American Beauties: The Cult of the Bosom in Early Republican Art and Society

Emily Gerhold
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/353

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
American Beauties: The Cult of the Bosom in Early Republican Art and Society

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Emily Catherine Gerhold
MA, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2003
BA, The College of William and Mary, 1999

Director: Eric G. Garberson
Associate Professor, Art History

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
April, 2012
Acknowledgments

The printed pages of this dissertation hold far more than the culmination of years of study; they also reflect the relationships with many generous and inspiring people I have met since beginning my graduate work.

Thanks of great magnitude must be given to Eric Garberson, this project’s advisor and most steadfast champion. I have been fortunate to work with Eric for many years, and, in addition to his tireless efforts on behalf of this project, he has immeasurably enriched my growth as an art historian. I thank him for his support, honesty, and good humor throughout our association.

The members of my dissertation committee, Frederika Jacobs, Catherine Ingrassia, and Rivka Swenson, have generously given their time and expertise in the midst of their own busy semesters to better my work. I thank them for their contributions, and particularly their conviviality at the dissertation’s defense. Special thanks to my reader, Kate Roach, whose insightful comments and encouraging words have improved this project in significant ways.

Thanks to the professors who have shown me by example and through challenging coursework how to think, teach, and teach others to think: Michael Schreffler, Charles Brownell, Robert Hobbs, and Babatunde Lawal.

Thanks to Virginia Commonwealth University and the Massachusetts Historical Society for providing research funding for this project. Thanks also to Julie Aronson for facilitating my study of portrait miniatures in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, and to Sarah Balcom for her hospitality during my time in Massachusetts.

Thanks to Dina Bangdel, Cynthia Myron, and the Department of Art History staff for assisting me with the administrative tasks necessary for completing my doctoral program.

Finally, boundless thanks to my parents, Carl and Beth, grandmother Florence, and daughter Minnie, for their love, support and understanding during the long years of my education, and to my husband Scott, my dearest friend, drill sergeant, voice of reason, counselor and life raft. Thank you for always coming to my defense.
# Table of Contents

List of Figures ........................................................................................................ iv  
Abstract .................................................................................................................. ix  
Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1  
  A Note on Terms .................................................................................................. 5  
  A Note on Texts ................................................................................................. 11  
  The State of the Question ................................................................................ 13  
1. Natural Beauties: Embodying the Rhetoric of American Difference ............. 22  
  Constructing American Difference ................................................................. 24  
  The Rhetoric of American Femininity .............................................................. 27  
  Describing the American Beauty ........................................................................ 32  
  John Bell’s Vision of the Feminine Bosom ...................................................... 36  
  The Feminine Bosom in the New Republic ....................................................... 44  
  Virtuous American Beauties .............................................................................. 63  
  The Meaning of Modesty .................................................................................... 69  
  Modesty’s Philosophical Foundations ............................................................... 74  
  Fashionable Modesty and American Ideology ................................................ 86  
  Revealing the Modest Bosom ............................................................................ 98  
3. Native Beauties: The Embosoming of an American Icon ................................ 103  
  Pocahontas: The Historical Record .................................................................. 105  
  Writing the Myth of Pocahontas ....................................................................... 111  
  A Portrait of Pocahontas .................................................................................... 126  
  Genre Scenes and the Iconography of Sentiment .......................................... 133  
4. Painted Beauties: Portraits and the Visual Codes of Femininity ..................... 141  
  A ‘Gallery of Beauties’ for the New Republic .................................................. 144  
  Expressions of Ideal/ized Femininity ............................................................... 150  
  The Codes of Femininity ................................................................................... 153  
    The Blush ........................................................................................................ 154  
    The Ruffle ...................................................................................................... 159  
    The Rose ....................................................................................................... 169  
  Modesty and the Display of America’s Beauties ............................................. 179  
5. Revealed Beauties: A Portrait of the Artist as a Pair of Breasts ...................... 188  
  Sarah Goodridge Revealed ............................................................................ 190  
  Goodridge and the Self-Portrait ....................................................................... 197  
  Beauty Revealed as a Gift ................................................................................. 208  
Bibliography........................................................................................................... 219
List of Figures

1. Sarah Goodridge
   *Self-Portrait (Beauty Revealed)*, 1828
   Watercolor on ivory
   Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

2. Claude-Louis Desrais, designer; E. Voysant, engraver
   “Jeune Dame de Qualité en grande Robe coiffée avec un Bonnet ou Pout élégant dit la Victoire,”
   *La Galerie des Modes*, 1778
   Hand-colored engraving on paper
   Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

   Hand-colored engraving on paper
   Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles, CA

4. Maurice Leloir
   “ Patron d’un corps à baleine d’environ,” *Historie du Costume*, 1715
   Engraving on paper
   Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA

5. James Gillray
   Hand-colored engraving on paper
   National Portrait Gallery, London

6. Isaac Cruikshank
   *Parisian Ladies in their Full Winter Dress for 1800*, November 1799
   Hand-colored engraving on paper
   The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

7. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun
   *Marie Antoinette (“en chemise”), 1783
   Oil on canvas
   Private collection

8. Simon van de Passe
   *Engraving of Matoaks als Rebecka* 1616
Published in John Smith’s *Generall Historie*, 1624
Engraving on paper
The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

9. John White
*An Indian Woman and Young Girl*, 1585-86
Watercolor on paper
The British Museum, London

10. Daniel Rice and James Clark
*Pocahontas (After the Turkey Island Portrait)*, 1842
Chromolithograph
Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

11. Robert Matthew Sully
*Pocahontas*, early 1850s
Oil on canvas
Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

12. Robert Matthew Sully
*Pocahontas*, 1852
Oil on canvas
Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

13. Gustave Staal
*Pocahontas 1595-1617*, illustration from *World Noted Women* by Mary Cowden Clarke, 1858
Steel engraving on paper
Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

14. J. A. D. Ingres
*Madame Moitessier*, 1851
Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

15. John Gadsby Chapman
*The Baptism of Pocahontas*, 1836-40
Oil on canvas
U.S. Capitol Rotunda

16. The Rescue of John Smith, frontispiece for *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas* by John Davis, 1805
Engraving on paper
The College of William and Mary Special Collections, Williamsburg, VA

17. Theodore de Bry
*The Capture, Evaluation, and Rescue of John Smith*, 1634
18. Thomas Sinclair
   *Captain Smith rescued by Pocahontas*, 1841
   Engraving on paper
   Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA

19. Illustration from Lambert Lilly’s *The Early History of the Southern States: Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia*, 1832
   Engraving on paper
   The College of William and Mary Special Collections, Williamsburg, VA

20. Sir Peter Lely
   *Margaret Hughes*, ca. 1670
   Oil on canvas
   The Collection of the Countess of Jersey

21. Thomas Sully
   *Portrait of Blanche and Rosalie Sully (The Lily and the Rose)*, 1842
   Oil on canvas
   The Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC

22. Thomas Sully
   *Eliza Ridgely*, 1818
   Oil on canvas
   National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

23. Rembrandt Peale
   *Mrs. William Marbury (Ann Odle Brewer)*, 1797
   Oil on canvas
   Private collection

24. Rembrandt Peale
   *Dolley Madison*, 1817
   Oil on canvas
   Private collection

25. William Williams
   *Deborah Hall*, 1766
   Oil on canvas
   The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY

26. Antoine-François Dennel (after Gabriel de Saint-Aubin)
   *La Comparison du bouton de rose*, 1761
   Engraving on paper
   Private collection
27. François Boucher
   *Madame du Pompadour*, 1759
   Oil on canvas
   National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh

28. François-Hubert Drouais
   *Marie-Jeanne Bécu, Madame du Barry*, ca. 1770
   Oil on canvas
   The Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

29. James Lovelace, after Thomas Hudson
   *Mary Carew*, 1754
   Mezzotint
   The British Museum, London

30. Louis-Leopold Boilly
    *La Toilette Intime or The Unpetalled Rose*, ca. 1815
    Oil on canvas
    Private collection

31. François Joseph Bourgoin
    *Family Group, New York*, 1808
    Oil on canvas
    Private collection

32. Joshua Johnson
    *Lady of the Shure Family*, 1820-25
    Oil on canvas
    Private collection

33. Joshua Johnson
    *Mrs. William Arringdale (Hannah Kirby)*, ca. 1820
    Oil on canvas
    Location unknown

34. Joseph-Pierre Picot de Limoëlan de Cloriviére
    *Young Woman holding a Fan*, 1805
    Oil on copper
    Cincinnati Museum of Art, Cincinnati, OH

35. William M. S. Doyle
    *Young Woman in a Sheer White Gown*, 1805
    Watercolor on ivory
    Promised Deutsch Bequest, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

36. *Woman Wearing a Brown Pelisse*, ca. 1825
    Watercolor on card
Private collection

37. Sarah Goodridge
   *Self-Portrait*, 1830
   Watercolor on ivory
   Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

38. Sarah Goodridge
   *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1820
   Watercolor on ivory
   Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH

39. Sarah Goodridge
   *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1825
   Watercolor on ivory
   Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

40. Sarah Goodridge
   *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1835
   Watercolor on ivory
   R. W. Norton Art Gallery, Shreveport, LA

41. Juste Chevillet
   *Engraving of Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin’s Self-Portrait (1771)*, ca. 1778
   Engraving on paper
   Bibliothèque National, Paris

42. “Ball Gown,” *Ackerman’s Repository*, January 1828
   Hand-colored engraving on paper
   Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles
Abstract

AMERICAN BEAUTIES: THE CULT OF THE BOSOM IN EARLY REPUBLICAN ART AND SOCIETY

By Emily C. Gerhold, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012
Major Director: Eric G. Garberson, Associate Professor, Department of Art History

This interdisciplinary project offers new research to introduce the American cult of the bosom, which emerged in the years following the Revolutionary War and helped shape the discourse around women’s roles in the early republic. The cult of the bosom sought to shift the way in which the female body, and especially the bosom, was regarded and represented by identifying it as the locus of a number of positive qualities associated with women, including virtue, modesty, beauty, and grace. This shift constituted, in the minds of citizens, a significant way in which American culture honored and celebrated women. Additionally, the cult of the bosom tied the bosom’s privileged status to a broader patriotic rhetoric that celebrated the special differences of America’s women and American culture as a whole, and insisted that, while most citizens of the world saw its potential to gratify lust, Americans were sufficiently enlightened to consider and
celebrate the bosom’s ‘true’ function as a signifier of sacred womanhood. Through a variety of cultural materials, this project traces the points at which beauty, virtue, femininity, and the female body intersected in the early republic and the implications of these intersections for the political and social status of women. The study consists of five thematic chapters, which address textual foundations for the discourse on the bosom and female modesty in early republican America and examine female portraits of the period in order to identify the visual codes that represented patriotic ideology and signified the bosom.
INTRODUCTION

[In America,] the female bosom [is] no longer viewed with pleasure, because it bears the throbbing hemispheres of love – rather, it is the abode of virtue . . . illuminated with the brightest rays of science . . . we behold it with the mingled emotions of transport, esteem, and admiration.¹

Two decades after the beginning of the Revolutionary War, an editorial in The Nightingale, a Boston-based literary serial, cataloged the advantages American culture offered to its women. Its author, the Congregationalist minister John Lathrop (1740-1816), notes that America’s singular regard for wisdom and reason has produced a culture that promotes education for both the sexes, and as a result, American women are advanced in both “elegance of diction” and “purity of sentiment.” Likewise, America’s encouragement of women to engage fully with literature and the arts has liberated them from “the narrow sphere of domestic drudgery” and the “contracted circle of housewifely and culinary sciences.” These observations were by no means singular; indeed, many texts published after the Revolution and in the first decades of the nineteenth century made similar observations about equality, or at least parity between the sexes, frames it as a mark of America’s cultural superiority. The remarkable part of Lathrop’s essay is found in its concluding lines, excerpted above, in which he identifies an unexpected advantage to life in America for women: that lascivious pleasure taken by men of other cultural traditions in the female

body, especially the breasts, the “throbbing hemispheres of love,” is superseded, for American men, by the sincere, virtuous regard and esteem they direct toward their women’s bosoms.

In researching this project, this passage has become a personal favorite, and I must admit that I have highlighted it partly because I find its artless erotic displacement, not to mention its verbiage, delightful and evocative. Its significance clearly transcends my favoritism, though, as it also offers a particularly clear articulation of this project’s focus, what I refer to as the American cult of the bosom, which emerged in the years following the Revolutionary War and helped shape the discourse around women’s roles in the new republic for much of the first half of the nineteenth century. The cult of the bosom sought to shift the way in which the female body, specifically the bosom, was regarded and represented by identifying it not in terms of its biological or sexual associations, but instead as the bodily locus of a number of positive qualities associated with women, including virtue, modesty, beauty, and grace. As Lathrop’s essay indicates, this shift constituted in the minds of citizens a significant way that American culture honored and celebrated women. Additionally, the cult of the bosom tied the privileged status of the bosom to a broader patriotic rhetoric that celebrated the special differences of America’s women, and American culture as a whole, and insisted that, while most citizens of the world saw its potential to gratify lust, Americans were sufficiently enlightened to consider and celebrate the bosom’s ‘true’ function as a signifier of sacred womanhood.

This study offers new research to introduce the bosom’s position in early republican culture, an era during which broad and far-reaching ideas about national identity, especially around the roles men and women were best suited to play in the new republic, were being formed. Many scholars have examined the codification of gender roles after the Revolutionary War, and especially the confinement of women to a separate sphere of maternal domesticity, but I focus the present discussion on more fundamental expectations placed on women by the nascent discourse
on *femininity*, a term understood as a hypernym that encompassed a range of positive, inherent attributes including physical beauty, sentiment, grace, and modesty. All of these attributes, the discourse asserted, both originated within and were embodied by the bosom’s delicate contours. Tracing its presentation in cultural materials produced after the Revolutionary War through the 1840s, I examine the bosom’s relationship with the ideology of femininity in order to provide support for two main assertions about its position in early republican culture: first, that cultural materials promoted the exceptionally feminine bosoms of American women, and the equally exceptional feminine behaviors assumed to originate therein, as signs of national difference; and second, that identifying the bosom as its primary signifier endowed the ideology of American femininity with an inevitable sensuality, which presented substantial challenges to one of its most crucial extensions, feminine virtue, and necessitated constant rhetorical maneuverings in order to legitimate what must be acknowledged as a rather unabashed cultural fixation on the breasts.

I conceived this study after becoming aware of an unusual portrait painted by American miniaturist Sarah Goodridge (1788-1853) in 1828 (figure 1). On the portrait’s tiny surface, Goodridge painted an unclothed female torso surrounded by gauzy swaths of pale fabric. The miniature’s unabashed display is startling and, devoid of any immediately apparent allegorical or historical meaning, seems designed for no other reason than to provoke sensual pleasure. The minute detail with which Goodridge applied the stipples of watercolor to the miniature’s ivory surface enhances this pleasure, as does its extremely small size, which necessitates viewing it at an intimate proximity. Such a singular object is, of course, inherently fascinating, but the interest it generates is heightened even further by its provenance. Shortly after it was made, Goodridge presented the miniature to Daniel Webster, her patron and friend. According to Webster’s descendents, the miniature is actually Goodridge’s own self-portrait and was, at the time of its creation, backed with a paper she inscribed with the title *Beauty Revealed*, a reference, no doubt,
to the aesthetic qualities of the painted breasts themselves, but perhaps, as well, an articulation of the assumption that the “beauties” of femininity originate from within the bosom. Beyond family lore, and a few letters exchanged between Goodridge and Webster, little documentation exists to shed light on the miniature, leaving the viewer to ponder why it was made and how it was received. Apart from speculation on the role the miniature played in Goodridge and Webster’s relationship, the real significance of *Beauty Revealed* lies in the fact that such a forthright object originated within in a cultural milieu traditionally associated with the displacement of female sexual expression. The nature of the image and the associations provoked by the title Goodridge attached to it also provide fruitful paths for inquiry into topics around the expression of femininity in early republican America, the boundaries of propriety, and visual display in the private versus the public realms.

While Goodridge’s miniature may be the most inherently interesting object in this study, it is by no means the only vehicle through which its themes are explored. In researching this project, I have uncovered what seems an inexhaustible store of references and images that associate feminine attributes and elements of American difference with the bosom, including many other portraits, theoretical and instructional texts, works of fiction, and illustrations. Through these materials, I trace the points at which beauty, virtue, femininity, and the female body intersected in early republican America and the implications of these intersections for the political and social status of women. The study consists of five thematic chapters. Chapter 1, ‘Natural Beauties: Embodying the Rhetoric of American Difference,’ addresses textual foundations for the discourse on the bosom in early republican America, tracing connections proposed between the bosom and feminine beauty as well as the development of a set of ideally feminine attributes in prescriptive

---

texts for women. Chapter 2, ‘Modest Beauties: Revealing and Concealing the Feminine Bosom,’ considers sexual modesty’s centrality to the construction of American femininity, especially in light of the radical shift in the cut, construction, and overall silhouette of women’s dress that occurred between the 1770s and the 1810s. The resulting garments that became fashionable around the turn of the nineteenth century were far more revealing of the shape of the body beneath them than women’s garments had been previously, which occasioned a renewed discussion about the importance of modest self-presentation. Chapter 3, ‘Native Beauties: The Embosoming of an American Icon,’ examines the significance of the seventeenth-century historical figure Pocahontas in nineteenth-century culture and identifies how texts and images endowed her with the qualities associated with the American feminine ideal, including large, often bared breasts, which allowed her to function simultaneously as a paragon of femininity and an exotic, sexualized icon. Chapter 4, ‘Painted Beauties: Portraits and the Visual Codes of Femininity,’ examines female portraits of the early republican period in order to identify the visual codes that represented American ideology and signified the bosom. Both full-sized portraits and portrait miniatures are examined; portrait miniatures, because of their historical associations with concealment, relate in significant ways to the discourse on modest self-presentation. Finally, Chapter 5, ‘Revealed Beauties: A Portrait of the Artist as a Pair of Breasts,’ offers a careful reading of Goodridge’s 1828 self-portrait that proposes a new interpretation of it as an extension of the cult of the bosom.

A NOTE ON TERMS

Clarification is required for several terms used frequently in this study. The first is bosom itself, which was generally understood to include both a woman’s breasts and the features adjacent to them, including the décolletage, collarbone, lower throat, and tops of the shoulders. We should note that American cultural materials drew a distinction between the bosom or singular breast,
which was implicated in a range of functions related to intimacy, affection, and concealment, and the plural breasts, the primary association of which was with the physical form of the mammae. This distinction was not exclusive to the early republic, and was articulated in contemporaneous European texts, such as *Das deutsche Wörterbuch*, the comprehensive German dictionary begun in the early nineteenth century. Jacob Grimm, author of the dictionary’s first volumes, reveals the difference he perceives between the bosom and the breasts in his pronouncement that the term “bosom, as well as breast in the singular” is “more decent than breasts.” As Simon Richter has observed, Grimm’s shift from the plural breasts to the singular breast or bosom idealized the bodily structures, transforming them into a gestalt and rendering them “presentable, mentionable, members of a symbolic order.” Although there is some overlap in the usage of *bosom* and *breasts* in American cultural materials, American texts tended similarly to locate the bosom within the realm of the symbolic, the breasts within that of the physical. For example, in Noah Webster’s *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), several definientia are attached to *bosom*, including “the seat of the passions, tender affections, and love,” as well as “the receptacle of secrets.” Webster’s definition for *breast*, on the other hand, includes a less complex definiens: it is, simply, “A part of the body.”

---

4 Richter also relates Grimm’s presentation to Jane Gallop’s construction of the bosom/breast dichotomy, which Gallop understands as an extension of the classic psychoanalytic phallus/penis relation. In Gallop’s comparison, the bosom, like the phallus, is the privileged signifier of a range of attributes, while the breasts, like the penis, are simply parts of the body. See Jane Gallop, “The Teacher’s Breasts,” *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 23-35.
5 Webster’s early republican dictionaries, first the short *Compendious Dictionary* (1806) and second the *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) are extremely useful in understanding changes over time to a word’s particular connotation within American culture. That the definitions in Webster’s Compendious Dictionary were (or at least aspired to be) reflective of American culture’s ideas can be assumed, since Webster himself was deeply committed to the production of a unified national culture as a means of ensuring political and social stability. For more on Webster’s ideas about the formation of a uniquely understood American system of
The designations *new republic* and *early republican* also require some clarification. Scholars of American history have subdivided the transitional historical period between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century in a number of different ways, and they have given their subdivisions a variety of names related to this period’s political, economic, social, and artistic developments. For the sake of simplicity, I use Paul Gilje’s definition of ‘the early republic’ as the period between 1780 and 1830, and I invoke Gordon S. Wood’s construction of early republicanism as a fusion of civic humanism and evangelical ardor that organized itself around the concept of self-sacrificial virtue.⁷

Throughout this study, the adjective *feminine* is used to invoke the ideal of female appearance and self-presentation privileged as inherent by early republican cultural materials. Exemplified by youthful women who displayed fair and flawless skin, softly rounded bodily contours, and romantic sensibilities, this ideal, to which cultural materials made near constant, fawning reference, positioned women as the decorative adornments to masculine achievement, as is clearly articulated by a popular and frequently reprinted essay “On Gallantry, Marriage, and Subjects relative thereto”:

> Women were not formed for political eminence or literary refinement: the softness of their sex, [and] the delicacy of their frame. . . absolutely disqualify them for such difficulties and exertions. . . their brows were not intended to be ploughed with wrinkles. If we were to

---

⁶ Webster, 36.
plan the *edifice*, they were to furnish the *embellishments*. If we were to lay out and cultivate the garden, they were to beautifully *fringe* its borders with flowers. If we were to superintend the management of kingdoms, they were to be the fairest ornaments of those kingdoms, the embellishers of society, and the sweeteners of life."

It goes without saying that this was a vision of femininity imbued with a tremendous amount of racial and class privilege, and I acknowledge that my choice to concentrate on this vision exclusively is, likewise, a reflection of privilege. I hope, however, that through its examination of what were considered to be the unquestionably natural signs of American female identity, this study will illuminate the universality of the aspirational ideal against which all early republican women were expected to measure themselves.

The final term for which some clarification is needed is *cult*, to which are attached a number of emotionally charged associations. I would first like to note that my choice to identify the rhetoric around the female bosom as a cult is a conscious one, made partly in order to position this study within a larger body of work examining the history of the American woman, and partly because I believe it to be an accurate and appropriate descriptor of the way in which the bosom was regarded in the early republic. The term cult derives from the Latin *cultus*, meaning “care” or “adoration,” and historians have traditionally used the cult designation to refer to faithful devotion by a group of adherents to some particular object, typically either a prominent celebrity in mass culture, such as an important artist or author, or a religious figure, such as a Christian saint. There are, of course, also more derogatory associations, implying fanaticism, religious extremism, or

---

misplaced loyalty to a destructive leader-figure, all of which are associated with the sociological definition of a cult.  

It is primarily the term’s historical meaning that I invoke in this study. Barbara Welter’s 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” was one of the earliest studies to suggest the existence of a discourse on the appropriate societal role of women in nineteenth-century America. In the years since its publication, it has been widely read, and today it is considered one of the foundational essays for the study of U.S. women’s history. I will discuss the particular relation of Welter’s study to my own later in this introduction, but I call attention to it here in order to explore Welter’s reference to the ideology of True Womanhood as a cult. Although she does not specifically address her choice of terminology, what other scholars have recognized as the perceptibly sarcastic tone her essay takes makes fairly clear her intention to expose the problematic elements of this ideology as fanatical and coercive.

Other historians followed Welter’s lead, and, by the 1980s, many were choosing to describe any number of cultural phenomena as cults. As the term proliferated in historical research journals and books, it seemed to lose some of the pejorative connotations Welter had implicitly connected to it, though, and it came to be used simply as a way to describe any facet of mass culture that ascended to a high level of popularity during a particular era. Like Welter, the authors of these studies typically neglected to justify their characterizations, likely believing that the context their studies provided, as well as the term’s widespread academic use, would prevent any confusion in interpretation.


For my purposes, I am most concerned with the way in which historians have approached historical cults of adoration, since my interpretation essentially understands the early American bosom as an object of both sensual fixation and veneration. Of particular relevance is the understanding of the Marian Cult, or those members of the Catholic church who are particularly devoted to the Virgin Mary, and who engage in ritual worship usually at one of a number of shrines erected in her honor, which has been the focus of several foundational sociological studies. Michael Carroll was among the first to base his interpretation of the origins of the Marian cult and the causes of the apparitions of Mary in modern times on psychoanalytic theory, proposing that the widespread devotion to the Virgin Mary across geographical and temporal boundaries can be interpreted as the result of a confluence of psychoanalytic disorders including Oedipal sexual attachment and castration anxiety. Critics have recently questioned some of Carroll’s controversial positions and have recommended that psychoanalytic concepts other than those he identified might be useful in the interpretation of cult practice. Specifically, Joseph Byrne’s response to Carroll’s work presents several intriguing possibilities, proposing that sublimation, rather than sexual attachment, might be the catalyst for the historical and present-day activities of the Marian cult’s members. Defined by Freud as “a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct’s directing itself toward an aim other than, and remote from, sexual satisfaction,” sublimation seems, for Byrne, to suggest a plausible explanation for the widespread devotion of certain Catholics throughout history and all over the world to the adoration of the Virgin Mary, especially when, typically, a cult is defined as a highly localized group.

---

The connection between the Marian Cult and sublimation offers interpretive possibilities for other situations in which what appears to be misplaced enthusiasm is directed toward some particular object. Freud’s own explanation of sublimation posits that in some instances, the constantly denied libidinal impulse becomes redirected as a sentimental, rather than sexual, attachment to the desired object:

The impulsion whose tendency is toward direct sexual satisfaction may now be pushed into the background entirely, as regularly happens for instance, with a young man's sentimental passion; the ego becomes more and more unassuming and modest, and the object more and more sublime and precious, until at last it gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego.\(^{14}\)

While I do not propose to conduct a psychoanalytic interpretation of the devotion to the bosom in American culture, Freud’s explanation of the transformation of repressed sexual desire into sentimental devotion to the object is consistent with this project’s thesis that the celebration of the bosom’s physical attributes over time became subsumed beneath the neutering rhetoric of sentiment.

**A NOTE ON TEXTS**

I would also like to clarify two points about the origins of the texts from which I draw support for my arguments throughout this study. First: I cite a number of philosophical treatises and essays from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including several by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau’s work has, of course, been widely translated since the time of its first publication. All of Rousseau’s quotations in this study are taken from eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century translations either printed in or distributed to America. Having compared

these translations to more recent examples and concluding that the two versions are consistent with one another, I have elected to use the older versions in the interest of preserving a consistent tone.

Second: I make extensive use of quotations and excerpts from a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American periodicals, including magazines written for both a general audience and specifically for women. Historians have thoroughly documented the fact that, at least until the second half of the nineteenth century, American periodicals frequently included items written and first published abroad, a practice that resulted from the inability of editors to assemble enough original material by American authors to meet the high demand for frequently published issues or editions. Historians widely agree that early republican audiences drew few, if any, distinctions between original American literary creations and those produced in Britain. Furthermore, as Jan

13 It is possible to distinguish between periodicals written for the general public and those designed to be of particular interest to women. Frank Luther Mott’s early twentieth-century research on eighteenth-century periodicals has shown that roughly half of the most widely circulated periodicals in America at the end of the eighteenth century were written specifically for women, and this proportion remained consistent through the first decades of the nineteenth century. See Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, Volume I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930), 139-148. However, as Jan Lewis and others have noted, most periodicals, regardless of the extent to which they claimed to be addressed to men or women exclusively, welcomed both sexes as readers and authors, and included articles on topics such as courtship, marriage, and virtue, meant to interest both sexes equally. See Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” The William and Mary Quarterly 44, 4 (October 1987): 689-721, especially 691-692.


17 Texts from the period support this assertion, although here I should note that texts published after the early republican period do seem to attach some significance to authors’ nationalities. For example, about John Greenleaf Whittier, one of the so-called “fireside poets” of the mid-nineteenth century, a critic in 1857 remarked “We need not go back to the old English poets, for Whittier is emphatically a poet of the present time – he is American, - and the dust of antiquity
Lewis and Jay Fliegelman have observed, we should consider not only the origins of British works reprinted in America, but also the particular significance American publishers and audiences might have attached to them.  

**THE STATE OF THE QUESTION**

While the interdisciplinary nature of this project draws from a diverse tradition of inquiry into the history and identity of the American woman, it is principally related to three scholarly models for the examination of cultural materials: first, studies that trace the visual construction of femininity in America and elsewhere; second, studies of American art’s representation of the female body; and third, studies that examine the formation of and changes to the social and political roles of American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first of these frameworks has been established by several explorations into feminine appearance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, including Lois Banner’s *American Beauty* (1983), which was the first scholarly text to examine changes to the American ideal of feminine dress and self-presentation beginning in the 1850s, the era of what Banner refers to as the “Steel-Engraving Lady,” and ending in the early twentieth century with the emergence of the flapper figure. Martha clings not to his garments.” See “An Hour with the Poets,” *The Ladies’ Repository, Volume XXV*, Mrs. E.A. Bacon, ed. (Boston: A. Tompkins, 1857), 56.

18 Fliegelman’s examination of the reprinting of British novels for American audiences includes several instances of publishers actually altering portions of texts in order to align them more closely with early republican social and political ideologies. Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748), for example, tells the tragic story of Clarissa Harlowe, a young woman who falls to ruin as she attempts to escape a loveless marriage arranged by her brother. When the novel was published in England, Richardson’s introduction noted that Clarissa’s disobedience was partly to blame for her later difficulties. American editions of the book, however, removed the assessment of Clarissa as disobedient from both the title and the introduction, instead positioning her as the innocent victim of patriarchal scheming. See Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 83-88; Lewis, “The Republican Wife,” 692-693.

19 Although Banner defines the limits of her study as 1821, when the steel-engraving process was first introduced, to the present, her analysis really begins with the 1840s, the decade during which...
Banta’s *Imaging American Women: Ideas and Ideals in Cultural History* (1987) has similarly documented the expectations for American feminine self-presentation as revealed through both fine art and mass culture images produced between 1876 and 1920, tracking the broad shift within women’s social and political roles through changes to their corsets, petticoats, and hairstyles. In both, texts and images are read closely in order to locate alteration to a discourse on feminine appearance and behavior. Although it has a similar aim and bases its argument on a similarly careful reading of cultural materials, a fundamental distinction exists between this study and those by Banner and Banta in its focus on embodied, as opposed to applied signs of femininity. The significance of this distinction relates to one of this study’s central assertions: that in addition to being celebrated as a cultural ideal, the American woman received political status from her embodiment of feminine attributes. Thus, the presence of a feminine type in early republican cultural materials should not be viewed as simply a reflection of a fashionable trend, but rather a crucial extension of political ideology.

Beyond this distinction, this study is also innovative in its consideration of the early republican period, an historical moment for which little inquiry into visual representation of women has been made, and in its identification of portraiture as a medium through which to track the typology of the American feminine ideal. Although historians of American material culture have made strides in recent years towards a more complete understanding of the relationship between the female body and the visual arts in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the bulk of published research has been focused either on the tentative attempts made by a few artists to

---

20 steel-engraved fashion plates first began to be published in women’s periodicals like *Godey’s Ladies Book*, and ends with the crowning of the first Miss America in 1921. Her analyses of aesthetic trends between 1821 and the late 1840s, and from 1921 to the 1980s, are very limited. See Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

present the nude within a classical or allegorical context in large-scale oil paintings or on the works of ideal sculpture created beginning around the 1840s by both male and female artists. What emerges from research into these genres is agreement that American audiences were extremely hesitant to accept the nude female form as an appropriate subject for publicly displayed works of fine art, and that artists who were able to successfully incorporate the nude into works did so by providing for viewers an explanatory narrative to justify their subject’s unclothed state. While discussions of the female nude’s reception in the early republic are typically underscored with critiques of what is seen as a lack of sophistication on the part of audiences, we should note the association of early republican art with a concern for decency so overwhelming that it limited the progress of the arts also overlooks a small but noteworthy body of clearly erotic works produced for American patrons beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century, most of which took the form of portrait miniatures. These works, which feature unclothed or thinly veiled but easily visible female breasts and nipples, have almost completely escaped the notice of art historians, except as curiosities. It is difficult to reconcile the existence of eroticized portrait miniatures with the prevailing discourse on the importance of morality in the arts. However, when considered alongside the body of textual materials related to the sensual and sentimental significance of the...
bosom, as they are in this study, these works can be understood as emblems of the tension
inherent in the dialectical position American culture forced the bosom to occupy, and it is for this
reason that I have chosen to highlight them.21

While inquiries into the early republican discourse on the nude have been nearly
unanimous in their assertion of American artistic modesty, the establishment and extension of a
discourse on the social and political roles of American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries is a subject that has provoked intense and spirited scholarly debate for more than three
decades. Historians have generally agreed that specific paradigms meant to inform the choices
made by or on behalf of women have been present in American culture from its inception, and
that these paradigms can be observed in the texts written to guide women’s behaviors by presenting
them with a specific vision of feminine normalcy. There is disagreement, however, about the extent
to which these paradigms either oppressed or empowered women of the past, a fact illustrated by
the oppositional, and in some cases even argumentative, stances adopted by many classic studies of
American women’s history. Enabled by the vast amount of primary source documentation for the
lives and experiences of American women, and therefore able to fill a number of different
interpretive frameworks, such studies have traditionally followed a pattern in which one historian
presents some facet of women’s history as oppressive, only to be countered by another who offers
evidence to suggest either that women of the past devised strategies by which they could acquire
agency within said oppressive situation, or that the oppression itself was only prescriptive, not
normative, and therefore not truly reflective of actual female experience.

21 There are many additional works in which the themes of this study can easily be located,
including the patriotic allegorical figures that began to proliferate in the form of idealized
sculptures around the middle of the nineteenth century. While an examination of these figures is
outside my present scope, the planned expansion of this project will certainly engage them in order
to develop an even more complete picture of the cult of the bosom’s visual rhetoric.
This study begins its investigation just after the end of the Revolution. For the past several decades, much of the scholarship on American women’s experience during this period has revolved around the concept of ‘Republican Motherhood.’ Introduced by Linda Kerber in the 1970s to explain what she identified as dramatic increases in both literacy rates and formal educational opportunities for women in the decades following the Revolutionary War, the term describes a political role created for American women as the maternal educators of future generations of patriots.\footnote{Linda Kerber has published a number of studies examining the ideology of Republican Motherhood. First among these is her article "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," \textit{American Quarterly} 28, 2 (Summer, 1976): 187–205; and its expansion, \textit{Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).} According to Kerber’s influential studies, their responsibilities to America’s children allowed women increased access to educational opportunities for themselves and elevated motherhood’s status, which, as Gordon Wood has noted, assumed almost the importance of “a fourth branch of government” in the early republic.\footnote{Gordon Wood, \textit{The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787} (University of North Carolina Press, 1969), quoted in Kerber, \textit{Women of the Republic}, 200.} A number of scholars have extended Kerber’s construction of republican motherhood, including Mary Beth Norton, who has argued that, while prior to the Revolution, political leaders viewed women as peripheral to public welfare, afterward they saw them as the “custodian[s] of civic morality,” and Sara Evans, who has noted that republican motherhood provided a solution to the incompatibility of women’s revolutionary politicization with post-revolutionary theories relegating women to the home that combined domesticity with political and civic roles.\footnote{Sara M. Evans, \textit{Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America} (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 57-59; Mary Beth Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800} (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 243.} While Kerber’s thesis has been useful to several generations of historians, and has gone largely unquestioned, some scholars have presented spirited challenges to its revered status, including Ruth Bloch and Jan Lewis, who have argued that,
for writers of the revolutionary era, motherhood was simply not the primary focus that Kerber and her followers have presented it to be. Lewis’s study of the post-revolutionary woman’s political role as what she terms “the Republican Wife” proposes the existence of a prevailing ideal of republican womanhood, of which motherhood was only one piece, citing the emphasis in post-revolutionary literary sources on a woman’s capacity to influence the adult men in her life, especially her husband. 27

At the other end of this project’s chronological span is the era in which the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ emerged. Barbara Welter was the first to clearly articulate the presence of this discourse, which codified expectations for appropriately feminine behavior in mid-nineteenth-century America. 28 Using women’s instructive literature from the 1840s and 1850s, Welter identified the main tenets of the ideology of true womanhood, a designation observable in many mid-nineteenth-century treatises and encomia on female virtue, which insisted that women embody what she called “the four cardinal virtues – purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness.” 29 The ideal American woman of the mid-nineteenth century, according to Welter, was contentedly, even happily, homebound and in complete service to the needs of her family. After the publication of her article, Welter’s voice was quickly joined by those of other social critics, all of whom echoed her assertion that nineteenth-century women were, at least to a certain extent, the powerless victims of an oppressive rhetoric that placated them with empty promises of domestic bliss, all the while keeping them circumscribed within the physical walls of their homes as well as the invisible bands

28 Welter’s research was first published in 1966 in a highly influential article entitled “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” American Quarterly 18, 2 (Summer, 1966): 131-174. She expanded her research into a 1977 book.
of an unobtainable ideal. While many historians have found in the ideology of true womanhood a useful tool with which to interpret nineteenth-century cultural materials, some have noted that it is difficult to embrace Welter’s assertion that women blindly accepted an ideal that was “physically injurious, economically unworkable, legally contraindicated for survival within the restraints of marriage, and intellectually vacuous.” For the past several decades, Welter’s critics have called upon various nineteenth-century sources to correct what they characterize as her overly harsh assessment of American women’s experience in the nineteenth century. Among these sources are works of sentimental fiction. Jane Tompkins and others have suggested that while sentimental works, on their surface, seem closely aligned with the ideology of true womanhood in their celebration of a woman’s love of her home, rather than reading them strictly as validations of an oppressive system, these works can be interpreted as instruments of power that normalized a female point of view and fostered the widespread social acceptance of a number of female-organized social movements, including temperance, abolition, and suffrage. Others have culled nineteenth-century instructive literature to find sources supporting the idea that true womanhood’s ideology was not so much a monolithic ‘cult’ as one of a number of co-existing feminine ideals.

Frances B. Cogan, for example, has presented support for the presence of what she identifies as

---


the ideal of ‘Real Womanhood,’ whose models possessed “ruddy cheeks and vigorous health,” in contrast to their pale, wan, true womanhood-embracing sisters. More recently, Barbara Cutter has suggested that the ideology of ‘Redemptive Womanhood,’ which focused on the special abilities of women to use their natural moral and nurturing qualities to redeem others, was the true ideal in the mid-nineteenth century.

Although dissension between their respective supporters has been spirited, the benefit of hindsight reveals significant similarities between the ideological tools promoted by Kerber and Welter, mostly in the extent to which both identify the privileging of female virtue as an emblem of American difference. Similar historiographical critiques have also been lodged against both. In her essay “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” Kerber herself critiqued Welter’s overreliance on the ideology of separate spheres, citing the influence of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* on women of Welter’s generation, and characterizing *The Cult of True Womanhood* as “a frank attempt to do for the nineteenth century what Friedan had done for the twentieth.” More recently, Margaret Nash has identified a similar tendency in Kerber’s own work, noting that “like Welter, Kerber self-consciously looked for women’s entry into the political sphere, and like Welter she looked for an earlier version of a hallmark of her own time.”

This project, situated in the historical period just between Kerber’s and Welter’s respective studies, engages themes developed by both, specifically those involving gendered notions of virtue and ideal behavior. My consideration of images alongside the texts that have already provided such

---

rich documentation about female identity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America constitutes what I feel is a significant point of difference between mine and earlier studies, though, and one that makes the discourse on the feminine body as a metonym for virtuous American difference particularly visible. And, at the risk of exposing myself to the same criticism to which Welter and Kerber’s work have both been subject, that I seek to recuperate some aspect of women’s experience in the present by exposing misogynist constructions of the past, let me forthrightly state that social convictions have informed this study’s themes. Despite protestations that the feminist movements of the past have done their work, and that today’s women need be the subjects of none but their independent wills, there persists in American culture a discourse on appropriately feminine self-presentation, the stifling agenda of which is particularly evident in the imagery of popular entertainment and advertising. My interest in the representation of femininity in the early republic is very much related to my concern for the limitations still imposed on women by an ideal that celebrates a false and impossible standard of sexualized beauty and censures those women who are unable to attain it or choose not to pursue it.
CHAPTER 1

NATURAL BEAUTIES:
EMBODYING THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN DIFFERENCE

Ye blooming daughters of the western world,
Whose graceful locks by artless hands are curl’d,
Whose limbs of symmetry, and snowy breast,
   Allure to love, in simple neatness drest;
   Beneath the veil of modesty, who hide
   The boast of nature and of virgin pride –
Oh make your charms ev’n in my song admir’d,
My song immortal by your charms inspir’d.37

Early republican cultural materials regularly included poems, essays, and encomia that celebrated unique aspects of life in America upon which citizens fixed claims about their nation’s ascendancy. One frequently noted point of pride, as illustrated by the poem above, was the superiority of America’s ‘blooming daughters,’ who were observed by these texts to be the world’s most perfect examples of femininity. While the attributes of femininity were cherished throughout the early nineteenth-century world, American culture placed a special emphasis on the extent to which feminine traits were observable in its women, and especially on the inherence of those traits, boasting that the qualities American women exhibited were in every way ‘natural’ and the product of the unique social environment in which they lived, rather than the result of instruction. This discourse on exceptional American femininity related to more general claims about the superiority of American society, but it also served an important cultural function beyond simply promoting

national pride, connecting expectations for gendered behavior to emerging nationalistic rhetoric, thereby creating a new political role for women as symbols of American difference.

The discourse on exceptional American femininity observed a proportional relationship between a woman’s outward appearance and the internal qualities that were femininity’s birthright, locating specific virtues in her body’s physical attributes, like soft skin or rosy cheeks. Yoking the psychic and the physical together in this way worked to mitigate the potential for sexual impropriety inherent in an open, enthusiastic celebration of the female body. Instead, cultural materials sanctioned, and even invited, the body’s public admiration as femininity’s sacred home, and celebrated its individual structures, like cheeks, hands, or neck, as direct manifestations of delicacy, industry, grace, or any of the others in the constellation of positive qualities associated with femininity. Out of the many delightful and virtuous parts of the American woman’s body, her bosom emerged as femininity’s dearest embodiment, what one text referred to as the “sacred shrine” in which “soft peace, and truth, and innocence” dwelt. The centrality of the bosom to the discourse on femininity was based on three factors: the first was its proximal and symbolic relationship to the heart, the assumed point of origination for particularly feminine feelings like tenderness, sympathy, and passion; the second was its ability to telegraph the emotional fluctuations associated with such feelings through reflexive physical changes like swelling, flushing, or heaving; and the third was its aesthetic appeal, including its gracefully curving contours and soft, delicate skin. The sensuality inherent in American culture’s open regard for the bosom was unavoidable, but the discourse on femininity attempted to neutralize it by insisting that any gratification offered by the bosom’s delicate contours was secondary to pleasure taken in the invisible, intangible virtues they reflected. The instability of this construction produced a body of cultural materials that invoked visions of the bosom with unabashed longing but steadfastly refused

to locate this longing in corporeal reality. Instead, they cloaked the bosom by substituting neutral, sentimental terms for it, especially ‘beauties,’ an expression to which was attached multiple significations around the beautiful attributes of femininity, and this strategy eventually allowed the bosom to transcend almost completely the physical realm and to function instead as a multi-coded symbol for the constellation of feminine qualities in which Americans took such patriotic pride.

This chapter considers the cult of the bosom’s genesis and the extension of its influence in the early republican period. I first examine the rhetoric of difference that informed American culture in the period during and after the Revolutionary War, which produced a uniquely American vision for femininity. While the philosophical underpinnings of the discourse on femininity had antecedents in European debates on appropriate feminine behavior that dominated philosophical constructions of gender during the second half of the eighteenth century, Americans reframed these debates to apply more directly to their cultural aspirations. I also distill textual descriptions of the American feminine ideal in order to identify the physical characteristics most often associated with femininity’s intangible attributes and to trace the construction of what came to be femininity’s most celebrated embodiment, the bosom, as an aspirational symbol of American difference and a site wherein many of the best qualities of both the female body and the body politic were believed to originate.

CONSTRUCTING AMERICAN DIFFERENCE

The ideology of exceptional American femininity emerged out of the intertwining of two discourses, the first of which sought to identify and promote differences between America’s governmental and social organization and models extant in European culture in order to assert the new republic’s parity with, or in some cases its superiority over Britain and the nations of Europe, and the second of which proposed the existence of a set of inclinations inherent within all women,
and established expectations for female behavior based on these essential qualities. The first discourse, what scholars have identified as the discourse on American difference, began to form even before the outbreak of the war, and was primarily based on the philosophical constructions of Enlightenment liberalism.\textsuperscript{39} These constructions had been circulating in Europe for much of the preceding century, but Americans, emboldened by their victory over British autocracy, laid special claim to principles of rational governance, democracy, and self-reliance. Attendant upon this claim was the suggestion that it was only within America’s government, far removed as it was from the stagnation of outmoded monarchies, and its society, organized around personal merit rather than entrenched social hierarchies, that the ideals of the Enlightenment could truly be realized.\textsuperscript{40} In

\textsuperscript{39} As Joyce Chaplin’s recent survey has proved, the literature on the discourse on American difference is extremely vast. I have found overviews of American identity formation in the republican and federal periods in the following books to be very helpful: Deborah Madsen, \textit{American Exceptionalism} (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Ronald Dworkin, \textit{The Rise of the Imperial Self} (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); and Seymour Martin Lipset, \textit{The First New Nation} (New York: Basic Books, 1955). In addition to these general works, I have been enlightened by John Shields’ \textit{The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self} (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); and Samuel Krislov’s article “American Federalism as American Exceptionalism,” \textit{Publius} 31, 1 (Winter 2001): 9-26, which traces the intersections between the discourse on exceptionalism and the political rhetoric of the Federal period. For a survey of recent publications about aspects of post-revolutionary political discourse, see Joyce Chaplin, “Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History,” \textit{The Journal of American History} 89, 4 (March 2003): 1431-1455.

