

# Defining Autonomy: Women Navigating Transatlantic Intellectual Connections in Boston, 1770–1779

*Laura E. Earls*

At the dawn of the American Revolution, before the idea of America as a sovereign nation emerged, Mercy Otis Warren wrote her first letter regarding colonial politics to the English historian Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay. In this June 1773 letter, Warren lamented how the “rapacious arm of tyranny has now seized and is devouring the fair inheritance.”<sup>1</sup> As the wife of prominent Patriot and Massachusetts politician James Warren, she was in a position to receive, process, and produce Patriot rhetoric. Warren placed Patriots and Loyalists in a dichotomy as she saw it, with the former as the “lover of his country” whose “land is groaning under the yoke of foreign servitude” versus the latter, comprised of “treacherous sons, dead to more laudable feelings of soul” who “stretch out their miscreant hands to fix the chain on a people.”<sup>2</sup> The ways in which she grappled with Patriot rhetoric resulted partly from class-based connections, educational resources, and her own exceptional intellect. Not all colonial women had access to the resources necessary to write sophisticated letters to fellow intellectuals, but those who did

---

<sup>1</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay, June 1773, in *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

could build their own rhetorical skills and became increasingly comfortable participating in society outside the home.

Scholarship since the 1980s acknowledges and analyzes women's participation in public life in the latter half of the eighteenth century; however, the majority of it neglects to address the 1770s as a significant decade for women's autonomy. Mary Beth Norton's work is the foundation for much of today's scholarship regarding women in early America because she was one of the first historians to analyze such a breadth and depth of women's private writing. Her timeline for how the revolution affected women's perceptions of themselves focuses mainly on how women's writing in the 1760s evolved by the 1780s and beyond. Norton notes that her work is not a representative cross section of American women at these times, which leaves room to contribute to her earlier work and more recent scholarship, including that of Rosemarie Zagarrri, by focusing on how upper-class women in Boston saw their world and functioned within it. Norton's work implies that the mechanics of the change she found occurred in the 1770s, so it is here that Mercy Otis Warren and her contemporaries, especially Abigail Adams, serve as the main examples to illustrate how women exhibited autonomy in varying forms in political and intellectual spaces in the 1770s.

The ways in which Mercy Otis Warren exhibited intellectual autonomy are difficult to trace. The educational resources necessary to develop one's writing skills and write to prominent intellectuals and politicians were rare for women during this time. Warren serves as the primary example of this type of autonomy because of her prolific writing and similar political views to Abigail Adams in the 1770s. By examining two types of autonomy through the lenses of a few women during this decade, we gain a more comprehensive perspective on the cultural spaces women occupied in the United States' foundational stages.

Fairly comprehensive scholarship exists regarding the place of women and their perceptions of themselves before and after

the revolution; however, this scholarship does not address the mechanics of how women occupied political and intellectual spaces during the revolution itself. Women around the time of the revolution experienced little to no progress in terms of the acquisition of legal rights; however, they did exhibit changes in their perceptions of themselves in their private writing after the war. In her book, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800*, Norton argues that during the 1780s and 1790s, women's private lives changed in terms of "familial organization, personal aspirations, self-assessments," and that historians can perceive this in women's private writing.<sup>3</sup> While Norton's argument that most women experienced the revolution and its aftermath this way is fairly representative given her research methods and inclusion of white and black women of varying classes, there are a few exceptions worth exploring. Not all women exhibited a greater degree of personal autonomy only after the 1770s ended, and not all of this expression was exclusively in private writing. Women like the wives of Massachusetts politicians Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams navigated political and intellectual spaces to create their own forms of autonomy throughout the 1770s both because of and despite the American Revolution. Their experiences highlight the process of change that resulted in heightened autonomy for some women in the 1780s and beyond.

Perhaps the least documentation exists for the development of intellectual autonomy among Boston's circle of upper-class women. This autonomy, as defined here, manifested itself in the ability to develop and articulate ideas regarding improving one's rhetorical skills and political ideas, with an additional focus on writing itself and the ability to publish this writing. Considering the resources available to most colonial women in terms of

---

<sup>3</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), xv.

literacy, spare time, access to consistent and reliable political information, and limitations imposed by race and class, only a few upper-class white women from Boston's Patriot circle were able to exercise this type of autonomy. The foremost example of this is Mercy Otis Warren.

