

**MERCY OTIS WARREN:
HER POLITICAL SELF AND HER PERSONAL DILEMMA**

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Mercy Otis Warren, one of the most distinguished female playwrights in American theatrical history, successfully employed the satirical farce as a dramatic form in an attempt to encourage political and social reform during the time of the American Revolution. Although she was most admired for her work and was actually encouraged to display her talent by her husband and her close friends, Warren found it very difficult to combine her feminine identity with her artistic genius. Aware of the conventional notion that literary women relinquished all those feminine virtues which made up the ideal of "True Womanhood," just because they ventured into an exclusively male area, Warren was particularly anxious to reconcile her roles as a woman and writer. The only way for her to resolve her inner strife was to enter the public world of literary creation anonymously.

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When Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) published her propaganda plays in the 1770s,¹ she appeared to be acutely aware of the political situation during those turbulent years of the American Revolution, and certainly aimed at stirring up "hatred for the Tories of Massachusetts and admiration for the American Revolutionaries" (Robinson 131). Probably the first woman playwright in America, Mercy Warren successfully tackled political issues in her plays and revealed her unswerving devotion to republicanism. An eminent literary figure during the Revolution, Warren cleverly used her pen to satirize people and events as well as influence the political thought and consciousness of the Americans. Walter J. Meserve observes that Mercy Warren "rallied to the Patriot cause with a fury that distinguishes her writing during the Revolution. She was no middle-of-the-roader; what she thought, she spoke or wrote. Her effect as a gadfly during the early years of the Revolution cannot be underestimated" (67).

For a woman of the eighteenth century, Warren's uncommon preoccupation with political and intellectual matters can certainly be attributed to the fact

that she was the daughter of Colonel Otis, the sister of the distinguished patriot leader, James Otis, and the wife of General James Warren. As the conflict between the American colonies and the royal home government intensified, Warren's house in Plymouth, Massachusetts, became the meeting place of some of the most ardent supporters of the revolution and democracy. As a result, Warren was unavoidably drawn closer to public affairs since she was present at all the political discussions that took place in her home and had the opportunity to meet important public figures such as Samuel Adams and John Adams, who later became the second President of the United States (1797-1801).

Although she was restricted to the narrowly-defined domestic sphere reserved for all women in early American society without access to political matters, Warren's contribution to the revolutionary cause was really significant. An indignant idealist, Warren showed her rightful anger and protest against the enemies of liberty through dramatic expression. According to Warren, drama could exercise a great influence on the public, and was particularly suited to her needs for political expression and moral instruction. In a letter to Abigail Adams, 19 January 1774, she articulates her belief in the moralizing power of drama: "The solemn strains of the tragic Muse have been generally more to my taste than the lighter Representations of the Drama. Yet I think that the Follies and Absurdities of Human Nature Exposed to Ridicule in the Masterly Manner it is done by Molière may often have a greater tendency to reform Mankind than some graver Lessons of Morality" (Richards 225). Although Warren had never attended a play in her life,² she had already read the plays of Shakespeare and Molière. In fact, while colonial women's formal education was effectively halted at the elementary level, Warren had the opportunity to study under her uncle, the Reverend Jonathan Russell, when he prepared her brothers for college. She was also allowed to use her uncle's library, thus becoming familiar with the Greek and Latin classics as well as the works of Pope, Dryden, and Milton.

A close observer of the strenuous political activity during the Revolution, Warren decided to turn to propaganda plays in an attempt to provide an outlet for her deepest patriotic feelings as well as exhort the people of her country to adhere to republican principles. She was one of the first American dramatists who managed to visualize an independent country with virtuous and freedom-loving citizens, and succeeded in setting up her ideal into dramatic form. A witty satirist, she manipulated the theatrical rhetoric of the time to voice her loyalty to the American cause, to comment on political events, and to express the British-American conflict. As George O. Seilhamer rightly observes, Mercy Warren was, among American writers, "the first to adopt the dramatic form as a vehicle for political satire" (3). Unquestionably, the fact that an early American housewife created a kind of literary polemic in the late-eighteenth century and actually took the lead in this style of propaganda plays is really amazing.³ It is also important to

mention that her work was recognized by her contemporaries and her plays, published in pamphlet form,⁴ swiftly circulated among the reading public.

The truth is, however, that Mercy Warren never openly desired to have her work published. It was John Adams, her intimate friend, who brought her work forward to the public, anonymously of course. In 1772, excerpts from her first propaganda play, *The Adulateur*, were printed anonymously in the radical paper *The Massachusetts Spy* on March 26 and April 23. Also, in 1773 she published anonymously in pamphlet form a revised five-act version of the same play. Furthermore, as Montrose J. Moses states, her most important play, *The Group*, “was anonymous, and those nearest Mrs. Warren showed reticence and were in accord with her desire to remain unknown as the authoress” (49).