\textsuperscript{40} As Rogers Smith has noted, this ideology was informed by a number of nonliberal discourses, including evangelical predestination, which suggested that America’s victory over the tyranny of foreign rule had been sanctioned by a heavenly authority, and that its unique society resulted from its substitution of a moral community for Europe’s outmoded cultural traditions. An address made on the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and published in a 1798 edition of an American literary anthology entitled \textit{The Time Piece, and Literary Companion}, illustrates this conflation of political and religious imagery and the persuasive rhetoric that resulted, praising the “Almighty God, whose providence presides over all,” for “the blessings we have enjoyed under the present government,” and especially for transforming what had been a “nerveless confederation” with His instrument, the Constitution, “which happily unites all the sinews of efficient government” with the “muscular symmetry” of republicanism. Quoted in “Extracts from an Address, July 4th,” \textit{The Time Piece, and Literary Companion} 2, 139 (August 3, 1798): 1. See Rogers Smith, “‘One United People’: Second-Class Female Citizenship and the American Quest for Community,” \textit{Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities} 1 (1989): 229-93. For more on the evangelical rhetoric of American identity in the post-revolutionary era, see John F. Wilson, “Religion and Revolution in
addition to the belief that their nation’s government and social institutions were ordered around Enlightened principles, Americans also perceived the behavior of individual citizens to be similarly aligned with virtue and rationality. The notion that citizens were responsible for upholding national ideology through their personal behavior led to the observation that there existed a manner of comportment unique to Americans, the characteristics of which included logic, intellect, rationality, and seriousness. The sober American became a familiar figure in accounts of foreign travelers published around the turn of the nineteenth century, and while such accounts sometimes intimated that what they considered Americans’ dull comportment indicated their lack of refinement, Americans themselves rebutted these assessments with critiques of the frivolous excesses of European or English culture. One author, for example, reprimanded foreign detractors by noting that the refined culture upon which their claims of superiority hung was, in fact, riddled with ill-health and moral corruption:

   It is really amusing to see John Bull, in his weakness and decrepitude, afflicted with diseases and approaching decay, set himself up as a model for our young, healthy, vigorous nation; and take us to task, because, forsooth, we do not imitate his bed-ridden habits; because we do not spend the morning in sleep, breakfast at eleven, dine at six, and waste hours over the bottle, instead of employing our hands or our heads in business or study...The glory of our country is its moral power. It is this which has made it, among the nations of the earth, a pioneer to that perfection to which they would all gladly attain."

---

M.A.H., “American Manners,” American Ladies’ Magazine; Containing Original Tales, Essays, Literary & Historical Sketches, Poetry, Criticism, Music, and a Great Variety of Matter Connected with Many Subjects of Importance and Interest 8, 9 (September 1835): 507.
The “gravity of demeanour” that characterized American comportment was believed to be the result of “the abstract, philosophical system of [the nation’s] civil polity,” which “addresses itself to reason [since]... It was founded on appeal to it.” This causal relationship between republican ideology and sober comportment was observed by many who visited America from Europe or England, including Alexis de Tocqueville and Francis J. Grund, the author of *The Americans in their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (1837). Grund noted that since “as the liberties of a people are enlarged, and their franchise extended, they must necessarily become more active and serious.” Thus it was to be expected that, in contrast to Europeans, most of whom he observed to be “mere spectators” to the machinations of their governments, American citizens were “ever watchful” and “ever on the alert,” ready to undertake the actions needed to maintain political and social equilibrium.

**THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN FEMININITY**

In addition to the sobriety and good sense universal to all American citizens, men and women were each observed to possess a set of positive attributes correlated with their respective sexes. An encomium in a late eighteenth-century literary journal called *The Time Piece* conveys the typical distinction drawn between the endowments of the sexes, describing the men of America as “statesmen whose counsels planned, [and] veterans, whose valor achieved, our happy

---

44 Grund was inspired to make his study of the manners and customs of Americans as a corrective for the writings of some of his European contemporaries, which he felt “grossly misrepresented” the national spirit of Americans. Grund asserted that while the publications he critiqued, mostly English in origin, ascribed to Americans “spurious qualities” and omitted “all mention of those which entitle them to honor and respect,” his aim was to “inspire the English with most just conceptions of American worth, and increase the respect and friendship of America for England.” See “A Review of ‘Miscellaneous Thoughts on Men, Manners, and Things,’” 415.
deliverance,” while characterizing America’s women as “the gems of female beauty,” who enriched and adorned the republic with their feminine attributes, grace, and charm. The recognition of a set of attributes particular to women was certainly not a unique feature of early republican cultural materials. Rather, the concept of femininity observed and celebrated in America was based on a model advanced by the European discourse on women’s inherent attributes and inclinations, which had begun to form during the first half of the eighteenth century, and was most forcefully articulated around its midpoint in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau offered a vision for the appropriate divisions within masculine and feminine enterprise based on the designs of ‘nature,’ which, according to him, were principally manifested in the differences between the bodies of men and women. In addition to the fact that women’s bodies were generally smaller than men’s, and had a more “delicate musculature,” Rousseau also cited “woman’s specific incommodities...[that] cause her to be temporarily inactive,” a euphemistic nod to the biological realities of pregnancy and maternity, as proof that the sexes should confine their pursuits to separate spheres. The differences in their bodies also handily corresponded to what Rousseau saw as inherent oppositions in male and female temperaments. Rousseau noted that while women were generally “passive and feeble,” the law of nature made men active and strong. As a result of

---


48 Rousseau states “In the union of the two sexes, each occurs equally, but not in the same manner, to the common object. From this diversity arises the first difference we can assign between the moral relations of both. One must be active and strong; the other passive and feeble; one must necessarily have power and will; it is sufficient that the other makes but a fair resistance.” See Jean-
men’s ‘natural’ inclination to bold action, Rousseau deemed them best equipped to perform the offices of public life, while women, according to Rousseau, were better suited to secluded domesticity and preferred its comforts over the world of business or industry. The key to success and happiness within families, in Rousseau’s paradigm, lay in both partners embracing their natural proclivities to perform the duties of their respective sexes. Rousseau’s writings on gender were widely published and well known in America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and although authors were not averse to citing him as the source for their construction of the natural differences between the sexes, his position rapidly became so ubiquitous that by the end of the eighteenth century, it was typically presented not as an individual’s theory but as incontrovertible fact.

The positive correlation Rousseau observed between the delicacy and beauty of a woman’s body and her gentle, virtuous temperament was seized upon by early republican authors, who fused it with the discourse on national difference to create a new


50 The influence of Rousseau in post-revolutionary constructions of the ideal American family should not be underestimated. The translated edition of *Émile*, along with his other major works, were first advertised for sale in Boston, Philadelphia, Annapolis, Baltimore, and Williamsburg as early as 1761, and continued to be available well into the nineteenth century. Paul Merrill Spurlin’s research has demonstrated that both *Émile* and *La Nouvelle Heloïse* were owned by some of the eighteenth century’s most highly respected Americans, including George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, who recommended *Eloïsa* (one of the many alternate titles under which *La Nouvelle Heloïse* was published) to several of his colleagues as a desideratum for their personal libraries. Rousseau’s *Émile* was profoundly influential in American culture. Jay Fliegelman notes that no book of Rousseau’s was advertised more often by American booksellers than *Émile*, and David Lundberg and Henry May in “The Enlightened Reader in America” report that 38% of the library holdings and bookseller’s catalogs surveyed for the period 1777-1790 included *Émile*. See Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 36-40; David Lundberg and Henry F. May, “The Enlightened Reader in America,” *American Quarterly* 28, 2 (Summer 1976): 262 – 293; and Paul Merrill Spurlin, *Rousseau in America 1760-1809* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1969).
archetypal figure: an exceptionally feminine American woman whose beauty, sensibility, and virtue brought glory to herself and the entire nation.

One of the attributes with which the exceptionally feminine American woman was particularly associated was physical beauty. Poets observed that “none Columbia’s fair excel / In faultless form or lovely face...Proud daughters of the fair and free, / That bathe in Freedom’s airs of balm” and travelers noted that, when compared with other women of the world, American women were significantly more attractive.\(^a\) Just as the discourse on American difference related the exemplary state of its institutions to political ideologies, the special beauty of American women was proclaimed to be a sign of the uniquely enlightened environment in which they lived. The author of an essay praising the exceptionally lovely women of Philadelphia remarked that they were distinguished by “a sweet and interesting expression of countenance...a form graceful and majestic, with a deportment of the most perfect ease, yet full of dignity.”\(^a\) Comparing them to those he met on a tour of the cities of Europe, he observed that the lifestyle enjoyed by Philadelphia’s women and the youthful, vigorous spirit of their city perfected both their figures and carriages:

In most large cities, the women in general have pallid countenances and emaciated forms; but here, from the healthy situation of the town, the breadth of the streets, promoting a free

\(^a\) Eugene St. Hubert, “The American Fair,” *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine, and Monthly American Review, Volume VI*, William E. Burton and Edgar A. Poe, eds. (Philadelphia: William E. Burton, 1840), 133. Writing in 1814, a foreign commentator remarked on the particular beauty of American women as compared to women elsewhere in the world, proclaiming that “Venus is not more beautiful, Hebe is not more blooming, and Vesta has not a more virginal appearance.” He also noted: “I have seen Circassian, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and – of course – French women, but I swear upon my word as an officer, that in my opinion the fair sex of this country are superior to all those celebrated beauties.” See “Letters from Pennsylvania,” *The Western Gleaner; or, Repository for Arts, Sciences, and Literature* 1, 2 (January 1, 1814): 91.

\(^a\) L.C., “The Ladies of Philadelphia,” *The Port - Folio* 4, 6 (December, 1810): 604. The author of this article attached a great deal of power to the beauty of American women, noting that just as “the skill and prowess of men” protected America and safeguarded its rights against foreign encroachments, the beauty of American women “arrested the warrior’s arm in the attitude of assault, averted the horrors of impending war, disarmed the fury of the foe, saved their country from the humiliation of defeat, and secured the restoration of peace and tranquility.”
circulation of air, the temperate lives young ladies lead, and the unusual quantity of exercise they take, their constitutions become invigorated, and the roseate bloom of beauty suffuses itself over their cheeks. A voluptuous indulgence in luxury and dissipation is extremely pernicious to health, and as a consequence thereof diminishes the luster of female charms; but...it is one in which the ladies here do not indulge...

In addition to viewing the beauty of America’s women as a reflection of the republic’s general superiority, cultural materials also related it to the broader role women were expected to play in the polity, and noted that, as the ‘beauties’ of the new republic, women were “as much a subject of national pride and exaltation as the wisdom and valour of [American] men.”

To the modern reader, the notion that the American woman was primarily valued for her passive roles as a ‘beauty’ is understandably problematic, but before early republican culture is judged too harshly, the particular connotation of term ‘beauty’ in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries requires some clarification. As it was defined in the decades before and after the turn of the nineteenth century, ‘beauty’ referred both to something that pleased the eye and to an exemplar, or according to Noah Webster, “a particular excellence, or a part which surpasses in excellence that with which it is united.” Thus, the term ‘beauty’ was frequently attached to an object or concept celebrated as a fine or noteworthy example. There were literally hundreds of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British anthologies comprising the most highly regarded passages or works from or about particular authors, philosophers, or artists, the titles of which refer to the ‘beauties’ of their subjects, including *The beauties of Swift* (1783), *Rousseau* (1788), and *Haydn* (1822). In addition to extracts from the works of individuals, British travelogues were frequently titled the ‘beauties’ of particular countries or geographical regions, such as *The beauties*

---

33 Letters from Pennsylvania,” *The Western Gleaner; or, Repository for Arts, Sciences, and Literature* 1, 2 (January 1, 1814): 93.
34 Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828, 78.
of England (1767), or Scotland (1808). The contents of these travelogues varied; for example, The beauties of Scotland featured plates illustrating the Scottish highlands, an inclusion that certainly aligns with the typical expectation about what would constitute a ‘beauty,’ but also contained “a clear and full account of the...mines and manufactures...of each county.” In fact, the term ‘beauties’ was so tied by some authors to the idea of an exemplar, as opposed to something that was simply lovely to look at, that it was even used to describe things not at all associated with visual pleasure, like The Beauties of the British Senate (1786). The connotations of a ‘beauty’ were clearly understood by American authors, as, for example, in an essay on the felicities of life in America, which praises the ‘beauties’ of the American landscape, including “mountains, vallies (sic), plains, and rivers” all “rendered magnificently beautiful by the creating hand of the almighty architect” and “calculated to inspire the most elevated conceptions of the imagination,” in the same breath as the “assemblage of...worthies, whom America has the honor of enrolling” as her daughters. Thus, when cultural materials described the most accomplished women of America as the ‘beauties’ of their nation, they were not just assigning value based on physical appearance. Rather, characterizing women as ‘beauties’ acknowledged their function as symbolic representations of American excellence, and it created a role for them that treated their physical beauty as a signifier of both personal and political virtue.

**DESCRIBING THE AMERICAN BEAUTY**

In spite of frequent praise for their remarkable beauty, texts were fairly vague when it came to specific descriptions of American women’s features and often relied on platitudes like ‘lovely,’ ‘angelic,’ or ‘dainty’ to express their regard. One text concluded that the beauty of American

---

women was improved by their ‘soft sweetness,’ which was difficult to fully explain, but clearly
discernible, especially when they were compared to English women. The author noted that

   The females of England appear at first...of a loftier and more showy style of beauty, with a
colder, less engaging, and a far less affectionate air. They have more of statuary and less of
poetry in their look; a something more of the ideal that we read of, and a something less of
the nature we hope for...\textsuperscript{37}

The beauty of America’s women, on the other hand, was in every way natural, according to the
author, who enthusiastically proclaimed that the American woman was just the sort of “creature to
make love to on a still summer night with the stars multiplying themselves above you.”\textsuperscript{38} Despite
the ineffable nature of female beauty, a careful reading of texts reveals several specific traits
common to most descriptions, first among which is the pleasing proportion and symmetry of
American women’s facial features. One traveler to Europe found that, while the features of French
and English women were, for the most part, irregular, the faces of American women exhibited a
“delicacy” and “regularity of feature.”\textsuperscript{39} We might be tempted to dismiss such an observation on
the grounds of patriotic bias but for the fact that it is frequently repeated, even by foreign-born
observers. For example, in a series of letters she wrote during her visit to the United States between
1818 and 1820, an Englishwoman named Frances Wright noted that all the women she

\textsuperscript{37} “English and American Women” \textit{The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature} 7, 3
(June 1828): 22.
\textsuperscript{38} “English and American Women,” 24.
\textsuperscript{39} The author of this observation does concede that, in general, English women have more
delicately colored complexions than American women, and notes that the charming interplay
between “rosy tint and alabaster white,” a characteristic of the Englishwoman’s visage, is so
captivating that “it often supplies the want of that conformation of features which peculiarly
Magazine, Devoted to Polite Literature, Useful Science, Biography, and Dramatic Criticism} 1, 3
(October 1816): 9.
encountered had “small and regular” features, so delicate that they looked as if they had been “moulded by fairy fingers.”

Inherent in these observations of perfect American proportions are two important points. The first is that the beauty of the regular, symmetrical features and elegant proportions possessed by American women was in every way natural, in contrast to physical perfection attained or enhanced with cosmetics, elaborate costumes, or adornments. While texts noted that British and European women sometimes relied on artificial means, like rouge or white face powder, to compensate for the charms nature failed to provide them, American women were natural beauties whose faces and forms required no improvements. The second point relates to the connection between the perfected outer forms of American women and their inner goodness, a patriotic extension of a broad discussion conducted both abroad and in America about the extent to which external appearance functioned as a signifier of internal qualities. While speculation about the relationship between appearance and character can be traced back as far as ancient Greece, scientific enquiries into the specific correspondence between the human countenance and the psyche began in earnest in the latter part of the eighteenth century with the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), a German physician whose research was informed by Johann Caspar Lavater’s doctrine of physiognomy. Gall’s writings, which began to be published in the late years of the

---

a Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America: in a series of letters from that country to a friend in England in the years 1818, 1819, and 1820* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row, 1821), 32.

b Lavater’s research, based on physiognomic theories developed in antiquity, assumed that bodily features were outward manifestations of the internal moral conditions of their bearers. His method for assessing the characters of individuals was more intuitive than objectively scientific, relying primarily on careful observation of the head and neck. While Gall followed in Lavater’s footsteps in terms of his careful observation of the features of the uppermost portion of the body, his research was more scientific, employing careful cranial dissection techniques to relate individual parts of the human brain to its overall structure. For a history of physiognomy and phrenology, see Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy*
eighteenth century, echoed Lavater’s pronouncements that specific character traits, which Gall called ‘faculties,’ were related to the ‘organs’, or parts of the human brain, which, in turn, influenced the shape and dimensions of parts of the head and face. As Charles Colbert has observed, however, the methods Gall used to draw his conclusions were regarded as more scientific, and thus more legitimate than those associated with Lavater.  

Gall’s ideas had become widely known even before the publication of his main work, *The Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System in General, and of the Brain in Particular*, in 1798. One of Gall’s most devoted followers was fellow physician Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832), who became Gall’s assistant and later his collaborator. Spurzheim’s many contributions to the field included coining the term ‘phrenology,’ popularizing the phrenological system in Europe and the United States in the early years of the nineteenth century, and expanding Gall’s original theory to include more cranial ‘organs,’ which he organized into a hierarchical system that adopted the nomenclature of botany. How and when the study of phrenology came to the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century is not completely clear, but by 1822 the first phrenological society had been established in Philadelphia, and within the next decade, its study was included in the curricula of several major institutions of higher learning, including the Pennsylvania Academy, where Dr. John Bell was appointed in 1839 as a professor of anatomy.
JOHN BELL’S VISION OF THE FEMININE BOSOM

Dr. Bell was one of the United States’ most zealous advocates for the new science of phrenology, codifying through his lectures and the publication of his writings the theories that had been circulating among philosophers for several decades. He was also an ardent admirer of the female bosom, and his opinions on the ideal proportions of the female form cohered a connection between the bosom and American ideology that had been developing for several decades. Bell’s most popular text was entitled *Health and Beauty: An Explanation of the Laws of Growth and Exercise; through which a Pleasing Contour, Symmetry of Form, and Graceful Carriage of the Body are Acquired; and the Common Deformities of the Spine and Chest are Prevented.* Published in Philadelphia in 1838, *Health and Beauty* proposed to educate young women not only in the history and theory of female beauty, but also in how beauty of form and face might be obtained through fashion, exercise, and diet. That it is based entirely on phrenological theories is made clear in the book’s introduction, where readers are informed that “ideas of goodness, of suitableness, of sympathy, of progressive perfection, and of mutual happiness, are, by intimate and inevitable association, connected with the first impression made by the sight of beauty.” The balance of the text is divided into four sections that each consider a particular aspect of the acquisition and preservation of female beauty.

---

he evidently had a great passion, and one of the tasks Biddle undertook while abroad was arranging for the shipment of 50 plaster casts of classical statuary donated to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts by Napoleon. Colbert notes that when considered together, the replicas of ancient art works and the tools of the new science of phrenology foreshadow the dialog that would develop in America about the relationship between phrenology and the arts in a nation eager to establish its citizens as modern models of the classical ideals of humanity. See Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection*, 10-12.

The first section of Bell’s study begins with a discussion of beauty’s aesthetic elements, the most fundamental of which is, in his estimation, “roundness...undulating and serpentine lines, [and] progressively diminishing circles.”\(^6\) This judgment reflects the broad influence of William Hogarth’s concept of the “line of beauty,” first articulated in Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty* (1752), Hogarth identifies the constituent characteristics of physical perfection, including symmetry, uniformity, intricacy, and what he considers beauty’s most important marker: the curving or undulating line, found in nature’s loveliest forms, such as flowers. The beauty of the curving line is principally related to the way in which it engages the eye, and, thus, the imagination, or, as Hogarth himself observes:

...the serpentine line, which by its waving and winding at the same time in different ways, leads the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety, if I may be allowed the expression; and which by its twisting so many different ways, may be said to inclose (tho’ but a single line) varied contents; and therefore all its variety cannot be expressed on paper by one continued line, without the assistance of the imagination, or the help of a figure; see... that sort of proportioned, winding line, which will hereafter be called the precise serpentine line, or *line of grace*...\(^6\)

Hogarth notes that although the elements of beauty are present in some combination in all beautiful things, including natural phenomena and inanimate objects, they are most present and readily discernable in the human form, which has been carefully designed by nature to be aesthetically pleasing and visually engaging. He observes that “wherever, for the sake of the necessary motion of the parts...the insertions of the muscles are too hard and sudden, their swellings too bold or the hollows between them too deep, for their outlines to be beautiful,” nature

\(^{6}\) Bell, *Health and Beauty*, 94.
has softened the hardesses and filled in the hollows with “a proper supply of fat” and has provided a covering for the body of “smooth, springy, and almost transparent skin.”

While this assessment of the human body’s natural beauty does not refer specifically to the female form, Hogarth’s description of soft curves and delicate skin calls to mind contemporaneous texts that associated these attributes with women’s bodies, such as Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), which locates a particularly potent embodiment of beauty in the swellings and recesses of the female bosom:

> Observe that the part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried.

Burke concludes this passage by asking, “Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?” The question is, of course, rhetorical, as there is no doubt that, for Burke, the gradual transitions between the swellings and recesses of the bosom are clear expressions of beauty, not just as he perceives it, but in its most essential and universal form. Beyond locating aesthetic enjoyment within the contours of the bosom, Burke’s analysis also establishes the bosom as the locus for the physical pleasure derived from the act of looking, and suggests a specifically sensual

---


Here it must be noted that what Burke presents as essential beauty is, of course, embedded with historical contingencies that gendered beauty as an inherently feminine attribute. That beauty came to be clearly associated with women during the eighteenth century is a commonplace. For an excellent analysis on the gendering of beauty in eighteenth-century British culture, see the introduction to Robert Jones’ *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
engagement between he who looks at a feminine bosom and she upon whose body that bosom resides. His observation that the bosom’s interesting composition of rounded shapes compels the eye and provides it with the pleasurable experience of roving about the “deceitful maze” of a varied surface was extended in the early nineteenth century by Alexander Walker, a Scottish physiologist and author of several essays linking the structures of the body to aesthetic theory including a very popular treatise on *Beauty, Illustrated Chiefly by and Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Women*, first published in 1836. In it, Walker borrows freely from Burke, identifying the curved lines that “mark the outlines of different parts, as in the region of the neck, of the bosom, at the shoulders ...[and] in the gradual transitions from the head to the neck” as particularly potent embodiments of beauty.71 In addition to its curved contours, Walker locates elements of beauty in the pleasing symmetry of the bosom’s “hemispheres” and the variance of color between the pale skin of the breasts themselves and the darker skin of the areolae.72 Walker’s theories on the embodied elements of beauty do not focus solely on the bosom, however. He catalogs beautiful passages throughout the lower part of the female body, and especially the points of transition between the bosom, the midriff, and the lower abdomen and pubis.73 Beginning his assessment at the breasts and then allowing the imagined gaze to wander downward, Walker describes what the eye encounters as it trips along a path of intersecting curves down, around, and back up the body:


72 For Walker, the visibility of the veins constitutes “freshness, or animation, which is nearly synonymous with health, and without which there is no beauty.” The polish of the décolletage’s skin is due to what Walker identifies as the female body’s natural production of a “slight degree of oleaginous secretion.” That the ideally beautiful bosom is white is assumed by Walker, although he does note that “brown women...have more oleaginous secretion, [and thus] possess in a greater degree the polish of the skin which gives impressions so agreeable to the organ of touch.” Walker, *Beauty*, 236-238.

73 Ideal female beauty is embodied for Walker by the *Venus de Medici*, so this account specifically describes her, the “Model of Female Beauty,” a woman in which “every beauty has just been perfected.” Walker, *Beauty*, 361.
The admirable form of the mammae, which, without being too large, occupy the bosom, rise from it with various curves on every side, and all terminate in their apices...the flexible waist gently tapering little further than the middle of the trunk; the lower portion of it beginning gradually to swell out higher even than the umbilicus; the gradual expansion of the haunches...expansions which increase till they reach their greatest extent at the superior part of the thighs; the fullness behind their upper part, and on each side of the lower part of the spine, commencing as high as the waist, and terminating in the greater swell of the distinctly separated hips; the flat expanse between these, and immediately over the fissure of the hips, relieved by a considerable dimple on each side, and caused by the elevation of all the surrounding parts; the fine swell of the broad abdomen which, soon reaching its greatest height, immediately under the umbilicus, slopes gently to the mons veneris, but, narrow at its upper part, expands more widely as it descends, while, throughout, it is laterally distinguished by a gentle depression from the more muscular parts on the sides of the pelvis; the beautiful elevation of the mons veneris; the contiguous elevation of the thighs which, almost at their commencement, rise as high as it does...the general narrowness of the upper, and the unembraceable expansion of the lower part thus exquisitely formed; - all these admirable characteristics of female form...these constitute a being worthy, as the personification of beauty.74

The structure of this passage connotes the same disorientation and instability suggested by Burke’s description of the ‘unsteady’ eye sliding over the bosom, so successfully, in fact, that the reader can barely keep pace with Walker’s frantic survey of the lower body’s contours. If we consider this assessment of the whole of the lower body alongside his remarks on the bosom alone, significant differences in both the style and substance of Walker’s characterization of each become clear. We

---

74 Walker, Beauty, 366-368.
note, for example, how his remarks about the bosom catalog its variance, texture, and symmetry with aesthetic detachment, while his assessment of the lower body spills out in an exuberant parataxis, and gives the impression that beholding the unclothed female form might cause one to literally lose himself in a tangle of contours as his mind’s eye ricochets wildly across the abdomen and the ‘unembracceable’ hips, thighs, and buttocks. The difference in style suggests a more substantive distinction drawn by Walker between the aesthetic pleasure taken in the bosom’s graceful, restrained appearance, and the powerful sensation prompted by the lower body’s complex beauty. These characterizations echo the Burkean construction of the beautiful and the sublime, although for Walker, the sublimity of the female form exists not in opposition to beauty; rather, it represents beauty heightened to an almost overwhelming level.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that Walker is more excitable in his ruminations on the lower body than he is when considering the bosom as a singular entity. We should note, though, that despite the possibility his text offers for interpretations to the contrary, Walker himself identifies the bosom, not the contours of the hips or even the exquisitely beautiful “elevation of the mons veneris,” as the most aesthetically pleasing part of the body, noting that it is “the region of the neck, of the bosom, [and] at the shoulders” wherein beauty is most principally concentrated, and can be most easily observed. In addition to aligning his study with the contemporaneous discourse on beauty’s essential elements, Walker’s privileging of the bosom’s beauty over that of the lower body offers a strategic method for conceptualizing and viewing the female form. As was previously

---

Ian Balfour has argued that Burke’s description of the act of looking at the female form complicates the distinction between his notions of the sublime and the beautiful. I think the category overlap is even more pronounced in Walker’s text than in Burke’s. See Ian Balfour, “Torso: (The) Sublime Sex, Beautiful Bodies, and the Matter of the Text,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 39, 3 (Spring 2006): 43-51. Although Burke and Walker both observe that the beauty of the form is not in its individual parts, but in the ‘gradual transitions’ between them, the enumeration of those individual parts in both descriptions, and most especially in Walker’s, circumvents the possibility of a unified vision and reduces the female body to a collection of beautiful, but ultimately disparate parts.
noted, Walker’s construction equates the bosom as a singular entity with the lower body as a whole in terms of aesthetics, but not erotics, since the language he uses to describe the bosom is far less sensually oriented than that which he uses for the lower body. While the bosom’s aesthetic connection to the lower body calls to mind the titillating appeal of those passages, its relative erotic neutrality makes the bosom appropriate as a site upon which to focus attention, and effectively contains the lower body’s unspeakable sensuality within its culturally sanctioned contours.

Bell’s American manual of *Health and Beauty* echoes Walker’s pronouncements, locating beauty in the contours of the female form and in delight the act of viewing them. Bell observes that:

> ...during youth and among civilized nations, woman is distinguished by the softness, the smoothness, the delicacy, and the polish of all the forms, by the gradual and easy transition between all the parts, by the number and the harmony of the undulating lines which these present in every view, by the beautiful outline of the reliefs and by the fineness and animation of the skin.\(^{76}\)

Unsurprisingly, Bell privileges the curving contours of the bosom above those located elsewhere on the body, characterizing the bosom’s fullness as “ever essential to beauty.”\(^{77}\) The centrality of the bosom to beauty, in Bell’s estimation, involves both the fact that the “fullness of the parts and swelling and undulating outline” of the breasts are pleasing to the eye, and the fact that “they give proofs of fitness and of health, necessary conditions for beauty.”\(^{78}\) The focus of Bell's handbook on the proportional relationship between beauty and inner ‘fitness’ constitutes a significant difference between Walker and Bell, who notes that a beautiful physical form is not just a source of aesthetic pleasure, but the sign of a range of positive inner attributes:

---

\(^{76}\) Bell, *Health and Beauty*, 100-101.

\(^{77}\) Bell, *Health and Beauty*, 94.

\(^{78}\) Bell, *Health and Beauty*, 71-72.
...the great models of ideal beauty please us, not merely because their forms are disposed and combined so as to affect agreeably the organ of sight; but because their exterior appears to correspond with admirable qualities, and to announce an elevation in the condition of humanity.\textsuperscript{79}

One of the main themes of Bell’s text is the pernicious effect of undergarments on the female body, especially on the round contour of the bosom.\textsuperscript{80} Such undergarments, in his view, destroy the health of the inner organs and the skin, the effect of which can be seen in a diminution of the bosom’s fullness and elasticity.\textsuperscript{81} Bell’s concern over the bosoms of those women who laced their corsets too tightly revolves around both the aesthetic effect of the fashion for tight-lacing and the reduced state of inner fitness it caused, since, for him, a beautiful bust of ‘amplitude’ both reveals a woman’s current state of health and reflects her feminine grace, that “often nameless charm” that produced “kindly feelings and a refined intellect.” It is also a sign of her success, or the potential for her success, in other feminine pursuits, especially motherhood, since, as “the fount of the pearly stream of nutriment” for infants, the more developed the bosom was, the more abundantly it could provide nourishment.\textsuperscript{82}

While Walker and Bell both locate beauty in the bosom’s contours, reading their assessments alongside one other reveals another important distinction. Let us first consider

\textsuperscript{79} Bell, \textit{Health and Beauty}, 14.

\textsuperscript{80} One of the chief beauties of the female body, according to Bell, is the elasticity of the skin, which must be able to “allow of its yielding to the distension from growth or temporary enlargement of parts, and to resume its former state when the distending ceases to act and the parts have returned to their pristine dimension.” See Bell, 92; Compressing the skin with rigid undergarments, especially the skin upon the body’s softest, most delicate parts, like the breasts, destroys both elasticity and the underlying “elastic cushion of fat and cellular tissue, “ which, in turn, makes “the undulating outline and desired fullness of the external forms” unattractively flat. See Bell, \textit{Health and Beauty}, 94.

\textsuperscript{81} Bell’s focus on undergarments related his study to emerging discourses on female health that warned women of the dangers of corsetry. For a discussion of the medical and social arguments against corsetry in mid-nineteenth century America, see Cogan, \textit{All-American Girl}, 27-62.

\textsuperscript{82} Bell, \textit{Health and Beauty}, 98.
Walker, for whom the bosom’s beautiful, elegant contours provide an aesthetically pleasing focus that recalls the more potently charged contours across the entirety of the female body, as well as its specifically eroticized regions. Walker’s construction constitutes what in rhetorical terms is a synecdoche, a part representing the whole. In contrast, Bell’s construction identifies the bosom and its beauty as a signifier not of other parts of the physical body, but of intangible qualities associated with femininity, like health, maternal nurturance, and charm, and is, therefore, an example of metonymy, the representation of an object or concept, in this case, health or nurturance, by another, closely related object or concept: the bosom. The distinction between synecdoche and metonymy is subtle, but significant, especially in this instance: synecdoche’s representation involves one tangible object substituting for another, or as in Walker’s construction, the bosom’s contours standing in for contours located across other parts of the body less appropriate for public admiration. Metonymy’s representation, on the other hand, substitutes a tangible object for a concept, or several recent studies have defined it, a substitution chosen from an object or idea’s “semic field,” the constituent concepts associated with the object/idea.

THE FEMININE BOSOM IN THE NEW REPUBLIC

The semic field of the bosom developed alongside the broader discourse on American feminine difference, and, by the era in which Bell’s text was published, included firm associations

83 Hugh Bredin defines the “semic field” as the constituent concepts associated with an object, which, when taken together, form its “concept entity.” Henry’s definition of metonymy uses as an example of the semic field concept the example of a certain type of French gold coin, commonly referred to as a ‘Louis.’ The coin’s semic field, present in the minds of most French speakers when they think about or use the coin, includes the concepts flat, round, gold, to pay, image of King Louis. Henry contends that when the term for one of these constituent concepts, in this case the name of the person whose image is represented on the coin, comes to designate the entire concept entity of which it is a part, the result is a metonymy. Henry notes that a metonym can be constructed from any element of the semic field familiar to the cultural group for whom it is intended. See Hugh Bredin, “Metonymy,” Poetics Today 5 (1984): 45-58; and Albert Henry, Métonymie et Métaphore (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).
with not only vitality and nurturance, but tenderness, modesty, grace, and sensibility. These associations had begun to be articulated in texts several decades earlier, including a very popular poem entitled ‘On His Wife’s Bosom,’ attributed to “the late Dr. Doddridge,” which first appeared in American periodicals late in the eighteenth century and was frequently reprinted in magazines and newspapers over the first 40 years of the nineteenth. Doddridge’s ode, which identifies the bosom as a sacred place from which a variety of moral and sensual pleasures originate, begins with a direct address to it, as he commands the bosom to “open, open...” so he might enjoy its many delightful attributes. He rhapsodizes about the comfort and pleasure he

---

84 Periodicals in which the poem appeared include The Medley; or, Monthly Miscellany (where it was published in 1803), The Balance and Columbian Repository (1803), The Philadelphia Repository (1804), and The Lady’s Weekly Miscellany (1808). The poem’s author is presumed to be Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), a British clergyman and essayist. Despite its consistent attribution to Doddridge, the poem does not appear in his collected works; complicating the matter further is the fact that snippets of the poem appear as part of works by other authors, including Charles Lindsay Crawford, whose ca. 1810 poem ‘Augustus and Sophronia’ contains several paraphrased stanzas from ‘On His Wife’s Bosom.’ Assuming that the poem is attributed correctly, we can surmise that it was originally written some time during the 1730s, since Doddridge married Mercy Maris (his only wife) in 1730. It seems to have been largely unknown until the mid-1770s, at which time it began to appear first in British, and then in American periodicals. For a reference to Doddridge’s popularity during the Romantic Era, see David Perkins, “How the Romantics Recited Poetry,” Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 31, 4 (Autumn, 1991): 655-671. For Doddridge’s biography, see Johannes van der Berg and Geoffrey Fillingham Nuttall’s Philip Doddridge and the Netherlands (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987).

85 The full text of the poem is as follows:

Open, open, lovely breast,
Lull my weary soul to rest!
Soft and warm, and sweet and fair,
Balmantidote of care;
Fragrant source of sure delight,
Downy couch of welcome night,
Ornament of rising day,
Always constant, always gay!
In this gentle calm retreat,
All the train of graces meet;
Truth and innocence and love,
From this temple ne’er remove.
Sacred virtue’s worthiest shrine!
Art thou here? and art thou mine?
finds therein, describing it as the “Balmy antidote of care,” the “Fragrant source of pure delight,” the “Downy couch of welcome night,” and the “Ornament of rising day,” and noting that “In this gentle calm retreat, / All the train of graces meet: / Truth, and innocence and love, / From this temple ne’er remove. / Sacred virtue’s worthiest shrine, / Art thou here, and art thou mine?” Doddridge’s identification of the bosom as a ‘temple’ wherein all the graces converge is particularly significant, as it indicates its dual status as a physical formation and the figurative locus of a woman’s most cherished inner qualities. Doddridge’s choice of words reinforces this understanding, as he alternates between using the anatomical ‘breast’ and the emotionally symbolic ‘bosom.’ In fact, the poem’s very structure underscores the duality of the bosom. Cataloged within its stanzas are the different functions fulfilled by the bosom, with more concrete functions explicated first and increasingly abstract ones considered in subsequent stanzas. This organization also suggests that the various qualities originating within the bosom exist within a hierarchy of importance, while the poem’s tone, narrowly focused at the outset on the bosom’s corporeal attributes, and building throughout the subsequent stanzas to an ecstatic celebration of its spiritual

Wonder, gratitude, and joy,  
Blest vicissitude! employ  
Every moment, every thought:  
Crowds of care are long forgot.  
Open, open, beauteous breast!  
Angels here might seek their rest.  
Caesar, fill thy shining throne  
A nobler seat I call my own.  
Here I reign with boundless sway;  
Here I triumph night and day;  
Spacious empire! glorious pow’r  
Mine of inexhausted store!  
Let the wretched love to roam,  
Joy and I can live at home.  
Open, open, balmy breast,  
Into raptures waken rest!
significance, implies that while each of the bosom’s functions has value, those associated with its intangible qualities deserve the greatest measure of esteem.

First among the lovely, adorable qualities Doddridge locates in his wife’s bosom is her sensibility, or capacity for deeply felt emotion, which he refers to as the “mine of inexhausted store” from which all her affectionate and sympathetic feelings issue forth. Her sensibility allows Doddridge’s wife to be an exemplary lover and helpmate enabling her to anticipate her husband’s needs and respond to them immediately by offering him respite within the “spacious empire” of her love and tenderness, the bodily manifestation of which is her bosom. Admiration for their extraordinary sensibility was a frequent theme of encomia on women in the early nineteenth century, and, like beauty, the sensitivity and emotionalism associated with these cherished feminine attributes were proclaimed in American cultural materials to be most clearly evident in the daughters of the new republic. Sarah Knott and others have observed that both sensibility and its closely related cognate, sentiment, engaged a wide spectrum of ideas, from simple physical sensations to sensory perceptions that produced thought and opinion.86 While sentiment and sensibility were generally regarded as favorable traits for both men and women to display, their foremost associations were with women, as was frequently noted in nineteenth-century texts.87 They

86 Here it should be noted that subtle yet significant distinctions exist between sentiment and sensibility. For example, John Mullen distinguishes between the two by noting that the term ‘sentimental’ was usually used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only to describe a representation, and, thus, while a person was said to possess ‘sensibility,’ a text or painting was more commonly described as ‘sentimental.’ As Christopher C. Nagle has observed, sensibility is the broader category of the two. See Christopher C. Nagle, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Pres, 1988). While I have no wish to quibble with either of these distinctions, my research indicates that the two terms were understood more or less interchangeably in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural materials, so for my present purposes, I consider them to describe the same feminine attribute of emotional susceptibility.

87 When sensibility was associated with men in eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts, it was typically associated with acumen. For example, a ca. 1775 essay in the *London Chronicle*
were “always expected in woman” and regarded as “those mild and tender qualities which
distinguish her from the other sex, whose practice is her peculiar province, and whose absence
occasions a very perceptible blank where all should be perfect.” So central were sensibility and
sentiment to female identity, in fact, that the character of a woman lacking either was viewed to be
“very defective.”

Just as sensibility was assumed to be the natural province of women, the bosom, because of
its physical proximity to the heart, was assumed to be sentiment’s bodily home. An essay “On
Sensibility” featured in the Lady’s Monitor declared it to be “the glory of the bosom,” and the
governor of emotional responses like sympathy and affection, noting that it was “the fairest growth
of the human heart; it branches out into many amiable dispositions and generous affections; and
blossoms into beautiful flowers of virtuous and elegant joy.” Another “On Female Beauty”
articulated the special connection between sentiment and the bosom, identifying evocative passages
throughout its various structures, especially the shoulders, the slope of which “convey a sentiment
of the gentle and acquiescent” and the inward dip just below the rib cage, which signifies a woman’s
calling as a “gentle creature, made to be beloved, and neither active nor powerful, but fruitful.”

In described sensibility as the faculty to perceive justice, and thus a useful attribute for men in the
world of business. The essay’s author defined it as “a lively and delicate feeling, a quick sense of
the right and wrong, in all human actions, and other objects considered in every view of morality
and taste.” Quoted in Markman Ellis, The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender, and Commerce in
the Sentimental Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5. As Inger Brodey has
noted, sensibility was sometimes applied towards specific purposes associated with masculine
enterprise, including scientific experimentation, because of its association with intuition. See Sarah
Knott, Sensibility and the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina
Press, 2009), 9-11; and Inger Sigrun Brodey, “Masculinity, Sensibility, and the ‘Man of Feeling’:
The Gendered Ethics of Goethe’s Werther,” Papers on Language and Literature 35, 2 (Spring,
1999): 115-140.

13 (October 1827): 100.


In addition to articulating the general connection present in all women between the bosom and
sensibility, the essay “On Female Beauty” also identifies women associated with various feminine
addition to identifying it as sensibility’s locus, texts praised the extent to which the bosom revealed its physical signs through its variety of responses to emotional stimuli. Since “the sensibility of women is livelier,” one noted, their bosoms are “wont to heave with the gentle emotions of benevolence.” Another explained the mechanics of sensibility’s alteration to the bosom’s appearance: because of its delicacy, embodied by its translucent skin and the visible circulatory system beneath, when a woman felt emotion, that emotion became visible as it “circulates through the heartstrings, dilates the breast, and kindles all the liberal affections.”

Because of sensibility’s strong associations with tenderness and affection, it is unsurprising that texts also connected it to women’s roles as mothers. Sensibility was observed to be a critical component of motherhood, primarily because it allowed women to experience the affective feelings necessary to bond with their children. American cultural materials promoted the image of a mother immediately responsive to her child’s needs, clutching him to her breast in a gesture of comfort or protection as the embodiment of motherhood’s most natural impulse, a significant component of which involved the physical act of breastfeeding. Even in the rare texts that did not specifically associate sensibility with the bosom, the language used to describe its effects provide a clear link to a vision of the maternal breast overflowing with milk. For example, one text proclaimed that sensibility was “the rich fountain of fond endearments,” and “the spring of all types through subtle permutations of their bosoms. Among these are “rosy-bosomed” women, the complexions of whom display “that healthy colour which ought to appear in the finest skin,” and “vernal-bosomed” women, exemplified by the poet Spenser’s description of the huntress Belphoebe’s “dainty paps; which like young fruit in May / Now little ’gan to swell; and being tied, / Through their thin weeds their places only signified.” The essay’s author describes the most “truly feminine” women as “deep-bosomed.” “A Criticism on Female Beauty – No. 11,” The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal 10, 55 (July 1, 1825), 150-153.


b The term ‘heartstring’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries referred both to the deepest feelings of love or compassion, and to the tendons and nerves thought actually to surround and support the heart. Quote from “On Sensibility,” Lady’s Monitor 1, 24 (January 1802): 185
tender sympathies,” and the emotion that generated the “graceful motions, and glowing forms” so central to feminine beauty. The connection between the breasts and maternal sensibility was thoroughly embedded in European culture at the end of the eighteenth century, so much so that the image of a breastfeeding woman could function as a signifier for not only maternal care, but all forms of emotional nurturance. Scholars have identified the cultural centrality of the maternal breast and attendant assertions about maternal breastfeeding’s beauty and naturalness as reactions to concern over the growing fashion among mid-eighteenth century women of the middle classes to hire wetnurses to feed their infants. Reformers, most vocal among whom was Rousseau, believed that the use of wetnurses was socially injurious, since it alienated mothers from their children and weakened familial bonds, and that the political effects of a widespread recommitment to maternal breastfeeding would be profound.


For example, God’s love for the church body was represented in early eighteenth-century British theological writings through the metaphor of a mother nursing her infant, while in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, female allegorical figures, equipped with multiple breasts capable of suckling all of France’s citizens were understood as symbols of the sustaining power of revolutionary political ideology. For the connection of breastfeeding to religious rhetoric, see Marylynn Salmon, “The Cultural Significance of Breastfeeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America,” Journal of Social History 28, 2, (Winter, 1994): 247-269. For the political significance of breastfeeding in late eighteenth-century France, see Madelyn Gutwirth, The Twilight of the Goddesses (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 178-184.

Wealthy women used wetnurses because it was fashionable or convenient, but what was really at issue for those who argued against the practice was the fact that poor women were abandoning children in large numbers to the care of foundling hospitals. According to George Sussman, in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, poverty forced parents to abandon tens of thousands of infants to foundling hospitals in Paris alone, and the wetnurses they employed were not able to meet the needs of so many infants, so many died from malnutrition or starvation. Abandoning children to foundling hospitals was not a concern for wealthy parents, but by appealing to elite mothers, reformers hoped to popularize maternal nursing with them so that less privileged women might emulate their practice. See Gutwirth, The Twilight of the Goddesses, 178-184; and George D. Sussman, “Parisian Infants and Norman Wet Nurses in the Early Nineteenth Century: A Statistical Study,” The Journal of Interdisciplinary History 7, 4 (Spring, 1977): 637-653.

Rousseau offered passionate political argument for the naturalism of maternal breastfeeding in several of his most well-known works, including Émile, and famously declared that when mothers committed to feeding their own children, “morals will reform themselves, nature’s sentiments will
It is not clear how common the use of wetnurses was in early America, although Paula Treckle has theorized it is probable that they were used by at least some upper-class women. Treckle has also noted that it is likely wetnurses were employed by many American families for at least a short period of time immediately following a birth, since many physicians actually discouraged new mothers from feeding their infants until their milk supply was firmly established, which could take more than a week. During this time, women were advised to send their babies to “the Breast of some other clean and sound Woman.” Regardless of the extent to which wetnursing was actually a prevalent practice in America, some anxiety clearly existed around the notion that it might become one, so texts framed maternal breastfeeding as the duty of women, as well as the first and best way to transmit virtues and values to children. For example, in an American study of the ‘Principles and Influence of Taste,’ the author advises the ‘daughters of America’ that children’s most important impressions are formed at the breast, which is the source for both physical and spiritual nurturance:

These tender objects, wax-like, receive the fair impressions of [their mothers’] own image. They inhale the perfumes of her chaste breath...and also the purity of her language and the amiableness and virtuous dignity of her whole mein...as they draw in the nutrition of the body from her snowy bosom.

---

Treckle notes that throughout the eighteenth century, physicians considered colostrum, the liquid initially produced by the breasts just after birth, to be toxic and hazardous to infants, so until the colostrum was replaced by the regular milk supply, women would either have to procure, at least temporarily, the services of a midwife or feed their infants something other than milk (one 1724 guide suggested sweetened wine as a milk-alternative). See Paula Treckle, “Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20 (1989): 25–51.