Warren was a prolific writer of letters, poetry, plays, and history, making her one of few early American women to have her own writing published in many genres. Because of her work, Warren deserves to assume a place among the ranks of her contemporary intellectuals. Rosemarie Zagarri's biography, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, seeks to establish knowledge of Mercy Otis Warren and her life on the same level as scholarship surrounding women like Betsy Ross and Abigail Adams. She argues that Warren deserves more recognition for her writing and political thought, especially since she made contributions to the Patriot cause despite not being welcomed by her male counterparts. Zagarri also argues that Warren felt tension between her domestic duties and intellectual pursuits because she lacked the language of feminism, and her life is an example of both manipulation of and constraint by eighteenth-century gender roles.<sup>4</sup> Zagarri focuses largely on the events of Warren's life and does not extensively discuss her subject's writing.<sup>5</sup>

If women did have access to certain forms of personal independence, or what we will call autonomy here, then what forms did this take? Who had access to what kinds of educational and political resources? Who was writing to whom and what did they think about a woman's place in society, especially in the context of the revolution? Answering these questions helps to create a more comprehensive arc of women's history and a better idea of how women interacted with the world around

---

<sup>4</sup> Rosemarie Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2015), xv–xvii.

<sup>5</sup> For more information regarding Warren's writing, see Jeffrey H. Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

them during the American Revolution, especially during the 1770s. Their actions, while not representative, illustrate the mechanics involved in developing the autonomy of the 1780s as discussed by historiography.

Upper-class white women were among the few with access to the resources necessary to develop their academic inclinations, and this development formed the basis of how they interacted with one another in the 1770s. Privileges afforded by race and class meant that women like Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay had the time and resources available to write letters for the purpose of improving their writing skills and rhetoric when discussing politics. These women do not represent a cross section of the female populace of the colonies during this decade; however, they forged connections with each other under similar circumstances—an absence of prominent men in their lives—which combined with the events of the war to create a unique transatlantic network of women pushing one another to develop intellectual autonomy by refining their rhetorical skills and contributing to the rhetoric of the revolution in ways that few women did.

Mercy Otis Warren received an education because she had access to a tutor and men who supported her intellectual endeavors. Rosemarie Zagarrri notes that Warren received an education alongside her brother, James, who encouraged her pursuits and was her closest friend. Zagarrri argues that James's graduation from Harvard was part of improving the status of the Otis family in the Plymouth community. Since college was not standard for everyone, James's ability to attend Harvard and graduate was a clear indicator of membership in the upper classes, which was the foundation of his younger sister's intellectual autonomy. One other critical aspect of this autonomy, Zagarrri argues, comes from the ways in which her

father, husband, and brother encouraged her education, writing, and entry into politics.<sup>6</sup>

Neither Abigail Adams nor Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay had access to the same kind of personalized education that Warren received; however, they did have support from men in their lives like her. Adams believed that she never attended school due to both her chronic poor health as a child and discrimination against her as a girl.<sup>7</sup> She learned to write and think critically as a child from her parents and grandmother; additionally, she and her friends read books and exchanged letters with the purpose of educating one another.<sup>8</sup> This initiative regarding her education somewhat resembled that of Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay. The biographer Mary Hays attributes Macaulay's early education to her own initiative. Macaulay's governess could not satisfy her curiosity, so she read countless books in her father's library.<sup>9</sup> Even though these women had different educational experiences as children and were part of vastly different societal structures in the colonies and England, they shared a somewhat analogous underlying class privilege that granted them the time and resources necessary to better themselves, even if it was of their own volition.

These women used the skills that their education gave them to forge transatlantic connections partly due to both the development of the American Revolution in the 1770s and coincidental lapses in the influence of men in their lives. Norton argues that American marriage statutes were modeled after English common law and emphasizes that in the case of widowhood, the husband's will often inadequately provided for

---

<sup>6</sup> Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Green, "Catharine Macaulay," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, spring 2014 ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/catharine-macaulay/>.

his widow.<sup>10</sup> Out of these three women, Macaulay was the only one who was a widow in the 1770s for any length of time, and it was during this time that she forged connections to Warren and Adams. Warren began her correspondence with Macaulay due to her brother's poor mental health and subsequent inability to keep up his own writing to Macaulay.<sup>11</sup> Adams did not have such a lapse in male influence, but she still wrote to both women regarding political issues.

Widowhood and the legal circumstances of marriage coincided with developments in Macaulay's political writing and the ways she related to the circle of Boston Patriots that included the Adams and Warren families. Macaulay, like Warren, married later in life. She married her first husband in June of 1760, and he died in 1766. Like Warren and Adams, her husband encouraged her intellectual pursuits. She started to write her histories, and he revised them for her; Karen Green argues that he moderated her language in order to make her sound less radical.<sup>12</sup> As tensions escalated between the colonies and England, she implored her fellow countrymen to see that they could not tax their colonies without allowing them representation in the British Parliament.<sup>13</sup> Macaulay was very connected to other philosophers and intellectuals in England during her time as a widow, which likely allowed for the development of the kind of intellectual autonomy that she later fostered in Warren and Adams.

Warren began her correspondence with Macaulay because of her brother James's poor mental health and subsequent inability to continue his own correspondence with the Whig historian.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, James's declining health also prompted

---

<sup>10</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Green, "Catharine Macaulay."

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 14.