Her husband, James Warren “described her as having a ‘Masculine Genius’ coupled with that Weakness which is the Consequence of the Exquisite delicacy and softness of her Sex” (Norton 121). However, Warren, herself, found it very difficult to combine her feminine identity with her intellectual abilities and shake off the conventional idea concerning the impropriety of women who engaged themselves in political analysis and intellectual activity. Despite the fact that, throughout her career as a political pamphleteer, Warren was constantly encouraged to write by her husband and her close friends, she struggled with her personal discomfort and anxiety caused by her ambivalent status as a literary woman. On the one hand, as a woman she was confined to the domestic sphere without having access to the political order. On the other hand, however, as a writer she was supposed to be absolutely aware of the social and political context of Revolutionary America. She also had to display talent and genius, as well as employ the public language of republicanism in order to project the republican values and principles and arouse patriotic feelings in the Americans.

Moreover, Warren’s inner strife caused by her extraordinary venture to enter the male world of political and social analysis was further intensified by the fact that she employed a male-devised genre,⁵ the political farce, and consistently manipulated the powerful effects of satire in order to reinforce the ideals of the Revolution. As Montrose J. Moses points out, “satire was no more effectively handled than by Mrs. Mercy Warren” (47). Her undertaking to deal with political matters seems to be quite unbelievable if one bears in mind Chris Weedon’s observation that in women’s writing “the concern is more often with sexual and family relationships than with areas which are thought to constitute public life” (153).⁶ Furthermore, the use of satire implies the study and analysis of human nature in order to comment upon human vices and follies. Also, a satirical work has to be witty, humorous and, sometimes, bitter and angry. However, in her attempt to expose the Tories’ folly and corrupted nature, Warren used satire so flagrantly that she, herself, felt really uneasy and uncomfortable with her work. In a letter intended to reassure Warren’s feelings of apprehension about the picture she

had drawn of the Tory politicians in her play *The Group*, John Adams clearly urges her to continue her most valuable work: "My most friendly regards to a certain Lady, tell her the God Almighty has entrusted her with Powers for the good of the World, which in the Cause of his Providence, he bestows on few of the human race. That instead of being a fault to use them, it would be criminal to neglect them;" and Abigail Adams added her own point of view to the letter: "I observe," she wrote, "my friend is laboring under apprehension, lest the severity with which a certain Group was drawn was incompatible with that benevolence which ought always to be predominant in a female character... Yet when it is so happily blended with benevolence, and is awakened by the love of virtue and abhorrence of vice ... it is so far from blamable that it is certainly meritorious" (Robinson 136).

As has been observed, "women felt guilty when they undertook literary careers" (Walker 34). Consequently, Warren's attitude towards her own literary creation, her feelings of guilt and apprehension, can certainly be explained by the fact that she was born into a society where women were trained in obedience, chastity, maternal love, and repression of personal desires and ambitions. In a letter to John Adams, Warren asks his pardon "for touching on war, politicks, or any thing relative thereto, as I think you gave me a hint in yours [i.e. your letter] not to approach the verge of any thing so far beyond the line of my own sex" (Cohen 489). The patriarchal structure of eighteenth-century American society clearly denied women a speaking voice while, at the same time, forced them to adopt a modest and self-effacing disposition. Warren was definitely aware of the fact that, by writing political farces, not only did she step out of her prescribed feminine sphere, but she also presumed to occupy a subject position reserved for men only. Instead of being a silent observer of political and social events, she became a powerful and effective commentator.

It is my contention that anonymity provided Warren with the only possible means of resolving her inner conflict between her personal need for self-expression and her culturally conditioned anxiety about the impropriety of female artistic creation. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "like most women in patriarchal society, the woman writer does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy" (50). What is most important, however, is that, by hiding her professional identity, Warren was able to challenge the patriarchal ideal of the passive, submissive femininity without suffering the overt hostility and trenchant criticism of the eighteenth-century American society.⁷ Her feelings of guilt, though, for undertaking a literary career as well as the fact that she had been conditioned to accept stereotyped roles of herself, such as those of mother and wife, indicate that it was not really her intention to challenge patriarchal power by writing propaganda plays. Warren was not a radical. In the study of her best known plays, *The Adulateur* (1773) and *The Group* (1775), one cannot fail to detect the inescapable fusion of Warren's