In addition to its role as a transmitter of ideology, the act of maternal breastfeeding offered women the opportunity to display their engagement with the American feminine ideal. In the same article quoted above, the author notes that “in the rearing of your off-spring, is seen, is felt, all the sensibilities, all the sympathies, all the loveliness, all the beauty, all the greatness, of woman.” Even the most quotidian of tasks, like feeding or caring for one’s child, was viewed as an opportunity for the special femininity of the American woman to be displayed.\footnote{99}

As has already been noted, while much scholarship on women’s lives in the early republic identifies the maternal role as the most significant avenue through which women of the early nineteenth century participated in American political life, several studies, including Jan Lewis’s influential article describing what she terms the ideology of the republican wife, have demonstrated that her virtuous participation in the marital relationship was even more central to the American woman’s political role than her duty as a mother.\footnote{100} Americans took particular pride in their approach to marriage, and frequently connected it to the ideology of national difference, noting that the marital relationship was a microcosm of other social and political relationships, holding a “place of the first importance in the social compact” as “the radical relation from which all others take their rise.”\footnote{101} Marriage was also observed to be a civilizing influence that encouraged chastity and virtue and reformed vice and its “savage habits.”\footnote{102} Mindful of marriage’s role in promoting virtue and social responsibility, American texts advanced the expectation that citizens would

\footnote{99}“Principles and Influence of Taste” also observes that a woman’s sensibility “is [not] that nice and delicate thing which is not to be exercised, and which flees from us in the common pursuits and in the general economy of life”; rather, a woman’s refined sensibility could be witnessed in even her most mundane actions, like writing a letter or tending her garden. Even taking a simple walk out of doors was an exercise in sensibility’s cultivation, as each exquisite footstep “brushed the dew from the honey-suckle in early morn, and trod lightly on a cluster of violets.”

\footnote{100}Lewis, “The Republican Wife,” 689-721

\footnote{101}“Answers to Queries on Marriage,” \textit{The Pennsylvania Magazine, or, American Monthly Museum} (December 1775): 557.

\footnote{102}“Answers to Queries on Marriage,” 558.
cultivate intimate relationships modeled on the democratic ideals of an Enlightened society. It was assumed that such relationships would intensify patriotic impulses in individual citizens, a benefit to which Benjamin Franklin famously alluded when he wrote that since his recent marriage, one of his friends was finally “in the way of becoming a useful citizen.” Americans also assumed that their model of marriage would foster positive conditions in larger cultural institutions, since, according to a 1774 edition of *The Royal American Magazine*, marriage “collects a man’s views to a proper centre ...[and] animates him to new exertions for the welfare of his little circle,” causing him to feel “a growing attachment to human nature, and love to his country.”

Despite its characterization as one of the many unique and positive differences between America’s new cultural practices and the outmoded traditions of English and European society, the ideal marriage in the early republic actually closely resembled a similar ideal promoted abroad: a relationship in which a husband and wife who had freely chosen one another were bound together with strong ties of affection and intimacy. In his foundational study of changes to the structure of the English family in the early modern period, Lawrence Stone traces the emergence of what he terms the ‘companionate marriage’ in the mid-eighteenth century out of a combination of political discourses, the origins of which extend back to the seventeenth century. According to Stone, affective marital partnerships and family units were advanced as correctives to the distant, authoritarian ideal to which familial relationships had aspired in preceding centuries.

---

105 Stone’s major work, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, proposes that the history of the family can be used as a route via which political and social history in general can be understood. According to Stone and others, the companionate ideal emerged out of the writings of political theorist John Locke, who promoted personal autonomy as the root of individual happiness and political harmony. Locke’s broader aim was the reform of monarchical power, specifically the divine right of kings to rule. Locke’s work specifically attacked the traditional
The companionate ideal received a significant endorsement through its promotion by Rousseau, who made it a central theme in both his fictional and non-fictional works. As with his broader theories of essential gender and women’s roles as nurturing mothers, Rousseau connected the companionate marriage, what he called the *mariage d’estime*, to his program for moral and political regeneration, citing the ability of loving, affectionate partnerships to mitigate the corruption of the French aristocracy, a major symptom of which he observed in the practice of its members to publicly engage in casual sexual relationships with one another. Rousseau’s main authoritarian patriarchal model of social organization, in which the agency of the individual was subordinate to a network of community involvements, including relationships with other kin, and, as a result, the nuclear family was not a major focus of emotional attachment and dependence for its members. In Locke’s view, the control exerted over the interests of individuals by this model diminished their capacity to seek personal fulfillment through their choice of occupation or lifestyle, as he believed that: “all men are naturally in ...a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.” See John Locke, *The Works of John Locke, Esquire, Volume II* (London: Printed for Arthur Bettesworth in Pater-Noster Row, John Pemberton in Fleet Street, and Edward Symon in Cornhill, 1778), 160. Locke’s vision for personal freedom quickly gained a foothold in Britain and throughout Europe, as did his interpretation of emerging social contract theory, which allowed for the possibility that a social contract could be broken in the event that the governing party failed to meet its obligations to those it governed. One of the cultural practices to which both of these positions were applicable was marriage; Locke’s followers saw marriages arranged by the patriarchs of extended families for financial or social advancement as antithetical to personal freedom. Lockeans were also concerned about the distance and authoritarianism that characterized familial relations after marriage, and found in his writings on the social contract and the conditions under which it could be broken an argument for more tender and communicative marriages. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage 1500-1800*, abridged edition, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1983). Many of Rousseau’s texts address how families and households should be organized, including *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), one of Rousseau’s most pointed endorsement for the *mariage d’estime*. In its introduction, Rousseau notes he wrote it specifically to support and encourage men and women in their companionate pairings: “I have great pleasure in the idea of a married couple reading this novel together, imbuing fresh courage to support their common labours, and perhaps new designs to render them useful. How can they contemplate the representation of a happy family without attempting to imitate the pleasing model? How can they be affected with the charms of conjugal union...without increasing and confirming their own attachment?” See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Eloisa: or, a Series of Original Letters, First American Edition* (Philadelphia: Samuel Longscope, 1797), xxiii. Rousseau’s *Emile* is another significant addition to the discourse, discussing how boys and girls should be educated from childhood in order to form successful relationships with each other as adults. The same assertion is made in several of his epistolatory
strategy to encourage morally sound families was to promote affection between husbands and
wives, and the confining of sexual expression to the marital relationship as practices that were not
just, in his or society’s opinion, proper and moral, but inherently natural. That nature, and not
society, prescribed fidelity and affection between husbands and wives was made evident for
Rousseau by the visible differences in the bodies of the two sexes, which he identified as part of the
grand design meant to both explicate male and female roles and to foster attraction and
interdependence between the sexes. In fact, Rousseau’s vision for the ideal marriage relationship
required that husbands and wives be so inseparable from one another that they actually seemed a
treatises, which also examine the social corruption and moral collapse that inevitably proceeds
from households not organized around the companionate marriage ideal. In her classic study of
Rousseau and socio-political theory, Judith Shklar explains how Clarens, M. Wolmar’s estate in La
Nouvelle Héloïse functions as a model for Rousseau’s ideal republican household, and Wolmar’s
management of his family, household staff, and the peasants who live on the estate present him as
the ideal Legislator. See Judith Shklar, Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory

Rousseau’s privileging of the natural is one of the most dominant themes in his work on all
subjects, not just those that provide templates for the proper organization of nuclear families.
According to Genevieve Lloyd, those philosophers who came before Rousseau (including Bacon
and Newton) related nature to feeling and instinct, and constructed it as an external model for
human conduct. Rousseau’s model understood nature’s power to be primarily internal rather than
external – as Lloyd characterizes it, “both the model and the source of an unspoiled simplicity and
spontaneity which will break the bonds of distorting convention and artificiality.” Susan Moller
Okin has noted that Rousseau’s writings offer nature as the best corrective to what he considered
corruption masquerading as civility and social progress. By invoking the centrality of nature in the
context of sex and love, Rousseau not only connects social morality to loftier goals of nation
building like democracy and equality, but he also establishes that his expectation for proper
behavior within the marital relationship – which is really nature’s expectation – is unable to be
disputed. See Genevieve Lloyd, The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western
Philosophy, (London: Routledge, 1984), 62; and Susan Moller Okin, “Rousseau’s Natural

Rousseau reiterated this point in several texts, including Julie, in which Julie, speaking of her
intended husband, explains “Had his heart been as tender as mine, it is impossible but so much
sensibility on each side must sometimes have clashed, and occasioned disagreements. If I was as
composed as he, there would be too much indifference between us, and our union would be less
pleasing and agreeable. If he did not love me, we should be uneasy together; if his love for me was
too passionate, he would be troublesome to me. We are each of us exactly made for the other; he
instructs me, I enliven him; the value of both has increased by our union, and we seem destined to
form but one soul between us; to which he gives intelligence, and I direct the will.” See Rousseau,
Eloisa, 120.
single entity, rather than separate individuals. This was the crux of his political defense of the companionate marriage: by intertwining the lives of men and women through their mutual reliance on the strengths and abilities of each another, both the nuclear family unit, which was, in turn, the model for an ideal republic, and attachment between husbands and wives, a condition of moral necessity to such a republic, found themselves strengthened. Of course, this model of interdependence should in no way be mistaken for a promotion of equality between the sexes, since Rousseau clearly and frequently noted that men and women were designed differently, and that men were designed by nature to dominate both their households and the government.

Early republican cultural materials repackaged Rousseau’s political defense of the companionate ideal in order to promote American marital relationships as extensions of political ideology and reflections of national pre-eminence, frequently noting that Americans enjoyed a “very elevated situation” in their marriages when compared to citizens elsewhere. In addition to celebrating the general feeling of cultural superiority associated with American marriages, authors cited specific ways in which the intimacy enjoyed by their nation’s couples exceeded that experienced elsewhere. One of the most crucial differences observed in the intimate relationships between Americans involved their rejection of arranged marriage. In the years following the revolution, cultural materials appropriated the rhetoric of political freedom to denounce the notion of parents brokering their children’s marriages, proclaiming such a practice to be

---


110 From his *Discourse on Political Economy*: “In the family, it is clear, for several reasons which lie in its very nature, that the father ought to command ...the authority ought not to be divided between father and mother; the government must be single, and in every division of opinion there must be one preponderant voice to decide...” See Rousseau, *A Discourse on Political Economy*, 4.

111 A Friend to the Fair Sex, “To the Editor of the Columbian Magazine,” *The Columbian Magazine* 1, 10 (June 1787): 491.
fundamentally incompatible with an enlightened society, as in this passage from 1785, which appeared in *The Boston Magazine*:

Various are the ways by which the rights of natural liberty are infringed, but no one strikes the mind with greater horror, than the unlawful restraints which many parents practice upon a child in point of matrimony...*Reason* is the oracle, which upon such an occasion ought ever to be consulted. And when reason points out an object which alone can render a man happy—*neither principalities nor powers should deter him from the laudable pursuit.*

Arranged marriage’s main disadvantage was the fact that only nature, or, in the case of the above essay, only Reason, the outward expression of nature’s inherent virtue, could command the heart to love, and therefore only nature could direct men and women into relationships based on its laws. When parents attempted to intervene in nature’s course, the result was unhappiness for those whose affections were being directed and corruption for those doing the directing. In a 1789 *Essay on Matrimony*, the author dolorously describes the wedding of a young woman forced into marriage as an inversion of the most essential elements of both the participants and the institution itself:

The victim comes in rich attire,

Dragg’d trembling by her ruthless sire,

Thy child, O monster, save!

With torch inverted Hymen stands,

The furies wave these livid brands,

Wild Horror, pale Dismay;

---

Compell’d, the fault’ring priest slow ties
The knot of plighted perjuries,
For spotless truth ordain’d;
More fitly had some demon fell,
Some minister of Sin and Hell,
The sacred rites profan’d.\textsuperscript{113}

Of course, as was noted before, what Americans intimated was English and European cultures’ common practice of forcing marriages between unloving partners had, in fact, begun to fall out of fashion in the first half of the eighteenth century. However, the American ideology of difference did suggest that a certain amount of cultural baggage from the tradition of arranged marriage was inevitably retained by European citizens.\textsuperscript{114} American culture, on the other hand, had never sanctioned social or legal restrictions on marriage, and therefore transferred no such baggage to its citizens, who were cheerfully insensible of such practices as “the trade of fortune hunting,” as \textit{The Columbian Magazine} termed it.\textsuperscript{115} Although the rewards of freely-chosen marriage were felt by the

\textsuperscript{113}“An Essay on Matrimony,” \textit{The Christian’s, Scholar’s, and Farmer’s Magazine: Calculated in an Eminent Degree, to Promote Religion; to Disseminate Useful Knowledge; to Afford Literary Pleasures and Amusement, and to Advance the Interest of Agriculture} 1, 5 (December 1789): 97-98

\textsuperscript{114}This claim was put forth particularly in light of the adoption of institutional practices that seemed deferent to antiquated customs related to marital practice controlled by patriarchal interests, such as the British Marriage Act of 1753, a set of laws designed to formalize and standardize marriage practice in England, ostensibly to eliminate the so-called ‘clandestine marriage.’ The main strategies of the Marriage Act included: 1) requiring men and women younger that 21 to have parental consent in order to enter into a formal engagement, and 2) requiring that any impending marriage be announced by the certifying of a license or the publishing of banns by an ordained priest and two witnesses. See Rebecca Probert, “The Impact of the Marriage Act of 1753,” \textit{Eighteenth-Century Studies} 38, 2 (2005): 247-262; Eve Tavor Bannet, “The Marriage Act of 1753: ‘A Most Cruel Law for the Fair Sex’,” \textit{Eighteenth Century Studies} 30 (1997): 233-54; and Jona Schellekens, “Courtship, the Clandestine Marriage Act, and Illegitimate Fertility in England,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 25 (1995): 433-44.

\textsuperscript{115}In fact, Americans were so doe-eyed when it came to the practice of arranged marriage that they could scarcely understand “...the tedious preliminaries of European contracts, [and] settlements of
entire polity, it was presented as especially beneficial to women, who were objects rather than active participants in marital transactions and thus particularly powerless in initiating or negotiating them. American women could rest secure in the knowledge that they would never be forced into a match with an undesired partner simply because it benefitted the families involved, or, as ‘A Poem on the Happiness of America’ put it: “no eastern manners here consign the charms / of beauteous slaves to some loath’d master’s arms / no lovely maid in wedlock e’er was sold / by parents base, for mercenary gold,” that it, that they would never be forced into marriage with an undesired partner simply because it benefitted the families involved.  

Just as American culture benefitted from the strength of its citizens’ freely chosen marriages, men and women each received blessings from their enlightened unions. For men, this blessing took the form of beautiful, feminine wives whose bodies provided pleasure and comfort. Women were similarly blessed by the esteem they received from their husbands, as well as the political agency granted to them through their roles as the embodiments of feminine excellence. Texts promoted the bosom’s role in originating and perpetuating these happy effects for both the sexes through its capacity for sentiment, which provoked the initial desire to be married. As an 1824 encomium on marriage observed, recounting the details of a wedding triggers in a woman “a soft thrill, vibrating like the treble cord of a piano, through every nerve of her susceptible frame.”

This thrill soon becomes manifested in a throbbing, heaving bosom, a sign to observers of her fortunes are scarcely understood by the inhabitants of America,” according to ‘A Friend to the Fair Sex’ in an letter “To the Editor of the Columbian Magazine,” The Columbian Magazine 1, 10 (June, 1787): 491.


“Marriage,” Daily National Intelligencer 3663 (October 15, 1824): 1. The essay’s author notes that every woman “from budding fifteen through blushing twenty up to ripened womanhood” feels this thrill.
preparation for her own happy union. But sentiment was not the bosom’s only gift to the companionate ideal. Along with its capacity to feel deeply, the bosom was also believed to be the locus of another privileged feminine quality, modesty, which, in addition to being cherished as “the sweetest charm of female excellence,” was celebrated because it was “infinitely valuable” to the formation of marital felicity and the extension of conjugal affection for both the sexes.  

In addition to its effect on the bosom, the thought of marriage manifests additional physical changes in women, according to the essay, including a brightening of the eye and a flush to the lips. It also causes a young woman to blush in spite of the fact that “no image that she needs blush for ever casts its passing form across her pure mind.” See “Marriage,” Daily National Intelligencer, 2.  

CHAPTER 2

VEIL’D BEAUTIES:
MODESTY, FASHION, AND THE FEMININE BOSOM

Of all the charms that most adorn the fair,
Sweet blushing modesty, the palm must bear:
‘Tis this gives luster – this the fairy spell
That binds the heart, but how, you scarce can tell.

And that soft flame, that kindles into love,
Burns not so pure, if modesty remove;
Nor do the charms, the virtues we possess,
Yield half their sweets, show half their loveliness.120

Female modesty’s privileged position in American culture, like that of femininity in
general, was related to the assumption of its inherence, and although it was celebrated throughout
the early nineteenth-century world, what was seen as the especially legible modesty of American
women was regarded as strong evidence in support of the nation’s Enlightened status. As with
sentiment, the modesty of American women was associated with the cherished peaks and valleys of
their bosoms, and the relationship between modesty and the bosom was generally presented as a
relatively straightforward symbiosis wherein its external qualities, like its tendency towards blushing
or the delicacy of its contours, signified a woman’s inner alignment with the principles of modest
femininity, and thus her compliance with the patriotic feminine ideal. An attentive reading of
endorsement to modesty in American cultural materials reveals a significant point about its
connection to the companionate ideal and the broader discourse on femininity. Modesty was
frequently described in American texts as both a protector of female virtue and a force for
attracting the attention of appropriate and worthy men. In fact, some constructions of modesty
promoted its romantic function to the almost complete exclusion of its protective one, as in, for

120 E, “Modesty,” Cincinnati Mirror, and Western Gazette of Literature, Science, and the Arts 1, 3
(October, 1831): 22.
example, the poem excerpted above, which makes only the faintest allusion to modesty as a foil for would-be despoilers of female innocence and focuses instead on its function as the “fairy spell” that adorns women with a special sort of “luster.”

Texts were careful to obscure specific references to modesty’s erotic potential with the language of sentiment, which cloaked allusions to sensually charged flesh with vague platitudes about a woman’s “sweets” or “charms.” Such subversions simultaneously allowed the physical structures most associated with the feminine ideal, the breasts and décolletage, to be observed and celebrated as signifiers of American women’s exceptional femininity and distanced these celebrations from more lascivious possibilities. To the modern reader, the constant association of modesty with attraction and seduction, coupled with the notion that a thinly veiled erotic fixation on the female bosom constitutes a collective act of patriotism, seems disingenuous, at best. Within the context of the American cult of the bosom, however, the associations around which the discourse on modesty was organized provided a means to mitigate femininity’s frequently contradictory significations. Recognizing the complex set of expectations related to modest female behavior and self-presentation necessitates its interpretation as not just a single attribute, but a chain of signifiers: protection and seduction, concealment and display, innocence and consciousness. Tension around these often oppositional signifiers prompted the creation of strategies through which expectations for modesty could be managed.

This chapter traces the discourse on female modesty’s emergence out of European treatises on sexual difference and its appropriation by early republican texts as a trait particularly associated with American women. I situate modesty’s construction in America within the broader discourse on femininity, and untangle the problematics associated with what was promoted as its dual nature. In addition to the challenges presented by its simultaneous construction as an

---

12 E, “Modesty,” *Cincinnati Mirror*, 22
attractive and a protective mechanism, modesty was also challenged by significant alterations to women’s dress that occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century, which left much more of the female form, especially the bosom exposed than previous styles had. Because the new garments were associated with a vision of natural femininity, it was imperative that they be regarded as modest, and so additional rhetorical maneuvering was required in order to preserve the bosom’s sanctity while still displaying it as a ‘beauty.’

VIRTUOUS AMERICAN BEAUTIES

As was established in Chapter 1, a major component of the American woman’s political role in the first decades of the nineteenth century involved her embodiment of femininity, inscribed on the ‘beauties’ of her body. There were, however, substantial risks attached to the placement of such a high cultural value on female beauty and the location of women’s political agency in their body’s ‘beauties.’ Even with the assumption of their inherent goodness posited by Enlightenment ideology, a suspicion existed about the shadow side to the pleasures beautiful women offered the world. This suspicion, fostered by hundreds, if not thousands of years of religious rhetoric and cultural tradition, held that beautiful women sought to ensnare men in order to control their thoughts and activities. Physician William Alexander’s popular treatise, *The History of Women* (1782), clearly articulates this concern, noting that “…this power of the women, in bending the stronger sex to their will, is no doubt greatly augmented when they have...beauty on their side.”

While a beautiful woman’s power was usually assumed to offer positive effects on men, such as by softening the male tendency towards brutishness, its darker potential was also clearly a concern.

---

Generalized anxiety over the power wielded by beautiful women was made specific with reports that there were women in the world, and even in America, who used their beauty to engage in acts of deception and subterfuge. Such reports, including tales of female spies in the army of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), or of American women acting as agents for the British during the Revolutionary War, made frequent appearances in early nineteenth-century American periodicals, and they reflect a set of anxieties centered around the inversion of nature that resulted when woman used their beauty to their own advantages, or, much worse, to further political or ideological agendas.\(^{123}\) Take, for example, the case of Margaret Moncrieffe, a beautiful, charming British sympathizer from New York. Because of her lovely appearance, Moncrieffe was able, according to an 1857 account of her exploits, to become the favorite of “a brilliant circle of beaux, among whom were a number of the officers attached to the American army in the neighborhood,” and to gain information about the army’s plans, which she then passed to British officers. The author of the account catalogs Moncrieffe’s deceptions with a sort of horrified glee, noting that none of her suitors could have imagined that the “fair enchantress was the spy to whose activity and efficiency they owed the frustration of many of their plans,” a testament, no doubt, to both Moncrieffe’s own talent for deception and the guileless assumption that female beauty signified goodness.\(^{124}\) Moncrieffe’s deception was eventually discovered, she was sent back to England, and while she was not heard from again in the United States, it was assumed that she lived out her days amid “all the surroundings of poverty and disgrace,” a fitting punishment for a woman who

\(^{123}\) Reports of Bonaparte’s female spies noted that he hand-selected what he jestingly referred to as his “Cytherian Cohort,” which included women of “superior beauty and great personal attractions, most of them involved in debt...and greedy of money.” See “An Account of the Female Spies in the Service of Bonaparte: Translated from the French,” *The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines* 11 (September 1822), 459. During the fighting of the Revolutionary War, a number of American women were accused of being British sympathizers or spies, either for giving aid to the British by lodging soldiers or distributing pamphlets on behalf of the British cause, or for engaging in acts of subterfuge. See Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 49.

\(^{124}\) “The Female Spy,” *Emerson’s States Magazine* 37 (July 1857): 46.
subverted nature’s gift of feminine virtue by using her appearance to deceive honorable men and thwart the noble cause of American independence.  

While Moncrieffe’s case clearly illustrates the potential for social upheaval attending a high estimation for female beauty, it also testifies to the potential for a beautiful woman to become personally corrupted by vanity. One of the most popular and frequently reprinted fables of the early republican period, “The Glow-Worm and the Nightingale,” provides a representative example of the discourse against vanity, recounting the tragic circumstances of a vain glow-worm whose immoderate pride is evident as she claims “sure there never was in nature / So elegant, so fine a creature ... / For grandeur only I was born; / Or sure am sprung from race divine, / And plac’d on earth, to live and shine.”  

The glow-worm’s distraction over her own beautiful reflection and the perfected forms of nature through which she believes her own beauty is reflected leads, inevitably, to her demise, since in her preoccupation with her own image, and the stars above (which she surmises must be “the glow-worms of the sky”), she fails to see the hungry nightingale who has been attracted by her illuminated body. Chastising the glow-worm before he ends her life, the nightingale reminds her that “’tis thy beauty brings thy fate; / Less dazzling, long thou might’st have lain / Unheeded on the velvet plain.”

A self-consciousness regard for her own appeal was seen as an almost unavoidable byproduct of the attention a beautiful woman received; as Dr. Alexander explained, “...every

125 The author of this account’s assessment that “the qualities of her heart were not calculated to make her path in life a happy or pleasant one” led him to “naturally anticipate” that Moncrieffe lived out her life in reduced circumstances. See “The Female Spy,” 46.
animal is conscious of its own strength, and of the proper mode of employing it; women,
abundantly conscious that theirs lies in their beauty, endeavour with the utmost care to heighten
and improve it. While Alexander’s assessment viewed such a tendency as a natural part of female
identity, other authors placed the blame for the vanity observed in beautiful women not on nature,
but rather on conditioning, observing that the desire to be looked at and praised for a beautiful
appearance issued forth from excessive attention given to little girls by their parents. According to
Mrs. John Sanford, author of Woman in Her Social and Domestic Character, a beautiful woman’s
“love of approbation” could trace its origins back to her early childhood, where it began to develop
from the moment she first “flutters her fan, or threads the gallopade at the baby ball” and was
praised for her “infantile coquetry.” Sanford and others identified vanity as the natural result of
the praise given to girls and young women for superficial accomplishments, like being beautiful,
since in the face of such an “early, persevering, and systematic course of instruction, tending only
to degrade the mind, and to fill it with the weakest, the most stupid, and the most transient of all
the objects of ambition,” even “an angel might be spoiled.”

In spite of such a looming threat casting its shadow over the daily ablutions of America’s
beauties, texts held that it was possible for women to overcome vanity’s insidious creep by
cultivating virtue. In fact, the possession of virtue was presented as the only way for a woman to
achieve happiness; without it, she was looked on, according to Richard Allestree’s popular guide to
female behavior, as “a kind of Monster, a thing diverted and distorted from its proper form.”

129 Mrs. John Sandford, Woman, in her Social and Domestic Character (London: Printed for
Longman, Rees, Orhm, Brown, and Green, 1831), 64-65.
131 Allestree’s guide to proper female behavior, The Ladies Calling, was first published in the 1673,
but it remained a popular work throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Anthony
Fletcher has characterized The Ladies Calling as “a signal moment in the creation of modern
English femininity,” noting that its frequent reprintings throughout the late seventeenth and
Virtue’s ability to counteract vanity made it beauty’s natural companion, and a number of texts went so far as to suggest that virtue alone was responsible for a woman’s beautiful outward appearance. The following passage from an encomium on the virtues of American women articulates this suggestion, proclaiming that the physical traits typically associated with beauty, like symmetry or unblemished skin, are nothing more than ‘artificial’ signs, and that true beauty, what the text differentiates as ‘loveliness,’ is discernable only in intangible virtues, like chastity and sensibility:

It is not the smiles of a pretty face, nor the tint of thy complexion, nor the beauty and symmetry of thy person...that compose thy artificial beauty...It is thy pleasing deportment – thy chaste conversation – thy sensibility, and the purity of thy thoughts – thy affable and open disposition – and, above all, that humility of soul...These virtues constitute thy *Loveliness*, Adorned with but those of nature and simplicity, they will shine like the refulgent sun...⁹³²

Virtuous behavior was considered to be so transformative to the appearance that it was even offered as a curative in nineteenth-century household manuals along with recipes for homemade rouges, skin powders, and blemish remedies. An American manual of hygiene, the *Toilette of Health* (1834), provides the following recipe for what it calls a “Never-Failing Beauty Wash;” in fact, it is nothing more than a standard set of behavioral commandments, each of which is tied to an element of what was believed to be the feminine ideal’s physical manifestations:

Let then the ladies observe the following rules: they must abstain from all sudden gusts of passion, particularly vanity, as that gives the skin a sallow paleness...Instead of rouge, let

---

them use moderate exercise, which will raise a natural bloom in their cheek, inimitable by art. Ingenuous candor, and unaffected good humor, will give an openness to their countenance that will make them universally agreeable. A desire of pleasing will add fire to their eyes, and breathing the morning air at sunrise will give their lips a vermillion hue...  

On the other side of texts’ claims that virtue made women beautiful was the belief that an absence of virtue worked against physical beauty. A poem reproduced within the text of Susanna Rowson’s popular novel *Charlotte Temple* (1794) explains the sad fate of beautiful women who lack virtue in the following terms, which make clear that mere physical beauty was regarded as a cheap and transient imitation of the lasting loveliness created by virtue’s presence:

The lovely maid whose form and face
Nature has deck’d with ev’ry grace,
But in whose heart no virtues glow,
Whose heart ne’er felt another’s woe,
Whose hand ne’er smooth’d the bed of pain,
Or eas’d the captive’s galling chain;
But like the tulip caught the eye,
Born just to be admir’d and die,
When gone no one regrets its loss,
Or scarce remembers that it was.

Of all the virtues associated with the feminine ideal, American cultural materials valued modesty the most highly and advanced the modest woman as an important symbol of both femininity and national identity. Even more than beauty, sentiment, or any of the other cherished

---

attributes of femininity, texts identified the modesty of American women as the most critical point of difference between them and their counterparts abroad, noting with pride the fact that they showed neither “the frank forwardness of the French, nor the self-possessed horteur (sic) of the English.”\textsuperscript{135} The modesty of American women differenced them in both behavior and appearance; since modesty was the most highly privileged of the feminine virtues, it reasonably follows that texts would propose an especially close connection between modesty and beauty.

**THE MEANING OF MODESTY**

Before modesty's cultural functions can be considered, we must first untangle, to the greatest extent possible, exactly how early republican authors understood its essential character. The ubiquity of modesty as a subject of essays, poems, and works of fiction has a tendency to create for the modern reader the impression that modesty was simply a conventional cultural theme, the nature of which was readily understood by all Americans. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell has noted, though, while modesty can rightly be called a conventional subject in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is by no means a simple one.\textsuperscript{136} Part of its complexity lies in the fact that, just as today, modesty held multiple meanings two centuries ago, engaging associations with moderation, decency, and the quality of being unassuming.\textsuperscript{137} Related to this is the fact that, while the understanding of modesty most frequently presented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts was associated specifically with women’s behavior, expectations for modesty existed for both sexes. In fact, separate, gendered constructions of modesty, which began to form during the


sixteenth century, had become widely acknowledged by the eighteenth. Male modesty’s primary association came to be with humility, or the absence of pretense. When Mary Wollstonecraft considered it as part of her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she characterized male modesty as temperate or unassuming comportment, “soberness of mind,” and “a simplicity of character that leads us to form a just opinion of ourselves, equally distant from vanity or presumption, though by no means incompatible with a lofty consciousness of our own dignity.”

Expectations for women’s modest behavior also included attributes like temperance and humility, but in addition to these, female modesty had a particular association with sexual conduct, and it engaged a number of interrelated concepts that constructions of male modesty did not, including decorum, privacy and bodily concealment. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of the adjective ‘modest’ includes two definientia relating specifically to women. The first, which originated in the middle of the sixteenth century, is associated with female behavior that is “decorous in manner and conduct; not forward, impudent, or lewd,” and the second, which originated in the second decade of the seventeenth century, describes female dress that is “seemly...so as to avoid revealing the figure of the wearer.”

Wollstonecraft’s description incorporates both of these aspects, characterizing

---

138 Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on modesty appear in a chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) entitled “Modesty – Comprehensively Considered, and Not as a Sexual Virtue.” In it, she notes that it is necessary to distinguish modesty’s construction as humbleness and self-restraint from “purity of mind, which is the effect of chastity.” She further argues that female modesty, the preservation of which philosophers insisted was related to keeping women uninformed, would actually be fostered by women’s exposure to the world and its goings on: “Would ye, o my sisters, really possess modesty, ye must remember that the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or ye will still remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved whilst ye are fair...modesty being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection.” See Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* 3rd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1796), 274, 296-297.

female modesty as the “purity of mind” that fostered “sacred respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life.”

While early republican cultural materials extended the gendered construction of modesty established abroad, associating both male and female modesty with reserve and humility and attaching to female modesty an additional association with sexual decorum, American texts further refined modesty’s parameters by connecting expectations for modest behavior in men and women to the separate spheres each was believed naturally equipped to occupy. Thus, male modesty was associated with the attributes needed to politely navigate the public sphere, like truthfulness, integrity, and sobriety, while female modesty, tasked with governing intimate relationships, became associated with those qualities that fostered romantic attraction. An encomium on modesty from 1840 highlights this binary. When referring to modesty as observed in men, the encomium’s author emphasizes the actions that define men as modest, as well as the way modesty improves

---

140 In his study of *The Evolution of Modesty* (1900), Havelock Ellis noted that the conceptualization of female modesty was closely related to the French idea of *pudeur*, or chastity, and “completely distinct” from modesty as humility. As an aside, Ellis noted that the ‘confusion’ experienced by English speakers over modesty’s various connotations did not exist for those who spoke French, since that language designated separate terms to describe modesty/humility (*modestie*) and sexual modesty (*pudeur*). It should be noted that an English near-equivalent for *pudeur* does exist, in the term *pudency*; both share the Latin root *pudens* (shame, and also a thing of which one ought to be ashamed), as well as a cognomen signifying “the modest.” *Pudency* began to be used in the early seventeenth century to describe “modesty, bashfulness, or reticence,” but was never as widely used as *modesty*, possibly because of the specifically erotic connotation it carried prior to the eighteenth century. This connotation has been examined by Frankie Rubinstein, who claims that Shakespeare used the term ‘pudency’ as part of an erotic pun in *Cymbeline* (1623), when Posthumous says of his wife Imogen “Me of my lawful pleasure she restrained,/And prayed me oft forbearance; did it with/A pudency so rosy the sweer view on’t/Might well have warmed old Saturn; that I though her/As chaste as unsunned snow.” Although Imogen’s ‘rosy pudency’ could refer to her blushing cheek, Rubinstein notes that it is more likely that Shakespeare deployed it as a joking reference to her genitalia. Nevertheless, it seems that by the late eighteenth century, ‘pudency’ had lost its erotic connotation. See Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1901); Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Puns and their Significance* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1989), 206.
other qualities associated with a masculine ideal, thereby enabling men to act more effectively in the world:

Should [modesty] garnish a statesman, so meek and becoming is his deportment, that envy itself is forced to adulation. When cherished by the orator, it communicates to the heart, and melts it with pity or moves it to contrition. The judgment, too, won by its influence, becomes less cautions, and in made its captive...It graced the Father of his Country when invested with supreme command...though the political tempest was seen resting upon him, as often as his sword or his epaulettes; and when the duty of patriotism was done, he bore it to his home...  

Although it does not articulate a specific difference between male and female modesty, the encomium’s description as it relates to women focuses on the qualities most associated with the courtship ritual, beauty and virtue, and the positive effect of modesty on those qualities, noting that “[Modesty] alone makes [women] truly lovely...I have seen the maiden wearing this flower, and I seemed as if in the presence of a being pure and holy.”

American cultural materials also refined a position on modesty’s source within each of the two sexes. Webster’s 1828 dictionary lists four definientia for the word ‘modesty,’ the first three of which relate to its masculine aspects and include: “moderation,” “that lowly temper which accompanies a moderate estimate of one’s own worth and importance,” and “humble, unobtrusive deportment.”  

Webster adds another layer of significance to the standard construction of modesty in English and European texts, observing that the extent to which men possessed and displayed

142 Although Webster’s explanation of modesty fails to distinguish modesty/humility as a specifically masculine trait, his confinement of the concept of female modesty to a separate definiens implies that those definientia not specifically associated with women’s sexual conduct apply primarily to expectations for male behavior.
various behaviors associated with modesty varied based on their age and life experience. He notes that:

This temper when natural, springs in some measure from timidity, and in young and inexperienced persons, is allied to bashfulness and diffidence. In persons who have seen the world, and lost their natural timidity, modesty springs no less from principle than from feeling, and is manifested by retiring, unobtrusive manners, assuming less to itself than others are willing to yield, and conceding to others all due honor and respect, or even more than they expect or required.  

This set of statements is significant because of their implication that male modesty, to a certain extent, a social construction, originating as much from ‘principle,’ a shared standard for acceptable behavior across a social group, as from ‘feeling,’ one’s personal, inborn sense of right and wrong. Webster’s description of male modesty as “an act or series of acts,” consisting of “humble, unobtrusive deportment, as opposed to extreme boldness, forwardness, arrogance, presumption, audacity or impudence,” underscores this implication, and frames male modesty as a performance undertaken in deference to cultural standards of politeness, or to foster an atmosphere of “honor and respect,” rather than a natural or inherent part of masculine nature.

Webster’s final definiens for modesty relates specifically to expectations for women’s modesty. He notes that “in females, modesty has the like character as in males,” that is, reserved behavior, humble deportment, and a moderate estimate of one’s worth, to which is added an element of “chastity, or purity of manners.” This distinction highlights the central difference between male and female modesty in Webster’s construction: while male modesty is ‘natural’ only until men reach a certain age or have certain life experiences, after which it becomes a socially expedient affectation, female modesty originates primarily in a woman’s “purity of mind,” which

---

14 Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 538.
suggests a certain independence from culturally constructed directives for polite behavior. For
Webster, female modesty constitutes a universal condition of womanhood that was not altered by
age or life experience. And while the modesty ‘naturally’ demonstrated by young or inexperienced
men connotes “timidity” or weakness, natural female modesty, the “richest gem in the diadem of
[women’s] honor,” fosters the respect and admiration of others, regardless of her age or social
status. In fact, some texts rejected the notion of inherent male modesty entirely, noting that men,
“who act a conspicuous part on the stage of life, and who require a certain audacity, and self
possession to bring their talents into full light” did not really need modesty to succeed at their
dealings in the public sphere, and, more importantly, that society needed assertive men of action
more than it needed polite, humble ones. These same texts were quick to note, though, that
women, “whose loveliest charm is the rosy blush of native modesty, whose virtues blossom fairest
in the vale,” should never abandon modesty, “the best protector of innocence,” because it was so
valuable, both to individuals and to broader society, and because it was so delightful.

MODESTY’S PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

That modesty was inherent within women, and would naturally make itself visible if women
were raised in an environment free from artifice, was among the most widely held and cherished
assumptions of the discourse on American difference in the early 1800s, but its ubiquity belies an
intense debate that spanned much of the previous century. Although the value of female sexual
virtue was by no means the invention of the eighteenth century, it was in the middle of that century,
with the publication of Rousseau’s works on the subject, that the idea of inherent female modesty
became widely accepted. Elements of this discourse had appeared in David Hume’s earlier A
Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40), but it was in Rousseau’s writings that the most convincing
arguments on modesty’s behalf were made.” Hume’s and Rousseau’s views on native modesty argue against an interpretation of modesty advanced earlier in the century by philosopher Bernard Mandeville, who had contended that modesty was an artificial, albeit necessary, convention designed to check women’s natural wantonness. Mandeville’s views on modesty were published in two works, *The Fable of the Bees* (1723), and *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724). The *Modest Defence* caused a particular scandal because it called for the establishment of public, government-funded brothels, called ‘stews’ after the original function of such gathering places as stew-houses or taverns, as a way to control vice in cities and regulate extramarital sexual activity. Mandeville’s observation that there existed women willing to participate in the sex trade was proof in his mind that not every female constitution was not automatically inclined towards sexual purity, and that if modesty seemed natural, it was only because women were educated from earliest childhood to respond to situations in modest ways. In his *The Fable of the Bees* (1723), Mandeville notes that:

> The Multitude will hardly believe the excessive Force of Education, and in the difference of Modesty between Men and Women ascribe that to Nature, which is altogether owing to early Instruction: Miss is scarce three Years old, but she is spoke to every Day to hide her Leg, and rebuk’d in good Earnest if she shews it; while Little Master at the same Age is bid to take up his Coats, and piss like a Man.”

---


In Mandeville’s view, although modesty was not in an inherent part of all women’s natures, by teaching girls modesty, or at least the physical behaviors associated with modesty, like covering their legs, beginning when they were very young, it became *second* nature by the time they were old enough to have the sorts of adult interactions that required modesty’s regulation. The fact that the girls being taught how to moderate their expressions and conceal their bodies were far too young to know why they were doing so made little difference to the success of the educational program, since Mandeville believed it was muscle memory, rather than conscience, that ultimately directed their movements and behaviors.

Unsurprisingly, Mandeville’s view of modesty as a social construction was controversial, for both its sentiment and the saucy example of a brothel he chose as an illustration. Mandeville was attacked in Hume’s *Treatise* (although not by name), as part of the crowd of “philosophers, who attack the female virtues with great vehemence, and fancy they have gone very far in detecting popular errors, when they can show, that there is no foundation in nature for ...exterior modesty . . .”

Hume challenged arguments against modesty’s inherence by offering the biological conditions of human reproduction as ‘proof’ that modesty was designed by nature to protect the social structures needed to support those conditions. His argument turned on three points: first, the “length and feebleness of human infancy” as well as “the concern which both sexes naturally have for their offspring,” which necessitated that parents live together for the duration of their children’s infancy; second, if men were to be induced to “impose on themselves this restraint, and undergo cheerfully all the fatigues and expences, to which it subjects them” they had to believe that the children they were supporting were their own; and third, since “the principle of generation goes from the man to the woman,” which allowed women to secretly be impregnated by men other than

---

their husbands, nature made women modest in order to circumvent the possibility of female infidelity.\textsuperscript{148}

Although Mandeville’s and Hume’s constructions of modesty diverged on the question of nature, they shared an important commonality in their suggestion that modesty’s primary social function was to control female behavior, either explicitly, as in Mandeville’s example of the little girl punished for showing her body immodestly, or implicitly, as in Hume’s suggestion that immodest women disgraced themselves and their families, thereby disrupting the natural social order. This view of modesty as a method for controlling the female propensity towards unruliness aligned with centuries’ worth of misogynistic ideology that identified women as more naturally disposed towards lust and vice than men, since they were “made of a temper more soft and frail, [were] more endangered by snares and temptations, less able to control their passions, and more inclinable to extremes of good or bad.”\textsuperscript{149} Viewing women through this lens, philosophers, regardless of their personal beliefs about modesty’s origins, could agree that its presence was simply a necessity to safeguard patriarchal interests, chiefly a father’s need to provide chaste, virginal daughters to potential suitors, and a husband’s need for assurance that the children he supported were ones he sired.

The emergence of Enlightenment assertions about the innate virtue of all humans, especially women, occasioned a dramatic shift in the discourse on female modesty. Rousseau’s moral texts did much to crystallize the notion of inherent female virtue as a sign of a society’s zenith of progress, and to reframe the discourse away from controlling inevitable female licentiousness. Instead, Rousseau’s view, which he outlined in an epistolary treatise (the 1759 \textit{Lettre à Mr. D’Alembert sur les spectacles}) and the fifth book of \textit{Émile}, both published just a few

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{148} Hume, “Of Chastity and Modesty,” 85-86.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Bishop Thomas Ken’s funeral sermon for Lady Mainard, quoted in Philip C. Almond, \textit{Adam and Eve in Seventeenth Century Thought} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
decades after Hume’s *Treatise*, presented women as fundamentally virtuous and modesty as a helpful device instilled by Nature in order to defend female chastity from male impudence and to foster affection and attraction between the sexes. In fact, modesty was far more than simply helpful in Rousseau’s model of gender relations; it was the centerpiece of his broader vision for a society reformed by the nuclear family, providing two critical supports for his companionate ideal.

The first way that modesty supported Rousseau’s views on the ideal state of marriage and family life was by protecting women from corruption, which he felt was a constant threat that lurked whenever they ventured outside their homes. Underscoring Rousseau’s anxiety over women in public was his assumption that since women were “made especially to please men,” and since they “take from the regard of others the only existence that they care about,” that is to say that women’s actions constantly adjust themselves to suit the opinions of others, they would naturally feel conscious of others’ perceptions of their appearance or behavior, especially in public, where they were subject to a wider variety of opinions. Rousseau undertook the *Lettre à M. D’Alembert* in response to the question of whether or not a ‘théâtre de comédie’ should be established in Geneva, because he believed that the theater was a particularly dangerous public space for women to occupy, either as actresses on the stage or as audience members. It records Rousseau’s concerns.

---

110 It should be noted that while Rousseau’s texts make frequent reference to modesty as nature’s gift to women, they also occasionally betray a conflicting understanding of modesty as a social convention so necessary to a virtuous society that it should be expected of all women even if they are not naturally inclined to be modest. For example, in his *Lettre à Mr. D’Alembert sur les spectacles* he notes that “even if it could be denied that a particular sense of shame was natural to the sex, still would it be less true that their province in social life ought to be retirement and domestic economy, and that they should be trained up in principles relative to these branches? If the fear, modesty and shame, by which their sex is so agreeably distinguished, are human inventions, it greatly behoves (sic) society, that every woman should acquire and cultivate these qualities.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A letter from M. Rousseau, of Geneva, to M. d’Alembert, of Paris, concerning the effects of theatrical entertainments on the manners of mankind* (London: Printed for J. Nourse at the Lamb opposite Katherine-Street in the Strand, 1759), 115.
about the theater’s effects on female morality, but more significantly, as David Marshall’s study has noted, it reflects on the general nature of spectatorship and spectacle.\footnote{Marshall rejects the traditional translation of the treatise’s title as “A letter to M. D’Alembert on the theater” in favor of “A letter to M. D’Alembert on spectacle,” arguing that Rousseau used the occasion of M. D’Alembert’s proposal to examine “how spectacles govern our lives: how we are affected by the theatrical relations enacted outside as well as inside the playhouse.” See David Marshall, “Rousseau and the State of Theater,” \textit{Representations} 13 (Winter, 1986): 84-114.}

Modesty, according to Rousseau, protected women from the threats to their morality occasioned by their participation in the marketplace of spectatorship by instilling in them a strong sense of shame and shyness that overrode the desire to trespass out of their homes. Rousseau believed confinement within the home, and total devotion to the care of their household and family, to be “the model of life prescribed for women alike by nature and reason.”\footnote{Rousseau, \textit{Émile}, 437. In fact, Rousseau’s construction of modesty’s protective function promised that female modesty would benefit all members of a family unit. The husband of a modest wife could rest easy, never fearing that his child might be “the child of another, the badge of his own dishonor, a thief who is robbing his own children of their inheritance.”} He further suggested that nature gave women modesty, which discouraged activity outside the domestic sphere and naturalized their circumscription, so that they would tolerate, and even prefer their restricted existence. In this way, modesty protected more than just a woman’s morality. It also protected her reputation, which was just as important, since it was central to the fulfillment of a woman’s role to retain the affection and trust of her partner. Rousseau claimed that “nature herself has decreed that woman...should be at the mercy of man’s judgment,” because while “men and women are made for each other,”

their mutual dependence differs in degree: man is dependent on woman through his desires; woman is dependent on man through her desires and also through her needs...she cannot fulfill her purpose in life without his aid...she is dependent on the price we put on her virtue...\footnote{Rousseau, \textit{Émile}, 437.}
While Rousseau’s construction of modesty as a method for protecting society by creating complacent, chaste wives is not particularly divergent from earlier constructions of modesty’s political expediency, the second support he argued modesty provided to society is more innovative. Recall Rousseau’s proposal that the naturalness of the companionate marriage was partly predicated on the interplay between the complementary physical and behavioral differences between (large, strong, aggressive) men and (small, soft, passive) women, which fostered attraction and ordered seduction like a game of “attack and defense.” In this game, it was men who did the pursuing, while women were responsible for resisting, although Rousseau noted that the vigor with which women eluded capture was inversely proportional to their desire to be caught. The basis for this teleological order of seduction was founded, according to Rousseau, on a number of physiological and psychological factors, the most important of which was the central precondition of the successful procreative act, male sexual arousal. Since men would presumably initiate sexual situations only when they were physically able to complete the sex act, female modesty protected men from the embarrassment of impotence, precluding the possibility of sex not initiated by a

154 More precisely, the differences between the sexes heightened male attraction towards women. Rousseau is clear that the successful intimate relationship requires only that the male feel attraction; with regard to female attraction, “the necessity is less urgent,” since female desire is permanent, while male desire is sporadic and must be aroused in order for a successful sexual act to take place. See Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 34. It should also be noted that Rousseau’s construction of amorous activity as a military maneuver aligned with a longstanding tradition that encoded the terms used to describe sexual activity with the violence and aggression associated with battle. According to Kathleen Brown, this tradition was very active in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, during which time English and American men described sexual activity by invoking military terminology (to “give a flourish,” “salute,” “mount the guard,” or be “a volunteer in the Wars of Venus,” etc.). Brown notes that each term “connoted the aggression of the military maneuver and the overarching struggle for domination that motivated troops to battle.” See Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 328-329.