Macaulay to start preserving her own letters.<sup>15</sup> Warren's early political writing came from a long-standing family tradition of political action, and it was this tradition that contributed to the dissolution of her brother's health. Warren wrote a letter on September 10, 1769, to her older brother, the prominent lawyer James Otis Jr., after he was beaten with a cane by a political enemy employed by the Crown. She states, "Yet though we knew their errand was to uphold villany, and protect villains—I believe few expected they would carry their audacity so far as to stand by and [??] the miscreant, to spill the blood of citizens, who criminate the designs, and their measures."<sup>16</sup> Warren refers to the agents of the British Crown that followed through with the attack as "villains," rather than "peacekeepers" as she had previously thought. Even though Warren refers only to her brother's attack, she appears to conceive of the incident in terms of widespread injustice, such as when she refers to how the attacker fully intended "to spill the blood of citizens."<sup>17</sup> After this incident, Warren began writing to Macaulay in her brother's place.

Warren's connection to Macaulay serves as an exceptional example of women using intellectual and political pursuits to further develop their own autonomy. According to the historians Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris, Macaulay wrote to several other Patriots as well, including John Adams.<sup>18</sup> Richards argues that Macaulay was Warren's role model. They shared Whig political ideology, a desire to make names for themselves in the field of history, and a willingness to criticize their respective governments.<sup>19</sup> Warren's first letter to

---

<sup>15</sup> Mercy Otis Warren, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to James Otis Jr., 10 September 1769, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren*, 42.



Macaulay indicates this autonomy as she readily delved into discussions regarding the relationship of the mother country to its colonies.

Adams's correspondence with Macaulay began due to her own intellectual curiosity about the historian and her education. Adams began writing to Macaulay after learning about her in a letter that her nephew, Isaac Smith, wrote to John Adams. The historian Woody Holton argues that Macaulay fascinated her because "she had confounded men's limited expectations of women."<sup>20</sup> In a February 1771 letter sent from London, Smith notes that he "had the pleasure of meeting with Mrs. McAulay," a woman "not so much distinguished in company by the beauties of her person, as the accomplishments of her mind."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, as Holton notes, Smith wrote a letter to Abigail Adams the same day and did not mention Macaulay at all.<sup>22</sup> Her response to Smith in April of 1771 expresses her "great desire to be made acquainted with Mrs. Maccaulays own history. One of [her] own Sex so eminent in a tract so uncommon naturally raises [her] curiosity and all [she] could ever learn relative to her, is this that she is a widdow [sic] Lady and Sister to Mr. Sawbridge." Adams furthermore expresses "a curiosity to know her Education, and what first prompted her to engage in a Study never before Exhibited to the publick [sic] by one of her own Sex and Country, tho now to the honour of both so admirably performed by her."<sup>23</sup> This curiosity about

---

<sup>20</sup> Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Smith Jr. to John Adams, 21 February 1771, in *The Adams Papers*, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 71–74, quoted in Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0056>.

<sup>22</sup> Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Abigail Adams to Isaac Smith Jr., 20 April 1771, in Butterfield, *The Adams Papers*, vol. 1, *December 1761–May 1776*, 76–78, quoted in Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0058>.

Macaulay's education and desire to delve into the mind of a woman intellectual set precedents for their friendship, even though they did not begin writing to each other for a few more years.

Warren's writing and development of intellectual autonomy began well before her correspondence with Macaulay; however, she often wrote when men prompted her to do so rather than for herself or other women. Warren believed her domestic duties should come before her intellectual pursuits and felt a degree of tension between these two duties for much of her life.<sup>24</sup> Zagari argues that Warren became the exceptional woman that she was because of support and encouragement from her father, brother, and husband.<sup>25</sup> The influence of men in her life reveals itself in her early writing. Warren's writing encompassed poetry, political plays, verse dramas, political essays, and the 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, which made her by far the most prolific woman writer of not only Boston but also the early United States.<sup>26</sup> She wrote poetry that focused largely on philosophy for almost fifty years.<sup>27</sup> Richards cites the 1774 poem, "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs; or the Sacrifice of the Tuscararoës," which mocked the Boston Tea Party, as a prime example of Warren's satirical poems, written primarily from 1774 to 1778. She wrote it because of a request made by John Adams to James Warren for her to write such a poem.<sup>28</sup> The text has a lilting, jesting tone to it. For example, part of the first stanza reads, "The heroes of the Tuscararo tribe, / Who scorn'd alike a fetter or a bribe, / In order rang'd, and waited freedom's nod, / To make an offering to the wat'ry god," which refers to

---

<sup>24</sup> Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, xvi–xvii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> For more information regarding Warren's writing career, see Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

the Patriots throwing tea into the Boston harbor.<sup>29</sup> The circumstances surrounding the writing of this poem correspond with Zagarrí's assertion that Warren became who she was because of the men in her life. We can see here her formation of Patriot political ideas before the war began – but in the context of how the men in her life wanted her to express herself.

