foundation. Passionately, she did all she could to promote liberty and equality while opposing the tyranny of Britain. After the revolution, she grew discouraged when the strict restrictions on federal power were imperiled by the creation of a new Constitution, but when her efforts to block ratification were unsuccessful, she found peace with the Constitution and was heartened by the passage of its Bill of Rights. Mercy was unable to be a Founding Father herself due to the limitations of her social role at the time, but she certainly exerted an influence over the patriotic leaders and earned their respect. Through her letters, satirical dramas, essays, poems, and most of all her *History of the Revolution*, Mercy was unquestionably a compelling contributor to the history of the nation.

Many have noted that conditions in the early federal period were not all that dissimilar to conditions we face in our modern world. In the years leading up to the revolution, according to historian Nancy Rubin Stuart, the colonies experienced “a dangerous dependence on overseas goods,” “crashing land values,” “a rapidly depreciating national currency,” “shabby treatment of veterans,” and “suppression of civil rights.”¹⁵³ Senator Mike Lee adds “[a]n overreaching judiciary. Executive orders. A permanent governing class.” and “Insolence of

¹⁵² Warren, "To John Adams, March [10], 1776."

¹⁵³ Stuart. "Muse of the Revolution." *Book TV - C-Span 2*.

office’” to the list of familiar concerns.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the lessons of the patriots are applicable today. Depending on the political priorities of those individuals elected to represent us as Americans, we face similar cycles of economic and political challenges on a regular basis as our 535 legislators make decisions that impact each of us. Therefore, we must remain diligent in electing those who would promote the republican values of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding Fathers.

Despite how things go politically, however, we can rest in the Lord’s sovereignty. We can follow in the example of Mercy Otis Warren who relentlessly pursued what was right by promoting limited government and maximum liberty in all the ways available to her, yet above all, her faith was in God, not man, and certainly not in any form of government. Deeply committed to making the world a better place, she pursued lofty goals to the best of her ability, and trusted God with the result. We can learn vital priorities from Mercy Otis Warren, who wrote to an author she held in the utmost esteem:

“Thou author of eternal truth!
Let reason be my guide,
And grant that through life’s pains and cares
The lamp may bright abide!
Oh! Teach my anxious mind to soar
On contemplation’s wing
To see him who dying drew

¹⁵⁴ Mike Lee, *Written Out of History: The Forgotten Founders Who Fought Big Government*, New York: Sentinel Books, 2017, 57.

From death his barbed sting!
He lightens up the darksome grave
Its victory destroys
Safe guide me though that posern gate
That leads to purest joys;
Th'irradiated soul endowed
With new extensive powers
Shall then behold the Saviour's face
She now by faith adores."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Hayes and Warren, "The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren," 224.

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