155 Whether the woman shares the man’s passion or not, whether she is willing or unwilling to satisfy it, she always repulses him and defends herself, though not always with the same vigor, and therefore not with the same success. If the siege is to be successful, the besieged must permit or direct the attack.” Rousseau, *Émile*, 428.

physically able man. Rousseau’s construction carries the centrality of female modesty to the sex act a step further with its suggestion that modesty not only offers protection to both women and men, but that it can also be a device for flirtation that, when used properly, could heighten arousal for both partners. Rousseau noted that “desires, veiled by blushes, grow only the more bewitching; the modest cheek does but inflame them”\(^{157}\) In fact, of all the traits associated with femininity, Rousseau argued that modesty was, in fact, the most seductive, because by resisting their advances, women provoked men to respond with assertion, or even force, and thus display their strength, an essential quality of their masculinity. In Rousseau’s own words, a woman made herself most pleasing to a man when she compelled him to “discover and use his strength,” and the surest way to do that was to “make it necessary by resistance.”\(^{158}\)

Rousseau’s construction of modesty as the agent of both protection and seduction was extended through English translations of Émile and the Lettre à M. D’Alembert, both of which were available in America. In addition to his own words, Rousseau’s construction of modesty’s duality became familiar through texts, especially the nascent genre of advice literature, which took such forms as conduct books and didactic novels.\(^{159}\) Advice literature, written primarily for an

\(^{157}\) Rousseau, Lettre, 110.

\(^{158}\) Rousseau, Émile, 426

\(^{159}\) As Vivien Jones and others have noted, the publication of advice literature emerged as an important industry during the eighteenth century. Although treatises on proper behavior had been available long before the advent of advice literature, they were generally short, specific works written for society’s elite and concerned with the establishment and maintenance of hierarchies within a rigid social order, or collections of religious directives and prayers designed to encourage piety. The advice literature that began to be produced early in the 1700s represented a revision of the genre in several significant ways: first, advice literature assumed a readership of women, and, more specifically, young, unmarried women, as opposed to the elite male readers addressed in earlier examples; second, advice literature focused on peer relations between men and women of all social classes, and especially the emerging middle class, instead of taking as its primary concern the relationships between servants and their ‘betters’; and third, advice literature focused specifically on the formation of companionate relationships, outlining the rules of engagement, so to speak, for those negotiating the social nuances of choosing a romantic partner. For studies of the behavioral guides available in England prior to mid-eighteenth century, see Valerie Wayne,
audience of young women, repackaged Rousseau’s ideas about modest femininity into promises that readers could act in accordance with the dictates of virtuous femininity and still achieve romantic success. Such assurance was timely in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the discourse on the ideology of the companionate marriage was at its most prominent. Katherine Green has argued that the advent of the companionate marriage brought such significant changes to the lives of young women that specialized literary forms were needed to help them embrace and navigate their altered roles. These alterations were both broad, such as the revision of self-perception necessitated by being given freedom to make for themselves such a life-altering decision as the choice of marital partner, and specific, such as the expectation that they attend and behave appropriately at the newly established social events, like balls, assemblies, and cotillions, designed to help young people initiate acquaintances and courtships.

Since their primary agency, at least in the initial selection of romantic partners, came from the attraction they could inspire in men, women also needed to know what physical and behavioral markers they could display to attract notice and esteem. Advice literature performed its most


10 Katherine Sobba Green, The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 1. Although Green specifically considers the genesis of the English courtship novel genre, her observation is broadly applicable to the whole of advice literature.
significant function on this point, providing women with a description of the seductively modest woman as a template to follow as they cultivated the most feminine versions of themselves. Like Rousseau, authors of advice literature presented the centrality of female modesty to the successful companionate relationship, but although advice literature echoed the fundamentals of Rousseau’s construction of modesty and attraction, its intended audience of women – and unmarried ones at that – limited the candor with which his theory about its role in fostering sexual passion could be presented. It was necessary, therefore, for authors of advice literature to reframe Rousseau’s model in order to explain modesty’s duality in a suitably delicate manner, so rather than discussing it as an agent in games of seduction conducted behind the closed doors of the bedroom, advice literature promoted modesty’s role within publicly enacted courtship rituals.

One of the late eighteenth century’s most successful reinterpretations of Rousseau was an extremely popular conduct guide by Dr. John Gregory, a Scottish physician, entitled *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774).\(^{161}\) Gregory’s text was the best selling female conduct book in both Britain and America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and its unparalleled popularity has been attributed to a number of factors, particularly its gentle, supportive tone, which is a clear departure from the brusque didacticism of earlier models, and its sentimental appeal, a product of the fact that Gregory supposedly wrote the text on his deathbed, as a series of letters to instruct his teenage daughters about life and love in his absence.\(^{162}\) The content of Gregory’s text is


\(^{162}\) Gregory’s publishers promoted the work’s sentimental aspect in its front matter: “THAT the subsequent Letters were written by a tender father, in a declining state of health, for the instruction of his daughters...is a circumstance which will recommend them to every one who considers them in the light of admonition and advice...Paternal love, paternal care, speak their genuine sentiments,
also a departure; although its title is a clear allusion to several popular religious guidebooks published more than a century earlier, like Elizabeth Richardson’s *A Ladies Legacie to her Daughters* (1645) or Susanna Bell’s *The Legacy of a Dying Mother To Her Mourning Children* (1673), Gregory’s text is, foremost, a secular guide meant to celebrate the gift of femininity. Unsurprisingly, this plan oriented itself around the all-important wedding day, when feminine progress’s first phase, romantic courtship, was brought to fruition and its second phase, affectionate domesticity, began. Thus, Gregory’s text focused its attentions on the goal of matrimony, organizing its chapters to reflect the progression of the courtship ritual from first acquaintance, considered in the chapter on ‘Conduct and Behavior’, which contains guidelines for how to display femininity, through attraction, considered in the chapter on ‘Amusements’, which discusses behavior at social events, and finally to a formalized romantic relationship, considered in the chapter on ‘Love and Marriage’.

The publishers of Gregory’s *Legacy* were careful to frame his text as an original work, the spontaneous product of his love and regard for his daughters and his concern over leaving them alone in the world. “In such domestic intercourse,” its introduction insists, “no sacrifices are made to prejudices, to customs, to fashionable opinions.” Despite this claim, though, Gregory’s text owes a substantial debt to Rousseau and his model of social interaction between the sexes.

Richardson and Bell’s guides both strive to control female behavior through religious directive; in fact Richardson’s is nothing more than a collection of suggested prayers for different occasions. Neither offers specific instructions for female behavior, beyond that it should be pious, but, as was noted previously, this is not unusual for the early modern period. See Susan C. Staub’s introduction in Part 1, Volume 3 (‘Mother’s Advice Books’) of *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002).

Gregory himself would undoubtedly dispute this claim. For example, in the first chapter of his *Legacy*, Gregory notes that he views women not as “domestic drudges, or the slaves of our pleasures, but as our companions and equals,” a statement that clearly presents a challenge to

Rousseau, Gregory professes the belief that modesty fosters the formation of successful romantic relationships and engenders respect for women. Gregory reiterates Rousseau’s construction of modesty as a device to protect women from the shame of public exposure, and he shares a similar concern about women who frequent public spaces, especially those who make themselves free to interact with men outside of their nuclear domestic sphere. Gregory’s concern over “the present mode of female manners” and the liberties taken by less-than-modest women, which included “being always in our eye at public places” and “conversing with us with the same unreserved freedom as we do with one another” reflect the same anxieties that prompted Rousseau to author his *Lettre à M. D’Alembert*. In fact, Gregory’s note that “one of the chief beauties in a female...[is] that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration...” is little more than a rephrasing of Rousseau’s admonition that “the virtues of the fair sex are to be found nowhere but in a retired life...”

Gregory also echoes Rousseau’s construction of modesty’s ability to foster desire, although, again, Gregory’s language focuses on the role played by modesty in companionate, rather than erotic couplings. For example, Gregory’s claim that “A fine woman shews her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them. The finest bosom in nature is not so fine as what imagination forms...” is a gently-worded description of the same arousing effect described by Rousseau, who celebrates the modest woman who “does not display her charms; she covers them, but, in covering them, she knows how to

---

166 According to Gregory, “The power of a fine woman over the hearts of men...is even beyond what she conceives.” Rousseau also celebrates the power and influence of good (modest, sensible, virtuous) women over men when he notes that “The strongest [sex] should be master in appearance and dependent in fact on the weakest.” See Gregory, *Legacy*, 15; Rousseau, *Émile*, 268.


make them imagined.” The construction of modesty as a method by which sentimental, virtuous women could make men long for their imagined ‘charms’ was appealing, especially in America, where the location of agency in the feminine structures of the body necessitated constant rhetorical slights-of-hand in order to mitigate potential indecency without drawing attention away from the feminine ideal’s bodily locus.

**FASHIONABLE MODESTY AND AMERICAN IDEOLOGY**

The discourse on feminine modesty required that, in addition to displaying modest behaviors, women wear clothing that was modest in order to comport with the ideology of American difference. That American culture implicated clothing in the display of specific ideologies is hardly surprising, since the notion that through the clothes, important aspects of an individual’s – and especially a woman’s – inner self were revealed was a commonplace in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. As Kate Haulman’s recent inquiry into the role of fashionable dress in the ‘culture wars’ of Revolutionary-era Philadelphia has demonstrated, clothing functioned both as a screen onto which various discourses were projected and a vehicle through which individuals could express their positions relative to those discourses. Modesty’s complex role in American culture was challenged by rapidly shifting modes of female fashionable dress at the turn of the nineteenth century. These shifts, which began in France during the 1760s

---

170 This passage from an essay on fashion from an 1830 edition of the *Ladies’ Magazine and Literary Gazette* offers a representative example of the advice concerning self-presentation as a signifier of character offered in almost every conduct manual and periodical edition published in the first decades of the nineteenth century: “Dress may be made a powerful auxiliary in displaying the graces of the mind, and no woman, let her genius be ever so brilliant, can neglect it without injuring herself in the esteem of society, and consequently diminishing the influence of her talents.” See “The Fashions,” *Ladies’ Magazine and Literary Gazette* 3, 11 (November 1830): 487.
and 70s, but were quickly adopted in Britain and America, resulted in the ascendancy of a new style of dress characterized by the display of a theretofore unseen naturalism of the female body. This style cast aside the formality of seventeenth and eighteenth century fashion, which imposed an artificial structure on the female body with the use of panniers and rigid stays that reached from the bust-points to the waist (figure 2), and replaced it with diaphanous styles undergirded by short, lightly-boned stays (figure 3). Such comparatively unstructured garments allowed the shape of the breasts, as well as the natural cleft between them to be discerned, and framed them with extremely low necklines and waistlines raised to just below the bust.

The genesis of this altered style of dress can be traced to a number of aesthetic, political, and commercial factors, including a widespread interest in classical antiquity and the establishment of trade relationships that allowed new fabrics, including fashionable lightweight cottons to be widely available.172 Perhaps most significant was Enlightenment philosophy’s privileging of nature, which prompted the claim by philosophers, most notably Rousseau, that there was absolute moral virtue in the natural shape of the body, and that artificial means of altering the appearance were problematic and corrupting. Rousseau was especially critical of the rigid, heavily boned stays that had been worn by women during the previous centuries (figure 4), which he regarded as

172 The French Revolution, in particular, is often cited by fashion historians, including James Laver and Norah Waugh as the primary impetus for the radical shift in European fashion that was completed by the turn of the nineteenth century. While it was, no doubt, a factor in the emergence and popularity of the new styles, especially those related specifically to the concurrent Neoclassical movement, Janet Arnold notes that it is problematic to cite the Revolution as the main reason for the popularity of a style of dress, the emergence of which, in fact, predated it. It is ultimately more instructive to understand the French Revolution as one event, albeit an important one, within a series of events that ultimately led to a shift from the elaborate gowns worn over rigid undergarments of the early and mid-eighteenth century to the soft, comparatively unstructured gowns that became popular by the end of the century. See Janet Arnold, “The Cut and Construction of Women’s Clothes in the Eighteenth Century,” Revolution in Fashion 1715-1815, Amy Handy, ed. (New York: Abbeville Press for the Kyoto Costume Institute, 1990); James Laver, Costume and Fashion: A Concise History (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982); Norah Waugh, The Cut of Women’s Clothes: 1600-1931 (New York: Routledge, 1968).
antithetical to femininity for two reasons. First, the compression of the breasts by stays limited a woman’s ability to perform the “duty of her sex” through breastfeeding. Even more problematic was the hindrance caused by stays to a woman’s bodily expression of femininity. For Rousseau, the natural, feminine woman was one who embodied all of femininity’s ideals, including what he termed “pliability,” undoubtedly a reference to feminine beauty’s most celebrated aesthetic element, the gracefully contoured line. Stays, according to Rousseau, made the torso hard and unpliant, and he considered them to be unnatural, and thus potentially hazardous to the bodies and souls of the women who wore them, noting that he believed the “abuse” of wearing stays, “pushed to an inconceivable extent in England,” would eventually cause womanhood to degenerate into physical and moral corruption. Rousseau’s outrage was not just directed at the decline of health and virtue he believed the wearing of stays caused. He also decried the practice because it made the bodies of women less aesthetically pleasing, observing that stays, especially those that are laced too tightly, deform the female figure, and make it less appealing for men to look at: “It is not attractive to see a woman cut in half like a wasp. That is shocking to the sight, and it makes the imagination suffer.”

Following Rousseau’s example, observers in Europe and America began to promote the new styles as the most natural and feminine way women could clothe themselves, identifying the advantages the new styles held over older, more formal modes of dress:

---

173 Rousseau, Émile, 367.
174 Rousseau, Émile, 366. As David Kunzle has observed, “Rousseau knew that stays sexualized the body, a function antithetical to an educational system designed to develop the heart at the expense of sexual maturation, which he regarded as dangerous, especially in girls who tended to awaken it in boys.” Kunzle further notes, “Enemies of the corset ...are generally autocratic males with a low opinion of the female sex and an attachment to the concept of the ‘natural women,’ that is, one dedicated to home and children.” See David Kunzle, “Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts’s "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman",” Signs 2, 3 (Spring, 1977): 570-579; For more on Rousseau and corsetry, see Kunzle, Fashion and Fetishism: A History of Tight-Lacing and Other forms of Body Sculpture in the West (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 92-96.
...it is but justice to the present day, to state, that the fashion for female dress in particular, is more natural, and far more becoming than the modes of past times...the modest white dress has more captivation in it than brocades and demasks, tissues and thick satins. There is, moreover, an enchanting purity in this style, greatly at variance with the old school of high heels like stilts, lappets, ruffles, lace aprons, fly-caps, and disfiguring hump-backed sacks...173

The most readily visible alteration to female dress at the turn of the nineteenth century involved the fabric out of which women’s garments were typically made. For much of the eighteenth century, women’s clothing was made out of either wool and linen, sturdy fabrics that lent themselves to the creation of fairly structured garments. By the end of the century, however, cotton, and especially lightweight cotton muslin, had taken the position of ‘fashion’s favourite.’176

The effect of this change, coupled with the outmoding of the rigid undergarments, including the long stays and side hoops that had previously given shape to the body and the clothes, was that women’s garments appeared much flimsier and less substantial than previous styles had. While turn-of-the-century women’s garments revealed only a little more bare flesh than older styles had, they were much more prone to cling to the body, revealing the shape of breasts, hips, and thighs. When the body was in motion, or when breezes tousled the fabric of garments, this revelation was

176 Beverly Lemire has written extensively on the development of the cotton trade in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in her book Fashion’s Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1600-1800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and in her chapter “Fashioning Cottons: Asian Trade, Domestic Industry and Consumer Demand, 1660-1780” in David Jenkins, ed., The Cambridge History of Western Textiles, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 493-512. According to Lemire, a British law passed in 1721, which was intended to protect the silk industry, banned cotton textiles in England, with the exception of Indian muslins, which were typically loosely woven and light colored. These muslin fabrics emerged as a popular, though expensive, choice for fashionable dress after the 1760s, and their popularity increased dramatically when the ban on the importation of all cottons was lifted in 1774.
even more pronounced, an effect that satirists like the British caricaturist James Gilray (1756-1817) lampooned mercilessly in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Gillray’s satirical print illustrating *The Three Graces in a High Wind*, for example, shows three young women, various parts of whose bodies have been revealed as the delicate fabrics of their gowns are tousled in the wind and mold to their contours (figure 5). Anecdotes about the extent to which the female body was revealed by flimsy, unsupported gowns regularly appeared in American periodicals offering further proof of the ease with which female modesty was compromised, even when garments covered the body fully. The “Old Woman,” a regular column in the *Ladies Monthly Museum* chastised the “Fair dames at noon of day in white / Shewing their shapes to all the men / Pacing the smooth parades in crowds / Like shadows folded in their shrouds,” reminding them that “though to earth the drapr’y reaches, / ’Tis but a kind of muslin breeches: / Tight ev’n as buckskin on the beau…”

Related to concerns over the extent to which soft muslins revealed and made vulnerable the female form beneath them was anxiety about the emerging aesthetic of informality emphasized by the new style of dress. One of the first styles to signal the departure from earlier, more structured modes of dress was the *robe en chemise* of the 1780s, the lines of which were based on the appearance of a woman’s innermost undergarment, the chemise or shift. Aileen Ribeiro

\[^{177}\] French caricaturists typically confined their mockery to the fashions themselves, finding ample fodder for their jokes in the flimsiness of women’s gowns, the complexity of their hairstyles, and the lengths to which women went in order to make themselves fashionable. British satirists, on the other hand, skewered both the insubstantial garments and the (im)morality of the French women who wore them, as in Isaac Cruikshank’s *Parisian Ladies in their Winter Dress for 1800* (figure 6) in which are shown three women, clad in silly caricatures of formal evening dress, attending a fashionable gathering. Each is posed differently, to recall the typical artistic arrangement of the three graces, and to demonstrate that French fashion left no body part to the viewer’s imagination – we see the buttocks of the woman with her back to the viewer on the far left, the pubis of the center figure who faces forward, the breast of the woman to the right turned sideways. These ladies seem to be fully aware of the fact that they are exposing themselves, a detail that adds a layer of self-righteous disgust for the baseness of French women to the mockery of their extreme clothes. \[^{178}\] *Ladies’ Monthly Museum* (January, 1802), 7.
describes the shape of the *robe en chemise* as “a simple tube of muslin...fastened with a drawstring at the neck,” an ideal garment to showcase soft, draping cotton muslin, the delicacy of which made it unable to support complex seaming or rigid construction. Ribeiro notes that the ease with which the *robe en chemise* could be pulled on over the head represented a shift from the previously established form of dress, which consisted of a separate petticoat and gown that women donned like a coat. The *robe en chemise* was immortalized in – and made infamous by – Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun’s 1783 portrait of Marie-Antoinette, which incited such a public outcry when it was exhibited at the Salon that it had to be removed from public view (figure 7). In her memoir, Vigée-Le Brun remarked that while she felt that Marie-Antoinette’s attire had been “quite orderly,” those who saw it exhibited “did not refrain from saying the queen was represented in her underwear.” While on the one hand, the popularity of the *robe en chemise* and equally casual, softly draped styles that followed it, represented in a tangible way the rejection of what Mary Wollstonecraft called the “idle caprices of an effeminate Court,” the abandonment of a certain formality in the approach to personal appearance, such as the tightly-laced stays, signaled the potential for a similar relaxation of morals. The formality of earlier modes of dress, while not given universal positive acknowledgment, was generally held up as a more effective guard to bodily modesty than the casual, diaphanous mode that replaced it. For example, an 1804 poem comparing early eighteenth-century garments to fashions of the present day wistfully remembers that “sweet old fashion,” when women “did not leave their bosoms bare.” The poem notes that the fashions of 1700 “hid almost all the skin,” and any flesh not covered by the garments themselves

---

was tended to by “the rough handkerchief [that] did so pin,” so that “no part of the breast lay open.” Similar anxiety around the shift from rigid, concealing garments to those with less structure is articulated in a satirical ‘Dialogue Between a Lady and a Man Milliner at Paris,’ which appeared in the *Lady’s Monthly Museum* in 1801:

**Lady:** “Citizen, I am just come to town: - pray have the goodness to inform me how I must appear, to be in the fashion.”

**Milliner:** “Madame, ‘tis done in a moment: in two minutes I shall equip you in the first style. - Have the goodness to take off your bonnet.”

**L:** “Well.”

**M:** “Off that petticoat.”

**L:** “There is it.”

**M:** “Away with these pockets.”

**L:** “There they go.

**M:** “Throw off that handkerchief.”

**L:** “‘Tis done.”

**M:** “Away with that corset and sleeves.”

**L:** “Will that do?”

**M:** “Yes, Madame, you are now in the fashion. ‘Tis an easy matter, you see. - To be dressed in the fashion, you have only to undress”

That the ‘Dialogue Between a Lady and a Man Milliner at Paris,’ which equates fashionableness with nudity, is conducted between a French milliner and a woman who is presumably not French, or at least not from Paris, betrays an undercurrent of anxiety in the early

---


183 *Ladies’ Monthly Museum* (February 1801), 74-75.
republic about the extent to which the preferences of American women were being shaped by foreign immodesty and excess. While Americans celebrated the natural silhouette of the new styles and their emphasis of the unfettered bosom’s softly rounded shape, their association with foreign, and especially French culture was problematic because of the widespread assumption that French culture was both riddled with vice and organized around luxurious pursuits out of step with republican virtues: 184

What are we to think of a country, that...has formally, professedly, and by law, established the connection of the sexes, upon the footing of an unrestrained concubinage? - That has turned the whole country into one universal brothel? - That leaves every man to take, and to get rid of a wife...and a wife, in like manner, to get rid of her husband, upon less notice, than you can, in this country, of a ready-furnished lodging? 185

Questioning the morality of the French had been a regular part of American cultural discourse before the turn of the nineteenth century, but the jabs intensified with reports of the bloodshed of the French Revolution, the Terror, and the rise of Napoleon, which were seen outside of France as punishments for the nation’s degeneracy. 186 French women were particularly targeted; reports of their lapses of delicacy ranged from the minor, such as dancing a gallopade with too much vigor, to

184 This assumption was undoubtedly furthered by reports to England from the Jacobin press of orgies and other outrageous behaviors engaged in by members of the French aristocracy. These reports were circulated in American texts as well. See Mary Trouille, “Revolution in the Boudoir,” Gail Schwab and John J. Jeanneney, eds., The French Revolution of 1789 and its Impact (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995) 80-83.
186 The anarchy and violence witnessed in France was caused, according to British moralist John Bowles, by the corruption of society. He noted that “The unutterable woes which the French people have since experienced – the inexpressible degradation to which they are now reduced, afford an awful proof of the Moral Government of that Supreme Ruler...the experience of all ages, and the immutable principles of justice warrant the conclusion, that they will continue to be the objects of Divine vengeance, until they expiate, as far as is yet possible, their foul treason...” See J. D. C. Clark, English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics during the Ancien Regime (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 315.
the flagrant and revolting, as illustrated by this passage detailing the casual air with which French women were observed to regard their bodily processes:

At Paris, we are told that a gallant frequently accompanies his mistress to the shrine of the goddess Cloacina [Cloacina was goddess who presided over the system of sewers in ancient Rome], stands sentinel at the door, and entertains her with bon mots, and protestations of love all the time she is worshipping there; and that a lady when in a carriage, whatever company be along with her, if called upon to exonerate nature, pulls the cord, orders the driver to stop, steps out, and having performed what Nature required, resumes her seat without the least ceremony or discomposure.  

Although it is unlikely that this passage or others like it reflect what was actually viewed as appropriate behavior in France, it speaks to an anxiety revolving around the belief that French women made into public spectacles those things that any decent American would know to keep private. This anxiety was particularly apparent in reactions to the extremes of bodily display in which French women reportedly indulged. Anecdotes about ladies in Paris wetting the fabric of their gowns so that they clung to their bodies, tailoring the necklines of gowns so low that their nipples were exposed, and wearing pink knit body-stockings to enhance the appearance of rosy flesh beneath their sheer garments were widely circulated in the last decades of the eighteenth century, and they contributed to the formation of an opinion in Britain and America that France was a place of either sexual corruption or opportunity, depending on one’s viewpoint.

In addition to anxieties around specific fashionable practices that were considered immodest, texts expressed more general concern over the foreign influence admitted into

---


188 Aileen Ribeiro notes that “anything French in the way of dress or pleasures was greeted [in England, and later in America] with a kind of horrified relish...[as] the notion of ‘gay Paree,’ with its vices of all kinds, became part of the mythology of the city.” Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2003), 121.
American society by fashions originated in Britain or France, and the challenge such influence presented to the formation of American cultural identity. Directly following the Revolutionary War, American texts began to tout the necessity of citizens choosing clothing and accessories that comported with national ideology as a way to difference themselves and, more importantly, to protect the nation’s freedom. According to an 1826 essay on fashion, American liberty was imperiled if “a tyrant of our own creation...controls our pleasures, fashions our garb, cramps our motions, fills our lives with vain cares, and restless anxiety.”\(^{189}\) In other words, an overreliance on foreign taste in fashion made Americans dependent on foreign interests, a particularly onerous enslavement, since “no chains are so cumbrous and galling, as those which we are pleased to wear by way of grace and ornament.”\(^{190}\) While all citizens were expected to choose clothing that comported with American ideology, women, as the ‘ornaments of the nation,’ were particularly implicated in the display of patriotic character through dress. The discourse on modesty encouraged American women to choose simple clothes that demonstrated sincerity, virtue, and “neatness without luxury...a characteristic feature of the purity of American manners.”\(^{191}\) The preference for understated clothing and restrained adornments aligned with broader principles of Republicanism that resisted luxury and artifice in favor of neatness and economy, as articulated in this treatise, which identifies simplicity as a central element of the American woman’s character:

The daughters of America ought to command the respect of the present, the homage of future generations. We desire to see them outstrip the servile customs of an antiquated nation, - to form for themselves a code of morals, and a model of intellect, - pure and independent as the constitution of the land which gave them birth. Let them not forget, that


\(^{191}\) S B., “American by French Pens,” \textit{Port - Folio} 4, 2 (August 1814), 199.
the story of their country’s freedom is an heirloom to future ages, that the unaffected simplicity of the revolutionary heroes is interwoven with that story, and will form a portion of the magic of its influence.\footnote{Female Character,} Garments that reflected liberty and freedom from artifice not only benefited the characters of American women, they also provided a gesture of support to American interests. This had been the case since the time of the Revolutionary War, during which women’s fashions were imagined to reflect their support of patriotic ideology in specific, tangible ways. According to one remembrance of the war, American women, “animated by the purest patriotism,” decided to “render themselves more really useful,” by “resigning the ornaments of their apparel,” and wearing “a clothing more simple...[and] hair dressed less elegant,” in order to conserve resources for the war effort.\footnote{The Sentiments of an American Woman,} Even after the war, when the choice of unadorned clothing was no longer an economic necessity, American culture continued to frame modest, simple female dress as a patriotic imperative. An essay on American culture, written by a British visitor early in the nineteenth century, illustrates the extent to which women’s mode of dress was regarded as a signifier of their own – and the nation’s – identity:

...I cannot help judging in part of national...character by the general fashion of garments...when the dress is arranged with decency and simplicity, we feel disposed to give women credit for modesty and good sense. I cannot as yet accord the latter quality to the young Americans, but I do give them full credit for native innocence of heart, which

\footnote{Female Character,}{The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine 6, 3 (September 1835): 204.}
\footnote{The Sentiments of an American Woman,}{The Columbian Magazine (January 1789): 760.}
prevents their gayety from ever overstepping decency and though we should sometimes
smile at their vanity, leaves us no room to blush for their immodesty.\footnote{194}

The author of the treatise also praises the “daughters of the republic” for dressing “in that
simplicity which is so appropriate a beauty in all that meets the eye in a young democracy.”

Instructions to women about how to dress themselves in accordance with the dictates of
modest self-adornment were fairly straightforward, and privileged simple silhouettes and restrained
accessories, as articulated in an excerpt from an 1839 article entitled “A Voice to Young Ladies”:

Let your dress always comport with neatness, propriety, and economy...\textit{Neatness} will
prevent you from arraying yourself in geegaws and tinsel, and running after the absurdities
of fashion, and will dictate an adaptation of dress to your form, complexion, age, and
circumstances.\footnote{195}

In addition to the beauty of its simplicity, American texts promoted the importance of unadorned,
neat dress as a corrective to foreign fashion’s pernicious effects on morality. Women who followed
the whims of fashion to extreme ends, on the other hand, not only undermined their own
characters, but threatened the very principles upon which America’s liberty was based.\footnote{196}

\footnote{194} “Extracts from Miss Wright's 'View of Society and Manners in America,' &c.,” \textit{The Literary Gazette; or, Journal of Criticism, Science, and the Arts} 1, 32 (August 1831): 497.


\footnote{196} According, for example, to an essay in \textit{The Knickerbocker}, “From the female part of the fashionable world has also arisen that inordinate desire for wealth, that extravagance of expenditure, that insane eagerness for display...which have not only wrecked the peace and prosperity of so many families, but which now threaten to undermine the fair fabric of our country’s birth-right – \textit{freedom and equality} – by the wide-spreading devastation of their corrupting streams.” See G., “American Society,” \textit{The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly} 9, 1 (February 1837): 163.
REVEALING THE MODEST BOSOM

Amid the chorus of concerns voiced in American texts over the moral and political ramifications of changes to female fashionable dress, one that is notably absent involves the greater revelation of the female body, and especially the bosom, occasioned by the cut and construction of the new styles. This is surprising, since the privileging of modesty, coupled with the bosom’s heady associations with beauty and femininity, should have necessitated the bosom’s constant management through specific rules about the proportion of its flesh displayed, or the extent to which its contours could be discerned. But while it is true that modesty’s centrality to American women’s identities was a frequently reiterated theme in texts, and that women were regularly reminded to monitor the compliance of their dress and comportment with the dictates of modesty, specific guidelines for what did and did not constitute modest self-presentation are somewhat vague, as in an 1830 guide for ladies’ fashion that pronounced immodest dress, and especially the exposure of the bosom “beyond a certain limit” to be “unpardonably meretricious,” but failed to give any indication exactly where on the body the threshold for problematic immodesty was located.\(^{197}\) One explanation for the absence of specific guidelines for the appropriate concealment of the female body is modesty’s inherent subjectivity, and the constant variability of its parameters across individual experience. Just as today’s standards for appropriate dress and comportment differ widely, so did early nineteenth-century visions for what modest self-presentation did and did not include. Modesty’s subjective nature caused one individual to denounce “absent kerchiefs and naked elbows” as “a certain indication of intellectual depravity,” while another permitted, even welcomed a display of “the bosom and shoulders.”\(^{198}\)


\(^{198}\) “Modesty in Dress,” *The Ladies’ Literary Cabinet, Being a Repository of Miscellaneous Literary Productions, both Original and Selected in Prose and Verse* 1, 18 (September 1819): 141-142.
One source that did provide some detailed information about what constituted modest and immodest dress was a book entitled *The Mirror of the Graces; or, the English lady's costume: combining and harmonizing taste and judgment, elegance and grace, modesty, simplicity and economy, with fashion in dress*. First published in America in 1813, reprinted in two additional American editions (1815, and 1831), and excerpted in numerous ladies’ magazines, *The Mirror* was an indispensible guide for young women navigating the world of courtship and working to present themselves in the most favorable light possible. At its outset, the anonymous author of *The Mirror*, who identifies herself only as “A Lady of Distinction,” presents an effusive argument on behalf of female modesty and its inexorable bond to beauty:

What is the eloquence of [a woman’s] beauty? – Modesty! What is its first argument? –
Modesty! What is its second? – Modesty! What is its third? – Modesty! What is its peroration, the winding up of all its charms, the striking spell that binds the heart of man to her forever? – Modesty!!! Modesty is all in all; for it comprises the beauties of the mind as well as those of the body... 

Echoing Rousseau’s construction of modesty as a device to attract male attention, the author of *The Mirror* promises women who follow her commandments access to all the delights attendant upon gaining the affection of a “man of delicacy and worth” who “with celestial rapture clasps to his warm and noble heart the unsunned bosom of the chaste and vestal enwrapped fair.” In addition to these general thoughts on modesty, *The Mirror* also provided readers with specific guidelines for dress, specifically the appropriate display of their “beauties,” or their bosoms. The extent to which women could appropriately reveal portions of their bosoms varied according to the

---

time of day, season of the year, and age of the wearer. Take, for example, its advice about the difference between modest daytime and evening dress, which notes that “the morning robe should cover the arms and the bosom, nay even the neck,” while in evening dress, a woman’s “arms, and part of her neck and bosom may be unveiled” without controversy. Even with such specific guidelines, the author of *The Mirror* remarks that she relies on her readers’ good sense and discretion to determine modesty’s parameters for themselves, noting that women “need not very close instruction; for at once they perceive, combine, and adopt with judgment and delicacy” the limits of modesty, and advising them to therefore “exhibit without shade as much of her bust as shall come within the limits of fashion, without infringing upon the borders of immodesty.”

One passage in *The Mirror* stands out as a particularly important statement for both specific guidelines for modest dress and the more general discourse on modesty in America. The author observes:

To the exposure of the bosom and back, as some ladies display these parts of their person, what shall we say? When a woman grown to the age of discretion, of her own choice “unveils her beauties to the sun and moon,” then, from even a Helen’s charms, the sated eye turns away loathing. It has discerned the licentious heart beneath the swelling breast, and its beauties no longer captivate.

While this passage specifically addresses women “grown to the age of discretion,” which, elsewhere in the text, the author identifies as those over the age of thirty, she later concedes that “the bosom

---

200 Although *The Mirror* was authored by a British woman, it was claimed by reviewers as a suitable guide for American women, as in the following synopsis and review from 1830: “It is, we understand, a reprint from the first edition, which appeared so far back as 1817, at Calcutta. If, however, it formerly contained any Indian allusions, these have been expunged, and the work is adapted to the present day, and the existing state of manners in this country.” See “Remarks on Rouging,” 305.

201 *The Mirror*, 60.


203 *The Mirror*, 75.
and shoulders of a very young and fair girl may be displayed without exciting much displeasure or
disgust; the beholder regards too prodigal an exhibition...as the effect of accident.”204

This second proclamation is particularly significant, and it compels careful consideration.
We note that The Mirror’s author allows for the possibility, even the likelihood that the young
woman’s body will occasionally be exposed to view, but excuses the exposure from the
problematics associated with a charge of immodesty if it appears to be inadvertent. Several
contemporaneous American texts made similar allowances for the accidental revelation of the
female form, such as the 1830 article “Hints on Female Dress,” the stated goal of which is to
articulate the delicate balance between daytime attire that is too concealing and too revealing. Its
author begins with the pronouncement that

...morning robes should be of a length sufficiently circumscribed not to impede...walking;
but on no account must they be too short; for, when any design is betrayed of showing the
foot or ankle, the idea of beauty is lost in that of the wearer’s odious indelicacy.205

We might well expect that a woman who considers the conscious display of one’s foot an act of
“odious indelicacy” would be intolerant to any bodily exposure, regardless of the exposed
individual’s intention. This is not the case, however. As with the judgment of The Mirror’s author,
the author of “Hints on Dress” declares that when immodesty occurs as the result of an accident, it
ceases to be immodesty. She notes:

...when no show of vanity is apparent in the dress – when the lightly flowing drapery, by
unsought accident, discovers the pretty buckskinned foot or taper ankle, a sense of virgin

204 The author observes that “when the freshness of youth vanishes; when Delia passes her teens,
and fastly approaches her thirtieth year...the sun which shines so brightly on her beauties declines
when she displays them. All must pass away with the flight of Time. Before this happens, it would
be well for her to remember that it is wiser to throw a shadow over her yet unimpaired charms,
than to hold them in the light till they are seen to decay.” The Mirror, 77.
205 A Lady, “Hints on Female Dress,” The Atheneum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines 3, 12
(March 1830): 476.
timidity, and of exquisite loveliness together, strikes upon the senses; and Admiration, with a tender sigh, softly whispers, “The most resistless charm is modesty.”

The advice to women presented by both this directive and that of *The Mirror* is clear: an immodest display of the body becomes socially acceptable when it results from an accident rather than a contrivance.

The significance of this sanctioning of occasional, inadvertent immodesty is related to the belief that female virtue was central to the characters of American women. So central, in fact, that is was assumed to be present even when dress or behavior temporarily indicated otherwise. Thus, the revelation of ankle, shoulder, or even breast, so long as it was unintentional, did not test the limits of propriety. What’s more, as “Hints on Female Dress” notes, such a display not only failed to challenge the perception of a woman as virtuous, but it could actually signify her modesty by reminding witnesses of both the loveliness of the female form and the guilelessness of its owner.

The notion that Americans privileged modesty so highly that they were more appreciative of the “virgin timidity” associated with a woman’s accidental exposure of her body than the exposure itself might strike the modern reader as an insincere trick to sanction the ogling of “wardrobe malfunctions.” Within the context of early republican culture, however, it was a necessary strategy that mitigated displays of the breast associated with the new modes of dress and, more importantly, preserved the impression of the American woman’s modesty as inherent and infallible, an impression central to the validation of the bosom as a political body.

---

206 “Hints on Female Dress,” 476.
CHAPTER 3

NATIVE BEAUTIES
THE ENBOSOMING OF AN AMERICAN ICON

Pocahontas...the glorious Indian maid,
   The tutelary of this land,
   The angel of the woodland shade,
   The miracle of God’s own hand...
He is no man who does not bend the knee,
And she no woman who is not like thee.\(^{207}\)

Along with instructive texts that illustrated how best to embody sensibility, modesty, and all of the other essential qualities of femininity, American women were also furnished with the narratives of historical exemplars, like Joan of Arc, Lady Jane Grey, or Hélöise, reports of whose beauty and virtue provided models for feminine behavior and appearance.\(^{208}\) Within this group, few figures were more highly esteemed than Pocahontas (ca. 1595-1617), the Powhatan Indian princess famous for aiding the English soldiers who established a settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, and for saving their leader, Captain John Smith, from execution at the hands of her own people. Pocahontas’s central role in America’s early history had been recognized since her own time, but following the Revolutionary War, her status was elevated even further by cultural materials that sought to connect early American history’s central players to the attributes associated with its emergent national identity. Thus Pocahontas, the “angel” and “tutelary” of the North

---

\(^{207}\) *Ode to Jamestown*, James Kirke Paulding, 1836

\(^{208}\) A number of American ladies’ magazines contained a regular biographical feature, such as the “Female Biography” column that appeared in both the *Ladies’ Garland* (Philadelphia, 1837-1850) and the *New York Mirror* (New York: 1823-42) or “The Young Ladies’ Garland” that appeared in the *Monthly Repository and Library of Entertaining Knowledge* (New York, 1830-34). Even those periodicals that did not have a dedicated space to celebrate exemplary historical women still regularly did so in poems, illustrations, and encomia.
American continent’s earliest English settlement, was transformed from an historical figure to a mythohistoric icon whose actions on behalf of the men of Jamestown were celebrated as an endorsement of American nationhood, the consequences of which reached far beyond her own time. In addition to aligning her life’s narrative with the broader discourse on national identity, the early nineteenth-century veneration of Pocahontas, carried out in a range of texts, including novels, poems, and dramas, as well as portraits and history paintings, also established her connection to the contemporaneous discourse on exceptional American femininity. These texts and images framed her actions on behalf of Smith and the other English explorers as expressions of her perfect, inherent femininity, embellishing the sparse details of the historical record with invented anecdotes that emphasized her virtue, tenderness, sensibility, and other feminine qualities.

As the excerpt from American poet James K. Paulding’s 1836 *Ode to Jamestown* indicates, the Pocahontas imagined by nineteenth-century culture was renowned both as an object of masculine desire and a paragon women were meant to emulate. American cultural materials enthusiastically imagined Pocahontas’s physical appearance with an eye for its feminine details, and just as romantic flourishes were added to the narrative of Pocahontas’s life, accounts of her face and body were ornamented with effusive descriptions of flawless skin, lustrous hair, and delicate limbs. Such embellishments not only aligned Pocahontas with the standards of beauty to which any early republican heroine was a subject, but also demonstrated her particular virtue, embodied in the exquisite perfection of her physical form. Arbitrarily ignoring actual history, which indicates that Pocahontas was a child of 11 or 12 when the most illustrated episodes of her narrative actually occurred, the Pocahontas of the early nineteenth century was a beautiful nymph with the physique of a sexually mature woman. This physical transformation, through which Pocahontas was endowed with a dainty waist, rounded hips, and, of course, a lush bosom, not only increased her erotic appeal, but also overlaid upon her historical significance the physical features associated with
patriotic femininity as well as the virtues such features signified. In short, the Pocahontas celebrated by early nineteenth-century cultural materials was ‘embosomed’ – endowed, through the making over of her body as an outward sign of her inner femininity, with the characteristics American ideology required its primeval model of womanhood to possess.209

This chapter will examine what came to be the standard descriptors of Pocahontas’s character and appearance in the early republic. That the Pocahontas imagined by nineteenth-century cultural materials was an exotic and sexualized figure is a commonplace, but I situate her eroticization within the discourse on femininity, which, as it did for all American women, celebrated the sensual passages of her body as signs of her virtue. In positioning her as a progenitrix of the American feminine ideal, I argue against recent interpretations that have proposed a binary vision of Pocahontas as either a virtuous lady or an eroticized forest nymph. Instead, I demonstrate that early republican presentations of Pocahontas simultaneously located both moral and sensual associations within the contours of her bosom, which was understood as the locus of not only her own feminine perfection, but also that spirit of femininity which she passed as a birthright to the daughters of America who came after.

POCAHONTAS: THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Tracing the presentation of Pocahontas and her narrative after the turn of the nineteenth century necessitates a firm grasp on the major events of her life, since it is these events upon which claims of her feminine superiority were based. Despite sparse primary documentation that leaves long periods unaccounted for, historians have successfully organized the chronology of

209 My use of the term ‘embosom’ is, of course, self-conscious. I mean for it to recall its archaic definitia, “to press to one’s bosom,” or “to cherish in one’s bosom,” and also to describe the process by which the historical figure of Pocahontas was literally bound up by the physical and emotional attributes of ideal femininity.
Pocahontas’s life after contact with the English soldiers who established the James Fort in 1607, based on four main primary sources, chief among which was John Smith’s *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, & the Summer Isles* (1624). Smith’s text, which contains the first published account of Pocahontas’s rescue of Smith, as well as her warning to the James Fort of a Powhatan attack and her rescue from Powhatan violence of two other Englishmen, covers the period of time from the first contact between Pocahontas and the English through late 1609. The second, Ralph Hamor’s *True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (1615) relates the period during which Pocahontas was held as a hostage by the English in 1612/13, as well as her Christian baptism and marriage to John Rolfe. The third, William Strachey’s *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannie* (written 1615, first published 1849), also discusses Pocahontas’s first contact with the English settlers at Jamestown and is notable because it contains details about her life prior to

---

210 Philip Young provides a concise summary of the major primary source documents related to Pocahontas’s life in “The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered,” *The Kenyon Review* 24, 3 (Summer 1962). Young notes the scarcity of concrete information contained in these records, a fact reinforced by Sharon Larkins’ discussion of teaching methods for the Pocahontas narrative, in which she distills the entirety of the seventeenth-century historical record into the following sequential chronology for Pocahontas’s lifetime:

1. Pocahontas’s birth in about 1595
2. The traditional story of her rescue of John Smith in 1607 and her continued relationship with Smith and the other English men at Jamestown.
3. Her abduction by Captain Argall in 1612 and subsequent captivity at Jamestown.
4. Her conversion to the Christian faith in 1613 while living at Jamestown.
5. Her marriage to John Rolfe in 1614 and the birth of their son Thomas in 1615.
6. Her trip to England in 1616 and her success there as an Indian princess.
7. Her death and burial in 1617.


211 Smith’s *Generall Historie* was one of four accounts he wrote about the exploration of Virginia. Smith’s other accounts include: *A True Relation* (1608), *New Englands trials* (1622), and *True Travels* (1630). Although each contains information about Smith’s dealings with the Powhatans, Pocahontas is only mentioned in the accounts published after 1620. In addition to his four texts, Smith also authored a number of letters that contain information about Pocahontas. The full texts of all Smith’s works can be found in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith, 1580-1631*, Philip Barbour, ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

1607, including the fact that she was married to a Powhatan man before her marriage to John Rolfe.\textsuperscript{213} There is also a brief mention of Pocahontas’s captivity in the 1614 edition of Samuel Purchas’s popular travelogue *Purchas his pilgrimage*, as well as an account of her journey to England, her reception by members of the royal court of James I, and her death in the 1625 edition of the same work, published under the title *Haklyuys Posthumus or Purchas his pilgrimes* (1625). In addition to these works, a number of letters written by shareholders in the Virginia Company and early residents of the colony mention Pocahontas and the events of her life, although most do so only in passing.\textsuperscript{214} A similar scarcity exists with respect to visual representations made of Pocahontas from life. In fact, there is only one portrait of her for which she is known to have sat – the engraving of *Matoaka als Rebecca* by Dutch artist Simon van de Passe, undertaken during her trip to England in 1616 (figure 8). As Pauline Turner Strong and others have noted, the van de Passe engraving, which was a standard illustration in texts about the exploration and colonization of Virginia through the end of the eighteenth century, was commissioned to record

\textsuperscript{213} In addition to the information about Pocahontas’s supposed first marriage, Strachey’s description of Pocahontas herself diverges from the standard characterization of a beautiful, virtuous heroine. He notes that she was “well-featured but wanton,” and describes what seems like a bizarre ritual of flirtation that Pocahontas initiated with some of the young men of the James fort in which she would “get the boyes forth with her into the market place, and make the wheele, falling on their hands, turning their heels upwards, whome she would followe and wheele so herself, naked as she was, all the fort over.” See William Strachey *The Historic of Travell into Virginia Britania*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Virginia Freund (1612; London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 72. Clearly, Strachey’s text presents several challenges to the dominant interpretation of Pocahontas, and it was popular with those who sought to discredit the notion of Pocahontas as a heroine of American culture (mostly northern historians in the mid-nineteenth century); See Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 381-444.