Richards argues that Warren developed a sense of her own identity in the 1750s and 1760s, which corresponds with Zagarrí's argument and leads to the conclusion that the men in Warren's life supported and directed her in the increasingly hostile political climate of the colonies. Much like the cases of prominent Boston merchant Elizabeth Murray and Abigail Adams, men were primarily necessary during the early phases in which they pursued their personal goals. Richards argues that James Warren's encouragement and support factored largely into Mercy Otis Warren's unusual conception of herself as a writer, since many women only acquired autonomy through economic ventures, not intellectual ones.<sup>30</sup> While her letter to her brother after his attack demonstrates a very personal outrage toward the underhandedness of the Crown, the above poem, written five years later, demonstrates her intent to write for the public. Warren's primary subjects for her writing may have been Massachusetts politics and the Patriot cause, but her demonstrated diversity in style and genre are indicative of the political and intellectual autonomy that she derived from writing after she began corresponding with Macaulay.

Warren's political plays indicate her Patriot perspective on local Massachusetts politics and do not appear to have been written at the request of a man, thereby indicating a possible shift toward her political and intellectual autonomy. According to Richards, her early plays discussed "the evils of Tory

---

<sup>29</sup> Mercy Otis Warren, "The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs, or the Sacrifice of the Tuscararoes," in *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous, by Mrs. M. Warren* (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1790), 202.

<sup>30</sup> Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren*, 5.

administration in Massachusetts.” She often dealt with themes of “freedom versus liberty,” and she often used Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson as her main antagonist.<sup>31</sup> *The Adulateur: A Tragedy, as it is now acted in Upper Servia*, is her first play and was published in the newspaper *Massachusetts Spy* in March and April of 1772 without her name and in pamphlet form in 1773. Richards states that the play focuses on Massachusetts politics in 1772, mainly when the Loyalist Thomas Hutchinson became governor. Considering that he was a Tory and the Warrens were Whigs, Hutchinson was a longtime family rival of sorts.<sup>32</sup> Even though her work was published without her name, the dissemination of this satire of Hutchinson shows a rare instance of the public having access to a woman’s opinions regarding the political climate of Massachusetts in 1772, even if they did not know it. Warren had an advantage because her writing was published; therefore, the general public had access to her ideas and writing, as opposed to Adams and Murray, whose ideas primarily came across in personal correspondence. This aspect of Warren’s writing meant that her intellectual autonomy came from her unique ability to develop and publish her writing, which continued once she became friends with Macaulay.

Warren’s first letter to Macaulay delves into the concept of liberty almost immediately, thereby setting a precedent for the direction that their friendship would take. This June 1773 letter begins with humble hopes for a long friendship and quickly transitions to a discussion of liberty as an autonomous entity. Warren laments that “the Genius of liberty which once pervaded the bosom of each British hero animating them to the worthiest deeds [had] forsaken that devoted Island” and expresses the hope that “she [had] only concealed her lovely form until some more happy period shall bid her lift her avenging hand to the terror of every arbitrary despot and to the confusion of their impious

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 86.

minions on each side of the Atlantic?”<sup>33</sup> Despite her avowed dedication to the Patriot cause, as late as 1773, she seems to state here that the British simply had a lapse in judgment. This letter portrays the mounting tensions between England and its colonies as an absence of the ideals extolled by England as a nation. This forthright discussion of the relationship between the colonies and England in Warren’s first letter to an esteemed woman historian whom she had never met indicates a readiness to develop the rhetorical skills necessary for her intellectual development.

Warren and Macaulay began a fairly regular correspondence that blossomed into a friendship that allowed Warren to develop her own intellectual autonomy as a historian. As early as her second letter, Warren discusses how history will treat the events of the Revolution. For example, in a December 1774 letter to Macaulay, Warren notes “how Absurd will the plans of modern policy appear when the faithful Historian shall transmit to posterity the late Manoeuvres of a British Administration: when they shall Behold them plunging the Nation still deeper in an immense debte [sic], Equipping her Fleets to Harrass [sic] the Coasts, & her armies to insult & subjugate these loyal & populous Colonies, who [...] have been Voluntarily pouring their treasures into the Lap of Britain.” She conveys the way that she conceives of the relationship between the colonies and England when she states, “But tho America stands Armed with Resolution and Virtue, she still Recoils at the thought of Drawing the sword against the state from whence she derived her Origen [sic], tho that state like an unnatural parent has plung’d her dagger into the Bosom of her affectionate offspring.”<sup>34</sup> In this quote, Warren refines the ways in which she refers to the relationship between England as a restrictive parent

---

<sup>33</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay, 9 June 1773, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Macaulay, 29 December 1774, in Richards and Harris, 37-38.

state and the colonies as innocent victims. While this creates a somewhat problematic dichotomy because neither side was without fault, this quote does demonstrate the development of intellectual autonomy on Warren's part because she shifted from statements that liberty was an autonomous entity that simply left the minds of the British to castigating the mother country for its actions and discussing how historical memory will treat them. Part of what makes these letters indications of intellectual autonomy are that they went to a well-connected woman sympathetic to the Patriot cause.

Adams and Macaulay's correspondence may not have coincided with the development of published writing as in Warren's case, but it did contribute to the formation of a series of transatlantic intellectual connections for women. Holton argues that Adams waited until she was the wife of a congressman in 1774 to write to Macaulay.<sup>35</sup> This indicates that membership in the upper classes was a precursor to participation in this type of network-based intellectual autonomy. In her first letter to Macaulay, dated to 1774, Adams begins by mentioning that the last letter her husband received from the historian expressed her "Desire to become acquainted with our American Ladies." Adams obliges her by addressing the current state of the colonies and the Patriot cause, "a Cause madam which is now become so serious to every American that we consider it as a struggle from which we shall obtain a release from our present bondage by an ample redress of our Grievances—or a redress by the Sword. The only alternative which every american thinks of is Liberty or Death."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> "Abigail Adams to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay, 1774," in Butterfield, *The Adams Papers*, vol. 1, *December 1761-May 1776*, 177-179, quoted in Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0119>.

Holton argues that Adams sought to impress Macaulay with this letter.<sup>37</sup> Adams uses similar language to Warren when discussing the present situation of the colonies, thereby creating a common discussion surrounding American desires for England to address their grievances and avoid war. By using similar language when writing to Macaulay in 1774, Adams and Warren placed themselves on a similar trajectory of development of their political opinions and the ways in which they wrote about them.

Adams' correspondence with Macaulay began a year after Warren began writing to the eminent historian, and the two American women bonded over this common connection, thereby creating a small network of intellectually autonomous women. Part of Adams and Warren's friendship, which began in 1773, was their common connection to Macaulay. Holton refers to Macaulay as their "mutual hero," and notes that the American women would exchange letters from her, which indicates their admiration for the historian.<sup>38</sup> Zagarrri, much like Norton, notes that women during the Revolution became adept at running households in the absence of their husbands during the Revolution. Zagarrri argues that Warren, however, did not adapt as well as Adams to the running of her own household. She also argues that Warren bonded with other women whose husbands were also away either in government positions or fighting in the army.<sup>39</sup> Zagarrri emphasizes how Adams and Warren equated being separated from their husbands to being war widows.<sup>40</sup> Although these wives of Patriot politicians were not actually widows, Macaulay was when she began her correspondence with both women, which meant that they all had a degree of autonomy in terms of their physical lack of husbands that helped facilitate their intellectual connections. Whether or not Warren

---

<sup>37</sup> Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Zagarrri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

ran her household as well as Adams is irrelevant in light of the ways in which this “war widowhood” helped them create a common identity upon which to develop their intellectual proclivities.

Considering the esteem in which Adams and Warren held Macaulay and the ways in which they wrote to her, we can reasonably assume that her advice carried over into their correspondence with each other and women outside this network of three throughout the rest of the 1770s. In letters between Warren and Adams, we often see the younger Abigail exhibiting more forthrightness and a greater willingness to transgress boundaries between public and private, whereas Warren was more content to remain within the bounds of propriety for women. According to Zagarri, John Adams did not take Abigail’s March 1776 “Remember the Ladies” letter seriously. Rather, he scoffed at the idea and his wife asked Warren’s opinion on the matter. However, she apparently never responded.<sup>41</sup> Despite this apparent reluctance to discuss the advancement of women’s rights, Warren did have other female correspondents with whom she discussed intellectual pursuits that fell outside of her jurisdiction within the home.

Warren’s letters to other female correspondents did not all use the same language; rather, she writes openly and unapologetically to some, and qualifies her assertions to others. In a letter to her friend Hannah Fayerwether Tolman Winthrop, for example, Warren qualifies her perceptions of the happenings of the provincial Congress with words like “appears” and “seem.” This marks a shift away from the frankness that she used with Macaulay and Adams. For example, in this January 1774 letter to Winthrop, Warren states: “It appears to me the gentlemen of the provincial Congress have a most difficult part to act, - the public expectation is turned towards them, and eagerly insisting some important step; - while affairs abroad as well as at home seem to hang suspended on such [ ] that the least eccentric

---

<sup>41</sup> Zagarri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 93.



movement to the right or to the left might be attended with the most alarming consequences. May heaven direct their resolutions, and mark their conduct with wisdom and integrity, while it invigorates the manly arm to execute whatever the exigencies of the times may require.”<sup>42</sup> Richards and Harris note that this excerpt refers to the meeting of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which succeeded a colonial government body dissolved by Hutchinson. The new governor, Thomas Gage, did not allow John Winthrop, who was elected, to take his position.<sup>43</sup> We see here Warren’s perspective on local politics in relation to other wives of colonial politicians in very gendered terms, rather than the more general ideological discussions she had with Macaulay. Warren’s hopes that the men of the provincial congress would act morally and as good Christians and her apparent faith that these men would act with a strength specific to men demonstrates the perspective of the dutiful wife who does not transgress the boundaries between the public and the private. Her manner of expressing herself conveys her tendency to confine her writing within the domestic sphere, despite her intellectual proclivities.