\textsuperscript{214} The authors of these letters include: John Chamberlain, a Virginia Company Shareholder, Thomas Dale, the Deputy-Governor of the Virginia Colony in 1611 and 1614-16, Alexander Whitaker, an Anglican minister who established two churches near the James Fort, and John Rolfe, the eventual husband of Pocahontas. See Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 552, 695, 865.
Pocahontas’s likeness, and, more importantly, to illustrate the success of the Virginia Company’s commitment to proselytism through its representation of an Anglicized Native woman.\textsuperscript{215}

Out of the body of seventeenth century sources, John Smith’s accounts became the main source for stories about Jamestown and Pocahontas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The popularity of Smith’s accounts owed much to the drama they attached to Jamestown’s settlement by the English, presenting it less as a sober, coherent historical narrative and more as a sprawling epic myth.\textsuperscript{216} His \textit{Generall Historie}, in particular, established a sense of romance and excitement through its tales of Smith and company swaggering and swashbuckling through the forests of Virginia, encountering danger at every turn.\textsuperscript{217} Smith, of course, casts himself as the hero of this drama, and makes Pocahontas his leading lady, the “only Nonpareil” of a savage land who

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The Virginia Company of London, which financed the expedition to Jamestown and supplied the explorers upon their arrival, received financial compensation from a number of prominent English clergymen based on their stated commitment to ensure, “with all diligence, care, and respect...that the true word and service of God and Christian faith be preached, planted, and used” in the New World. Pocahontas’s conversion to Christianity and her subsequent marriage to John Rolfe were viewed as that policy’s first fruits, and her trip to England along with several Powhatan attendants, including her sister, and brother-in-law, the high priest Utamatomakkin, was, in part, a publicity campaign to ensure continued financial support for the ‘missionary’ endeavors of the English in Virginia. For the language of the Virginia Company Charter, including the quoted passage, see Samuel M. Bemiss, \textit{The Three Charters of the Virginia Company of London} (Williamsburg, VA: Virginia's 350th Anniversary Celebration Corp, 1957), 15. For more on the purposes of Pocahontas’ trip to England, see Ivor Noël Hume’s “Pocahontas’s London Christmas” in 1607: \textit{Jamestown and the New World}, Dennis Montgomery, comp. (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2007), 138-143; Pauline Turner Strong, \textit{Captive Selves, Captivating Others The Politics and Poetics of Colonial Captivity Narratives} (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 65-70; and Frances Mossiker, \textit{Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend} (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1996), 270.
\item As David Read has noted, Smith’s chaotic narrative mirrored the multi-voiced and somewhat chaotic nature of the Jamestown project itself. See David Read, “Colonialism and Coherence: The Case of Captain John Smith's ‘Generall Historie of Virginia’,” \textit{Modern Philology} 91, 4 (May, 1994): 428-448.
\item This is especially true of his \textit{Generall Historie}, which, as Smith’s twentieth-century biographer Philip Barbour notes, Smith wrote with an eye towards self-promotion. According to Barbour, such self-promotion was needed in order to distance Smith from the recent failures of the Virginia Company and to publicize his successful diplomacy with the Powhatans. See Barbour’s introduction to \textit{The Complete Works of Captain John Smith}, 4-5.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
“much exceedeth” any to the rest of her people “for wit and spirit.”  He introduces her during an account of the rescue scene that would become the most famous moment of her narrative, setting the scene with an account of his capture by the Powhatans, who brought him before Pocahontas’s father, Wahunsonacocock (or Chief Powhatan). As Smith understood the proceedings of his audience before the Chief, the decision was made that he should be executed, perhaps as a symbolic gesture to the Virginia Company, and Wahunsonacocock’s warriors prepared to “beate out his braines.” Referring to himself in the third person, as is his custom throughout the account, Smith describes his salvation, in the form of Pocahontas:

...two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs ...Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her own upon his to save him from death ...

---

218 Philip Young and Rayna Green have noted that Smith’s story closely resembles an ancient Scottish ballad called “young Beichan” or “Lord Batemand and the Turkish King’s Daughter,” which tells the tale of a young and handsome English adventurer who travels to a foreign land populated by dark-skinned natives, is captured by their King, and thrown into a dungeon to await execution. He is saved at the last moment by the King’s beautiful daughter, who sends him back to his homeland. She then follows him, converts to Christianity, and the two are married. According to Green, this story was known in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both in its ballad form and as the frame story for several other English and Scottish legends. See Young, pp. 389-441; and Green, “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture,” The Massachusetts Review 16, 4 (Autumn, 1975): 698-714. Smith’s quotes can be found in Haile, Jamestown Narratives, 241.

219 For more on the structure of the Powhatan political hierarchy at the time of first contact, see Helen Rountree, Pocahontas’s People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 10.

220 There is a great deal of controversy as to whether or not Smith’s life was actually in danger during the ritual he describes. Several historians of Powhatan Indian culture, including Frederic Gleach and Karen Ordhal Kupperman, believe that what Smith describes is actually an initiation ceremony involving a symbolic reenactment of death and subsequent rebirth as a member of the Powhatan community. See Frederic Gleach, “Controlled Speculation and Constructed Myths: The Saga of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith,” in Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History, Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), 39-74; and Karen Ordhal Kupperman, “‘Brasse without but golde within’: The Writings of
Smith’s report of Pocahontas’s emotional appeal on his behalf and his emphasis on the drama of her throwing her arms around his head and laying herself before the would-be executioners paints a dramatic picture of a spontaneous decision made under the influence of either overwhelming sympathy or instantaneous romantic attraction (or possibly both). Smith heightens the emotionalism of the moment in a later letter to Queen Anne, in which he adds the detail that Pocahontas imperiled her own life by saving his, noting that "at the minute of my execution, she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to Jamestown."

Pocahontas’s spontaneous attraction to Smith, and the loyalty it engendered to both Smith and his men, is implicit in other anecdotes about the aid she gave to the Jamestown settlement, including an occasion when she brought them food and supplies during their first difficult winter, and later when she warned them of an impending attack on the James Fort by the Powhatans. In all of these incidents, Smith makes it clear that Pocahontas risked alienation from her people in order to serve the interests of the English. Smith’s description of Pocahontas warning him about the planned attack on the settlement is particularly poignant:

...for Pocahontas his dearest jewell and daughter, in that darke night came through the irksome woods and told our Captaine great cheare should be sent us by and by: but Powhatan and all the power he could make, would after come and kill us all, if they that brought it could not kill us with our owne weapons when we were at supper. Therefore if we would live shee wished us presently to bee gone. Such things as shee delighted in, he

---

would have given her; but ...shee said shee durst not be seen to have any: for if Powhatan
should know it, she were but dead, and so shee ranne away by her selfe as she came.222
Karen Robertson’s analysis of Pocahontas’s visit to the English court of King James in 1617 has
demonstrated that this first characterization of Pocahontas, and others written by British observers
during her own lifetime, reflected a need on the part of Europeans to transform the radical
‘otherness’ of the Native American woman into something recognizable and acceptable.223 In
Pocahontas’s case, that recognizable figure was a modest, beautiful heroine whose choice to save
John Smith and help the English was not really a choice at all, but a signifier of her intuitive,
inevitable preference for white Christian culture.224

WRITING THE MYTH OF POCAHONTAS

While the story of Pocahontas’s life has necessarily revolved around her relationships with
the English explorers since its earliest retellings, prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, the
focus was actually on her relationship with John Rolfe, the agricultural entrepreneur to whom she
was married in 1614, and on the birth of her son Thomas in 1615, and not John Smith. As Robert
Tilton has observed, late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors celebrated the
Pocahontas/Rolfe relationship because they saw it as a model for the possibility of successful

222 Smith, Generall Historie, 77.
223 Robertson’s analysis is based on Tvetzan Todorov’s discussion of Christopher Columbus, in
which Todorov notes the European tendency to impose hierarchies of inferiority and superiority
when confronted with difference, and concludes that “What is denied is the existence of a human
substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself.”
Tvetzan Todorov, The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other (Norman, OK:
University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 42. See Karen Robertson, “Pocahontas at the Masque,”
Signs 21, 3 (Spring, 1996): 551-583.
224 Susan Scheckel has characterized Pocahontas’s choice to help the English settlers as her
“intuitive recognition of the inherent superiority of the conquerors and their values.” Susan
Scheckel, The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American
intermarriage between European and Indians. Although letters written by Rolfe himself reveal the various problems the seventeenth century mind encountered with the prospect of such a union, not the least of which was Rolfe’s concern his own moral status, imperiled, he felt, by his intimate association with Pocahontas, several later authors of the narrative, including William Byrd and the Marquis de Chastellux, blithely praised Pocahontas’s peaceful assimilation, and wondered at the fact that more Indians had not chosen to do so (in fact, intermarriage between Indians and colonists was generally prohibited).

In the years that followed the Revolutionary War, emerging nationalistic interests took precedence over the desire for narratives of appropriate Native assimilation, and compelled a revision of the plot’s focus away from the symbolism of Pocahontas’s marriage and onto her rescue.

---

225 Although intermarriage or “miscegenation,” as those who opposed the practice typically termed it, was by no means a widely embraced concept during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tilton notes that there were several writers who suggested that the practice could benefit both peoples, and America as a whole. Writers who supported the idea of intermarriage often offered Pocahontas, an Indian woman who converted to Christianity and married an English man, and whose descendents went on to be influential members of southern society, as an exemplar of successful intermarriage. See Robert Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press: 1994), 9-33.

226 Even when making a case to Governor Thomas Dale for his being allowed to marry Pocahontas (since such couplings were generally prohibited), Rolfe defensively insists that his desire for the marriage comes not out of his desire for Pocahontas herself, but rather “for the good of this plantation, for the honour of our countrey, for the glory of God, for my owne salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbelieving creature, namely Pokahuntas.” See in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 850. Byrd was particularly pragmatic in his explanation of the golden opportunity European settlers missed when they discouraged intermarriage early in the seventeenth century, since Indians would have been more likely to peacefully give up their land to family members, rather than armed conquerors. According to Byrd, if seventeenth-century Europeans could have “brought their stomachs to embrace this prudent practice” America would have been spared from needless violence, and besides, within just a few generations, evidence of these unions would be virtually undetectable. He notes: “Had such affinities been contracted in the beginning, how much bloodshed had been prevented and how populous the country would have been, and, consequently, how considerable! Nor would the shade of skin been any reproach at this day, for if a Moor may be washed white in three generations, surely an Indian might be blanched in two.” See Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*, 18-19.
of Smith. The reason for this shift relates to a desire widely felt following the Revolutionary War to construct what Dorothy Ross terms a “grand narrative” of American historical development. Incorporating the related ideologies of American exceptionalism and western progress, this narrative cohered disparate historical episodes into a single story of American progress in order to authorize a national identity that matched the aspirations of Revolutionary rhetoric. Rufus Choate, a politician and orator articulated this desire in an 1833 address entitled “The Importance of Illustrating New-England History by a Series of Romances like the Waverly (sic) Novels.” In the address, Choate urged American authors to make generating a canon of dramatic and exciting historical narratives their top priority, citing the ability of such ‘romantic fictions,’ as Choate called them, to help citizens “realize the serene and august presence and paramount claims of our

227 This shift is traced by Robert Tilton, who notes that the recasting of Pocahontas as a proto-nationalist heroine could only have occurred after the Revolution, observing that “there had to be a United States of America before the ultimate implications of the Rescue could be recognized and before her individual act of rebellion and sacrifice could be seen as a saving of, and even a precedent for, the citizens of the new nation.” Tilton, Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative, 33. See also Tilton, Chapter 2.


229 My assertion that American historical texts functioned as authorizing narratives is based on Hayden White’s studies of European historical narratives, and in particular, White’s The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987): 19-25.

230 The ‘Waverly Novels’ referred to in the title of Choate’s address are the novels of Sir Walter Scott, published beginning in 1814, the series title of which is actually ‘Waverley.’ As Ernest Bernbaum first noted, the widespread enthusiasm for Scott’s novels is related to the broad Romantic movement, which held an interest in the manners and personalities of the past. Scott’s work was the first, though, to combine that interest with narrative prose fiction. Indeed, it is a truism among literary historians that Waverley and the novels that followed it established the genre of historical fiction. As Andrew Hook and others have observed, Scott’s novels also helped to legitimate the novel as a literary form, removing it from the strict purview of the female reader and making it the form “for writers’ richest and deepest imaginative explorations of human experience.” Choate’s invocation of Scott throughout his address speaks both to a desire to see America’s history depicted so heroically as the history of ancient Scotland, as well as to the fact that he believed a similar treatment of US history would benefit the republic. See Ernest Bernbaum, Guide through the Romantic Movement (New York: Ronald Press, 1941); Andrew Hook’s introduction to Sir Walter Scott, Waverley (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981); and P. D. Garside, “Waverley’s Pictures of the Past,” ELH 44, 4 (Winter, 1977): 659-682.
country” and experience the “full flood of American feeling.” The value of such romantic fiction, in Choate’s view, dwelt in its ability to show the events of the past “through a brighter, more lustrous medium” than traditional, strictly factual histories, allowing readers to see “the best of everything – all that is grand and beautiful in nature, all that is brilliant in achievement, all that is magnanimous in virtue, all that is sublime in self-sacrifice.”

To that end, Choate suggested that authors regard the “historical truth” surrounding such events as the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, King Philip’s War, and the Battles of Lexington and Concord as nothing more than a point of departure for their texts, and direct most of their attentions towards the invention of ‘embellishments,’ in the form of anecdotes, conversations, or characterizations. Such embellishments would not only bring to texts the “vividness, individuality, nearness, [and] magnitude” that readers enjoyed, but they would also create memorable and easily accessible impressions of historical events, or, as Choate put it, “melt down ...and stamp the heavy bullion” that was history into “a convenient, universal circulating medium.” This ability of romantic fictions to cultivate collective patriotic memory was extremely valuable, since Choate was confident

---

231 As an illustration of the difference between “the romance and the reality of history,” Choate described how each would represent the events that precipitated the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. In a factual account, he noted that readers would learn how “tea was thrown overboard ...and The Gaspar burned; town meetings were held, and committees of correspondence chosen,” all of which would be true, but none of which would incite the “strong and wide excitement” that was both desired and needed. See Rufus Choate and Samuel Gillman Brown, The Works of Rufus Choate: Memoir, Lectures and Addresses (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1863), 341.

232 Besides, as Choate notes, historical truth was inevitably distorted by imperfect recitation over time anyway. According to Choate, facts provided by historians “probably all happened just as they are set forth; but you can’t exactly prove it out of any book of history. They are all probable...But the record is lost by time and accident. They lie beyond the province of reason; but faith and imagination stretch beyond that province, and complete the ...revelation.” See Choate and Brown, The Works of Rufus Choate, 340-341.

that the existence of a “treasure of ancestral recollections,” shared by citizens across divisions of social class, would erase “overrated diversities of interest,” and thus “perpetuate the Union itself.”

Although his address does not specifically identify the story of Pocahontas as one that should be given the romantic fiction treatment, it is difficult to conceive of a narrative better suited, both practically and ideologically speaking, to Choate’s opinions about the genre. As has already been noted, the Pocahontas narrative was relatively unencumbered by specific historical fact, as she herself left behind no writings, and contemporaneous accounts from those who were actually acquainted with her tended to focus on only a few episodes, thus allowing authors a great deal of latitude to embellish the story and direct its focus. More importantly, though, the arc of the Pocahontas narrative established by its first iterations in the seventeenth century was extremely well suited to the work required of historical fiction in the new republic. As Philip Young and many others have noted, the facts that are known about the Virginia Company’s establishment of Jamestown and the often contentious relationship between the English soldiers and the Powhatans lent themselves to retelling as an epic tale of triumph over hostile forces of nature and incivility – a group of adventurers on a desolate shore, their dashing leader captured by hostile Indians but spared at the last moment by the tribe’s beautiful princess, an instantaneous love that compels her to renounce her family – it is, quite simply, the stuff of romance, as both Northrop Frye and the Harlequin novel might define it.

235 Northrop Frye, the noted literary theorist, defined romance as a narrative mode distinguished by its tendency to “displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to ‘realism,’ to conventionalize content in an idealized direction.” Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 136-137. As Dorothy Ross characterizes Frye’s definition, if realism is bound to the horizontal plane of human imagination, romance “is plotted as an ascent from a lower to a higher world; the lower one demonic or regressive, the higher one ideal of progressive.” This characterization is particularly relevant to the Pocahontas narrative. See Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing,” 652-653.
In addition to its role in sustaining a broad patriotic discourse, the Pocahontas narrative was particularly useful in supporting the ideology of femininity’s central assertions about the model marital relationship, in which a woman’s role was that of helpmate to her partner, exemplified by Pocahontas’s sacrifice of self, and her unwavering loyalty to the interests of John Smith, even above those of her own people. It is also important to note that while Pocahontas’s relationship with Smith was a central point around which authors could insert elements of the feminine ideal into her narrative, nineteenth-century Americans did not understand Pocahontas’s femininity solely in terms of the amative subplot overlaid upon her interactions with John Smith. A biographical essay from the 1830s articulates the extent to which Pocahontas’s historical identity was associated with the general dictates of femininity, even apart from her relationship with Smith:

It is difficult to speak of the character of Pocahontas, without falling into extravagance. Though our whole knowledge of her is confined to a few brilliant and striking incidents, yet there is in them so complete a consistency, that reason...permits us to construct the whole character from these occasional manifestations. She seems to have possessed every quality essential to the perfection of the female character; the most graceful modesty, the most winning sensibility, strong affections, tenderness and delicacy of feeling, [and] dovelike gentleness...These beautiful qualities were not in her nurtured and trained by the influence of refined life, but were the native and spontaneous growth of her heart and soul.\textsuperscript{236}

Although the essay’s author, the well-known biographer Jared Sparks, admits that Pocahontas’s life story is known only through “a few brilliant and striking incidents,” he nonetheless feels as though he can discern her feminine spirit, a confidence clearly in line with the discourse on the feminine

ideal’s routine assignment of value judgments based on women’s adherence to a narrow and specific set of behaviors. Besides providing a concise catalog of required feminine attributes, this essay also reinforces a central assertion of the ideology of femininity in its insistence that Pocahontas’s qualities “were not nurtured and trained by the influence of refined life, but were the native and spontaneous growth of her heart and soul.” In other words, her femininity was untaught, and in every way natural to her, just as the femininity in American women was regarded as the natural outcome of their life in the new republic.  

Pocahontas’s status as a primeval feminine ideal began to crystallize during the 1780s, when the Marquis de Chastellux, author of the travelogue *Travels in North-America in the years 1780-81-82*, proposed a tentative connection between her actions and the canon of femininity. In *Travels in North-America*, Chastellux documented his encounters with descendents of Pocahontas in Virginia and recounted Smith’s rescue. Although his narrative focuses more on Smith and his bravery in the face of danger than on Pocahontas, he does describe her in positive terms as a

---

237 A passage in *The Rural Repository, devoted to Polite Literature* articulates the inherence of Pocahontas’s femininity: “Her mind had not been formed and fed by books, or the conversation of the gifted and cultivated; the nameless graces of polished like had not surrounded her from her birth, and created that tact in manner and deportment, and becoming propriety in carriage and conversation, which all well bred people...seem to possess in about the same degree; nor had the coarse forms of actual life been, to her eyes, concealed by the elegant drapery which civilization throws over them. From her earliest years she had been familiar with rude ways of living, uncouth habits and lawless passions. Yet she seems to have been, from the first, a being distinct from and unlike her people, though in the midst of them.” See *The Rural Repository devoted to Polite Literature, such as moral and sentimental tales, biography, traveling sketches, notices of new publications, poetry, amusing miscellany, humorous and historical anecdotes, &c. &c.*, (Hudson: William B. Stoppard, 1833), 101.

238 The historian Richard Beale Davis has noted that an English version of the narrative, which appeared in a London Magazine article entitled “A Short Account of the British Plantations in America,” assigned a romantic motivation to the narrative several decades before Chastellux’s book was published. The earlier narrative attributed the success of the Jamestown colony to “the love this young girl had conceived for Capt. Smith.” As Robert Tilton has noted, though, Chastellux’s was the most popular version of the narrative, and certainly the one most familiar to American readers in the 1780s and 90s. Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in Jefferson’s Virginia, 1790-1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 314; Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*, 36-40.
helpmate to the English soldiers and the “protectress of the colony,” and he notes the passion of Smith’s rescue scene, during which Pocahontas “threw herself on his body” and “clasped him in her arms.” He also inserts the sentimentally feminine characteristic of uncontrolled weeping into his description of Pocahontas’s interactions with the English, noting her highly emotional state when she rescues Smith, when she warns the English of the planned Powhatan attack, and when she and Smith are reunited during her visit to England. Although Chastellux’s text makes no specific comments about her appearance, it does note that one of Pocahontas’s “exquisitely delicate” female descendents he meets has inherited an “amiable” disposition from her royal ancestor.

If Chastellux laid the foundation for an ideally feminine Pocahontas, the chief architect of that persona was John Davis, a British adventurer and novelist who visited the United States on several occasions during the late 1700s and published several popular travelogues and historical novels in the early years of the nineteenth century. While Chastellux had merely hinted at Pocahontas’s engagement with the feminine ideal, Davis clearly articulated the characterization of her behavior and physical appearance that would become standard for depictions that followed, as well as a specific amative subtext for the narrative. Davis first wrote about Pocahontas in his novel The Farmer of New-Jersey, or, A Picture of Domestic Life (1800). He quickly followed the brief anecdote about the “Indian Queen Pocahuntas” that appeared in The Farmer of New-Jersey with a much longer version of the narrative, which he inserted into his Travels Of Four Years And A

---
240 Davis introduces Pocahontas with a significant bit of dialogue between the storyteller (the narrator’s son Harry) and a member of the audience (a Colonel Brandywine). After Harry declares that he will tell the story of “Pocahuntas, an Indian Queen,” Brandywine remarks, “Bravo – the story, I guess, of a squaw.” Harry proceeds to correct the mistaken notion that Pocahontas is simply a common Indian woman by telling the story of Pocahontas’s rescue of Smith. See John Davis, The Farmer of New-Jersey (New York: Furman and Loudon’s Type, 1800), 32.
Half In The United States Of America (1804). Shortly thereafter, he published two romantic novellas about Pocahontas, Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas (1805) and The First Settlers of Virginia (1805). In each of these works, written by Davis as part of his stated goal to erect a “monument to [Pocahontas’s] memory,” she is presented as a paragon of the kind of unstudied femininity and inherent virtue that could only be fostered in America’s enchanted wilderness, a “ministering angel at the throne of grace” possessing sensibility and “native modesty.” In fact, both Pocahontas and John Smith were paragons, in Davis’s estimation, noble and compellingly Romantic figures whose affection for one another blazed a trail for European progress in the new world and validates the necessity and goodness of the colonial project, as he notes in his introduction to Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America:

Of the first settlers in Virginia, the most distinguished character was Captain Smith, a man who seemed to inherit every quality of a hero; a man of such bravery and conduct, that his actions would confer dignity on the page of the historian ...With the story of Captain Smith is interwoven the story of Pocahontas, whose soft simplicity and innocence cannot help but hold captive every mind. . .

One of the commonalities in all of Davis’s iterations of the narrative is the fact that he tends to dwell rather unabashedly on Pocahontas’s physical appearance. Davis describes his Pocahontas as a young teenager of about 14 years with bright eyes, blushing cheeks, long, glossy hair, and delicate limbs. While these are descriptors of women that appear in any number of early republican sentimental texts, the level of detail present in Davis’s appraisal of Pocahontas’s physical features extends well beyond typically chaste celebrations of feminine beauty’s signifiers.

242 Davis, Travels, 282-283.
Instead, he offers readers an almost obsessive cataloging of Pocahontas’s face and body, as illustrated by this description in *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas*:

She was of a delicate form, but admirably proportioned. Her fine dark eyes beamed forth that moral sense, which imparts a magic to every look, and constitutes expression. There was a dash of melancholy in her countenance more interesting than smiles...There was a delicious redness in her cherub lips, a red a little riper than that which burnt on her cheek, and the nether one somewhat fuller than the other looked, as if some bee had newly stung it. Her long black hair emulated in glossy plumage of the eagle...It flowed in luxuriant tresses down her comely back and neck, half concealing the polish and symmetry, the rise and fall of a bosom just beginning to fill.

Descriptions like these, which read like the textual equivalents of languorous glances down the body of a lover, litter the pages of Davis’s texts. They are often presented as asides or footnotes, the purpose of which was likely to bolster his claims about the ‘truth’ of his accounts. As Davis notes in his preface to *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas*, he felt a particular, almost metaphysical connection to the events of Jamestown’s settlement, and, as he was writing, he “not only felt the scenes, but fancied I saw the objects my pen has described.” Thus, his ability to

---

244 While an investigation into how the reader is gendered by Davis’s texts is beyond the scope of the present study, it must be noted that this and other descriptions of Pocahontas are clearly meant to construct a masculine and eroticizing gaze directed at her body. There is an ironic tension present in this fact, which seems to contradict what Tilton characterizes as Davis’s strong desire to attract “the growing, largely female, audience for fiction in America.” See Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*, 34-35.
245 Davis’s introduction to *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas* attempts to reassure readers of the work’s accuracy with the assertion that he has some sort of mystical connection to Smith and Pocahontas, which should, therefore, give his readers confidence that he is not “obtruding on an American public an impertinent legend of false heroism in love,” but rather following “Nature, [which] it has been my endeavour to study and copy.” See Davis, *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas*, v.
comment on the span of Pocahontas’s waist and the daintiness of her feet and to make other florid assessments of even the most minute details of Pocahontas’s face, hair, and body were intended to be read not as “the effrontery of a corrupt mind’s indelicate libertinism,” but as accurate statements of historical fact.26

Although it was Davis’s desire for his accounts to be regarded as truth, his overblown descriptions also generate an impression of Pocahontas as a creature too good to be true, or at the very least an exceptional figure whose perfect virtue is embodied in her equally perfect physical form. As Davis describes her, this perfection is evident all about her body, from her remarkably shiny hair and perfectly proportioned waist to her “exquisite insteps.”27 One feature in which Davis perceived a particularly tangible level of feminine perfection is Pocahontas’s bosom, to which he makes frequent reference. Rebecca Blevins Faery’s research has situated Davis’s characterization of Pocahontas’s body within what she identifies as a larger duality of her early nineteenth-century identity, which alternated between descriptions of a selfless, angelic heroine and what Faery characterizes as the “Playboy centerfold” of the forest.28 Ann Uhry Abrams has observed a similar dichotomy in Pocahontas’s presentation as either a virtuous lady whose behavior aligned with prescribed Anglican cultural expectations or a “nubile forest nymph” whose lack of adherence to Anglican standards of modesty was perceived as exotic and seductive.29 While both of these assessments are well-founded, as this project has already demonstrated, femininity in the early republic was not a disjunctive proposition, but a interdependent relationship in which beauty and

26 Davis, Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas, vi.
27 He notes: “Her person was below the middle size, but admirably proportioned. Her waist resembled that of the French Monarch’s mistress; it was la taille á la main. Her limbs were delicate; and her feet were distinguished by exquisite insteps.” See Davis, Travels, footnote, 277.
virtue were so closely intertwined that it was difficult to consider one without the other. My interpretation of the sensually feminine beauty that became associated with Pocahontas in early republican texts, therefore, considers her physical allure as a sign of her internal perfection and a reflection of her capacity to fulfill *simultaneously* all of the requirements of a virtuous, feminine paragon. In other words, I argue against an interpretation of Pocahontas’s characterization as a binary in which dichotomous characteristics that identify her as *either* a sensual nymph *or* a virtuous feminine paragon necessarily exist in conflict with one another, and instead see a symbiosis in Pocahontas’s dual identity that reinforces her status as the originator of the American feminine ideal.

Davis’s frequent allusions to Pocahontas’s breasts reflect this symbiosis of virtue and sensuality, as they simultaneously emphasize her sexual desirability and focus readers’ attentions on the bosom as the locus of her virtue, her affection, and especially her sensibility, which Davis identifies as one of Pocahontas’s most endearing qualities. Pocahontas’s thorough sensibility is illustrated by Davis’s description in *Travels* of her meeting John Smith for the first time. In the encounter, Pocahontas is drawn to Smith, both because of his “prepossessing” good looks, enhanced by “that external grace which he had acquired in the court and camp of *Great Britain*,” and because of some mysterious pull she feels to him, quite apart from her attraction to his comeliness.20 Davis notes:

> The influence of the passions is uniform, and their effects nearly the same in every human breast; hence love operates in the same manner throughout the world, and discovers itself by the same symptoms in the breasts of beings separated by an immeasurable ocean. When Smith appeared before Powhatan...his attention was

---

principally attracted by the charms of a young girl...who could not conceal those soft
emotions of which the female bosom is so susceptible.\textsuperscript{251}

Contemporaneous retellings of the Pocahontas narrative used similarly ornate and sentimental
language to describe the emotionalism of her first encounter with Smith, as in this essay on the
origins of sensibility and sympathy, which identifies Pocahontas as an exemplar of both:

Pocahontas sees, her heart bleeds, her sympathy kindles, she can no longer
refrain...she rushes thro’ the croud, falls on the devoted victim, and with the keenness
of censure and soul-melting accents of female eloquence, reprobated their cruelty and
implores mercy for the unhappy man...Sympathy assumes empire in the bosoms of
savages...The war hardened chief...falls harmless before the Goddess sympathy and
devoutly worships at her sacred shrine.\textsuperscript{252}

Pocahontas’s sensibility was primarily associated with her rescue, first of Smith, and then of the
other English soldiers, but it was also implicated in the romantic love she developed for Smith. As
is to be expected from a young woman possessing such sensibility, Davis’s Pocahontas is absolutely
ruled by her emotions, which range from tender ecstasy when she first beholds Smith to dark
despair when she is later abandoned by him. It is her bosom, from whence these emotions
originate, that acts as a sort of compass guiding, if not actually compelling, the actions that lead to
her destiny and indicating the fluctuations in her emotional state: Davis describes a bosom
fluttering and heaving, both from fear and her exertions as she runs through the forest to warn
Smith and the English of a Powhatan attack, which sighs rend when Smith abandons her to return
to England, and which burns with blushes when she discovers the affections of John Rolfe.

\textsuperscript{251} Davis, \textit{Travels}, 273.
\textsuperscript{252} “Observations on Sympathy,” \textit{The Literary Tablet; or, a General Repository of Useful
Entertainment; Consisting of Essays Original and Selected, in Poetry and Prose} 1, 24 (July 1804):
93.
In addition to her clear alignment with the feminine quality of sensibility, Davis’s Pocahontas also possesses other qualities associated with the feminine ideal, and like her sensibility, these qualities are inscribed on her body. Pocahontas’s modesty is of particular note to Davis and his contemporaries, although the historical facts around Powhatan cultural norms presented something of a challenge to those who would make Pocahontas into an icon of femininity. As Helen Rountree’s research has shown, it is likely that the Pocahontas met by the English explorers in 1607 was mostly, if not fully unclothed. The dress of a Powhatan woman at the time of English contact left much of her body exposed, including her buttocks, and the entirety of her torso, as her typical costume consisted of a short buckskin apron and, if she was going out into the forest to gather food, leather leggings and moccasins; a Powhatan child of eleven or twelve, the age William Strachey reported Pocahontas to be in his account of the Jamestown settlement, did not typically wear any clothing at all. Rountree’s assessment of Powhatan fashion is supported by John White’s watercolor images of the Algonquian Indians of Roanoke Island, off the coast of what is today North Carolina, which he made in 1585. White’s watercolor of “An Indian Woman and Young Girl,” for example, shows an Algonquian woman clad in a fringed apron that covers the front of her body from her waist to just above her knees, as well as a young Powhatan girl who is completely unclothed (figure 9).

---

253 For more on the dress of Powhatan women and children in the early seventeenth century, see Rountree, *Pocahontas’s People*, 8.
254 White, an artist and cartographer, accompanied a 1585 voyage from England to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. White was at Roanoke Island for about thirteen months before returning to England for more supplies. During this period he made a series of over seventy watercolor drawings of indigenous people, plants, and animals. The purpose of his drawings was to give those back home an accurate idea of the inhabitants and environment in the New World. In 1590, Theodor De Bry made engravings from White’s drawings to be printed in Thomas Hariot’s account of the journey. See John White and Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, *The New World: The First Pictures of America*, Stephan, Lorant, ed. (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946).
255 The daughter is, according to White’s caption, between 8 and 10 years old, again, close to Pocahontas’s age at the time of first contact.
Textual narratives of the nineteenth century tended to dodge the realities of Pocahontas’s state of dress, instead speaking in platitudes about her ‘delicacy’ and ‘refinement’ but refusing to acknowledge what she was actually wearing, or not wearing, during the celebrated moments of her life. The only hint of Pocahontas’s “state of nature” comes from Davis, who makes coy reference to Pocahontas’s long hair flowing down her “comely neck and shoulders, shading, but not hiding the protuberance of her bosom,” leading readers to believe that, as Davis imagines her, she is bare-chested. Authors of the narrative slightly later in the nineteenth century took a more pointed interest in Pocahontas’s simultaneous nudity and modesty, and the ideological potential located therein. In fact, tributes to Pocahontas’s modesty provided American authors with the perfect opportunity to simultaneously difference Pocahontas from other Native women and reify one of the central assertions of the discourse on exceptional American femininity: that, although its inherence was unquestionable, female modesty was enhanced by life in an environment free of artifice, a point articulated by this passage from a later nineteenth-century biographical sketch of Pocahontas:

She seems to have possessed every quality essential to the female character; [especially] graceful modesty...tenderness and delicacy of feeling, dovelike gentleness...These beautiful qualities were not in her nurtured and trained by the influences of refined life, but were the native and spontaneous growth of her heart and soul. Her mind had not been formed by books, or the conversation of the gifted and cultivated; the nameless graces of polished life had not surrounded her from her birth...nor had the coarse forms of actual life been, to her eyes, concealed by the elegant drapery which civilization throws over them. In all those qualities which mankind have agreed to regard as the peculiar and most winning attributes of women – modesty, sensibility, tenderness – she may safely be affirmed to be without a rival...Had Pocahontas been
carefully nurtured under a mother’s jealous eye, surrounded by the appliances of civilization and the influences of Christianity, her character still would have been one of the loveliest in history; but when it is remembered that...that her virtues were intuitive, not called forth by culture...we are compelled to regard her as an exceptional being, created for a special purpose...256

A PORTRAIT OF POCAHONTAS

In the decades following Davis’s attempts to present Pocahontas’s ‘true’ life story, American artists felt a similar pull to create an image that reflected not only her appearance but all the feminine characteristics textual narratives projected onto her. After all, this was a woman whose beauty was described in the following terms:

She reminds one of a delicate wildflower, growing up in the cleft of a rock, where the eye can discern no soil for its roots to grasp, and sustain its slender stalk. We behold her as she came from the hands of her Maker, who seems to have created her in a spirit of rebuke to the pride of civilization, giving to an Indian girl, reared in the depths of the Virginian forest, that symmetry of feminine loveliness, which we but seldom see, with all our helps and appliances, and all that moral machinery with which we work upon the raw material of character.257

It is unsurprising, then, that American artists were eager to present a beautiful portrait of a woman so cherished by American ideology. The first American artist to make Pocahontas his subject was Robert Sully (1803-1855), the nephew and protégé of Thomas Sully, who encouraged Robert to

---

copy a portrait of Pocahontas supposedly painted while she was in England. Guided by his longstanding desire to produce an ‘authentic’ image of “the idol of [his] romantic dreams, from boyhood,” Sully was happy to accept the challenge, and arranged to view the original portrait, which was, by that time, in the possession of Thomas Bolling, a member of a large Virginia family that traced its ancestry back to Pocahontas. He found the portrait to be badly damaged, with some areas of the canvas missing and others too deteriorated to be legible, but despite this fact, Sully pressed on, copying it as best he could. The portrait, which was completed in 1830, is now lost, as is the seventeenth-century original, but Sully’s interpretation of Pocahontas’s appearance remains in the form of a full-color lithograph made in 1842, which portrays a short-necked, broad woman dressed in a layered garment reminiscent of late seventeenth-century English portrait drapes (figure 10).

It should not be particularly surprising to learn that the Bolling family found fault with Sully’s portrait, judging it to be a less-than-flattering representation of their beloved ancestor.

William Bolling, the brother of the original portrait’s owner, remarked that Sully had captured

---

258 The portrait copied by Robert Sully was not the 1616 Simon van de Passe engraving, the only image of Pocahontas known to have been drawn from life. Instead, Sully copied the so-called ‘Turkey Island’ portrait, which had been painted in England during the seventeenth century for a descendent of John Rolfe and was acquired by Ryland Randolph (a member of the Bolling family) during a visit to Warwickshire, England, in the mid-eighteenth century. Although family lore held that the Turkey Island portrait had been painted from life, the draped style of garment worn by ‘Pocahontas’ suggests that it was, in fact, made closer to the end of the seventeenth century. William Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend* (Richmond, VA: The Virginia Historical Society, 1994), 35-36.

259 Sully wrote in May of 1854 about his fascination with the Pocahontas story in a letter to Lyman Draper, a potential patron. Sully noted that he had long imagined “many wild scenes of romantic adventure” between Pocahontas and John Smith, and that the story held only one disappointment: the fact that Smith had returned to England instead of marrying Pocahontas, which, to Sully, was a “lame and impotent conclusion” to an otherwise perfect romance. See Rasmussen and Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, 38.

260 Sully’s portrait of Pocahontas was widely circulated as an illustration for Thomas McKenney and James Hall’s *The History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, a three volume collection published between 1836 and 1844. See Rasmussen and Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, 36.
neither Pocahontas’s features nor her exotic bronze skin tone, painting her instead with a complexion of “rather a dead, white” color.\(^{261}\)

He noted further inaccuracies in the color and texture of Pocahontas’s hair (brown and curly, instead of black and lustrous) and eyes (blue, instead of dark brown). While these critiques imply an understandable desire on the part of Pocahontas’s claimed progeny to discern an accurate image of her, not to mention a legitimate doubt that such an image would include pale skin or light eyes, Bolling’s critique also targets aspects of the portrait related not to its historical authenticity, but to its failure against nineteenth-century standards of feminine beauty. For example, he directed vehement disapproval toward Pocahontas’s “large and fat” neck and body and her “enormously large breasts,” displeasures echoed by other members of the family, one of whom denounced the woman pictured as “Dowdy, Gross...& homely,” with a body that bore no resemblance to Pocahontas’s “delicate...and beautiful” physique.\(^{262}\)

When Sully’s portrait was exhibited to the public at large, similar complaints about Pocahontas’s unattractive appearance were lodged. The painter John Gadsby Chapman remarked that Sully’s Pocahontas looked “coarse and unpoetical,” expressing concern that such an unflattering image could “break the beau ideal” of her story. John Esten Cooke, a novelist and historian, took aim at Pocahontas’s broad frame and fleshy face, asking, “Is there any, the slightest authority, for making Pocahontas fat?” and continuing:

...painters have made her a handsome Creole, or a Spanish matron – a good dame who has just put the children to bed, and is about to mend her husband’s stockings ...[an act] for which, I as a Virginian, visit them with my bitter malediction.\(^{263}\)

\(^{261}\) Quoted in Rasmussen and Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, 35.


\(^{263}\) John Esten Cooke, *Southern Literary Messenger; devoted to every department of literature and the fine arts* 26, 6 (June 1858): 457-465.
Cooke’s critique, which appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, along with his own, typically Romantic version of the narrative, echoes William Bolling’s concerns about the size of her body, and while Cooke did not directly comment on the size of Pocahontas’s breasts, his pointed comment that she appears like a “matron...who has just put the children to bed” calls to mind the vision of a female body altered by childbearing and lactation, specifically one with enlarged, pendulous breasts. For Bolling and Cooke, and other observers who found Sully’s portrait dowdy or unrefined, an image of Pocahontas with a broad, maternal bosom was a far cry from the pert and virginal ideal, and it conjured the notion of a spent body past its prime. Beyond the discomfort provoked by a clearly visible asynchrony between Sully’s vision of Pocahontas and the image promoted by Romantic texts like Davis’s, concerns about the portrait’s matronly appearance may have been attached to deeper anxieties surrounding the alterity of the Native woman’s body, the origins of which can be traced back to exploration narratives written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jennifer Morgan’s study of travelers’ accounts of European exploration has demonstrated that the image of a woman with large, sagging breasts was an established trope deployed to signify the radical difference and savagery of Native women.\(^{264}\) This image continued to be familiar in the nineteenth century, although it became associated with African women in addition to Native Americans. We see, for example, in descriptions of the South African Khoikhoi, whom Europeans called the Hottentots, frequent references to their women’s pendulous breasts, in some cases “being of such a length...as to reach almost to the knees,” and long enough “so that they can turn them under or over the shoulder, and suckle their infants on

their backs.” Travelers’ and physicians’ accounts of Khoikhoi women’s bodies were compiled into an essay entitled “Varieties of Figure,” which Sir William Lawrence delivered to the Royal College of Surgeons in the early nineteenth century and published as part of what became a popular anthology in 1819. In the decades that followed, characterizations of African women’s bodies based on Lawrence’s descriptions made their way into mass culture materials, such as an 1853 essay about the relative beauty of Americans in comparison to other peoples of the world. In it, the author reflects on the subjectivity of human beauty and wonders why Madame de Pompadour was considered to be a beauty when “the Hottentot Venus, who suckled her young over her shoulders and carried the rest of her family upon her natural bussle” was not. As much of the scholarship on the fashioning of the Pocahontas narrative has noted, Davis and other Romantic authors worked to difference Pocahontas from traditional representations of the Native or exotic ‘Other’ in order to tie her actions to emergent nationalist tendencies. Visual representations of Pocahontas were similarly required to preserve a feminine appearance that signified her virtue and alignment with the patriotic feminine ideal. An image of Pocahontas in which she bore exotic and somewhat frightening signifiers of Native or African women’s difference was, therefore, not only unattractive to audiences accustomed to idealized descriptions of her, it also actually threatened her status as a patriotic icon.

Despite the controversy surrounding his first portrait, Sully’s zeal for capturing an image of Pocahontas was undeterred. Later in his career, he painted Pocahontas two more times, and both portraits demonstrate his wise reconsideration of absolute fidelity to ‘original’ sources and instead show that he may have heeded John Esten Cooke’s advice, which noted that:

---
265 Sir William Lawrence, Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man, delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons (London: J. Callow, Medical Bookseller, 1819), 416
267 Faery, Cartographies of Desire, 102-117.
...we do not want *Mrs. Rolfe of England*, we want *Pocahontas of Virginia*...let us see upon canvass, the warm glowing cheeks of our slender little fawn of the forest...her figure half-nude and draped with the plumage of gay colored birds. Let us have in place of a full-figured matron, a light-footed Indian girl.  

Sully provided the public with such an image in his second portrait of Pocahontas, completed early in the 1850s (figure 11). In this version, Pocahontas looks coquettishly over her left shoulder, exposing her long and graceful neck and dignified profile. Her clothing is non-specific, consisting of a dark colored drape, which Sully probably intended to resemble a fur pelt. The drape is arranged about her upper arms, which allows the entirety of her shoulders and much of her bosom to be seen. Perhaps most significantly, Sully’s second Pocahontas wears her dark, straight hair loose about her shoulders, adorned with a mantle of woodland flowers and exotic feathers. As William Rasmussen and Robert Tilton have observed, Sully’s second version of the Pocahontas portrait is filled with elements that help it conform much more closely to the established narrative, since, as Sully himself noted, his goal was to “preserve the likeness, contour, feature of the copy...from the preserved original” but “change the civilized, or rather fashionable, Princess to the beautiful forest girl of more pleasant association - The Guardian Angel of the Colony!”  

Observers, including William Maxwell, the president of the Virginia Historical Society in the 1850s, celebrated Sully’s accomplishment, noting that the portrait agreed with Sully’s ideal. Sully’s third and final portrait of Pocahontas, painted between 1852 and 1855, outfitted its subject in the costume of a medieval princess, complete with a jeweled circlet around her head (figure 12). Despite her ‘civilized’ appearance in this version, however, Sully certainly painted with an eye

---


towards pleasing critics, as he slenderized Pocahontas’s body, tinted her cheeks with a pronounced and feminine blush, and elevated her breasts to their pre-maternal position high on her chest.

Sully’s second and third portraits of Pocahontas established a standard that was followed by other artists, who interpreted her image as a reflection of contemporaneous standards of sentimental beauty and femininity. As a result, the image of Pocahontas as she was portrayed after 1850 is that of a conventionally beautiful, full-bosomed white woman playing dress-up in buckskin and beads. Pocahontas’s ethnicity in these portraits was indicated by the addition of various accessories to her person that connoted a fantasy vision of Native American culture, like feathers and shells, or fringed trim on one-shouldered garments, as in an 1858 portrait of Pocahontas by Pierre Gustave Eugene Staal (1817-1882) (figure 13). The pose of Staal’s Pocahontas, whose left hand rests gently on her right breast, immediately draws attention to her femininity. This pose is not meant to titillate, but to signify the grace and sentiment located within her bosom. It and the other aspects of her self-presentation are fully compliant with mid-nineteenth-century notions of female beauty and modesty: her skin is pale, her expression is serene, and her hair is arranged in a center-parted style that covers her ears with decorative plaits. In addition to aligning Pocahontas with the sentimental ideal, the composition of Staal’s portrait also connects it to any number of

---

A number of historians have made important observations about the tendency of visual and textual descriptions of Pocahontas to difference her from the Powhatan people by emphasizing her lighter skin tone. While this is an extremely significant trend in nineteenth-century representations of Pocahontas, which speaks to the narrative’s appropriation by a racist discourse on whiteness and power, it is beyond the scope of this project to delve more deeply into the implications of Pocahontas’s progressively lightening complexion in depictions throughout the nineteenth century. See Faery, *Cartographies of Desire*, 156-175; and Rasmussen and Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, 15-47. For discussion of how white marble sculptures of Pocahontas further distanced her from her Native American heritage, see Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 174-175; and Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 94.

Staal’s portrait was made for Jean Raymond Eugène d’Araquy’s *Galerie Historique des Femmes*, an anthology of famous women’s biographical sketches with accompanying illustrations.
contemporaneous European female portraits, and it seems especially indebted to Ingres’ 1851 portrait of *Madame Moitessier*, the hairstyle and body position of which are mimicked in Staal’s representation (figure 14). Even if Staal did not draw inspiration from Ingres directly, his Pocahontas looks like a fashionable woman who could easily inhabit a plate in a ladies’ magazine, save for a few details that mark her exoticism, like the feathered band that decorates her upper arm and the peace pipe she holds in her hand. These accessories are not meant to accurately reflect Powhatan cultural traditions, but to substitute for the fan or flower she would likely carry if she were the subject of any other feminine portrait of the mid-nineteenth century.