In contrast to this qualifying language, Warren also expressed her political sentiments quite directly in letters to other women in her social circle. Richards and Harris argue that letters like those to longtime friend Hannah Quincy Lincoln demonstrate her complex rhetorical strategies that linked gender, social connections, family, and politics.<sup>44</sup> In a June 1774 letter to Lincoln, Warren stated, “I know not why any gentleman of your acquaintance should caution you not to enter any particular subject when we should meet. I should have a very ill opinion of myself, if any variation of sentiment with

---

<sup>42</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Fayerwether Tolman Winthrop, 31 January 1774, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

regard to political matters, should lessen my esteem for the disinterested, undesigning, and upright heart; - and it would argue great want of candour to think there was not many such (more especially among our own sex) who yet judge very differently with regard to the calamities of our unhappy country, and the authors of its misery.”<sup>45</sup> Richards and Harris note that this quote may refer to the differing political views between herself and Hannah Lincoln’s brother, but it seems mostly to refer to a warning from a friend of hers not to listen to Warren’s politically radical ideas.<sup>46</sup> The rest of the letter continues to vaguely discuss the need for men to avoid civil war. This quote relays Warren’s own willingness to discuss politics without apology with other women, as well as her recognition of gender disparities in regards to political opinions, which is a marked transformation from her apologies in letters to men that discussed politics. This correspondence with both Winthrop and Lincoln shows that Warren used different language with different people within Boston’s elite circle, thereby indicating that she had intellectual autonomy in how and to whom she chose to articulate and distribute her ideas and opinions.

Warren was somewhat apologetic in letters to men that discussed politics. Her letters to female correspondents in 1774 show more ease in discussing what she thinks, but later letters to men show a more restricted form of expression in which Warren couches her inquiries into contemporary politics in either apologetic terms or in terms of her relationship to a man. Zagari argues that Warren “frequently felt herself open to attacks, both real and imagined, for having violated her assigned domestic sphere.”<sup>47</sup> This fear is evident even in letters to her friend John Adams. In a letter to Adams dated to April 4, 1775, Warren asks for Adams’ “indulgence so far as to Favour me with

---

<sup>45</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Quincy Lincoln, 12 June 1774, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 29-30.

<sup>46</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 30-31.

<sup>47</sup> Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, xvii.

your opinion [...] of the present dark and Gloomy aspect of public affairs. [...] You Cannot Wonder sir at my perticuler [sic] anxiety and solicitude to know the sentiments of the judicious as Mr. Warren is Absent and in such a Remote quarter that I have not heard from him since the news of the late transactions of an August Assembly [...].”<sup>48</sup> While we can most likely attribute Warren’s request for Adams’s “indulgence” in her inquiry as to the state of contemporary politics to the formalities of eighteenth-century letters, the part about her husband stands out in particular. Here, Warren frames her inquiry in terms of her husband’s absence. If he were at home, she would have asked him, but since he is away, she asks Adams instead. Warren does not express her desire for knowledge as directly as she does in letters to women.

In the second half of the 1770s, once the war began, Warren’s correspondence with Macaulay still encompassed the ideas surrounding the relationship between the colonies and England, but came to include discussions of widowhood as her friends’ husbands died in war. In a letter from August 1775, Warren refers to a previous letter in which she stated “that the sword was half Drawn from the scabbard.” However, by the time of this letter, the first battle at Lexington and Concord had passed, and “Soon after which this people were obliged to unsheath it to Repel the Violence offered to Individuals.”<sup>49</sup> Warren then proceeds to update Macaulay on the state of affairs in the colonies after the Battle of Lexington and Concord, and refers to the last attempt of the Continental Congress to reconcile with England. Warren describes this last effort as “A final proof with what Reluctance the progeny of Britain Draw

---

<sup>48</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, 4 April 1775, in *The Adams Papers*, vol. 2, *December 1773-April 1775*, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 413–414. quoted in Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-02-02-0087>.

<sup>49</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Macaulay, 24 August 1775, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 58-61.

forth the sword against their unnatural parent.”<sup>50</sup> The continued use of language that emphasizes American reluctance to go to war with its mother country indicates more of a consistency of political opinion than development of rhetoric through correspondence. As the war progressed, however, Warren’s language shifted away from this American reluctance to go to war.

Two years into the war itself, Warren’s rhetoric in writing to Macaulay no longer referred to a parent-child relationship between England and America, but rather oppressor and oppressed. In a letter from February 1777, Warren laments how “freedom of intercourse is now cut off” by royal proclamation and “necessarily impeded by the hostile movements between Great Britain and a country which has been long used to look over to her with warm affection as a friend, protector, and parent.”<sup>51</sup> Although this language resembles that of her previous letters, Warren then states “That period is now past, the connexion [sic] is broken, and the American Continent feels these convulsions which have been experienced by every country ere they have obtained the permanent establishment of the rights too frequently wrested from them by the strong hand of power.”<sup>52</sup> This focus on an irreversible change in relations between the two nations becomes especially apparent in her statement “that no suffering which ministerial vengeance can inflict [...] will reduce America to submission and dependence on a foreign power who has already added insult to injury.”<sup>53</sup> These shifts in language indicate a definitive acknowledgement of America as an independent nation, rather than colonies revolting against a parent nation. Warren’s tone seems harsher

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Macaulay, 1 February 1777, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

as well, which can likely be attributed to the hardships she both faced and witnessed at the center of the war.

Warren's letters to other female friends besides Macaulay in the latter half of the 1770s did discuss politics and the broader ideological significance of the Revolution, but as the war progressed, war widowhood became a central theme in her correspondence. Although she was not a widow herself until 1808, some of her friends lost their husbands in the war. Janet Livingston Montgomery, wife of General Richard Montgomery and sister of Chancellor Robert Livingston of New York, was one such correspondent. The British killed the general and several others in battle in Quebec on December 31, 1775.<sup>54</sup> Warren's January 1776 letter to Montgomery expressed her deepest condolences both as a fellow woman and fellow lover of her country. She related his death to the broader Patriot cause by telling Montgomery that "the Urn of the companion of your heart will be sprinkled with the tears of thousands who revere the character of the commander at the gates of Quebec, though not personally acquainted with General Montgomery." Since Montgomery and Warren had never met, she attributed the motivation for this letter to the war widow to her own "love of virtue, from the tenderest feelings of humanity to the distressed, and from a particular respect and affection to the votaries of freedom, and to the distinguished supporters of the righteous cause which ingrosses [sic] not only the attention of the American Continent but of the European World."<sup>55</sup> This letter, unlike her earlier letters to women like Abigail Adams, was very forthright in both tone and purpose. She conceived of war widowhood in terms of sacrifice for a nation as well as a tragic loss to a family, which indicated a shift away from writing concerned primarily with her own family and community earlier in the decade.

---

<sup>54</sup> Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Janet Livingston Montgomery, 20 January 1776, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 64-66.

By 1779, Warren's letters to her female correspondents still discussed war widowhood. For example, in a March 1779 letter to Montgomery, Warren expresses her desire to "readily accompany the widowed hand to spread over the Cypress and pour a plentiful shower into the Urn of a Montgomery" for "the anniversary of that day when the hero fell *in the reins of glory* and thus insured the applause of his enemies will never be forgotten by his friends."<sup>56</sup> Even two years after General Montgomery's death, Warren still conceives of his passing in terms of its significance for the Revolution. She does not discuss death in this way in a May 1779 letter to her friend Hannah Fayerweather Tolman Winthrop after Dr. Winthrop's death earlier that month; rather, she instead implores her friend to "consider the memorable and great name of our excellent Friend, as past beyond the short date of human life into the annals and veneration of Posterity."<sup>57</sup> These letters indicate that widowhood was part of womanhood in the 1770s, as it had always been, but it carried political weight in times of war. Whether or not these women were war widows, Warren still offers her most articulate condolences and confidence in the legacies left behind by the husbands.

By 1779, Warren also had confidence in America's future as a sovereign nation, even though the end of the war was not yet in sight. For example, in a letter to Abigail Adams from March 1779, Warren lamented that she knew little of "the late disputes among the higher powers of America [...] except what is contained in the public papers." She felt that "time must unravel some misteries which authority at present thinks best should be hushed in silence."<sup>58</sup> She believed that the "lord of the universe

---

<sup>56</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Janet Livingston Montgomery, 18 March 1779, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 110.

<sup>57</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Fayerweather Tolman Winthrop, 24 May 1779, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 113-114.

<sup>58</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Smith Adams, 14 March 1779, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 107-108.

will disappoint the projects of our foes to carry on the system of his own Government” and would not “suffer a new formed Nation to be trodden down ere it arrives to maturity.” Furthermore, she stated that “America is a theatre just erected – the Drama is here but begun – while the actors of the Old World have run through every species of pride, luxury, venality, and vice.”<sup>59</sup> Judging by her language, Warren conceived of America as a new nation destined to mature, despite the fact that the war was still happening. Unlike her letters at the beginning of the decade, Warren was unapologetic. She stated what she believed without qualifying herself, and part of this came from the network of female correspondents she developed over the course of the 1770s, namely with Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay and Abigail Adams.