**GENRE SCENES AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SENTIMENT**

While portrait artists were guided by fairly general cultural expectations about feminine beauty and grace, artists painting works that made the events of Pocahontas’s life their subject were bound by a more specific set of expectations, related both to Pocahontas’s appearance and to sentimental elements within the scene’s overall composition. Central to the successful reception of a narrative painting about Pocahontas in the nineteenth century was its ability to convey the deeply felt emotion associated with the narrative’s most cherished moments. By creating works that were dramatic and expressive, artists were able to showcase the sensibility with which Pocahontas was so closely associated. In spite of the proliferation of texts about Pocahontas and the settlement of Jamestown by the early nineteenth century, pictoral versions of the narrative were scarce before the 1830s, and those that were available were small-scale illustrations for texts, rather than works meant to be viewed on their own. The first paintings to depict scenes from Pocahontas’s life were

---

Staal was born in France, and began his career as a painting apprentice in the studio of Paul Delaroche. In addition to producing a number of original engraved works, his services as an engraver were used by many French artists, including Ingres, by whose portraits it seems very possible that Staal’s Pocahontas was influenced. See “Notes,” *American Art News* 5, 27 (April 1907), 1-12.
produced in the mid-1830s by the Virginia-born artist John Gadsby Chapman (1808-1889). Chapman produced a number of works depicting the narrative during the 1830s and 1840s, among them *Pocahontas Saving the Life of Captain John Smith* (1836), *The Warning of Pocahontas* (1836), and *The Baptism of Pocahontas* (1840). Although his first two paintings were not widely known outside of Virginia, his *Baptism of Pocahontas* received a great deal of public attention, since it was part of the prestigious Congressional commission for murals depicting significant events in America’s history, to be installed in the Capitol’s Rotunda.273 The painting features a virginal Pocahontas clad in a white gown and kneeling before a baptismal font surrounded by English colonists as well as members of her Powhatan family (figure 15). A visitor’s guide to the Capitol makes clear that Chapman’s image was meant to serve ideological purposes, referring to it as a celebration of America’s Christian heritage, and of Pocahontas’s salvation “from the fangs of barbarous idolatry.”274 It was also purported to demonstrate the fact that the English settlers did not “exterminate the ancient proprietors of the soil, and usurp their possessions,” but rather that they spread “the blessings of Christianity among the heathen savages,” thus offering critics of government efforts to control America’s native population an historical example of assimilation’s benefit to Indians.275

Although Chapman’s hopes for the painting’s positive reception were high at the time he was awarded the commission, the painting he actually produced received decidedly mixed

---

273 The subjects of other murals include the Landing of Columbus, painted by John Vanderlyn (1847); the Discovery of the Mississippi River, painted by William Henry Powell (1847); and the Embarkation of the Pilgrims, painted by Robert W. Weir (1844).
275 Truettner, *The West as America*, 71.
In addition to negative assessments of Chapman’s technical skill, including his ability to correctly render architectural perspective, his depiction of Pocahontas herself, and specifically his choice to base his Pocahontas on Robert Sully’s first portrait, was cited as one of the work’s shortcomings. Chapman’s interpretation of Pocahontas’s physical form was judged to be only a modest improvement over the original, with one critic conceding that she supposed Chapman’s Pocahontas was “pretty for a squaw,” but that ultimately “the artist has fallen short of ...her real charms.” Significantly, though, it was not the technical ‘imperfections’ that were perceived as the painting’s primary weakness. Rather, it was the moment of the narrative Chapman chose to depict, which many commentors felt a less worthy representation of Pocahontas’s passionate and intensely sentimental nature and of the ideology her singular spirit reflected than, for example, the rescue scene. In fact, the Rotunda already contained one depiction of the rescue in Antonio Capellano’s sandstone relief panel, *The Preservation of Captain Smith by Pocahontas* (1825). Critics chose to overlook this fact, instead attributing Chapman’s unpopular choice of subject to self-awareness about his artistic inadequacy, with one review noting that Chapman’s “talent does not seem that of the epic or dramatic painter,” and that while he was capable of executing “an exquisite sketch” his talents seemed ill-suited for undertaking “that highest of all branches of the art, historical grouping.” One critic went so far as to scoff that Chapman “has bestowed upon us a painting that has no more to do with our national history than the Conversion of St. Paul; nor, in fact, half so

---

276 Ben Bassham’s examination of the Chapman family’s correspondence details Chapman’s initial enthusiasm for the project, which waned during the 3 years he worked on the painting, and his disappointment over its lackluster critical reception. See Ben L. Bassham, *Conrad Wise Chapman: Artist and Soldier of the Confederacy* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), 15-18.


much.” For Americans who accepted Davis and company’s florid descriptions as unbiased historical truth, such a staid image must have indeed seemed problematically incongruous with what was perceived as the facts of America’s early history and, more significantly, with the dear vision of Pocahontas as a passionate heroine. As one critic noted, Chapman’s Pocahontas would have been better, and, in fact “more historical, had the artist depicted in her face and air, some of the noble qualities which led her to risk her life for the English colonists.”

In the years that followed the installation of Chapman’s *Baptism* in the Rotunda, only a few artists undertook large-scale narrative paintings with Pocahontas as their subject, and none took on the beloved rescue scene, a fact that frustrated William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), an influential writer of fiction and non-fiction who was well known in the mid-nineteenth century for his works about southern history and culture. Simms was confident that, in the hands of an accomplished artist, a depiction of the rescue scene could have a profound impact on both the conscious minds and the imaginations of viewers. He also had specific ideas about what such a painting should look like, and how its composition should operate on viewers, noting that, in his ideal, Smith’s “eagle eye makes no appeal for mercy,” and his “muscular form, though fettered with gyves from the neighboring vines, subsides nevertheless into an attitude of grace, consistent with the reputation of

---

281 Simms introduced an essay on the necessity of incorporating Pocahontas’s narrative into major works of American art by observing that artists, in general, were reluctant to take up the dramatic events of her life as subjects for historical paintings: “I know not one, having any genius, by whom it has been attempted. Mr. Chapman, whose high merits I am pleased to acknowledge and assert, has made a noble picture of the reception of the Indian Princess into the bosom of the English Church; but it is to the reproach of this gentleman, that he avoided the nobler incident in her fortunes. It is one, certainly, of the greatest difficulty; - but, it is this very difficulty which constitutes, in the eye of genius, the superior value of the material.” See William Gilmore Simms, “Pocahontas: A Subject for the Historical Painter,” *Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 92
a courtier. While Smith’s dispassion in the face of a horrible death fills viewers with admiration for his manly restraint, it is Pocahontas whose “form of light” constituted the most emotionally affecting element of the work, engaged in the physical action of shielding Smith’s head from the force of a war club:

She darts from her seat – voiceless – gasping with new and convulsive emotions, which lead her, she knows not whither, and flings herself between the captive and the blow.

One arm is flung upward, to prevent the stroke – one covers the head of the victim.

Although Simms claimed that no “painter having any genius” had yet undertaken the rescue scene, there were a number of prints depicting the rescue by the time his entreaty to artists was written. All, with the exception of Chapman’s 1836 painting, which, as was noted before, was not well known outside of Virginia, were made as illustrations for textual narratives. One of the first nineteenth-century images to depict the rescue was an engraved frontispiece for an 1805 edition of Davis’s *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas*, which features Pocahontas attempting to hold back a club-wielding Powhatan’s blows to the head of John Smith, who kneels at her side and clutches her leg (figure 16). The composition of this rescue scene bears some similarity to Johann Theodore de Bry’s 1618 engraving after Georg Keller’s watercolor of John Smith’s dealings with the Powhatans (figure 17), part of a folio of prints Dr Bry made to illustrate the lands and peoples of North America. De Bry’s engraving features several vignettes that illustrate Smith’s capture by the Powhatans, the thwarting of his execution, and his eventual acceptance as a member of the tribe. In one, his kneeling figure is shielded from an attacking warrior by another Powhatan.

Although the face and body of Smith’s rescuer are obscured by the figure’s hair and Smith’s own body, and are, therefore, largely illegible, we assume it to be Pocahontas who aids Smith. While

---

282 Simms, “Pocahontas: A Subject for the Historical Painter,” 146.
283 Simms, “Pocahontas: A Subject for the Historical Painter,” 95.
the intertwined pose of Smith and his rescuer introduced by de Bry anticipates later compositions, including that of the 1805 illustration, his Pocahontas is barely visible amidst a complex continuous narrative. In contrast, the 1805 rescue scene makes Pocahontas and her bravery its focus through the careful arrangement of her body with one arm outflung to stop the attack. The composition also demonstrates Pocahontas’s tender affection for Smith. Her free hand cradles his head and her fingers caress his hair in a gesture that recalls Davis’s assertion that, upon first setting eyes on Smith, Pocahontas became unable to “conceal those soft emotions” of which the female bosom, “the seat of every tenderness...is so susceptible.”

The formula developed to illustrate Davis’s text was used by artists throughout the nineteenth century, although later examples make the connection between Pocahontas and the attributes of femininity even more clearly. For example, Thomas Sinclair’s 1841 lithograph *Captain Smith Rescued by Pocahontas*, produced as an illustration for a book about the history of America’s Indians, incorporates a number of elements from the 1805 illustration, including Pocahontas’s position to the left of center, the attacker’s position to her right, and the figure of Pocahontas’s father with his arm upraised to stop his daughter from inadvertently being struck (figure 18). Sinclair’s illustration extends the sentimental appeal of the rescue scene, though, through the addition of several elements designed to heighten its drama, including the arrangement of Pocahontas’s hands, which clutch the mantle of the warrior about to strike Smith in a desperate gesture. Further heightening the scene’s drama is the inadvertent exposure of Pocahontas’s breast, which has been revealed when, in the excitement of the moment, the one-shouldered garment she wears becomes disheveled. The figure of Pocahontas with her clothing disarrayed and her bosom partially exposed was first used in 1832 by Lambert Lilly for an illustration in *The Early History of the Southern States: Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia*, although in Lilly’s version, 284

Despite the fact that Pocahontas’s emotion has caused her garment to slip down below her breast, a convenient lock of hair covers her bust point to diminish the immodesty of her bodily display (figure 19). There is no such mitigating hair in Sinclair’s version, however. His Pocahontas is unapologetic in her revelation, demonstrating through her temporary violation of nineteenth-century standards for female modesty the power of her affection for Smith and her desire to save his life.

In a nation whose ambivalent reception of the artistic nude censored most displays and only tentatively allowed others, it seems puzzling that depictions of its most beloved historical heroine baring part or all of her bosom were accepted. While Pocahontas’s bosom and the connection it represented to her status as the originator of the American feminine ideal was widely revered, this reverence alone was not enough to sanction an unproblematic display of the nude female form, even as a work of ‘fine art.’ Joy Kasson’s research into the reception of ideal sculpture in nineteenth-century America has showed that it was necessary for audiences to have an appropriately moralizing narrative frame in which to view unclothed figures in art works, so that their nudity did not seem gratuitous or inappropriate. In many ways, Pocahontas was the most ideal subject imaginable to appear partially unclothed without facing charges of impropriety. Her privileged historical status made her immediately recognizable, while her cultural affiliation, although it was often subsumed by her association with the European feminine ideal, gave her the advantage of legitimating her bodily display. Because of the narrative established by Davis and

---

285 A close comparison of Sinclair’s and Lilly’s illustrations reveals startling similarities in the poses of the figures surrounding Pocahontas and Smith. For example, the warrior who raises a club to strike Smith is virtually identical in both, as is the figure of Pocahontas’s father. These parallels strongly indicate that Sinclair used Lilly’s illustration as a template for his own, and made a conscious decision to reveal more of her bosom in his version.

286 Kasson elucidates the connection between a work’s positive reception and the extent to which audiences could view it as a moral lesson through her discussion of Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave* (1844). See Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 46-72.
others, Pocahontas's nudity that resulted from her disheveled clothing was covered, in a metaphorical sense, by the protective cloak of sentiment, which not only mitigated the problem of her nudity, but also reinforced her status as an embodiment of the attributes of femininity. Indeed, it was Pocahontas’s bared bosom, depicted in images of her rescue of Smith, which came to represent her extreme feeling and, by extension, her perfect femininity.
CHAPTER 4

PAINTED BEAUTIES: PORTRAITS AND THE VISUAL CODES OF FEMININITY

This be thy mirror, and it shall be
A glass, my beauty! worthy of thee –
A glass, the emblem of my heart,
From which thy image will not depart.
If Time will but spare this loveliest trace
Of thy fairy form and thy radiant face,
Just leave this record of my heart
To tell how lovely and loved thou art!287

Just as images of Pocahontas extended the cult of the bosom’s origins back to the very moment of America’s inception, portraits of individual women promoted the ubiquity of the embodied feminine ideal. As the poem excerpted above indicates, early republican culture viewed the portrait as a mirror that reflected a woman’s radiance and charm as well as a testament to vitality that stood against the inevitable erosion of youthful loveliness. The regard American culture had for portraits of its ‘beauties’ is certainly understandable. Such charming visions easily appeal to modern audiences even centuries after their creation, so we can well imagine how affecting they were to viewers steeped in a culture of sentiment. Beyond their obvious charm and prettiness, though, feminine portraits, those in which the likeness’s primary function was as a transmitter of the feminine ideal, performed important ideological work in the early republic, acting as aspirational models relative to which all women could locate themselves and furnishing visual cues that called to mind the discourse on femininity’s most central elements. These cues, which the portrait’s format made easily visible, promoted a vision of the ‘natural’ ease with which American

women fulfilled the patriotic duties of their sex, and animated crucial elements of the feminine ideal, including the contours of the bosom, either materially or metonymically.

When examining portraits of the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary eras, many scholars proceed from an assumption that various discourses, primarily those around social class, gender, and national ideology, are visible in representations of citizens. As Paul Staiti’s study of John Singleton Copley has established, late eighteenth-century Americans were invested in the belief that the portrait could operate as what Staiti terms an “authenticating narrative,” in which settings, objects, and the details of a sitter’s appearance were meant to be read as signs of his or her place within a social hierarchy. In a similar vein, many scholars, including Margareta Lovell, Ellen Miles, Graham Hood, Wendy Bellion, and Dorinda Evans, have shown that American patrons understood the portraits they commissioned as representations of abstract ideals of national identity, civic virtue and character. Like the scholars whose work has laid a foundation for this study, I regard early republican portraits as texts to be read for information about feminine ideology and identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In their particular case, however, it is imperative to consider the extent to which a portrait reflects either a likeness or a

288 For Stati’s concept of the portrait as an authenticating narrative, see his “Character and Class” in Carrie Rebora [Barratt] et al., John Singleton Copley in America (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 74.
general depiction of the American feminine type, as well as the impact of negotiations between mimesis and idealization on the finished image and its reception, points sometimes overlooked by other studies.

As this study has already shown, the cult of the bosom formed its vision of ideal American femininity by conflating extrinsic physical features and somatic responses with intrinsic qualities and motivations. Feminine portraits reflected this vision, offering images that called to mind aspects of the feminine ideal through a unique vocabulary of embedded signs and visual codes. These signs and codes subordinated sitters’ individualism, throwing a “veil of femininity” over them in order to make their portraits’ ideological functions more immediately legible. The result of this portrait mode in which likeness is secondary to type is that American feminine portraits appear less as personal mosaics of likeness and character and more as discrete, purposeful texts, illustrating, with bright eyes, blushing cheeks, and shy but beckoning smiles, the successful compliance of American women with the feminine ideal’s standards of appearance and behavior.

Beginning from this observation, this chapter will examine portraits as extensions of the discourse on femininity with two tasks in mind. The first is to identify and examine the signs of femininity present in portraits, which reinforced connections between a feminine appearance and the attributes associated with the American feminine type. I focus on three signs in particular, each of which is connected not only to femininity in general, but also to the bosom as its locus: the blush, the ruffle or flounce, and the floral corsage. Each of these motifs appears regularly in early republican portraits of women, and they can be read as indicators of both the sitter’s aesthetic perfection and her compliance with feminine ideologies. My second task relates to the size and format of feminine portraits. I offer a new interpretation for the rise in popularity of portrait miniatures in the early republican period, which has traditionally been connected to the advent of the companionate marriage and the affective family and the resulting desire on the part of the
rising American middle class to exchange love tokens and remembrances. Bearing in mind the historical associations of portrait miniatures with both psychic propinquity and privacy, I argue that miniatures, meant to be carried on the person within a pocket or concealed beneath the folds of a garment, allowed images of feminine beauty to function as private sources of visual pleasure for their owners, or for chosen others who had to be invited to look. Miniatures thus provided women with a suitable outlet where they could freely display the essential qualities that signified their femininity while keeping away from the ‘public eye’ and remaining within an appropriately modest sphere.

A ‘GALLERY OF BEAUTIES’ FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

As Americans looked back on the early years of their independent nationhood, a call went out for the creation of portraits that celebrated the revolutionary past’s heroic glory. Since subsequent generations would “examine the pages of our infant history, and see if the deeds they record betoken a noble or degenerate race,” Americans living in the first decades of the nineteenth century saw it as their special duty “to collect and transmit the evidence upon which judgment must be founded.” Engravers James B. Longacre and James Herring led the drive to produce ideological portraits of past notables, publishing, with the endorsement of the American Academy of the Fine Arts, a well-regarded compilation entitled *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*. According to Longacre and Herring, the project, which featured sober, serious images as well as brief biographical sketches of political and military leaders of the Revolution, was meant to express national pride and ensure that the heroic deeds associated with America’s quest for independence and its creation of an ideally enlightened system of governance

would be remembered. Critics received *The National Portrait Gallery* warmly, noting that it brought considerable honor to “the illustrious men who have contributed to our rising greatness.”

Just as portraits of statesmen and military leaders displayed the masculine virtues of heroism and honor, feminine portraits showcased the attributes embodied in America’s women, even the most typical among whom revealed her “charities, devotion, sympathies, [and] attachments” through her painted likeness. Early republican Americans were not alone in recognizing the potential of feminine portraits to celebrate exemplarity. More than a century earlier, during the reigns of King Charles II (1660-1685) and William III (1689-1702), painters had been commissioned to create portraits of the royal court’s ‘adornments,’ including the wives of important noblemen, some of whom also acted as the King’s mistresses, to be displayed at Windsor Castle and Hampton Court. These so-called ‘galleries of beauties,’ principally executed by Sir Peter Lely and Sir Godfrey Kneller, portrayed the elegance and grace of aristocratic women, as well as the universality of their adherence to contemporaneous feminine ideals of beauty.

---

291 In the introduction to *The National Portrait Gallery*, the authors note that “The enterprise presents the loftiest appeal to national honour and self respect, as an effort at once to preserve the features, and to rescue, from the wasting hand of time, the memory of those whose noble deeds, exalted fame, or eminent virtues, have shed a luster upon their age.” See James B. Longacre and James Herring, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1834), Introductory Address, np.


294 When scholars speak of galleries of ‘beauties’ made during the English restoration period, they are referring to two sets of portraits. The first, painted by Lely, was commissioned for private display at Windsor Castle and depicted the most noteworthy women attached to the court of Charles II. A generation later, working under a commission by Queen Mary II, Kneller painted a second group of feminine portraits of the beautiful women associated with the court of William III, to be displayed in the state rooms at Hampton Court. See Lara Perry, *History’s Beauties: Women and the National Portrait Gallery, 1850-1900* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 89-114; and Shearer West, “Gender and Portraiture,” in *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 152-154.

295 When the portraits are examined as a group, it is very clear that likeness has been consciously minimized in favor of a general, idealized image of feminine appearance, dress, and demeanor.
creation of these galleries can be attributed, in part, to the demands of European fashion and collecting practice, but they were also meant to impress upon audiences the exemplarity of the women they represented. To underscore this goal, artists inserted symbolically charged items related to ancient deities and their attributes into the portraits of some of the ‘beauties,’ such as a bow and quiver of arrows to call to mind the goddess Diana and her purity, or a scallop shell to reference the love and beauty associated with Venus (figure 20), thus transforming the portraits’ celebrations of earthly beauty into venerations of their sitters’ consummate femininity.

There are, of course, many other historical examples of portraits that functioned as representations of exemplarity, but I draw attention to the seventeenth-century beauties for both their specifically feminine focus and the extent to which they were viewed to have a symbolic

The universality of the feminine ideal in these portraits is reinforced by the sameness of the images themselves: they all conform to a standard size and format and, although slight variations in their physical features can be noted, the women portrayed are largely similar in terms of costume, hairstyle, pose, and even facial expression. The similarities were noted even as the portraits were being produced; one critic remarked that “all [Lely’s] pictures had an Air one of another, all the Eyes were Sleepy alike. So that Mr Walker Ye. Painter swore Lilly’s Pictures was all...Sisters.” Quoted in Diana Dethloff, “Portraiture and Concepts of Beauty in Restoration Painting,” Painted Ladies: Women at the Court of Charles II, Catherine MacLeod and Julia Marciari Alexander, eds. (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2002), 26.

Shearer West notes that the practice of amassing galleries of beauties originated in fifteenth-century Italy, when Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza began collecting feminine portraits, which he later displayed in a group. Other Italian aristocrats followed his example, and the practice spread to other parts of Europe, most notably England. See West, Portraiture, 153.

In his examination of late seventeenth-century British portraiture, J. Douglas Stewart maintains that galleries of beauties were meant to inspire through their symbolic iteration of Neoplatonism, and specifically of the intertwined doctrines of love and beauty, which held that the attributes of beauty, truth, and virtue each produced and reinforced one another and posited an opposition between the attributes of goodness and spirituality and the those associated with tainted or inverted beauty, including lust, carnal appetite, and vice. Although a beautiful woman’s appearance might inspire carnal desire, in the Neoplatonic schema, her beauty had the power to subsume the vice of lust and transform it into virtuous thoughts and deeds. More recently, Diana Delthoff has suggested that the understanding of Neoplatonism underwent a shift during the 1680s, the result of which was that feminine portraits came to be seen not as evocations of virtue, but as sensuous celebrations of the beautiful female flesh. See Delthoff, Painted Ladies, 24-35; J. Douglas Stewart, “Pin-Ups or Virtues? The Concept of ‘Beauties’ in Late Stuart Portraiture,” English Portraits of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar April 14, 1973 (Los Angeles: The Clark Library, 1974), 3-43.
function as much as a mimetic one. They were also familiar to early republican audiences, who used them as points of negative comparison to images of their own beauties. The critical view of the Windsor and Hampton Court beauties in America reflects a discourse around them that had begun in England in the mid-eighteenth century, when concerns about the personal histories of the sitters began to elicit widespread public condemnation of the portraits.\textsuperscript{298} By the early nineteenth century, this discourse targeted not only the sitters’ behavior, but the depictions themselves, identifying in their lavish, revealing draperies and florid coloration a provocative and problematic sensuality. Literary critic William Hazlitt’s frequently reprinted assessment, from his 1824 essay entitled ‘Sketches of the Principal Picture-Galleries in England,’ offers a representative early nineteenth-century opinion of the seventeenth-century beauties and their portraits:

[The] ‘Beauties’ of Charles II.’s court, by Lely...look just like what they were – a set of kept-mistresses...showing off their theatrical or meretricious airs and graces, without one touch of real elegance or refinement, or one spark of sentiment to touch the heart...As paintings, these celebrated portraits cannot rank very high.\textsuperscript{299}

Hazlitt’s critique centers on the impertinent demeanor of the sitters and the artifice of their self-presentation, both points resonant with audiences accustomed to the Enlightenment’s construction of natural, modest femininity. American audiences, who became familiar with the Hampton Court and Windsor beauties through Hazlitt’s essays and a popular book about them published in 1838

\textsuperscript{28} Horace Walpole was one of the first critics to turn an eye of judgment toward the portraits, referring in his \textit{Anecdotes of Painting} to Lely’s gallery as “the court of Paphos,” a reference to Ovid’s description of the group of beautiful Cretan women who angered Venus by denying her divinity, and whom she punished by forcing them to prostitute themselves before she turned them to stone – certainly not the classical association originally intended for the portraits. See Horace Walpole, \textit{Anecdotes of Painting in England; with some account of the principal artists, with additions by the Rev. James Dallaway, and Vertue’s catalog of engravers who have been born or resided in England} (London: R. N. Wornom, 1876).

entitled *Memoirs of the Beauties of the Court of Charles II*, were particularly sensitive to the beauties’ scandalous biographies and the historical associations between the feminine portrait and lust or vice. In order to prevent the Restoration beauties’ associations from being transferred to their own feminine portraits, American critics were careful to articulate differences between American sitters and the “painted, tawdry” mistresses of the seventeenth century.

The deployment of this strategy is seen in reviews of the work of Thomas Sully, an acknowledged specialist in the production of beautiful, feminine likenesses. Sully was one of the most popular portraitists in Philadelphia during the 1820s, 30s, and 40s, painting celebrated political and public figures and the fashionable elite. As Richard Brilliant has noted, one function of a portrait is as a reflection of its artist’s ability to read and respond to cultural constructions of status and identity; Sully's success as an artist followed from his ability to visualize cherished elements of the feminine ideal, and, in his portraits of young, beautiful women, either on their own or in casually posed, affectionate pairs, position his beauties as exemplars within its discourse.

From the outset of his career in the 1810s, critics had observed Sully’s talent for producing feminine portraits, noting that “female loveliness was never more happily drawn on canvass...than it has been in some portraits by Mr. Sully,” but it was with the unveiling of his portrait of Queen

---

30 *Memoirs of the Beauties of the Court of Charles II*, written by the noted nineteenth-century art historian Anna Jameson (1794-1860), includes both the images and a short biographical sketch of each of the women who comprised the gallery. Jameson frames her introduction of Charles II’s Beauties within the nineteenth-century dichotomy that opposed genuine beauty (associated with modesty, grace, and delicacy) with false or ‘vicious’ beauty (associated with vanity, coquetry, and sexual availability), making it clear that not all of the women in her text share the reprehensibility of a few, and noting that “those who imagine that the Beautiful Women *condamnées a la célébrité* by the mischievous wit of De Grammont’s Memoirs, were all *perdues de reputation*, may be pleased to find, that of one-and-twenty portraits in this collection, twelve are those of women as blameless as they were lovely.” Lara Perry has observed that nineteenth-century critiques of the Windsor and Hampton Court beauties reflect the importance of relegating to the past “unruly” women, thereby strengthening contemporary notions of appropriate femininity. See Perry, *History’s Beauties*, 97.


Victoria in 1838, which was immediately recognized as both a technical and ‘poetic’ triumph, that Sully was declared to be “without rival” in his talent for painting women beautifully.303

As the preeminent American painter of feminine portraits, Sully was cited as the artist most capable of producing an American ‘gallery of beauties’ to rival those by Lely and Kneller, especially after the publication of his 1842 portrait of his teenaged daughters, Blanche and Rosalie Sully (figure 21). In one review of the Sully daughters’ portrait, the author begins his assessment by praising Sully’s Kneller-like capacity for “discerning the beautiful in the female countenance,” the result of which was that “all who appear from his easel look refined and pure.”304 In the critic’s estimation, though, the refinement and physical charms of Sully’s sitters constituted the only similarities between his portraits and seventeenth-century galleries of beauties. So as to establish the moral superiority of American women over the bawds with whom Kneller was associated, the reviewer catalogs the differences between the portraits, such as, for example, the fact that Sully’s aesthetic is very soft, in contrast to Lely and Kneller’s “hardness of manner and execution,” a distinction that reflects both the artists’ personal styles and the appearances of their subjects. The most important difference, according to the critic, is the sitters’ respective characters and capacities for virtue, which he believes are evident in the expressions on their faces. It is here that Sully has the decided advantage, since “his American ‘beauties’...whose spotless reputations [are] in unison with their pictures,” display both beauty and femininity of expression, and thus “recall only pure and pleasant ideas and associations...unlike those of Hampton Court.” These ‘pure and pleasant associations’ are revealed through his sitters’ animated eyes, soft features, and, as is particularly evident in the portrait of Blanche and Rosalie, delicately blushing cheeks. In fact, the Sully sisters’ modest blushes were so central to their portrait’s association with the feminine ideal that when the

portrait was published in several different magazines during the 1840s, it was given the title *The Lily and the Rose*, a play on the sitters’ names, but, more importantly, a reference to their feminine blushes.

**EXPRESSIONS OF IDEALIZED FEMININITY**

Binding up elements of national identity in the physical appearance of American women, and locating moral attributes in the perfection of their physical exteriors, necessitated that portraits reflect established standards for beauty, even if artists had to slightly alter sitters’ appearances to do so. Idealization in portraiture and the tension it provoked were familiar issues to early republican artists and audiences, as articulated by Gilbert Stuart’s famous complaint that his patrons “bring him a potato and expect that he will paint...a peach.” Although the portraitist’s obligation simultaneously to represent a likeness and please a patron was a burden by no means uniquely felt in America, the confinement of most artistic endeavors throughout the eighteenth century and into the first decades of the nineteenth to portraiture meant that artists were forced to confront it nearly every time they took up their brushes. Of course, Stuart’s comment is primarily addressed to a desire felt by many, if not all sitters, to be flattered and to present the best version of themselves in their portraits. Idealization in feminine portraiture should be considered as a separate issue, since it cannot be solely attributed to a patron’s wish to look her best. As Lara Perry has observed, there is a persistent tradition in portraiture that considers the making of a female portrait not as an opportunity to produce a highly subjective representation, but as a platform on which to display aesthetic or decorative compositions. These displays provide artists with the opportunity to demonstrate their formal skills and transform their sitters, to varying degrees, from individuals to

---

allegories. This is certainly true of American feminine portraiture, about which it was often assumed that the image presented reflected at least some degree of improvement over the reality of a sitter’s appearance. Connoisseurs, some of whom openly stated their lack of concern for mimetic likeness in portraiture, privileged artists who celebrated the feminine ideal over the real, as is seen in reviews of miniaturist George Freeman’s American belles:

...he seems to know the look we most admire, the posture by which the fairest beauty is displayed...He idealizes a face, rendering the plain comely...He touches nothing which he does not adorn; every part is finished, every hue is as perfect as that of a rose.\footnote{Review of George Freeman, “The New World: A Weekly Family Journal of Popular Literature, art, Science, and News, volume 9, July-December 1843, Henry C. Deming and James Mackay, eds. (New York: E. Winchester, 1844), 726.}

Sully was similarly lauded for the manner in which he perfected sitters while still retaining individuality, according to one critic who noted that Sully “idealizes the features in harmony with such a soul, and gives that tone and finish to the colouring which beautify the picture,” all without “impairing the distinctive likeness to the original which at once reveals its identity.”\footnote{“The Rose and the Lily,” 1.} Even when confronted with an unpromising subject, another critic noted, Sully was always able to produce a beautiful portrait by identifying her “redeeming element” and capturing her “most desirable expression.”\footnote{“The Fine Arts in America,” The Southern Quarterly Review 15, no. 30 (July 1849), 212.}

Critics recognized this as Sully’s particular gift, and observed that while other portraitists might be said to surpass him in “subtlety of thought, felicity of invention, and in delineating what they see or remember,” Sully’s gift lay in his ability to capture a woman’s “force and richness of expression,” and “freshness, transparence and beauty of coloring,”

While it might seem problematic that American audiences would show what seems like little concern for the impulse towards idealization when it contradicts the Enlightenment’s emphasis on naturalness and freedom from pretense, we must consider that early nineteenth-
century artistic discourse viewed idealization as a means by which portraitists could present an image of a sitter that was not only more aesthetically perfect, but truer to what we might call his or her ‘true’ self. Charles Baudelaire’s famous quip from his review of the Salon of 1846 that a portrait can be understood in one of two ways – either as history or as fiction – as well as his insistence that a painterly, imaginative portrait could more clearly express its sitter than a perfect likeness hints at the tension provoked by any portrait’s dual role as an index of physical features and a means of expressing interiority. As Heather McPherson’s study of nineteenth-century French portraiture has shown, portraits that can be characterized as falling on the side of Baudelaire’s fiction – those with painterly surfaces, blurred elements, or irregular compositions – operated by reducing or conceptualizing sitters in order to capture the soul, at the expense of the likeness. While early republican portraits lack this level of self-conscious artistry, they were highly informed by the idea that, rather than dwelling on small details, the effective portrait should strive to reduce or generalize a sitter’s appearance, in order to symbolize his or her “social powers,” and, even more importantly, provide an “expression of the soul.”

This was especially true of feminine portraits, in which idealization was viewed not as artifice or trickery, but rather as an important tool that allowed femininity to be more effectively transmitted to viewers. In fact, since the opinion of some critics held that “the eyes, nose, and mouth, are among the least important marks from which many persons derive their impressions of certain faces,” American patrons regarded the strictly mimetic feminine portrait as unnecessary, not to mention potentially confusing to those who knew the sitter, since impressions of her were formed based on interaction and affection, not on a careful study of her features’ particularities:

---

What an infinite variety of opinions and feelings there is about the face of the beautiful Miss M— on the part of the crowd that see and adore her. They all agree as to the quality of her complexion, the colour of her eyes, and the shape of her nose and mouth; but, among these palpable glories of her face, each has some secret idol—a something amounting almost to a look, perhaps; an inexpressible kind of half-closing of—not both eyes—and yet altogether of only one; a segment of some unprecedented sort of smile—particularly on the left side of the mouth; a dropping of the eyebrows—no—not a frown, nor anything like it; a movement of the chin, observable only when the mouth is neither open nor shut; and other exquisite diversities, which an artist might overlook, but which each proprietor thinks absolutely essential to the perfect loveliness of his mistress.311

In order to avoid distracting viewers with what Albert Boime has termed the “myopic realism” of a slavishly mimetic portrait, painters softened and regularized, creating in their feminine portraits a visual analog to the tendency within the broader discourse on femininity to essentialize women’s characters around a standard set of attributes.312

THE CODES OF FEMININITY

In addition to general elements of femininity, like soft, regular faces with animated expressions, feminine portraits were embedded with codes that drew specific connections between their subjects and the cult of the bosom. Just as the rhetoric of femininity deployed euphemistic

312 Boime defines a myopic realist work as one that is “verisimilar in its painstaking detail but ringing false in the whole.” Boime’s definition of myopic realism appears as part of the larger comparison of Courbet to Gérome and French realism in his Art in an Age of Civil Struggle, Volume 4, 1848-1871 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 606.
language to reference the structures of the female body without explicitly naming them, these codes shifted sensual focus away from the bosom itself, placing it, instead, on non-bodily objects situated nearby. These elements shared aesthetic similarities with the bosom, such as softness, visual complexity, and delicate coloration, and served to remind viewers of the bosom’s attributes, both physical and psychic, without compromising propriety.

THE BLUSH

The first element common to American feminine portraiture is the delicate blush that frequently tinged sitters’ faces. Blushes, as we have already learned, were used to great effect by Thomas Sully, the American master of the “golden, roseate” complexion. Many of Sully’s subjects display beautiful blushes, but none more so than Eliza Ridgely, the elegant Lady with a Harp, as her 1818 portrait is often known (figure 22). Ridgely’s effulgent cheeks punctuate the otherwise perfectly smooth and creamy color of her complexion, and provide a delightful contrast in coloration to both her skin and her pale dress. Most feminine portraits of the early republican period contain self-conscious blushes, which Sully and his contemporaries bestowed on sitters in order to give them what was frequently referred to as “the most powerful charm of beauty.” By emphasizing sitters’ warmly-tinted faces, artists also connected them to the blush’s cherished associations with femininity and modesty, the discourses on which privileged the blush because of its involuntary, spontaneous nature and, thus, its ability to telegraph a woman’s inner feelings and her true spirit of virtue.313 Texts identified the modest blush as an important signifier of American feminine difference, and noted that, in contrast to women abroad, whose immodesty was revealed by the fact that they did not blush, and who went so far as to approximate a blush with the “bloom

of Circassia” when their own natures fell short, American women blushed easily and needed no “ingenious chymical preparations” to create the sign of their superior virtue.

In addition to its connection to modesty, blushing signified a number of other positive qualities in American women, most notably the good health they attained by life in a clean, wholesome nation. Medical professionals observed in blushing cheeks the “effect of the free transmission of pure and florid blood,” a primary element of proper circulation and vitality, which, in turn, indicated strength of constitution, fitness, even fertility, and was, therefore, an essential condition of ideal femininity. Dr. Bell’s treatise on physiognomy and health correlated flushed skin to both vitality and feminine beauty, observing that “without a healthy circulation of the blood, which implies in it a healthy respiration, and action of the lungs,” the complexion lost its delicate coloration, which ideally varied from “a beautiful and rather opaque white” at the temples to an “altogether rosy” pink at the cheek. Bell regarded this coloration as an extremely attractive characteristic, so he urged women to follow his regimen, which included “cleanliness, exercise, and cheerfulness,” as well as a restrictive vegetarian diet, in order to promote proper circulation and, thus, facilitate ready blushing. The health signified by a ‘vital’ complexion served to difference

---

314 Although advertisements reveal that rouges and other cosmetics were readily available in America, prescriptive texts decried their use, and authors with particularly patriotic aims refused to even admit the possibility that American women might use them. According to one author, while some critics of American society accused women of relying on rouge to animate their faces, he felt sure that they did not, asserting that “in Philadelphia, the pure and the pious, where no cheeks are crimsoned but by the modest suffusion, or the glow of Christian charity, there cannot be the least foundation for the...charge. See “Festoons of Fashion,” The Port-Folio 2, 1 (January 16, 1802): 5.

315 Bell, Health and Beauty, 25-26.

316 Bell, Health and Beauty, 26. Dr. Bell devised an entire regimen of diet and exercise for improving the coloration of a woman’s skin and ensuring the beauty of a contrast between the “hues of the lily and the rose.” It included regular walks out of doors and a diet composed almost exclusively of vegetables. Bell’s plan was advertised to ward off a variety of “serious and alarming diseases” and, more importantly for the ladies, make the skin softer and smoother, the complexion more luminous, and improve overall appearance. Bell observed: “Nutrition will...be manifested by a more harmonious outline of feature and limbs under this simple regimen that where the more stimulating aliment, drawn from the animal kingdom and seasoned with various condiments has
American women from other women of the world, especially their British counterparts. While it was frequently observed that British women had lovely, delicate complexions, a fact attributable to the “moist climate” of England, which was “favorable to the...pellucid rose tint, that distinguishes the faces of the young and beautiful,” American authors were quick to note that this delicacy also revealed their frailty, as it required constant care and coddling. An essay that posed to its American audience the question “Are we a Good-Looking People?” notes that the delicacy of their faces circumscribed English women’s activities within a narrow sphere, since an “additional degree to the thermometer, a glass of beer more than the daily allowance or an unusual emotion” could cause the bloom of an English woman’s cheeks to flush from a “delicately shaded rose tint...into the full-blown peony.”

The complexions of American women, on the other hand, were beautiful and sturdy. The essay describes the typical complexion of the American woman as “a compromise between the oriental olive and the English red” and notes that “it may be compared to a rose blooming through the misty vapor of early morn; it is like a ripe peach, with its golden tint spread over the roseate hue beneath.” In addition to its general loveliness, such a complexion signified the energy and vitality of American culture since it was observed to “[show] itself everywhere where enterprise and labor are busy in doing their part.”

Sentimental pleasure taken in the interplay between milky skin and flushed cheeks was a common theme in early republican literature, such as an encomiastic poem from 1827, which addressed itself directly to the blush, and cataloged its many beneficial functions, including improving a woman’s appearance, imparting to her countenance the “bloom ethereal” and bidding

---

been used. Some of the most agreeable examples of...maidenly beauty and loveliness are of persons whose food is habitually simple, and mainly, if not exclusively, vegetable, including the ripe fruits of the season.” See Bell, *Health and Beauty*, 78.


318 “Are we a Good-Looking People?” 315.
her “Loveliness more lovely shine.”\textsuperscript{319} The blush was cherished for more than the feminine attributes it signified or the stirring in the soul it caused, though. Since the early eighteenth century, the same theoretical constructions of beauty that related the bosom’s aesthetic perfection to the contours of its swells and recesses located aesthetic pleasure in observing “the lily and the rose” of a woman’s cheek. These treatises identified the variations in color between milky white skin and flushed cheeks as visual pleasure’s source, as, for example, in Hogarth’s foundational \textit{Analysis of Beauty}, wherein he observed that “in all animals...the beauty of colour, when slightly varied, becomes extremely interesting. – In human beauty, considerable variety is produced by the different shades of the skin.”\textsuperscript{320} Nineteenth-century medical texts like Bell’s noted that the physiological response that caused the cheeks to blush also generated a becoming flush on the décolletage, since the “reticular tissue, or substance interposed between the true skin and scarf-skin” of both had similar properties, including transparency and a propensity readily to fill with blood. As a result, the same stimulus that caused a woman’s blush also filled the veins visible just under her bosom’s surface, creating “all those shades of azure which the charmed eye follows with so much pleasure on the surface of the bosom.”\textsuperscript{321} We note in these constructions of the blush’s beauty points of connection between it and the cult of the bosom. The first of these points

Bloom ethereal, blush divine!
Bidding, by the sweet suffusion,
Loveliness more lovely shine!
More than beauty’s fairest feature,
More than form’s most perfect grace;
Touching the fond heart, and giving
Softest charms to every face!
Test of quick-impassion’d feeling;
Jewel in the dower of youth;
Modesty’s unquestion’d herald;
Pledge of innocence and truth!
\textsuperscript{320} Hogarth, \textit{The Analysis of Beauty}, 96.
\textsuperscript{321} Bell, \textit{Health and Beauty}, 73-74.
associates attributes like modesty and vitality, the locus of which was the bosom itself, with blushing, transforming the blush into a sign of the discourse on American feminine difference. The second connects the aesthetic pleasure located in the variation of both the bosom and the cheeks and compels the eye to seek aesthetic gratification in the variations of each. The third proposes a physiological connection between the blushing cheek and the bosom, adorned with both its own delicate coloration and a map of intertwining veins that the eye could trace over its surface.

The association of American women’s blushes with the attributes of their femininity challenged painters of feminine portraits to enhance sitters’ rosy cheeks without making them appear as if they were wearing the “artificial blush” of rouge. American audiences prided themselves on their ability to recognize “the daubed visage of a play-house belle,” and they saw in such a practice not only the shameful deception of the cosmetic-wearer herself, but a threat to the ideology of American difference. As Caroline Palmer has noted, eighteenth century British texts betray substantial anxiety around not only the women who enhanced their own appearance by wearing cosmetics but the portrait painters who improved their sitters by applying paint to compensate for absent blushes. To mitigate such concerns, American portraitists carefully observed facial anatomy and the subtlety of natural coloration, in order to translate such subtlety with their paints. Mary Philadelphia Merrifield, the author of several mid-nineteenth-century treatises on painting, provided detailed instructions for artists on how to best capture a natural appearance when painting a woman’s blush:

...work the colour on the cheek, which is composed of Vermillion and Pink Madder, observing the gradations of colour and light on the cheek-bones; stipple the edges of the

322 Oliver Oldschool, “The American Lounger,” The Portfolio 2 (February 27, 1802): 57.
colour near the nose, bring the colour up well to the temple, and diffuse it over the cheek
towards the ear, and a little on the chin. This done, deepen the extreme shadows where
they require it. Then hatch over the shaded parts...sometimes the hatching will appear too
wiry, in which case wash it several times with a clean brush dipped in water, in order to
blend the tints.  

THE RUFFLE

Another signifier of femininity and its locus is the light colored ruffled or ruched fabric
almost always seen adorning the décolletage of early Republican portrait subjects. Such fabric,
whether it was sewn as trim onto a gown or framing the bosom in the form of an accessory like a
fichu, shawl, or tucker, appears in portraits so commonly as to be an ubiquity, the presence of
which has been explained by portrait scholars as either an accurate reflection of contemporaneous
fashion or an artistic tactic to cast flattering light onto and draw focus to a sitter’s features and
expression.  Both of these explanations have the support of history. One needs only glance
through a history of nineteenth-century fashion to know that, despite other changes in the
silhouette of women’s garments over this period, the presence of white lace, ruffled trim, or swaths
of fabric around the neckline is a typical element of fashionable dress. The omnipresence of a

324 Mary Philadelphia Merrifield, *Practical Directions for Portrait Painting in Water Colors*
(London: Winsor and Newton, 1851), 40.
325 Linda Baumgarten’s recent examination of clothing in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-
century portrait miniatures identifies white linen or lace around the neckline as an ubiquitous motif
in portraits of both men and women from all regions of the United States, and explains that its
presence is attributable to a number of factors, including a deliberate choice on the part of the
painter to highlight and direct viewers’ focus to the face and an accurate record of what was actually
worn. Baumgarten also notes that light colored lace or fabric can also be read as a sign of status,
since the accessories themselves were costly to obtain and their pristine appearance required the
maintenance of specially skilled ladies’ maids. See Linda Baumgarten, “Clothing in Portrait
Miniatures,” in Julie Aronson and Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Perfect Likeness, European and
American Portrait Miniatures from the Cincinnati Art Museum* (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 2006), 17-32.
light, intricate frame about the bosom also reflects conventions of early republican portrait painting, an assertion ratified by directives in contemporaneous texts for painters. Such texts advised portraitists-in-training to copy the compositions and colorations of great paintings from the past, which frequently displayed their female subjects dressed in “white muslin dresses, or in light drapery of a warm neutral tint.” The aforementioned Mrs. Merrifield, who, in addition to being an instructor of painting was an amateur historian of art and costume, observed this practice to be a rule among the most beloved painters of the past, including Van Dyck, Rubens, Rembrandt, Velasquez, and Correggio, all of whom contrived, when painting women, “to place white next to the skin.” The greatest contemporaneous painters were also observed to favor white costumes and light-colored draperies for their female sitters, including Gilbert Stuart, about whose feminine portraits a late nineteenth-century art historian remarked: “We find most of the women that he painted robed in diaphanous, colorless gowns, wherein he could show his feeling and his power,” a penchant that was the result of his “true artist instinct.” According to Merrifield, placing white textiles next to the flesh of the face, the neck, or the bosom held several advantages, the most important of which was that it improved the skin’s appearance. Similar observations were made by connoisseurs of both art and fashion throughout the early nineteenth century, who advised women to embrace the “decided contrast” of a white ruffle, which produced the effect of “setting off or heightening a complexion” by casting flattering light back onto it. In addition to their positive effect on the color of a woman’s skin, white ruffles also had the effect of “softening and harmonizing” a woman’s face and décolletage, as well as protecting their delicate textures from

what was considered to be a harsh effect produced by overly contrasting coloration, and thus preventing an unflattering darkness from being cast upon her.\textsuperscript{330} This final result was of particular benefit to the positive reception of the sitter by her audience, since, as another portraitist’s manual noted, regardless of a woman’s costume, or the attitude in which she was placed, the successful portraitist must “contrive to give her face as little shade as possible, that she may appear more fascinating.”\textsuperscript{331}

The role of ruffles and flounces in increasing the fascination a sitter held went beyond simply illuminating her countenance, though. Draped and ruffled fabric was also credited with enhancing a sense of engagement between the portrait’s subject and its viewer. As has already been noted, texts identified a particular charm about portraits made at the turn of the nineteenth century, and, although hard-pressed to quantify just what it was that made these images so appealing, many credited the ‘naturalness’ of the sitters’ dress, as noted by an “advocate on behalf of beauty”:

We are inclined to think that the female attire of the present day is, upon the whole, in as favorable a state as the most vehement advocates for what is called Nature and simplicity could desire...calculated to bring out the natural beauties of the person, and each of them has, as far as we see, fair play.\textsuperscript{332}

The elements of fashionable dress that constituted this delightful simplicity included all the artless garments and accessories popular beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century, including high-waisted muslin gowns and lacy or gauzy shawls. Writing in the late 1830s about the fashions of the preceding decades and the way in which they enhanced a woman’s portrait presentation, one

\textsuperscript{330} Cassell’s Household Guide, 215.  
\textsuperscript{331} “Hints to Young Portrait Painters,” The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction, volume 9 (London: J. Limbard, 1828), 36.  
The author observed that few who viewed female portraits from the turn of the nineteenth century “would not confess that there was something in the style of costume then prevailing, which threw over its wearer a grace which we look for in vain in the more formal and recherché attire of earlier or later days.” This author notes that the elements of dress most “favorable to the painter’s art” include “the vague and indefinite flow of the drapery,” as well as “the careless manner in which locks, guiltless alike of powder and hairdressing, flowed in admired disorder, confined perhaps by a simple fillet of ribbon, over neck and brow.” Celebrations of simple, flowing garments and hairstyles with minimal adornments were partly motivated by the patriotic sensibilities of Americans to decry ostentatious, formal dress and instead to privilege what seemed like a more “natural” aesthetic. Flowing and ruffled garments and accessories were central to the cultivation of this aesthetic, since their irregular contours mimicked natural forms, like, for example, the petals of flowers. A humorous review of contemporaneous fashions written in 1816 makes such a comparison explicit, observing that the advantage to which women appear in the current fashions owes much to their ruffles, which “give them the appearance of elegant tulips,” and closing with a quip that “as a tulip is like a bell, why should not a belle, be like a tulip?”

The delight American audiences found in the ruffled and lace-trimmed prettiness of feminine portraits also reflects the aesthetic implications of a change from the artistic practices associated with portraiture abroad, where the method for preparing likenesses often involved the employment of specialist subcontractors called drapery painters who were responsible for the costumes and other draped textile elements in portraits. Drapery painters were utilized by many artists in Europe and England beginning in the seventeenth century, and by the eighteenth century, the practice was widespread, especially in London, where popular drapery painters operated

---

334 Quintus Quill, “Chamber of Fashion,” The Parterre, a Weekly Magazine, Conducted by a Trio 1, 17 (October 26, 1816): 131.
independent studios to which most fashionable portraitists sent their canvases for finishing. As Deborah Prosser has noted, though, the practice was virtually unheard of in America. This fact owes to several conditions, including the lack of a formalized system for the training of artists’ apprentices in America, which, for English and Continental artists, generated a team of studio assistants obligated to paint backgrounds and draperies, as well as what Ellen Miles has identified as a relatively scant demand for portraiture in America, at least when compared to the number of commissions generated by popular portraitists abroad. Although the practice of employing drapery painters allowed portraitists to work more efficiently, critics also observed that, in some cases, the finished portraits looked ‘manufactured’ rather than painted, with jarring seams between the body, the costume, and the setting that disrupted the pleasurable experience of gazing at a likeness. American audiences took some measure of pride in what was identified as the “harmonious” aesthetic of their portraits, wherein all elements were observed to relate gracefully to one another.

This harmonious effect offered a particular aesthetic advantage to feminine portraits, as explained by a frequently reprinted essay entitled “The Art of Dress,” which addressed both the state of American feminine portraiture in the first half of the nineteenth century and the means by which women could achieve the most flattering representation of themselves. The author of the essay notes that, in the present day, portraits offer the viewer “such a plentitude of charms that we hardly know where to begin the catalogue.” The anonymous author goes on to describe the swell

---
333 As Prosser notes, the central difference between the working method of English and Continental portraitists and those in America was that, in contrast to portraitists abroad, who supervised large, assembly line-like manufactories, American portraitists, with only a few exceptions, worked alone. See Deborah Prosser, Visual Persuasion: Portraits and Identity among Colonial Artists and Patrons, 1770-1776, Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1997 (UMI Dissertation Services: 1997), 28.
of emotion attendant upon the eye’s perusal of a portrait as it starts at the top of a sitter’s head and moves down past her face and décolletage:

...hair light as silk...Throat, a lovely stalk, leading the eye upwards to a lovelier flower, and downwards along a fair sloping ridge, undulating in the true line of beauty, to the polished precipice of the shoulder; whence, from the pendant calyx of the shortest possible alcove, hangs a lovely branch, smooth and glittering like pale, pink coral...terminating in five taper petals, pinker still...especially contrived by Nature to pick your heart clean to the bone before you know what they are about.337

This passage articulates an expectation that a successful feminine portrait would compel languid, circuitous looking wherein the viewer’s eye moved in a dreamy path from the top of a woman’s head down the contours of her face, the neck and shoulders, to her bosom, and in and out of the ruffles that adorned her neckline.

The extent to which audiences expected feminine portraits to display harmony between costume and figure becomes even more clear when we consider nineteenth-century reviews of the work of one of the only known portrait teams in early America: Samuel Lovett Waldo (1783-1861) and William Jewett (1792-1874), whose artistic partnership lasted from 1817 until 1854. Waldo, who had trained in London with Benjamin West before establishing a portrait studio in New York in 1809, took on Jewett, the recent graduate of an apprenticeship with a carriage painter, as a pupil in 1812, and the two men became partners several years later.338 Their studio was extremely prolific, and historians believe that Waldo was primarily responsible for painting sitters’ faces and hands, while Jewett added costumes and drapery.339 The practice of two artists working together on

339 Sherman, Early American Portraiture, 17.
a single portrait, what one review referred to with puzzlement as “this partnership business in painting,” was evidently problematic to American critics, who dismissed the enterprise as being “more like trade than art.”[^340^] Even more problematic was the disconnect perceived between the carefully painted, feminine faces of sitters and their stiff, graceless costumes, as an 1827 review of Waldo and Jewett noted. Speaking of one of their female portraits, a critic observed that while “there is a pleasant air of the head, and it is well drawn,” the background and dress were “slovenly painted,” displaying a “sharp and painful” angularity and lacking anything “sprightly or aerial.”[^341^]

Most offensive to the critic was the “scanty drapery,” which “does not float on the air in graceful folds, but is stiff and solid,” and he concluded that while “we have seen excellent portraits by Waldo & Jewett...if he intends to appear to advantage by the side of his contemporaries, there must be less of the manufactory in his pictures.”[^342^]

Just as theorists located visual pleasure in the varied coloration of a blushing cheek, the harmonious interplay between a figure and her draped, ruffled garments was observed to be inherently beautiful as well. In addition to locating aesthetically pleasing qualities in the contours of a woman’s body and the varied coloration of her skin, William Hogarth also took visual pleasure in her garments and accessories, noting that when women “are at liberty to make what shapes they please in ornamenting their persons,” those with the best taste choose “the irregular as the more engaging.”[^343^] Ruffles and draped fabrics, especially those that were “irregular, varying, and somewhat complicated” were particularly engaging, in Hogarth’s view, because of their ability to “excite that active curiosity, and those movements of imagination, to which skilful women never

American connoisseurs of portraiture concurred, observing that one of the most “picturesque” accessories a female subject could choose was a ruffle or flounce placed next to the skin, both of which led the eye across an aesthetically delightful irregular surface. In the aforementioned essay “The Art of Dress,” for example, the author locates visual pleasure in both the drapery itself and, especially, in its “vague and indefinite flow,” which the gaze of the viewer is compelled to follow on its meandering path across the body.\(^\text{345}\)

As my earlier discussion of the conceptual relationship between feminine beauty and the bosom has shown, early republican culture located the essence of beauty at the intersection between the bosom’s special status as femininity’s point of origin and the optical experience of tracing around its curves, into and out of its recesses, and over the trailing paths created by its contours. The nature of ruffled and draped fabrics mimicked the irregular swells and recesses of the bosom, and observing them led viewer’s eyes on a similarly giddy journey, providing an analogous visual experience to that of losing oneself in the contours of the flesh. In fact, the experience was even more highly charged, because it necessarily involved a tactile element not present in theories of the feminine body’s inherent beauty: that of delicate fabrics dancing over the flesh and caressing its contours. Descriptions of meandering lace and embracing draperies inevitably call to mind roving hands and fingers tracing the contours of the bosom, an undeniably sensuous effect heightened to an additional degree by the portrait’s indexical nature, which referred the act of the portrait’s production, thus more specifically referencing the hands of the artist on the flesh of the sitter, or at the very least on the painted representation of her flesh.\(^\text{346}\)


\(^{346}\) C. S. Peirce’s trichotomy of signs, which includes the icon (a sign that looks like the thing it represents), the index (a sign that draws attention to some dynamic relationship outside of but
So that their portraits would fulfill both the feminine and picturesque ideal, when selecting attire for their sittings, women were advised to forgo garments and accessories that were rigid or opaque and instead choose ones that “wave and flow, as in a very light material,” giving the effect that the wearer “has no outline and no mass, but looks like a receding angel, or a ‘dissolving view’” Ruffles, gauze, and lace clearly fit the bill, but other draperies, like shawls and scarves, required some caution. For one, a shawl that was too dark in color or too heavy could not drape prettily across the bosom or shoulders, reflect light onto the face, or provide viewers with the aesthetically pleasing irregularities their eyes craved. Not only was a heavy shawl unable to float gracefully over and mimic the contours of the body, its opacity obscured the bosom’s inherently picturesque nature, which undercut the portrait’s ability to transmit the signs of femininity. On the other hand, a sheer, draping shawl with an intricate pattern or a lacy border constituted “as picturesque a thing as a lady can wear,” which easily “supplies the eye with that irregularity which drapery requires.” Even better, it showcased the bosom beneath a constantly shifting screen, an effect that provided some special delights to viewers. In a poem addressed by a feminine portrait’s commissioner to its maker, the author declares that the painter should showcase the sitter by

---

contriving to “let a floating, lucid veil, / Shadow her...but not conceal,” in order that “a charm may peep, a hue may beam.”

Even as women’s garments became more structured in the 1820s and 30s, soft, draping details were retained, especially around the neckline. The ‘Berthe’ or ‘Bertha’ collar provides an excellent example of the continued popularity of intricate ruffled elements in the costumes of the 1830s and beyond. An ornate, draped collar, usually detachable from the rest of a woman’s gown, a berthe was worn slightly off the shoulder and encircled the bosom with multiple rows of lace, ribbon trim, and pleated fabric. Observers located in its visual complexity and proximity to the bosom tremendous erotic potential related to the manner in which it led the eye across and down the surface of the bosom:

There is something especially beautiful...in the expanse of breast and shoulder...like a fair sloping sunny bank...[this effect is] increased by the berthe’s carrying out that fair sunny bank still deeper, or rather environing it with a rich ring fence, of which we admire the delicacy and beauty, though it impedes out view of what is beyond.

In addition to textile accessories, other irregularly contoured, transparent or screening elements of female self-presentation, including necklaces and curled ringlets of hair hanging about the face and on the shoulders, were also associated with the construction of picturesque femininity. The ringlet’s allure was described by American cultural materials in the same terms as draped or ruffled trim, as in a poem that addressed itself to the hair directly, lovingly following its path as it wended its way across its owner’s décolletage and, like the ‘peeping charms’ of a ruffle or a gauzy shawl, locating its allure in its ability to partially screen the female flesh while permitting fortunate viewers the occasional tantalizing glimpse:

349 “A Poem,” *The Literary Tablet; or, a General Repository of Useful Entertainment* 4, no. 9 (March 1807): 36.
350 “Art of Dress,” 143.
OH blest is the Ringlet, and envied its maze
As down thy fair bosom of transport it strays;
Thy tear-drop dissolving; or fann’d by thy sigh,
Veiling the fugitive gleam of thine eye!
Oh ne’er may a pang that fair bosom molest,
And that Lock in its mazes forever be blest! 334

A late eighteenth-century portrait by Rembrandt Peale offers an excellent example of the enthusiasm with which American artists added draping, irregular, and generally picturesque elements to feminine portraits. The portrait’s subject, Mrs. William Marbury (Ann Odle Brewer), peers at the viewer, wearing a typically fashionable turn of the century gown accented along its neckline with a wide, sheer ruffle, and a draped shawl arranged casually about her shoulders (figure 23). Her dark hair trails down her neck and shoulders, and her costume is accessorized with one string of white pearls around her neck and another arranged in a path that winds along the underside of her breasts. The composition of the portrait functions almost as a Venn diagram, in which all of the ruffled, curled, and irregular elements are arcs that overlap at the nexus of both the image and the identity of the sitter, her bosom. Peale’s ca. 1817 portrait of Dolly Madison contains a similar effect, with irregular, meandering elements placing a frame around her expansive, brightly highlighted décolletage, to which the viewer’s eye cannot help but be drawn (figure 24).

THE ROSE

While the blush and the ruffle each held pointed significance when deployed in American feminine portraiture, neither was as highly charged as the final sign this study identifies: the rose.

Usually seen tucked into a sitter’s bodice or held just in front of her décolletage, the rose, as either a single blossom or mixed with other flowers and greenery in a nosegay or corsage, brought an extraordinarily significant set of symbolic associations to the American feminine portrait.\textsuperscript{352} Roses began to be seen in them during the first half of the eighteenth century, and they were regular inclusions by its midpoint, especially in portraits commemorating an engagement or marriage. The connection between roses and marriage relates to their ancient association with Venus, her great beauty, and the love it inspired in others. This association was retained in later centuries as it acquired the additional significations of temporality and frailty, a connection articulated in an eighteenth-century English book for children wherein the fully bloomed rose represented:

\begin{quote}
the bloom of life, when all our Faculties are in their Prime, yet but little more lasting that the Blooming Flower; (and when, if we are not suddenly crop’d, we shall quickly feel our Honours and our Glories fade, and Infirmity and old Age lay their cold and withering Hand upon us.)\textsuperscript{353}
\end{quote}

Roses also symbolized the co-mingling of pleasure and pain, especially when the blossoms were depicted upon their thorn-covered stems. Roland Fleischer has noted that the motif of the rose bush or tree first appeared in Renaissance literature, where it was used to illustrate the thought that

\textsuperscript{352} Of course, a woman wearing or holding roses is by no means a convention unique to early republican portraiture. That the presence of flowers in art works holds a number of associations, such as the transience of beauty, is a commonplace, as is the longstanding association between femininity and the qualities of flowers, like delicateness and sweet smell. Roses have particularly strong historical connections to love, beauty, and virtue, because of their ancient association with Venus and their use as a symbol for the Virgin Mary by early cults devoted to her worship. It is to be expected, then, that flowers in general, and roses in particular, have been a typical element in portraits of women during many historical periods, the presence of which symbolically associates sitters with femininity and the virtuous qualities required of their sex, since, as Beverly Seaton has noted, “every age writes its own language of flowers in its literature and its customs.” See Seaton, \textit{The Language of Flowers: A History} (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 60.

\textsuperscript{353} \textit{Emblems for the Improvement and Entertainment of Youth: containing emblematical, hieroglyphical, and aenigmatical devices, relating to all parts and stations of life ; intended to promote morality, virtue and religion} (London: Printed for D. Steele, 1787), 69.
love has both its joy and its sorrow, just as a rose has the beauty of its delicate petals and the
sweetness of its smell along with the painful prick of its thorns. The motif continued to appear in
eighteenth-century texts, such as, for example, a popular book entitled *Emblems for the
Improvement and Entertainment of Youth*, in which the image of the rose bush was captioned
with the adage that “No rose is without its thorns.”

Roses, then, were apt symbols to include within early eighteenth-century portraits in which
sitters wished to convey preparedness for, and willingness to accept both the pleasures and the
sacred duties that accompanied marriage and motherhood, such as William Williams’ 1766
portrait of Deborah Hall in which the sitter, standing in a carefully articulated formal garden,
plucks an open rose from a bush growing in a pot (figure 25). Ellen Miles has identified a number
of symbols of romantic love and marriage in this portrait, including the enclosed garden setting, a
traditional pictoral symbol of the Garden of Love, and the fountain in the background, which
carried associations with Venus, but the rose, with its thorn-covered stem that Deborah Hall holds
between her fingers, is certainly its most prominent symbol.

Several events challenged the exclusive association between flowers and chaste, serious
preparation for marriage in the middle of the eighteenth century. One was the publication of Lady
Mary Wortley Montague’s letters in 1763, written during her travels through Turkey several
decades earlier. Lady Montague’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* were widely read, offering Europeans a
glimpse into life in one of Ottoman culture’s most exotic spaces, the harem. The travelogue
contained several references to the *sélam*, a method of communicating through coded messages
delivered via groups of objects or bouquets of flowers. Lady Montague intimated that the *sélam*

---

of the College Art Association, New York, February 1982, unpublished. Quoted in Ellen Miles’

was a practice used mostly by the harem concubines to converse secretly with their lovers outside the harem’s confines, and introduced her description of the “Turkish Love-Letter” by noting:

There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit ...[or] herb ...that has not a verse belonging to it; and you may quarrel, reproach, or send letters of passion, friendship ...or even of news, without ever inking your fingers.  

It should be noted that this statement is somewhat confusing regarding the method by which the sélam was actually used to communicate. The codes associated with flowers in Turkey were evidently quite complex, with the designated species assigned to each word or phrase chosen not because of any symbolic association between the two, as Montague’s description seems to indicate, but rather because the name of the flower rhymed with the word it was meant to invoke. Its slight muddling of the process’s mechanics notwithstanding, Montague’s account of the sélam was fascinating to her readers, and it established an association, if only imagined, between flowers and mischevious intrigue or eroticism.

The iconography of contemporaneous French genre paintings furthered this association. Within the study of eighteenth-century French pastoral scenes, Mary Sheriff has demonstrated how flowers acted as playful metonyms for female sexuality, or for specific parts of female sexual anatomy, especially the breast and nipple. The origins of this association were both lexical and visual. In the parlance of the day, the French word bouton (button) was a colloquialism referring to both the nipple and the rosebud. The lexical association between nipples and rosebuds was reinforced by observations of their structural resemblance, in terms of size, shape, and color, made

---

357 The sélam was correctly explained in an earlier travelogue written by Seignur Aubry de la Mottraye, in his Voyages du Sr. A. de la Motraye en Europe, en Asia et en Afrique (1727). See Seaton, The Language of Flowers, 60-65.
explicit in a 1761 engraving after a painting by Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, *La Comparison du bouton de rose*, in which a young woman, perched upon a bed in her underclothes, observes with delight the similarity between the rosebud she holds and her own nipple, reflected in a hand mirror (figure 26). While the double entendre presented in this engraving is frank, and rather crude, other artists relied on the fact that the association and its accompanying terminology were widely understood by their patrons, and they embedded punning anatomical references that often took the form of a rose corsage worn by a painting’s female subject.

This inclusion would have been instantly recognizable to the cultured audiences for whom the paintings were made, and for whom the visual vocabulary of eroticism was familiar. Sheriff has identified a number of works featuring a carefully placed rose corsage on the bodice recalling the breast or nipple, mostly drawn from the erotically encoded pastoral paintings of Fragonard and Boucher. For example, in Fragonard’s *The Wanderer*, an image saturated with sexual symbols, a rose corsage covers the right breast of the young female subject, while her left breast and nipple are left uncovered by her enticingly low bodice. In addition to genre scenes, the specific metaphoric and metonymic relationship in which a rose bud or rose represents the anatomy of the breast can be seen in French portraits, such as Boucher’s 1759 portrait of Madame de Pompadour, who wears an effusive and unmistakably symbolic rose corsage (figure 27), or the somewhat less explicit portrait of Madame du Barry painted by Drouais in 1770, in which we can see just the barest hint of her right nipple, and would surely see her left as well, were it not for a conveniently concealing garland of white and pink roses and foliage draped over her shoulder (figure 28). Although it is in French portraiture that this practice is most readily visible, it appears in English examples as well, such as Thomas Hudson’s 1754 portrait of Mary Carew, which features the same conscious, careful placement of a rose corsage along with a thematic nod to French pastoral genre scenes, evoked by Carew’s guise as a shepherdess (figure 29). Rococo artists also used roses as visual
substitutes for the female external genitalia. Although this connection was not as common as the one drawn between the rose and the breast or nipple, it is seen in a few cabinet paintings, such as Louis-Leopold Boilly’s *La Toilette Intime* or *The Unpetalled Rose*, which shows a young woman dressed in her underclothes, straddling a bidet and washing her genitals, with a wilted rose placed conspicuously in the painting’s foreground (figure 30).

The association between roses and the attributes of femininity persisted into the nineteenth century, but the sexual and anatomical aspects of this association were retained only peripherally, as the more widespread interpretation of rose shifted to align with the rhetoric of modesty and the feminine ideal. In an 1802 poem entitled *A Nosegay*, attributes of various flowers are equated with the virtues of femininity so that “in each plant some lesson we may find, / Which serves t’improve while it corrects the mind.”* A Nosegay likens violets, hyacinths and jasmine to the qualities of innocence and “sweet diffidence,” because of both their colors, which are “chaste and pure,” and their growth patterns, which in the author’s mind signify shyness and self-concealment. In contrast, the colorful tulip is associated with the beautiful quality of variety “that changes with the hour.” The flower that holds the most privileged position within the Nosegay is the rose, the connotation of which is ideal femininity, signified by beauty and modesty: “Though it reveals itself...it a blush betrays.” Like a beautiful but appropriately modest young woman, the Nosegay’s rose allows its beauty to be regarded by others, but its self-display is tempered by the presence of the most cherished signifier of natural modesty and femininity, the sweet and innocent blush. The physical properties of the rose also recalled other signifiers of femininity, including the rounded contours of a young woman’s body, or the softness and delicacy of her skin, as observed by a poem entitled “The Rose and the Thorn” (1834), which describes the attraction felt for a rose by the ‘scraggy

---

30 “A Nosegay,” *The Portfolio* 2, 50 (December 18, 1802): 400.
thorn’ who would woo her: “He loved her velvet cheek, / Her round and swelling form, / He loved her posture meek, / Beneath the driving storm.”

Early nineteenth-century texts also characterized the rose as a symbol of perfect balance between femininity’s most important attributes, beauty and virtue, since the rose’s attractive elements, like the soft petals and delicate coloration of its flower, were protected by its thorns, just as a woman’s ‘beauties’ should be protected by her modesty. This characterization of the rose as nature’s exemplar of modest self-display was strengthened in prescriptive texts by the regular comparison of the rose to the tulip, which was characterized as extravagant and showy. Dr. Gregory’s *Legacy*, for example, contains the fable of the Spider and the Bee, which offers a comment on both the allure of modesty and the dangers to the courtship process posed by feminine artfulness and deception. Observing the web spun by a spider in order to catch flying insects, meant to symbolize the problematic figure of a cunning woman, a passing bee remarks that “...A thoughtless fly or two at most, / Is all the conquests thou canst boast; / For bees of sense thy arts evade, / We see so plain the nets are laid...” The bee then recounts various flowers he has encountered in his travels, and, in a not particularly subtle metaphor, remarks upon those flowers which have most attracted him to sip nectar from their blossoms. About the tulip, he says “The gaudy tulip, that displays / Her spreading foliage to the gaze, / That points her charms at all she sees, / And yields, to every wanton breeze, / Attracts me not.” The association here between the tulip and affected beauty and immodesty is clear, and was echoed in many contemporary publications for young women, which used the rose and tulip to symbolize the familiar opposition of the ideally modest woman and her foil, the coquette. *The Lady’s Monthly Museum*, for example, published a fable entitled “The Rosebud and the Tulips” in 1798, in which “A race of

---

dazzling tulips bright, / With various hues of richest dye, / Display’d their beauties to the eye.”

In the fable, the tulips scorn the small rose bush that grows just outside their bed, mocking the fact that it goes unnoticed next to the “painted ranks” of the tulips’ “gay phalanx.” Unsurprisingly, the tulips meet an unfortunate end as a sudden storm tears down “the high-rais’d frames” of the tulips and leaves them “defaced – torn – scatter’d all around” and lying in “a useless heap.” Passed over by the attentions of bees or ravaged by the effects of time and weather, the inevitable fate of the tulips is only ruin and despair, the same, according to prescriptive literature, as the fate of coquettish or immodest young women.

While the allure of the tulip was transient and fragile, the rose or rosebud was characterized, in these fables, as being captivating both because of its quiet beauty and the attributes recalled by its physical structure of a lovely blossom guarded by thorns. It is this combination of beauty and self-protective modesty to which the bee, who likes flowers that play hard-to-get, finds himself most attracted: “Where blushing grows, / Guarded with thorns, the modest rose, / Enarmour’d round and round I fly, / Or on her fragrant bosom lie; / Reluctant she my ardour meets, / And bashful renders up her sweets.”

The thorns of modesty are charged with the task of protecting the rose, a task made even more vital since the beauty of the rose constitutes such a desirable treasure, and it is the bashful, blushing rose alone who can choose to “render up her sweets” to the bee who proves himself most worthy. This imagery provided an especially apt and potent symbol for young women, who were expected to display their beauty but constrain its effect on others through their simultaneous display of femininity’s visible markers and their adherence to its behavioral circumscriptions. The most compelling of these circumscriptions was

---

33 Gregory, Legacy, 23.
modesty, the best weapon with which women could keep the ‘flowers of their virtue’ from being plucked too easily.

As with the bosom itself, and its other metonymic replacements, the blush and the ruffle, the variety of the rose’s colorations and contours was identified by theorists as inherently pleasing to the eye. The visual and sentimental pleasures the bosom imparted to the eye and the soul were thereby extended when sitters were portrayed with roses, either held in their hands and positioned near or on their bosoms, or, somewhat less commonly, pinned to the bodices of their gowns. François Joseph Bourgoin’s 1808 *Family Group in New York* is illustrative (figure 31). The portrait’s composition, which includes an adult couple and their four children, arranged in a comfortable domestic interior, offers many interpretive possibilities around the ideology of separate spheres and the discourse on the affective American family, but for the purposes of this discussion, we will primarily consider the teenaged female figure on the far left, who examines her reflection in a tabletop mirror, and her younger brother, who holds a pink rose in full bloom in front of her bodice. This rose, we will note, is in the very same physical position it occupied in French Rococo portraits and genre paintings, curving on its stem to cover the young woman’s right breast and a bit of the bare flesh above her yellow gown’s neckline. The sexual associations of such a juxtaposition have been completely neutralized, though, by the seemingly inadvertent circumstance under which it has happened, as well as the familial setting. The innocence of the

---

364 Alexander Walker noted that flowers “assume the varied forms” of the system of life and reproduction,” and were, therefore, inherently pleasing to the eye. He also observed that the pleasure taken in flowers extended beyond mere aesthetic interest, since “by their color and smell, [they] associate with emotions, which they also express and communicate to others.” See Walker, *Beauty*, 113.

365 It should be noted that Barbara Groseclose ascribes a less innocent interpretation to the young female figure in the Bourgoin portrait, seeing “nuanced alterations of the sexual subcurrent that flicker in the eyes of Bourgoin’s young girl; a subcurrent, to be sure, usually suppressed ...but sometimes definitely aglow,” and a signal of the girl’s willingness to participate in the adult world of
action and the setting extend to the young woman herself, for whom the rose’s presence signifies not a coy or coquettish sexuality, but rather the modest and delicate femininity expected of a virtuous American family’s ‘blooming daughter.’ The placement of a rose in front of the breast became something of a convention for American portraitists in the early republican era. The Maryland portraitist Joshua Johnson, for example, posed a number of his female sitters with a rosebud or open rose pinched between the thumb and forefinger and held in front of the bodice, at just the level of the nipple (figures 32, 33). The overall modesty of their presentations clearly align the roses and rosebuds held therein with modest femininity.

The transformation of the rose from a signifier of sexuality to one of virtue mirrors broad discursive movements in both Europe and America that located virtue in the bodies of women. These movements purported to honor women by replacing the hypererotic trivializations of the female body associated with the Rococo with chaste and sentimental celebrations the feminine ideal, a laudable goal, to be sure, but one in which historical hindsight reveals an unavoidable problem. By promoting what was truly only a perfunctory appreciation for modesty, not for itself alone, but for the anticipation of pleasure it signified, the feminine ideal merely sanitized the problematics of overt sexual desire for the female body by veiling it with rhetoric that made its accidental revelation all the more titillating. Celebrations of the bosom’s texture, coloration, and contour via symbolic elements that called them to mind, like blushing cheeks, ruffled fabric, and roses, extended this titillation into portraits.

Traveling between Charleston, South Carolina, and Georgetown, Virginia, in the summer of 1799, John Davis, the same author responsible for refashioning Pocahontas into a romantic heroine, visited a tavern and spent time in the company of its owner, who had recently commissioned painted portraits of his three young sisters. Unsurprisingly, Davis’s ardent and generally applied admiration for feminine beauty compelled him to comment on the portraits and the charm of their sitters:

Delicate were their shapes, transparent their skins, and the fire of their eyes drove the traveller to madness. Finding my young landlord companionable, I asked him why he did not pull down the sign of General Washington, that was over his door, and put up the portrait of his younger sister. That, said he, would be a want of modesty: and, besides, if Jemima is really handsome, she can want no effigy; for good wine, as we landlords say, needs no blush.366

Davis regards Jemima Dubusk’s portrait with particularly enthusiasm, evidenced by his suggestion that her brother pull down a portrait of George Washington and replace it with Jemima’s likeness. The significance of this suggestion is fairly clear: Davis regards Jemima as a paragon of femininity, possessing a power to inspire viewers equal to that of the most recognized American political figure at the turn of the nineteenth century and, more importantly, the national symbol of manly republican virtue.

Davis’s effusive description of the portraits indicates that there was nothing untoward in their portrayal of the sisters and yet, Mr. Dubusk considered their public display to be “a want of modesty. “ We can understand this assertion as brotherly concern for the virtue of attractive young women on two levels. The first revolves around protecting women from their own tendency

366 Davis, Travels, 127.
towards vanity, and it aligns with the belief that receiving too much admiration was corrupting for women, over time causing them to degenerate into immodest creatures who cared only for the approval of others. Dubusk’s comment that “good wine, as we landlords say, needs no blush,” echoes the pronouncements of periodicals and conduct books that encouraged young women to set aside arrogant pride in their appearance or face ruinous consequences. The second concern also relates to protection, this time from the improper looks of strangers, and engages the notion that showing a portrait in a visible public location presented a significant challenge to modesty’s boundaries. Although, as we will recall, the discourse on modesty promised protection for young women from unwanted male attention, it also forced them to bear the blame if they received unwelcome notice. The discourse around feminine domesticity promoted life within the protective walls of the home as women’s ‘natural’ sphere, and it problematized their choices to occupy spaces outside them, since their presence in public also signified an implied desire to be looked at. Not only were women who willingly showed themselves off by venturing outside of the protective confines of the home risking their reputations, according to proponents of the discourse of separate spheres, but they were actually compromising their safety, as being looked at by men to whom they were not acquainted was only a few short steps away from a physical violation and could cause almost as much harm. An episode documented in *The (London) Times* during the 1860s demonstrates the gravity with which the issue of women being subjected to uninvited or unwelcome glances from men was understood. It began with a letter from an angry father who explained that his daughter was the victim of an assault, which occurred in broad daylight while walking with a female relative on the streets of London, and which took the form of unsolicited looks and comments from gentlemen who appeared to be respectable, but whose behavior clearly

---

367 In his *Lettre à Mr. D’Alembert sur les spectacles*, Rousseau makes the pronouncement that “any woman who shows herself off disgraces herself.” See Rousseau, *Lettre*, 119.
identified them as rapscallions.\textsuperscript{\textsection} The ensuing debate, which was hashed out in a series of letters published in \textit{The Times}, generated responses that, as Lynda Nead’s insightful analysis has shown, place the burden of responsibility on women to protect themselves from unwanted advances, and assume that women who willingly call attention to themselves do so as a signal of their sexual availability. Regular involvement in activities outside of the domestic sphere was likewise problematized for American women, and the advice offered to avoid unwelcome attention should a young woman be forced to venture outside of the home recommended similar strategies of minimizing expressivity in dress and deportment, and studiously ignoring potential offenses by “hearing nothing that she ought not to hear, and seeing nothing that she ought not to see,” or, “having unmistakably heard, she did not understand.”\textsuperscript{\textsection}

The discourse around ways in which women could appropriately inhabit public space in the early nineteenth century had repercussions for not just women themselves, but their portrait images as well. As Davis’s anecdote indicates, the mere act of displaying a feminine portrait publicly courted attention. Flouting conventions for the modest display of a feminine portrait could bring the shame of exposure onto a sitter herself, especially since little distinction was drawn between the painted image and the woman it represented, a fact made clear by Davis’s description of the Dubusk sisters’ not as painted images on a canvas but as living, breathing things with

\footnote{\textsection For a more complete account of this episode and an analysis of its implications, see Lynda Nead, “The Rape of the Glances,” \textit{Victorian Babylon} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 62-73.}

\footnote{\textsection Quoted in John Kasson, \textit{Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America}, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 130. Kasson notes that the strategies suggested to protect young women who chose or were forced to venture out alone in the urban environment often involved considerable theatrics, as is evidenced by the popular anecdote about a young woman who dealt with a man’s persistent overtures by pretending not to understand English, finally turning to him and giving him a dime as if he were a beggar, saying in French that it was all she could afford. This anecdote, and others offered forth by women’s etiquette books, reinforced the notion that the public sphere was inherently dangerous for women, rife with possibilities for what Kasson terms “intrusion and symbolic violation.”}
‘transparent’ skin, ‘delicate’ shapes, and a ‘fire’ in their eyes.\textsuperscript{370} Related to the immodesty occasioned by the public display of a feminine portrait was the potentially problematic relationship between artist and subject brought to the viewer’s mind by the portrait’s indexical nature, and the circumstances inherent within the act of its production. As Shearer West has noted, while any portrait’s production necessitates the artist’s prolonged looking at its subject, when a portrait’s subject is female, and its maker male, this looking, typically conducted in a private setting, inserts a frisson of erotic tension into the finished portrait, revealing for viewers an index of the psychological entanglements between artist and sitter.\textsuperscript{371} American cultural materials were sensible of the potential visibility in a finished feminine portrait of sedimentary remnants of erotic gazing, as revealed in an essay about the pleasures of the artist’s life, in which it is noted that “a portrait painter must have some blissful hours” applying himself to a profession that not only involves the fulfilling work of drawing “inspiration at pleasure from Nature’s most perfect models, until his mind overflows with beauty,” but also permits him to “gaze, at will, and without reproof, upon charms which others must only glance at.”\textsuperscript{372}

Thus far, this study has considered full-sized feminine portraits meant to be hung on walls, but it is critical to note that early republican artists made feminine portraits in a range of sizes and formats, and that these variations were implicated in the extent to which representations of sitters were bound by conventions of female modesty. In particular, miniature portraits, the diminutive size of which was intended for private gazing, offered a format in which even very frank

\textsuperscript{370} Kasson, \textit{Rudeness and Civility}, 127.

\textsuperscript{371} West notes that such entanglements were frequently considered in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural materials, such as novels wherein an innocent young woman is corrupted by the gaze of her portraitist, as well as romantic anecdotes about artists, such as the frequently repeated tale of George Romney, who allegedly fell in love with several of his female sitters, including the infamous Emma Hart, when she sat for a series of portraits. See West, \textit{Portraiture}, 40-41.

representations of a sitter's 'beauties,' could be shown while still guarding the private nature of her self-display. To begin, we note that the historical associations between the miniature portrait format and privacy or concealment are well established. The portrait miniature as it was known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was first produced in Elizabethan England, where it became fashionable among members of the royal circle to wear tiny likenesses of loved ones encased in jeweled lockets. Early accounts reveal that portrait miniatures were prized for both the status they conferred upon their owners, and for their ability to conceal private imagery. In her study of the cultural and artistic practices of the English Renaissance, Patricia Fumerton recounts an episode from the memoirs of James Melville, ambassador to Mary Queen of Scots, in which Queen Elizabeth I brought Melville to her private apartment and showed him her collection of miniatures. After leading him through the labyrinthine chambers of her residence, she:

...opened a little cabinet, wherein were divers little pictures wrapt within paper, and their names written with her own hand upon the papers. Upon the first that she took up was written, “My Lord’s picture.” I held the candle and pressed to see that picture so named. She appeared loathe to let me see it; yet my importunity prevailed for a sight thereof, and found it to be the Earl of Leicester’s picture.

Whether hidden behind a finely wrought case, wrapped in paper, or locked up in a cabinet, the secrecy and ritual involved in the collection and display of miniatures indicates the regard in which they were held, and, more importantly, the private affections they signified.

In her examination of English miniatures, Marcia Pointon has noted that practices around the collecting and viewing of portrait miniatures in eighteenth-century England shifted their cultural

---

function away from that of a private memento and brought them “into the semi-public world of the collector’s cabinet.” In contrast to British practice, American culture maintained the association of miniatures with private, even secret viewing throughout the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century. In fact, cultural materials indicate that concealment became even more important to Americans in the early republican period, a fact that likely owes to American culture’s general interest in propriety, as well as its somewhat pointed disapproval for public displays of affection. Although the American discourse on marriage maintained that its intimate relationships were diferenced from European models by their closeness and affection, it was equally clear that too exuberant a display of that affection could be detrimental to relationships, and, thus, the nation’s moral fiber. To that end, women were advised to cultivate their feminine beauties, but to keep them for the eyes of their husbands alone. According to an early nineteenth-century set of rules “For the Promotion of Domestic Happiness:”

Sweetness of temper [and] affection to her interests, constitute the duties of a wife, and form the basis of matrimonial felicity...[but] the charms of beauty...will shorten their own reign, if...they shine more for the attraction of every body else than of their husbands. Let the pleasing of that one person be a thought never absent from your conduct.

Along with the advice that they should reserve their affections for their husbands, women were also cautioned to demonstrate those affections only when alone, since “Few things are more disgusting than...a display of fondness before company. There is a time and place for all things.”

The language used to describe the practices around exchanging and viewing American miniatures

---

375 Pointon notes that one of the events that occasioned this shift was the establishment of the Royal Academy, which began to include miniature paintings in its annual exhibitions beginning shortly after its establishment in 1768. See Marcia Pointon, “Surrounded with Brilliants: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England,” *The Art Bulletin* 83, 1 (March 2001): 48.


aligned with these notions of privacy around intimate relationships. For example, in 1824, a young man named Thomas Robson presented a miniature of himself to his intended, Sarah Cachett. Painted by Henry Bounetheau, Robson’s miniature was inscribed on the back of the locket in which it was housed with the following hopeful verse: “To the bosom of Sarah be this image confin’d / An emblem of love and esteem / bestow’d by a friend desirous to find / A place in that bosom unseen. T. R. 1st of June, 1824.”

In addition to their signification and safeguarding of private emotional attachments, miniature portraits also provided female subjects with the opportunity to reveal in an appropriate context the physical beauties of their bosoms. While full sized portraits were compelled to legitimate sensual representations of the female body by inserting metonymic substitutions that called its most cherished structure to mind without picturing it directly, portrait miniatures, intended for the eyes of only a single chosen individual, were not required to veil the bosom so completely, and, as a result, early republican culture produced a surprising number of miniatures that depicted the bosom in a frank and unapologetic manner. At first glance, most of these miniatures seem fairly conventional, with bust-length portrayals of their sitters set against neutral backgrounds, but upon closer inspection we observe that they reveal the breasts in their entirety, including the nipples! For example, French-born artist Joseph-Pierre Picot de Limoëlû de Cloriviére’s portrait miniature of a young woman holding a fan (1805) shows its sitter dressed in a high waisted gown with an extremely revealing bodice, at the center of which is a spray of pink roses and greenery (figure 34). The top edge of the bodice dips down so low that the “accidental” exposure of a nipple seems an inevitability, and, in fact, if we carefully examine the breast on the left side of the subject’s body, we see that it may have already happened, as what appears to be a

---

rosy pink nipple peeks out from the leaves of the floral spray. Other examples reveal the breasts and nipples even more unmistakably. The young woman in a miniature of ca. 1805 by Boston portraitist William M. S. Doyle wears a gown with a full enough bodice to avoid an accidental revelation of the nipple like de Cloriviére’s sitter may have experienced, but the fabric of her gown is completely sheer, exposing her breasts’ contours as well as her nipples (figure 35). As Robin Jaffe Frank has observed, the flimsy fabric of the young woman’s gown could not possibly support the weight of the jeweled brooch she wears pinned at its center. Thus, we can interpret the costume and its revelation of the sitter’s bosom as a deliberately titillating inclusion. In fact, we can note that most erotic portrait miniatures in which the breasts and nipples are revealed through the insubstantial fabric of a sitter’s gown should be understood as a fantasy, since, despite the fact that women’s underpinnings became less rigidly structured after the turn of the nineteenth century, they were still made out of opaque fabrics that shielded from view the parts of the body they covered. Thus, a portrait miniature in which a woman’s breasts and nipples are clearly visible beneath the sheer drapery of her bodice does not reflect the realities of early republican dress, but, rather, is designed to provoke and excite. A miniature of ca. 1825 depicting a woman dressed in a brown coatdress provides an amusing example of the lengths to which artists and sitters were willing to strain believability in order to present an exciting view of the bosom. The subject’s garment, what is known as a pelisse, is clearly made out of fairly substantial fabric, but despite the opacity of the pelisse itself, and the fact that such a garment was often worn over one or more muslin underlayers, plus canvas stays, the subject’s nipples are unmistakably outlined, complete with stippled shadows to suggest areolae (figure 36). Portrait miniatures in which subjects’ breasts

---


Jane Ashelford describes a pelisse as a garment “half-way between an over-tunic and a coat” and notes that it was usually made with long sleeves and its skirt could extend anywhere from the knees to the ankles. See Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress* (London: The National Trust, 1996), 178-179.
are exposed to view may seem, at first blush, very out of step with a discursive formulation constantly working to shift erotic focus away from the bosom in order to openly celebrate it as a sign of exceptional American femininity. In the private visual relationship possible between an individual and the tiny painted surface of a portrait miniature he held in his hand, however, the veil of modesty could be pulled back and the full measure of a woman’s beauties revealed.
CHAPTER 5

REVEAL’D BEAUTIES:
A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A PAIR OF BREASTS

The sigh that you heard – O! it came from the breast
Of affection unfeign’d, and of friendship most pure,
From the bosom of beauty that yet shall be blest,
With joy and with pleasure both constant and sure.

Yes, dear to my soul is the sigh of the heart,
’Tis the breast of true love and of transport the sign,
Sweet is the sensation a sigh can impart,
When it comes from a bosom so charming as thine.  

As we have learned, first among the cherished functions early republicans ascribed to the feminine bosom was generating pleasure and happiness in those who beheld it. The verse above, written around 1816 by American poet Thomas Kennedy, expresses the centrality of this function in its observation that viewing the bosom produced sweet sensations of “friendship most pure” and promoted “affection unfeign’d.” The early republican lecturer and author Charles Constantine Pise similarly articulated the bosom’s role in cultivating love and intimacy when he defined the ideal relationship between husbands and wives as an “illimited contract between two sensibile and virtuous hearts” bound together by sentiment, which originated from “the fountain of sensibility and virtue,” the feminine bosom. In its role as the source of feelings that joined lovers’ hearts and cohered the bonds between affective families, the bosom bestowed gifts that were cherished by the

entire nation, and it is this role upon which this study’s final chapter places its focus. The article through which I consider the construction of the bosom and its attributes as gifts is a singular portrait miniature painted by Sarah Goodridge in 1828 (figure 1). Goodridge’s tiny image, executed on a tiny ivory support measuring just 3 1/8 inches wide by 2 5/8 inches high, depicts an unclothed female bosom from the bottom of the collarbone to just beneath the breasts, surrounded by swaths of gauzy white fabric. While such an image would be notable within the context of early republican culture regardless of the circumstances of its production, what makes this object truly remarkable is that the bared breasts depicted belonged to Goodridge herself, who created the image of them for the politician Daniel Webster (1782-1852), her long-time friend and correspondent. Webster family tradition indicates that, at the time Goodridge gifted the miniature to Webster, it was housed in a covered case and included a paper backing she inscribed with the title by which it is still commonly known, *Beauty Revealed*, and the date (both the backing and case are missing).  

Understandably, its intimate presentation of the female form has generated a great deal of interest in *Beauty Revealed*, heightened by its connection to such a notable historical figure as Daniel Webster. While Goodridge’s miniature has been discussed in several recent studies of American miniature painting, including exhibition catalogs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Yale University Art Gallery, these discussions have been brief and fairly superficial, commenting on the image’s exceptionally intimate nature but offering little in the way of analysis. Focused study of *Beauty Revealed* has been confined to an essay by the

---


novelist John Updike and a short, problematic consideration by the literary historian Christopher Packard, who speculates on the clandestine erotic life he imagines Goodridge must have had in order to have produced such a sensual self-representation.

Of course, curiosity is an understandable reaction when confronted with such an object, especially given the tantalizing fragments of information that are known about Goodridge and Webster’s relationship, their long correspondence, and their frequent visits to one another. Beyond fragments, though, information about the exact nature of their relationship is scarce, leaving answers to questions about how Beauty Revealed operated in the context of that relationship frustratingly out of reach. Independent of its meaning to Goodridge and Webster, though, Beauty Revealed represents a significant moment of engagement with the discourse on the feminine bosom in early nineteenth-century America. It also presents an opportunity to consider broader questions about beauty, modesty, and bodily display, such as: what does a respected, professional female portraitist’s self-representation as a pair of breasts mean as an artistic statement and, more importantly, as a gift exchanged within a culture that located a woman’s most ‘powerful charms’ within her bosom’s delicate contours and revered it as the source of her erotic and sentimental power?

**SARAH GOODRIDGE REVEALED**

Today her name is probably familiar only to enthusiasts of American miniature painting, but during her lifetime, Sarah Goodridge (alternately spelled Goodrich in some nineteenth-century

---

documents) was one of the most prolific and well-respected miniaturists in Massachusetts, painting many of Boston’s citizens in a manner that was realistic and individualized. Born in 1788, Goodridge was the sixth child of Ebenezer Goodridge, who worked as a farmer and a mechanic, and his wife Beulah. While Goodridge had neither a familial connection to the world of professional artistry nor exposure to other artists as a child, she was reported to have a natural propensity for drawing from an early age, so much so that, according to family lore, when she lacked drawing paper as a child, she drew portraits on her home’s sanded wood floors with a stick. At age 17, Goodridge moved to Milton, Massachusetts, to live with her eldest brother and his family. It was there that an artist who also lodged in the Goodridge household offered her drawing lessons. Another move several years later, this time to Boston, where she lived with her sister and brother-in-law, Beulah and Thomas Appleton, brought Goodridge into contact with an itinerant miniaturist named Elkanah Tisdale (1771-1835), a figure who would prove to be extremely important to both the development of Goodridge’s technical abilities and her particular interest in miniature painting.