Zagarri attributes the tension that Warren felt between her duties as a wife and mother and her intellectual and political activities to the absence of a feminist ideology to explain herself.<sup>60</sup> This anachronistic twentieth-century language, however, does little to explain this tension because there was no concept of feminism in the eighteenth century, and Warren’s writing indicates that this tension ceased to be an issue. In letters to both Abigail and John Adams in the early 1770s, she does express uncertainty as to whether or not she should write, discuss politics, or even educate her own children. By 1779, however, she no longer expresses such doubts in herself. She unapologetically states her opinions and even reaches out to people to whom she has never met. We can attribute this in part to the small network of intellectually autonomous women that Warren participated in because she, Adams, and Macaulay, along with their other correspondents, provided feedback for one another’s rhetorical strategies and writing in general. In

---

<sup>59</sup> Mercy Otis Warren to Abigail Smith Adams, 14 March 1779, in Richards and Harris, *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters*, 108-109.

<sup>60</sup> Zagarri, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, xvii.

supporting each other like this, they were able to create their own forms of intellectual autonomy.

Autonomy for the elite women discussed here did not end in 1779, or even with the end of the American Revolution. While the war may not have caused a clear change in terms of women's rights, we can still see developments of economic, political, and intellectual autonomy in a few upper class white women who were able, due in part to their race and class privilege, to work within and stretch the boundaries of eighteenth-century gender constructs partly as a result of the upheaval caused by the American Revolution. After the 1770s, we can discern a continuation of the trends exhibited by the women studied in this watershed decade, especially in terms of Warren's political activity and work as a historian.

The work by which we now recognize Mercy Otis Warren developed during the 1780s through the early nineteenth century. The increase in written works that she published under her own name indicated that her intellectual autonomy only developed further after the 1770s. Her most substantial work after the American Revolution was the Antifederalist *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Zagarri notes that Warren's work was the first history of the war written by a woman, it carried myriad moral implications, and, unlike her earlier writing, did not conceal her perspective as a woman.<sup>61</sup> Zagarri also discusses the falling out between John Adams and Warren as a result of her writing this work.

John Adams's infuriated reaction to Warren's *History* serves as a testament to her intellectual autonomy in that she developed her rhetorical skills enough to write and publish three volumes of her own opinions with a wider audience than just her correspondents. Adams wrote a series of letters in 1807 denouncing Warren and her work, which was unprecedented in their friendship. In the first of these letters, Adams informed Warren that he read her work and was "not about to write a

---

<sup>61</sup> Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 144-149.



review of it” because if his comments were truthful, then “the Commentary would certainly be at least twice as voluminous as the Text.” Perhaps most important to him was his perception that “in those Passages which relate personally to [him], there are several Mistakes.”<sup>62</sup> The ease with which he took offense to her writing of history and her criticism of him within it indicated that her intellectual autonomy was not confined to just herself, it was public knowledge.

Warren’s response to this first critical letter embodied the development of her intellectual autonomy because she still defended herself and her work, and indicated her knowledge that this work would reach a wider audience than her other writing. She chided Adams for his unjust criticism, stating that she did not expect to be “charged with a want of veracity, or a malignancy of heart, by a gentleman who has long known [her] too well to suspect [her] wilfully [sic] guilty of either.” She furthermore noted that she had “lived long enough to be sensible that such a work would be variously received by such a world, and in such times as those in which we live.”<sup>63</sup> Warren did not stray from her faith in her own abilities, and unlike her letters or fiction from the 1770s, she knew that her work would reach many people. Here, she had intellectual autonomy because she had an audience.

Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams were exceptional women for their time. The 1770s in the American colonies fell right before the solidification of public spheres for men and private spheres for women, but gendered activities and societal perceptions of proper roles for men and women at home and in public were already prevalent. The documents of upper-class

---

<sup>62</sup> “From John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 11 July 1807,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5193>.

<sup>63</sup> “To John Adams from Mercy Otis Warren, 16 July 1807,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified July 12, 2016, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5194>.

white women form the narrow source base with which to analyze the implications of eighteenth-century gender constructs. Even though they were not representative of colonial women as a whole, these women demonstrated a variety of ways in which it was possible to function within yet move beyond established gender constructs. Perhaps the most telling testament to the ways in which they developed their own autonomy is the unapologetic ways in which they wrote about their own lives and personal decisions after the 1770s. Not all women had the resources available to Warren or Adams, and these women used what was available to them to both defy and live within established gender constructs. By having other women and each other as correspondents, they were able to validate each other's opinions and rhetorical strategies, and these connections helped solidify them as the means by which women's autonomy developed on a personal level by the 1780s. While not representative, these women and their writing demonstrate the myriad ways in which women exercised autonomy in the 1770s.