It was shortly after her acquaintance with Tisdale began that Goodridge first took up paid work as a miniaturist, making portraits in colored crayon for fifty cents and in watercolor for a dollar and a half. Here it should be noted that the widespread popularity of miniature painting in America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries presented Goodridge and many other female artists the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations while still presenting a public

39 This anecdote apparently appears in the unpublished correspondence of Goodridge’s sister Eliza, and was first recounted the Dictionary of American Biography, Volume 7 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 404-405.
42 Tufts, American Women Artists, catalog 28.
appearance that comported with expectations for appropriate women’s behavior. The particular suitability of miniature painting as an occupation for female artists owes to several factors. As Rosemary O’Day and Ann Bermingham have recently noted, women’s artistic ambitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were frequently directed toward media associated with the private realm, such as calligraphy, decorative interior murals, and miniatures. Women were thought to be particularly adept at painting miniatures because of their small size, and the “delicate sense of touch” required for such detailed work. In addition to the decorative connotations of miniatures themselves, their frequent incorporation into larger jewelry pieces, like bracelets and lockets associated miniatures with a feminine concern for personal adornment, an association that allowed those women who did enter into business as miniaturists to achieve success without presenting too strenuous a challenge to their prescribed feminine roles. Virginia Penny, a nineteenth century advocate for female education, asserted that women had been employed as miniature painters for centuries, and that American female miniaturists could command fees for their work at “very nearly the same rate paid to men,” which, in some instances, could be upwards of $100.

---

393 Penny, The Employments of Women, 83-84.
In addition to providing Goodridge with encouragement towards a career as a miniature painter, Tisdale was also indirectly responsible for Goodridge’s mastery of the techniques that would transform her from an amateur enthusiast to a professional artist.\(^{394}\) Realizing that her own portraits lacked qualities she admired in the miniatures produced by others, and especially by artists abroad, she wrote to Tisdale for advice in 1819, remarking that she had “lately seen some exquisitely beautiful miniatures” of French and English origin, and was “extremely desirous to learn the method by which they were executed.”\(^{395}\) Tisdale was himself unable to teach her the specific techniques that would give her portraits the finished appearance of the European models she admired, but he suggested that Goodridge seek the advice of Gilbert Stuart, which she did in the early 1820s. Stuart evidently held Goodridge’s work in high regard, and he seems to have taken a personal interest in her artistic education, visiting her studio, critiquing her work, and referring her to drawing classes in which she could expand her skills. Under Stuart’s tutelage, Goodridge’s artistic dexterity markedly improved as she learned the techniques used by European miniaturists, such as applying watercolor pigment in graduated layers and accenting the washes of color with minutely detailed areas of stippling. It was also around the time of her acquaintance with Stuart that Goodridge began to utilize ivory as a painting surface.\(^{396}\) The use of ivory gave Goodridge’s portraits a glowing, luminous quality, highlighted the effects of light and shadow that her careful washes of

\(^{394}\) Julie Aronson’s catalog essay about Sarah Goodridge provides the most complete accounting of the mentoring relationship between Tisdale and Goodridge. See Aronson, “Sarah Goodridge,” Perfect Likeness, Aronson and Wieseman, eds., 196.

\(^{395}\) Aronson and Wieseman, eds., 196.

\(^{396}\) British miniaturists, including Richard Cosway (1742-1821) and Samuel Shelley (c. 1750-1808) had perfected the use of the ivory support late in the eighteenth century, and it is likely that Gilbert Stuart encouraged Goodridge, knowing that it was only with an ivory support that she could achieve the luminous results she admired in European miniatures. See Elle Shushan, “How America found its Face: Portrait Miniatures in the New Republic,” The Magazine Antiques (April 2009): 26-35.

193
color captured, and enhanced the naturalism imparted by her delicate brushwork.  Goodridge’s
talent for capturing and animating a likeness earned her praise from Stuart, who invited her to
paint his portrait, an event recounted by his daughter Jane in 1877:

My mother, being very much dissatisfied with the portraits painted of Stuart, implored him
to sit for Miss Goodrich...and, as she was a great favorite of his, she would frequently invite
her to the house, hoping he could be induced to sit to her. One afternoon he said,
“Goode, I intend to let you paint me.” She seemed to be quite overcome at the idea, as she
worshiped his genius. She then came prepared, when he gave her every advantage,
considering how much he disliked what he called “having his effigy made.”

Stuart viewed Goodridge’s portrait as a great success, and was particularly pleased with its accurate
reflection of both his features and his expression. In contrast to an earlier portrait done by a New
York artist that made him look, in his opinion, “dull, heavy” and foolish, Stuary de
clared that
Goodridge’s portrait captured his “fire and energy,” and members of his family considered it the
finest of any portrait made of him. Her success with her portrait of Stuart added to Goodridge’s
fame as a miniaturist, and between 1820 and 1840, she produced an average of three miniatures
per week and earned an income that afforded her a degree of self-sufficiency out of reach to most
unmarried women in the nineteenth century. It also allowed her to support other members of her
family, including her mother, her disabled brother, and an orphaned niece whom she raised.

[38] “Anecdotes of Gilbert Stuart by His Daughter,” *Scribner’s Monthly* XIV (July 1877): 379,
quoted in John Hill Morgan, *Gilbert Stuart and his Pupils* (New York: New York Historical
Society, 1939), 61.
[39] Quotes from Stuart himself and members of his family about Goodridge’s portrait are found in
Stuart’s nineteenth century biography. See George Champlin Mason, *The Life and Works of
Gilbert Stuart* (New York: Scribners, 1879), 77-81.
[40] In addition to her work as a portraitist, Goodridge earned additional income by teaching
summer art classes at a school in Templeton, Massachusetts, near Boston. See Johnson, “Sarah
Goodridge,” *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection* 125.
Because of failing eyesight, Goodridge was unable to paint professionally after the early 1840s but her saved income allowed her to purchase a home in Reading, Massachusetts, in which she, her sister, and her sister’s husband lived during the last years of her life. She died of a stroke while on a Christmas trip to Boston in 1853.401

While Goodridge’s professional success is certainly remarkable, it is her association with Daniel Webster that historians often identify as her biography’s most noteworthy aspect, a fact that is hardly surprising, given Daniel Webster’s historical prominence. Goodridge and Webster met sometime during the mid-1820s, and she painted his portrait for the first time in 1827.402 Around this time, they began a friendship and correspondence that continued for more than twenty years. From this correspondence, forty-four letters written by Webster to Goodridge survive, although none of those from Goodridge to Webster do. Of these extant letters, most are brief and cordial, and while Webster’s biographer, Robert Remini, has characterized their salutations as progressively warmer over the course of the correspondence.403 But beyond this evidence of growing friendship and Webster’s professional esteem for Goodridge, the letters reveal nothing extraordinary about Goodridge and Webster’ relationship, and certainly do not indicate the sort of romantic bond that might have prompted Goodridge to make and give her singular self-portrait.

In addition to their long correspondence, Goodridge and Webster made regular visits to one another during the 1820s, 30s, and 40s. The first of these visits occurred in the fall of 1827,

403 In his longer letters, Webster discusses his concerns over the running of his household and his mounting financial obligations, while his shorter letters – some only one or two sentences – are merely memoranda arranging appointments to sit for portraits executed by Goodridge, or notes attached to payments for her artistic services. Remini’s examination of their correspondence observes that early letters begin with a formal “Dear Madam,” while later examples address themselves to “Dear Miss G,” and finally to “My dear, good friend.” See Robert Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and his Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 306.
when Webster and his wife, Grace Fletcher, went to Goodridge’s studio, presumably on business related to a portrait she was painting of him. After Grace’s death in 1828, Webster became a regular visitor to Goodridge’s studio and home. In fact, his correspondence indicates that, although his political career compelled him to live in Washington, D.C., for most of the year, he visited or made plans to visit Goodridge almost every time returned home to Massachusetts between the end of the 1820s and the early 1840s. It is certain that at least some of the time the two spent together was oriented around Goodridge’s work as a portraitist, since twelve completed portraits of Webster plus several more in varying stages of completion can be attributed to her. In addition to the visits Webster made to her Boston studio, Goodridge also visited Webster at his home in Washington, D.C., during the winters of 1828-29 and 1841-42, visits that constitute the only documented times that Goodridge left the state of Massachusetts. Intriguingly, the timing of her visits corresponds to significant personal events in Webster’s life. Goodridge visited Webster and presumably gave him Beauty Revealed in 1828, only a short time after the death of Webster’s first wife, and in 1841 and 1842, during Goodridge’s second visit, Webster was separated from his second wife.

---

404 Webster was first elected to the House of Representatives as a representative from New Hampshire in 1812. His strongly conservative record and celebrity as an orator led to his election as a Massachusetts senator in 1827. Webster also served as Secretary of State under President William Henry Harrison beginning in 1841, as well as under Presidents John Tyler and Millard Fillmore. See Robert Remini’s chronology of the major events in Webster’s career. Robert Remini, Daniel Webster, 15-21. For some of the letters in which Webster arranged visits to Goodridge, see correspondence from Daniel Webster to Sarah Goodridge, Microfilm Edition, F4/38400, 38404, 38409, F28/38406.

405 These portraits, along with several Webster commissioned of his children and other members of his family, were painted by Goodridge over a period of two decades. For more on the portraits painted of Webster by Goodridge, see Barbara J. MacAdam, Marks of Distinction: Two Hundred Years of American Drawings and Watercolors from the Hood Museum of Art (Hanover, NH: The Hood Museum of Art, 2005), 66; Barber and Voss, 24-25.

406 Webster’s correspondence with her indicates that at least part of the reason for Goodridge’s visits to Washington was to seek out new clients. For example, on one of her visits, Webster sent Goodridge a note that read: “Mr. Webster presents his respects to Miss Goodridge, & hopes she has recovered from the fatigues of her journey - Mr. Webster was prevented yesterday by his engagements, & today by the weather, from calling to say to her that he has spoken to a Gentleman
The existence of *Beauty Revealed* casts an unavoidably sensational shadow on the relationship between Webster and Goodridge. Webster family lore suggests that, after the death of his first wife, Goodridge may have fulfilled what his biographers have described as Webster’s almost insatiable desire for female society, and that the two might even have considered an engagement to one another. As Remini notes, though, while the existence of *Beauty Revealed* and their many encounters over the years might indicate that Goodridge was Webster’s mistress, any sexual needs she may have fulfilled were secondary to his desire for the legitimate companionship that only a wife could provide. Unsurprisingly, Goodridge, whom Remini unflatteringly describes as “a struggling spinster-artist,” was not an appropriate candidate for this role. Webster’s search for a suitable marital partner eventually led him to Caroline LeRoy, the daughter of Herman LeRoy, a wealthy merchant. Although Caroline was, by all accounts, rather plain, Webster apparently found her to possess “enough of personal comeliness to satisfy.” More importantly, she was “amiable, discreet, prudent. . . & of the most excellent character & principles.”

GOODRIDGE AND THE SELF-PORTRAIT

While it is clearly the most striking, *Beauty Revealed* is not Goodridge’s only self-portrait. She produced three conventional examples (figures 37-39) as well as one that is much less typical, painted near the end of her career. The number of self-portraits she produced and the differences they display suggest Goodridge’s enduring interest in the self-portrait’s ability to locate its maker to look out for her a suitable room for the exercise of her art.” DW to Goodridge, *Microfilm Edition*, F28/38406.

47 According to Dale Johnson, one late nineteenth century reference to Goodridge made by a member of the Webster family calls her as Webster’s ‘fiancé,’ although the source of this anecdote is unclear. See Johnson, “Sarah Goodridge,” *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*, 126-127.

48 Quoted in Remini, *Daniel Webster*, 308-311.
within a social type. Christopher Packard has recently identified *Beauty Revealed*, as well as two of Goodridge’s other self-portraits, as conscious attempts at identity formation via ‘self-fashioning,’ a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt to describe the process by which an individual constructs his public persona by connecting himself to culturally recognized behaviors or objects. Packard argues that the stylistic diversity across the range of Goodridge’s self-portraits reveals the fact that she located herself within a number of different discourses and demonstrates Goodridge’s awareness that her fashioned self could serve her social and professional interests by announcing her alignment with these discourses. For example, with regard to a self-portrait painted around 1830 (figure 39), in which she presents herself in a thoroughly conventional pose and mode of dress, Packard notes that Goodridge has fashioned the identity of an upper-middle class woman by wearing a stylish gown, ornate hair ornament, and shawl draped around her shoulders, all of which illustrate “a certain degree of wealth” and her understanding of appropriately feminine self-expression. On the other hand, a self-portrait made around 1835 (figure 40), in which Goodridge portrays herself seated behind her portrait painting equipment and peering down at a miniature on her easel rather than out at the viewer, should be read, according to Packard, as an advertisement for potential clients, since such an image allowed them to “judge whether this likeness was accurate, and use it to assess the quality of likeness they might see in their own commissioned portraits.” *Beauty Revealed* provides what, for Packard, is Goodridge’s most potent example of self-fashioning. The fact that it contains nothing portraitists would ordinarily use to construct identity is of little consequence to his interpretation, which locates in the miniature’s coloration, shadows, and textures the elements of fashioning that costumes or settings provide in other portrait

---


40 Packard erroneously dates this portrait as having been made in 1845.
representations. In fact, each brushstroke by which she delineated the contours of her breasts, for Packard, constitutes “a piece of costume,” and the deliberateness with which she crafted her breasts ‘clothed’ them with “youth, balance, paleness, and buoyancy,” allowing the viewer to “interpret their adornment as we would any conventional self-portrait.” The interpretation they compel, in Packard’s view, centers on Goodridge as a sexualized figure who uses the forthright display of her nude breasts to announce her sexual availability to Webster and to command his attention.

In addition to their significance as reflections of her own identity, Packard notes that the diversity in Goodridge’s body of self-portraits reveals important information about early republican culture. He observes that her occupation of such different personas as the society beauty, the serious artist, and the sensual temptress proves that nineteenth-century constraints of gender did not bind women as tightly as historical thought suggests. *Beauty Revealed* is central to this facet of Packard’s argument, as, for him, its very existence demonstrates that some women successfully defied the strictures of the modest feminine ideal regarding appropriate bodily display. This conclusion aligns with others offered to explain the existence of Goodridge’s miniature. For example, in her study of portrait miniatures and the private lives of Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Robin Jaffee Frank asserts that Goodridge’s miniature demonstrates the fluidity of boundaries around female conduct and modesty, as well as the fact that “a forty year old woman in the early nineteenth century could enjoy her sexuality.” 

The novelist John Updike, who considers *Beauty Revealed* an expression of early republican America’s ambivalent relationship with the artistic nude, similarly concludes that, while its existence within a cultural milieu that found publicly displayed nudes problematic raises questions, its significance within the private context of Goodridge and Webster’s relationship is clear. Updike imagines that the erotic

---

41 Frank, *Love and Loss*, 263.
energy with which Goodridge imbued her miniature was meant to reach out to Webster, and notes that it is almost as if the breasts themselves say to their viewer: “We are yours for the taking, in all our ivory loveliness, with our tenderly stippled nipples.”

I take issue with these interpretations, not only because they force viewers to a speculative and unsatisfying conclusion about Goodridge’s feelings and motivations, but because they also base themselves on inherently contradictory logic. This logic insists, on the one hand, that making assumptions about restrictions imposed on women by sexual mores of the past is problematic while demanding, on the other, that Goodridge be viewed as a woman far ahead of her time who threw off the shackles of her era’s established conventions of modesty and embraced her own body with the verve of a sex-positive feminist. What’s worse, their willingness to project modern notions of female sexual empowerment backwards positions Beauty Revealed as an outlier, an oddity that needs no consideration beyond imagining the romantic story that must have prompted its creation.

At the same time, while the portrait miniature has, on the whole, been traditionally overlooked as a subject worthy of theoretical analysis, the gossipy tone that underscores interpretations of Beauty Revealed even further separates this miniature from the realm of art worthy of serious consideration and presents it, instead, as an anomalously sexy footnote to an otherwise dry artist’s biography.

The problem of his final conclusions notwithstanding, Packard does make a sound observation when he notes that Goodridge’s breasts address their viewer in a manner that is unusually forthright. This effect is, for Packard, the result of her talent for creating dimensionality, which has produced an image that “confronts the world of the viewer.” To his point, I would add

42 Updike’s connection of Beauty Revealed to the controversies surrounding works like Vanderlyn’s Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos (1809-1814) bears critical examination in the future, but it is somewhat beyond the scope of the present investigation. See Updike, “The Revealed and the Concealed,” 72.
that the confrontational engagement between *Beauty Revealed* and its viewer is a function of both Goodridge’s talent for modeling and a number of pictorial and compositional elements. Incorporating these elements, which include its surprising choice of subject matter and its cropped and fully frontal composition, into *Beauty Revealed* complicates the typically modest engagement of the feminine portrait with its viewer.\(^{415}\)

To further consider this point, let us first examine Goodridge’s similarly atypical 1835 self-portrait, which presents her seated behind her easel, peering down at her work. While Packard’s primary interpretation of the 1835 miniature focuses on its function as an advertisement for Goodridge’s artistic skill, he and others have also observed that it makes a statement about her parity with her male artistic counterparts. The arrangement of an artist with tools or objects that signify professional success and the intellectual or creative processes around artistic production is, of course, a long-standing convention of the self-portrait genre, and Goodridge’s 1835 self-portrait is clearly meant to situate her within that tradition. She sits behind a tall desk and gazes down to study a small easel, and, atop it, what we surmise is a painting in progress. That she is at work in the image is clear from the presence of a tumbler of water for her paints, as well as the fact that her curled fingers, which seem to grasp a brush or pencil, are visible just to the right of the easel. In addition to these signs of artistic enterprise, elements of Goodridge’s carefully chosen costume reinforce her working status, especially the pink patterned kerchief she wears around her neck. Such a kerchief, according to Linda Baumgarten, was part of the everyday dress of farmers and

\(^{415}\) I must clarify that when I refer to Goodridge’s compositions complicating the typical engagement between feminine portraits and their viewers, I am not invoking the concept of the gaze in a theoretical sense, although such an analysis would certainly provide another useful context for considering Goodridge’s self-portraits. Instead, I mean to consider *Beauty Revealed* and her other self-portraits as I have considered visual cultural materials throughout this study, by using period texts in conjunction with formal analyses in order to form an understanding of how images might have been understood as extensions of the intertwined discourses of modesty, femininity, and sentiment that formed the American cult of the bosom.
manual laborers, and thus out of step with the neckwear typically worn by fashionable women.44
Beyond its associations with practical rather than stylish dress, the kerchief is significant because of the way in which Goodridge styled it. Contemporaneous treatises on dress denounced the casual way in which the kerchief is knotted about Goodridge’s neck, noting that such an arrangement disrupted the eye’s ability to conduct a meandering survey of the bosom and the soft folds of fabric that adorned it. The *Art of Dress* specifically addressed the problem of feminine portrait subjects wearing “common, square” shawls and kerchiefs like Goodridge’s, noting that “whatever piece of dress conceals a woman’s figure, is bound in justice to do so in a picturesque way,” and observing that an accessory with a uniform pattern and a stiff shape was particularly ill-suited to the task.45

As an artist and a fashionable woman, Goodridge was certainly aware that it was important to create a picturesque composition around the feminine portrait subject’s bosom. Indeed, her success with such a composition is readily visible in other examples from her oeuvre, including her earlier self-portraits. The fact that she chose to represent herself wearing a quickly tied kerchief instead of a carefully draped and arranged shawl ought to be read, therefore, as a conscious decision rather than an inadvertent inclusion. The forethought associated with its presence becomes even clearer when we compare the rest of her chosen attire, a black silk gown with stylish beret sleeves and a pleated Bertha collar, to the kerchief, the incongruous nature of which is striking next to such refinement.46

44 Baumgarten notes that during the revolutionary era, French gentlemen, in order to express their solidarity with the “Revolution against monarch and aristocrats who wore white linen,” replaced their fine white linen or lace cravats with plaid or calico neckerchiefs, the same sorts as those worn by farmers and manual laborers. Baumgarten, “Clothing in Portrait Miniatures,” *Perfect Likeness*, 58.
46 As Anne Sue Hirshorn has noted in her study of the miniatures produced by Charles Willson Peale and other members of his family, American miniaturists made a conscious effort to portray their association with refinement and affluence in order to appeal to the elite clientele to whom they sold their wares. This association was frequently signified by the clothing worn by miniaturists
But while the kerchief is clearly out of place if we are to interpret Goodridge’s self-portrait as a statement about her femininity, it is not if we are meant understand it primarily as an image through which she reinforced her artistic identity. Within this context, we can recognize its practicality and hasty arrangement as signs of Goodridge’s efficiency and dedication to the task before her. Beyond this signification, the kerchief’s presence may constitute an even more specific and self-conscious allusion to artistic identity, as it is strikingly similar to the pink Madras kerchief knotted around the neck of Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) in his 1771 self-portrait (figure 41). While it cannot be conclusively stated that Goodridge’s pink kerchief was a reference to it, Chardin’s self-portrait was an image popular in both Europe and America through an engraving made in the late 1770s by German engraver Juste Chevillet (1729-1790). Given Goodridge’s professional connection to the European-trained Gilbert Stuart, it seems likely that she would have been familiar with it. 417

In addition to the kerchief, Goodridge deploys other strategies to construct identity as an artist in her 1835 self-portrait. In contrast to earlier self-representations that presented amiable images compliant with standard notions of feminine beauty, her final self-portrait portrays a prim and rather plain woman with a thin, angular face and pale skin. Such a deliberately humble representation seems calculated to reflect Goodridge’s feminine modesty, her commitment to and talent for mimesis and, I believe most significantly, her gravitas as a professional painter. Goodridge likely understood that it was necessary to position herself in opposition to early

in their own portraits. For example, in Charles Willson Peale’s portrait of James Peale Painting a miniature (1795), we see the artist with brush in hand wearing a refined suit of clothes, complete with impractical ruffled cuffs that would undoubtedly have become stained as he produced the paintings visible on the easel behind which he sits. See Hirshorn, “Anna Claypoole, Margaretta, and Sarah Miriam Peale: Modes of Accomplishment and Fortune,” 228-229.
417 This kerchief actually appears in several of Chardin’s self-portraits, including his 1775 Self-Portrait with an Eye-Shade, but its pattern and coloration are most prominent in the 1771 example.
republican culture’s tendency to marginalize female artistic production as an expression of refinement rather than a professional endeavor. The peculiar direction of Goodridge’s glance down at the easel in front of her instead of out of the portrait’s frame reinforces the seriousness with which she regards her work by indicating that her focus is so great that she fails even to take note of her audience. It also reinforces her position as the image’s creator by reminding the viewer of the process through which the image came to be. In contrast to her earlier self-portraits, in which her feminine self acknowledges her audience’s desire to look at her and signifies, through her smiles and amiable expressions, her receptiveness to being enjoyed as the object of visual pleasure, the serious figure in Goodridge’s 1835 portrait seems to understand that the role of a professional artist is that of creator, not muse or object, and she composes her self-representation to emphasize that role. In addition to constructing artistic identity, there is no doubt that Goodridge’s self-portrait also aimed to control the way in which its viewer engaged with it. The fact

Hirshorn has observed that early republican culture was by no means resistant to the idea of women as artists, and, in fact, women were invited to display their works alongside men in the opening exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, one of America’s first institutions for the instruction of artists and the display of their works. Joseph Hopkinson, the Pennsylvania Academy’s first president, announced plans for its first public exhibition of American artists’ works in 1810, noting that “The gardens of literature are now illuminated with many a lamp trimmed by a female hand [and], . . . the arts of painting and engraving have softened under the hands of the female touch. I hope and trust the walls of our academy will soon be decorated with products of female genius; and that no means will be omitted to invite and encourage them.” Despite the invitations and encouragements offered to female painters, they still faced a number of social boundaries around the assumption that their artistic activities were less ‘serious’ than those of their male counterparts. See Anne Sue Hirshorn, 229-23. Of course, the tendency to marginalize the work of female artists was certainly not a feature of the artistic discourse that was unique to early republican America. A major goal of research into the professional activities of female painters in Early Modern and Modern Europe has been to understand strategies women used to achieve artistic and social positions equal to those held by their male counterparts. See, for instance, Joanna Woods-Marsdan, Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1998); Liana de Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon, and Kathleen Russo, Self-Portraits by Women Painters (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2000); and Liz Rideal, Whitney Chadwick, and Frances Borzello, Mirror Mirror: Self-Portraits by Women Artists (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2002).
that Goodridge’s head is down and she is seemingly unaware of her audience creates a vague feeling of discomfort in the viewer for the intrusion his presence might cause and, rather than stopping to gaze, he feels that he should leave Goodridge to her solitary work so as not to disturb her obvious concentration.

Understanding the purposeful composition of her 1835 self-portrait reveals Goodridge’s understanding of the ways in which an artist’s choices could construct and manage a viewer’s interaction with a portrait. It also compels a reconsideration of *Beauty Revealed* as a similar exploration of the interaction between a portrait and its viewer, the intimacy of which produces a powerful set of sensations in the viewer. The first of these must be felt as shock for the audacity of Goodridge’s display. Even modern viewers, for whom the opportunity to see bared breasts is, if not wholly ordinary, then certainly not scandalizing, gasp when setting eyes on Goodridge’s miniature for the first time and taking in its unapologetically presented forms and the lush, twisted swaths of sheer fabric that surround them. Both the sensuality of its depiction and the extent to which Goodridge renders her bosom lifelike and exquisitely touchable make clear the fact that *Beauty Revealed* was intended to arouse its viewer. The titillation inherent within its presentation is heightened by the sense of secrecy associated with the miniature format, which produces in the viewer a sense of prurient thrill around seeing that which he knows he should not. This thrill eventually gives way to an uncomfortable feeling of modesty on Goodridge’s behalf, produced by the knowledge that she painted the miniature to be seen by only its intended recipient, thus anyone else seeing it violates the privacy of both the miniature and Goodridge herself. This discomfort is further aggravated by the assertively frontal arrangement of the breasts themselves, designed to enthrall the viewer in much the same way eyes staring intently out of a conventional portrait would. The mesmerizing appearance of Goodridge’s image can be understood as another means by which she challenges the typical experience of viewing a portrait, since by creating an image calculated to
en thrall its viewer, Goodridge ostensibly exerted some control over his interaction with it, a suggestion reinforced by her choice of title, which reminds the viewer that it is only through her choice to reveal that which is usually concealed that access to the sensual delights of her body is granted.

Despite the desire evident in both her 1835 self-portrait and *Beauty Revealed* to manage viewers’ engagements, it is clear that the two images aspire towards very different aims. While Goodridge’s 1835 self-portrait cultivates the artist’s identity position and the power that attends it, the conferral of artistic subjectivity is clearly not the goal of *Beauty Revealed*. Indeed, the nature of its display welcomes, even encourages objectification, and we would, in fact, be hard pressed to imagine the body in a presentation that is more objectifying. Although as has been noted, Goodridge rendered her painted breasts in a way that makes them appear as luminous and dimensional as the real forms they represent, this impression is challenged by the image’s composition, which denaturalizes the breasts and disorients the viewer by separating them from their bodily context. This sense of disorientation is heightened significantly by two elements. The first involves the black background surrounding the breasts and their fabric drape. Although this background is primarily visible at the upper corners of the image, careful observers will notice a narrow but clear strip of black painted along the bottom edge of the image and blended into the small sections of background color at the lower corners, implying that the painted breasts are discreet objects rather than parts attached to an unseen body. The twisting scarf also complicates the viewer’s impression of the circumstances around the image’s production. Its arrangement, which completely encircles the breasts, would be gravitationally unlikely if Goodridge painted her self-portrait while seated in front of a mirror. Instead, fabric falling away from the breasts in all directions suggests that Goodridge was lying down when *Beauty Revealed* was painted, or, more likely, when it was imagined, since the flesh of the breasts themselves appears to be acted upon by
gravity from beneath, rather than below. Even the impression of the image as that of a female body reclining back into a cloud of diaphanous fabric heightens the erotic energy already inherent within it, though, and calls to mind sensual scenarios like those depicted in drawings by British painter Francis Wheatley (1747-1801), in which young women, often clad in disarrayed underclothes, hold miniature portraits close to their bosoms and gaze dreamily at them (figure 40). Of course, in the case of Goodridge’s portrait, the dreamy gazing is directed at her own bosom, not the image of her lover, and the sensual gratification obtained through looking is compounded through its transferral back to the erotic still-life she designed for the gratification of its recipient.

The drapery surrounding the breasts further enhances the image’s eroticism by recalling a curtain that has been pulled back, an allusion that evokes the nineteenth-century practice of keeping curios, mementos, and precious objects hidden within cabinets. Emily Apter has examined the eroticism implied by the keeping of cabinets, noting that images and items within the nineteenth-century cabinet titillated through both the secrecy and concealment with which they were associated and the promise of their continual accessibility to their owner. Beauty Revealed closely follows this practice, drawing the viewer in with the promise of a peep show, via the reference to revelation in its title, and delivering on that promise with an image of sensualized anatomy and cloth, revealed for its owner’s eyes alone. The assumption of the image’s exclusivity, which is inherent to the miniature portrait’s format, heightens the sensuality of Beauty Revealed still further, creating for its viewer a fantasy around the assumption that its representation of desire has been made for his sole enjoyment.

**BEAUTY REVEALED AS A GIFT**

The arrangement of bunched fabric around the perimeter of *Beauty Revealed* also recalls the appearance of diaphanous paper or cloth surrounding a gift in a box, an association that takes on additional significance in light of what has been identified as the social function fulfilled by the giving and receiving of portrait miniatures in the early republic. Anthropologists have long understood any exchange of a gift as an act that “tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved.” While this statement is, on its surface, rather self-evident, theories of the gift, outlined by Marcel Mauss’s foundational essay and later examined at a philosophical level by Jacques Derrida and many others, observe that a range of social interactions are ordered through the giving and receiving of gifts, which receive and impart significance by initiating interrelated obligations, including the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate.

As we have learned, the early republican period was one during which the affectionate and closely bonded family was privileged as a sign of national difference. One of the gift’s most universal functions, according to Mauss, was as a way to celebrate births, betrothals, marriages, and other social passages. This function, as Robin Jaffee Frank and others have noted, was readily associated with portrait miniatures, the giving and receiving of which constituted a central way that early republican Americans marked affective life events. The significance of miniatures extended beyond simply representing changes to the status of relationships, though, primarily because miniatures carried emotional significance that far exceeded that of most other gifts. The extent to

---

422 See Frank, *Love and Loss*, Introduction, Chapter 3.
which miniatures were implicated in the production of affect and attachment made them particularly appealing forms of expression in America during the era of sentiment, as an 1832 essay on the centrality of miniatures to the formation of close relationships articulates when it observes that “perhaps the most decided token of regard that can be presented...is a miniature...[since] nothing is so powerful in testifying the character of the feelings one party entertains for the other.”

Belief in the miniature’s power to summon strong feelings of attachment relates to the frequently iterated impression of the portrait as a proxy for the individual it represented, believed to be able to “keep alive the memory of the donor, and associate it with...tender recollections of affection.”

Studies of Italian Renaissance portraiture have noted that artists heightened this impression by including poses and gestures that invited the viewer into the sitter’s pictorial space. As demonstrated by early republican examples in which sitters beckon with warm smiles and open postures, American miniaturists were familiar with these techniques, and used them to similarly exploit the viewer’s feeling of engagement with a portrait image. In addition to embedding invitations into their compositions, miniaturists also used aesthetic strategies that encouraged viewers to recall or imagine physical interactions with sitters’ bodies. These are particularly visible in feminine portrait miniatures, which artists painted using techniques replicating the textures and engaging colorations of delicate female flesh. In order to encourage the viewer’s eye to move over and caress the image in the same way it would the body of an actual woman, miniaturists modeled

---

424 “Miniature Painting,” 190.
426 Elle Shushan has traced the emergence of what she identifies as the uniquely American method for painting miniatures using crosshatching and washes of color, identifying the technique’s first practitioner as Edward Greene Malbone. Although Malbone’s own career as a miniaturist was cut short by his death at the age of 29, he mentored other artists, including Joseph Wood and John Wesley Jarvis, who extended his aesthetic, which Robin Jaffe Frank refers to as the “luminous style.” See Shushan, “How America found its Face,” 26-27; Frank, Love and Loss, 263-272.

209
contours with meticulous webs of crosshatches and reproduced skin tones by floating pale washes of color over images’ ivory surfaces.\textsuperscript{427} The portraits that resulted from the use of such techniques enticed viewers into fantasies of sensation in which the pleasures of hands caressing rounded forms and delicate skin were imagined via the eye’s caress of the miniature’s painted surface.

Along with the psychic engagement prompted by their compositions and the manner in which they were painted, miniatures also encouraged viewers to interact with them physically, either by wearing or holding them on the body, as described in Chapter 4 of this study, or through the close looking that was necessary to study such tiny, detailed objects. This intimacy of touch extended beyond simply bringing miniatures close to the eye, however. Early republican cultural materials, especially sentimental novels and short stories, report that miniatures were stroked, talked to, even kissed. For example, in a fictional account of a young sailor’s taking leave of his sweetheart, published in 1829, the sailor, an older man at the time of the account’s writing, recalls his plan to give his love, Agnes, a miniature of himself in order to provide evidence of his affection “in some pointed and striking manner” prior to his departure.\textsuperscript{428} The transmission of the miniature apparently had the intended effect on Agnes, since upon its receipt, he recalls that she immediately began to shower it with kisses before tucking it “among the halcyon splendours of her bosom.” Before taking his leave, the sailor recounts that he “besought [Agnes] to cherish it as she would cherish my memory - to hoard it up in the choicest recesses of her privacy, even as I would expect her to cherish the image graven on her heart,” and to use the miniature to as a channel for her emotions in his absence. Following several years of conscription, the sailor describes his return to Agnes, and a trick he initiated to test the constancy of her affections. He recalls that he first sent Agnes a letter conveying the false news of his death, and later called on her so that he could see

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{427} Shushan, “How America found its Face,” 28.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
her reaction. When he did, he found her “bathed in tears” and kissing the miniature “with the manner and energy of a maniac.” While unhappy to have caused her distress, he recounts the pleasure he took in the knowledge that she was upset by his death, and credits his gift of the miniature to Agnes, and her interactions with it, with preserving affection between the couple.

While this example and others like it illustrate the idea that most early republican miniatures acted as signs of the emotional bond described by Mauss’s statement that one who gives a gift makes “a present of some part of oneself,” Beauty Revealed stands alone as what seems like a particularly potent manifestation of the gift transaction’s operation on intimate relationships. As was noted at this chapter’s outset, it is impossible to know the exact circumstances that prompted Goodridge to make Beauty Revealed, and, ultimately, fruitless to guess at how it functioned within the context of her relationship with Webster. Nevertheless, considering Beauty Revealed using elements of the anthropological model of gifts facilitates a partial understanding, or at least a more grounded impression of the implications around its exchange. First, let us consider an assertion central to Mauss’s construction of the gift transaction: that, when freely given, the gift obliges reciprocity. Marcia Pointon has questioned the appropriateness of gift theory as a model with which to understand portrait miniatures because of this notion of reciprocity, noting that it is difficult to reconcile the singular nature of individual portrait miniatures with the obligation to reciprocate in kind. That a circular model of giving requires reciprocation in kind implies the gift transaction is ordered by social expectation. It also implies that the exchanging of gifts must occur

42 Mauss, The Gift, 12.
43 This element of Mauss’s construction has been examined by Bronislaw Malinowski in his Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea (New York: Psychology Press, 1978), 80-95.
within some sort public performance in order to illuminate the action, and thus fulfill the social expectation. In her introduction to Mauss’s work, Mary Douglas explains the importance of public visibility in gift transactions in this way:

The gift cycle...supplies each individual with personal incentive for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges. Gifts are given in the context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem [and] the distribution of honor...the gift economy is more visible than the market. Just by being visible, the resultant distribution of goods and services is more readily subject to public scrutiny...in operating a gift system a people are more aware of what they are doing.432

To be sure, the centrality of public exchange to Mauss’s understanding of gift transactions complicates our ability to fit the giving and receiving of early republican miniatures into his model, since miniatures were typically both presented and beheld in private. Early republican texts recommended givers of miniatures maintain a certain level of secrecy around the occasion of their presentation, noting that the transaction should be conducted away from “the presence and observation of strangers.”433 Additionally, they cautioned recipients against the practice of allowing their miniatures to be “paraded on the mantle-piece, or in any way perpetually exposed to view,” warning that if the eye became too familiar with a miniature, it would cease to “call up the associations which spring at the sight of it when suddenly presented.”434 On the other hand, relegating the viewing of a miniature to a moment when one was prepared for the flood of emotion it provoked, kept it “fresh in its charms.”435

432 Mauss, The Gift, xiv.
435 “Miniature Painting,” 190.
While giving and receiving miniatures may not have initiated tidily reciprocal or publicly enacted performances, there is no doubt that early republicans viewed the exchange of miniatures as a way to share and oblige emotional currency. The value in miniatures was not held in the objects themselves, despite the refined materials out of which the images were made, or the precious, elaborate mounts in which they were housed. Instead, within the context of a culture ruled by sentiment, the feelings and attachments generated by having, looking at, and touching portrait miniatures, and the extent to which miniatures functioned as signs of those feelings and attachments, were worth as much as, or even more than any intrinsic value. Applying this interpretation of the miniature as a sign of emotional currency to Beauty Revealed, we can see how it may have fostered an emotional circularity in which its recipient felt desire provoked both by the image itself and his knowledge of the intimate circumstances under which it was produced, and projected that desire onto its creator, who, in turn, received gratification as the object of erotic fantasy.

Although Beauty Revealed is singular with regard to its particular focus on the bosom, it is not the only example of a miniature portrait composed to highlight a fragment of the body. There was, from the last decade of the eighteenth century through the 1830s, a fashion in England and France for using tiny paintings of facial features, most frequently the eyes, to decorate miniature brooches and rings, as well as a variety of other small objects, like snuffboxes and toothpick cases. This tradition originated with a commission made to Richard Cosway (1742-1821) by his friend, George IV, then the Prince of Wales, in 1785, for a portrait of the prince’s right eye. George IV sent the miniature to the object of his affections, Maria Fitzherbert, with whom he was entangled in a forbidden romance. The gift must have resonated with Fitzherbert, since soon after she

---

436 An explanation of the problematic circumstances surrounding the relationship between George IV and Maria Fitzherbert can be found in Hanneke Grootenboer, “Treasuring the Gaze: Eye
received it, she married the prince in a secret ceremony and commissioned Cosway to paint her own eye in a miniature for her new husband (figure 41). Rumors about the romantic exchange of miniatures by the Prince and Mrs. Fitzherbert prompted the creation of more ‘eye paintings,’ as they were collectively known, which were much smaller than traditional miniatures, and showed what to most observers was an unrecognizably small portion of the face, often surrounded by wispy or gauze-like clouds. The inability of most observers to recognize the eye painting’s sitter allowed them to be discreetly exchanged and even publicly worn by participants in clandestine relationships.

In addition to their ability to conceal identity and stand in for more complete portrait representations, eye paintings also conveyed a range of sentimental, erotic, and sacred associations. As Robin Jaffe Frank and Marjorie Wieseman have both noted, sentimental culture observed that desire and love entered the body through the eye, which caressed the desired object as a first step towards acquiring it. Like all miniatures, the eye painting was made to be gazed at and treasured. Its unique format and focus on the eye, and by extension, the process of looking, also shaped the way in which it interacted with its viewer by challenging the assumption of the viewer’s scopic authority and implying that, under the gaze of an eye painting, it was actually the beholder who was being watched. In addition to creating a circular economy of looking, desiring, and possessing between the viewer and the sitter whose eye was represented, eye paintings were imbued with significance related to the eye’s longstanding symbolic associations, especially with the concept of the eye of Providence. This particular association began to be widely articulated in the fifteenth century, and by the sixteenth, the visual emblem of the sacred eye, usually represented as floating


in the clouds and surrounded by rays of light, was circulating in pattern books. The dualism of the eye as a sign of both sensual and sacred watchfulness permits a number of interpretive possibilities around the symbolic meaning of eye paintings, but whether their owners regarded them as materializations of the all-seeing eye of God or reminders of a lover’s ever-present observation, images of eyes seem to scrutinize their viewers, to transform them, as Hanneke Grootenboer has observed, from spectators into spectacles. They are images calculated to operate on their viewers at an emotional level, to dissuade their possessors from straying from their dictated paths of morality or fidelity.

While eye paintings were not widely circulated in early republican America, Grootenboer notes that Edward Malbone, the celebrated miniaturist whose experiments with watercolor on an ivory support likely influenced Goodridge’s chosen medium, was rumored to make them. The close-cropped composition of *Beauty Revealed* and the ethereal fabric surrounding its perimeter resemble the clouds with which Cosway and his followers surrounded the eyes in their miniatures and argue for the idea that Goodridge knew about eye paintings and had likely seen examples. Another element connecting *Beauty Revealed* to the eye painting tradition is the small round mole or birthmark visible on her right breast, the presence of which we can read as an identifying gesture.

---

438 Some scholars locate the modern emergence of the ‘Eye of Providence’ motif to Leon Battista Alberti, who made it his personal emblem. Alberti traced the origins of the connection back to ancient Egypt, noting that humanity had long recognized that “the eye is more powerful that anything...[it is] the first, chief, king, like a god of human parts.” As Laurie Schneider has noted, Alberti’s conflation of the eye with God was meant to serve as a reminder that God saw all of humanity’s acts, and that individuals should aspire to an ideal that would be acceptable in his constant and unblinking sight. See Laurie Schneider, “Leon Battista Alberti: Some Biographical Implications of the Winged Eye,” *Art Bulletin* 72, 2 (June 1990): 261-270, quotes on 264-265. According to Michael Paul Driskel, the motif of the sacred eye first appeared in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, published in 1593. See Michael Paul Driskel, “By the Light of Providence: The Glory Altarpiece at St. Paul’s Chapel, New York City,” *The Art Bulletin*, 89, 4 (Dec., 2007): 715-737. Information about the eye of Providence and sixteenth and seventeenth century patternbooks is found on 723.

439 Grootenboer, “Treasuring the Gaze,” 496-497.
440 Grootenboer, “Treasuring the Gaze,” 505.
not unlike the individualizing details, like eye color, eyebrow shape, and sections of visible hair, present in some eye paintings. Robin Jaffe Frank has identified Goodridge’s mole as a secret hint to her identity “with a meaning known only to her lover,” but while the interpretation of the mole as recognizable only to someone who had seen Goodridge’s bosom in its unclothed state is a tantalizing one, it relies on a mistaken premise. 441 Considering the placement of Goodridge’s mole against fashion plates and extant contemporaneous garments, we find that it would likely have been visible above the necklines of at least some of Goodridge’s gowns. As was noted in Chapter 2, the diaphanous, low-necked garments popular around the turn of the nineteenth century began to give way in the 1810s and 1820s to more structured and concealing garments. Christopher Breward has observed that as female garments became more substantial, their silhouettes also shifted from a vertical to a horizontal emphasis, the result of which was a lowering of shoulderlines and a slight raising of necklines (see figure 42). 442 While the mole’s location, relatively high on the breast and near the cleavage, may have been concealed by the slightly raised necklines of fashionable day dresses, which were typically worn with scarves or shawls to further conceal the décolletage, the cut of some evening gowns could have easily revealed the mole, thus reducing its effectiveness as a privately identifying mark.

Although the elements contained within Goodridge’s miniature present a number of possibilities for understanding its significance, in the end, definite conclusions about it remain elusive. It is, on the one hand, a representation of the artist who made it that likely functioned as a reminder of intimacies shared in the past or promised for the future. We must also consider its relationship to various artistic practices, including the eye-miniature tradition, and to the cultural associations provoked by giving and receiving gifts. Underscoring any interpretation is the

441 Frank, Love and Loss, 263.
miniature’s signification of the powerful influence held by the cult of the bosom over even the most private of relations, an assertion confirmed by the title Goodridge apparently inscribed on its original backing. Like the image itself, the title *Beauty Revealed* can be understood in multiple ways. It makes reference, no doubt, to the beauty inherent in the pert, softly tinted breasts themselves and the delicate hand with which the paint has been applied to the miniature’s surface, both of which are revealed when the miniature is studied closely. We can also assume that it contains a reference to the use of “beauty” or “beauties” as euphemistic substitutions for “bosom” or “breasts,” a swap commonly seen in early republican cultural materials and one with which we imagine Goodridge was familiar. Of course, Goodridge’s choice of title also associates the image of her bosom with one of the most important attributes of American femininity, and, in so doing, acknowledges that the miniature represents more than just her expertly-painted, lovely breasts. Especially significant is Goodridge’s invocation of “beauty” in the singular. As was noted in this study’s introduction, American cultural materials drew a small but important distinction between the singular “bosom” and the plural “breasts,” associating the first with metaphorical operations and the second with physical processes. Goodridge’s location of the attribute of beauty within her bosom associates the image with the figurative realm, but her choice to refer to her breasts as a single entity of “beauty” rather than two “beauties” even further extends their idealization, and argues for a conscious effort on Goodridge’s part to locate the image in the symbolic order. That is not to say that the image should only be read as a symbol. Indeed, the startling naturalism of Goodridge’s painted breasts, which seem to leap forth out of their cover, compelling the viewer’s finger to stroke and caress their contours, clearly aligns the image with the physical realm just as much as the metaphorical. Perhaps, then, *Beauty Revealed* can best be understood as a reference to the liminal space between the bosom as a virtuous symbol of femininity and the breasts as “throbbing hemispheres of love.” It was in this space that the cult of the bosom operated, and in
which gifts of love and sentiment, like Goodridge's miniature, were cherished as extensions of the female body and all of the “beauties” it contained.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY TEXTS


Lawrence, William. Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man, delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons. London: J. Callow, Medical Bookseller, 1819.


----. *Emilus; or, A Treatise of Education.* Edinburgh: J. Dickson and C. Elliot, 1763.


Wright, Frances. *Views of Society and Manners in America; in a series of letters from that country to a friend in England in the years 1818, 1819, and 1820.* London: Longman, Hurst, Rees Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row, 1821.
CONTEMPORARY TEXTS


Vita

Emily Catherine Gerhold was born on December 22, 1977, in Irving, Texas, and is an American citizen. She graduated from Walsingham Academy, Williamsburg, Virginia in 1995. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art from the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia in 1999. She received a Master of Arts in Art History from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 2003.