culturally constructed femininity and her political consciousness and social awareness. As I have already pointed out, Warren followed the events of the American Revolution closely,⁸ and both her plays deal with particular historical events viewed from a feminine critical perspective. *The Adulateur* was written after the “promiscuous death and slaughter” (II,i) of American citizens, what is known as the Boston Massacre (1770),⁹ and the chief satire of the play is directed against Thomas Hutchinson, who finally became Governor of the Colony. Also, *The Group* focuses upon a specific historical event, the appointment of a Council by the King rather than through election by the Assembly, thus resulting in the abrogation of the charter of Massachusetts. However, despite the political content and polemic style of her plays, Warren’s treatment of these events is contingent upon her process of socialization to fit the constraining feminine role reserved for her in early American society. Conforming to the patriarchal ideology, which prescribed purity and moral superiority as the most-cherished characteristics of the ideal woman, Warren approaches the political events from an ethical standpoint. Alice Brown argues that for Mercy Warren “there was never a middle course. Life, and even political life, was right or wrong. There were moral blacks and whites; there were no grays” (153). The tension between right and wrong, the juxtapositions of virtue and corruption, of tyranny and freedom, of wealth/power and the dignity of the common man are prevalent in her plays. In *The Adulateur*, dramatic intensity is achieved through the depiction of the major moral conflict between Rapatio’s tyrannical government and the group of Patriots led by Brutus. The characters in the play are drawn in strong contrast — the unscrupulous Tories and the virtuous, heroic Patriots. As a matter of fact, the political divergence of the opposing factions is subordinated to their moral antithesis, which is given particular emphasis in the play. The moral aspect of human nature appears to be of primary importance. When Meagre, Rapatio’s brother, introduces himself, his villainy and repulsive nature become evident:

...And here’s a soul, like thine, that never linger’d
 When prompted by revenge- If thirst of power;
 A spirit haughty, sour, implacable,
 That bears a deadly enmity to freedom,
 But mean and base; who never had a notion
 Of generous and manly; who would stab,
 Stab in the dark, but what he’d get revenge;
 If such a soul is suitable to your purpose,
 ‘Tis here.

(III,iv)

On the other hand, honest Brutus, the leader of the Patriots, becomes the voice of morality and righteousness in the play:

Oh! patriots rouse. The distant branches lop'd
The root now groans- Let not the thought of power,
Ungenerous thought! freeze up the genial current.
'Tis not a conquest, merely, leads to fame-
Th' attempt enobles. Yes, the suffering patriot
Tow'rs while he bleeds, and triumphs while he dies.

(I,i)

In *The Adulateur*, apart from the stark contrast between the virtuous Patriots and the evil Tories, bombastic language is employed to describe some of the Tories' inner tensions as they waver between glory/wealth and loyalty to their country. Even ruthless Rapatio is smitten by his conscience:

Destroy their boasted rights, and mark them slaves
To ride triumphant o'er my native land,
And revel on its spoils- But hark! it groans!
The heaving struggles of expiring freedom! -
Her dying pangs- and I the guilty cause: -
I shudder at the thought- why this confusion?
The phantom conscience, whom I've bid alien -
Can she return? - O let me, let me fly!
I dare not meet my naked heart alone.

(IV,ii)

It appears that Mercy Warren viewed her role in fighting for a cause as an extension of the traditional role of women as the "moral pillars of society." It was in the name of morality and public virtue that Mercy Warren fought her own battle against British tyranny. Emerging from the Revolutionary War, the Republican ideology of the late-eighteenth century emphasized the importance of women as the teachers of morality and virtue. It became absolutely essential for the welfare and survival of the young republic that its citizenry would be trained to political virtue. Therefore, it was assumed that women, certainly not politically active citizens, could exercise a salutary influence upon their husbands and sons. "Virtue," as Mary Kelley explains, "was defined most broadly as a selflessness in which individual desires and interest were secondary to the welfare of the body politic" (60). Who could better, then, instill democratic values in the hearts of the citizens of the new nation, than women who were expected to display a self-effacing attitude and focus their whole interest on the care of others? Without being directed away from her domestic sphere, the late-eighteenth century woman was schooled in virtue and was prepared to meet her significant role as the mother of virtuous, democratic citizens.

Warren's preoccupation with right and wrong, virtue and vice, takes a more incisive form in *The Group*. Tory politicians became the target of the sharp shafts of Mercy Warren's wit and poignant observations. It is particularly interesting to note that the characters in the play are all members of the Council while the Patriots are physically absent. The reason for such an artistic decision is, as B. Franklin observes, "that the government's men need no foil. They are so venal and spineless that introducing their adversaries would blur the play's focus and would divert the reader from the group's villainy" (xiv). Warren's play focuses upon each one of the mandamus councillors and successfully projects their corrupted nature and moral laxity through an in-depth study of their personal confessions. As a text written by a lady of culture, a morally superior woman, *The Group* penetrates the consciences of the Loyalists and exposes their villainy. All of them, at some point in the play, decide to betray the American cause for personal gain. Hazlerod declares that for fame and wealth he could: "give [his] tears and conscience to the winds" (I,i). So absolutely selfish and base the Loyalists appear to be, that they are unable to recognize a higher cause and purpose in life than power and glory. One of the characters, Beau Trumps, states that: "there's nought on earth that has such tempting charms as / rank, show, and pomp, and glitt'ring dress" (II,i).

By skillfully epitomizing the moral difference between the two sides, Mercy Warren reveals her resentment and rage against those who reject the great ideal of liberty. In *The Adulateur*, she successfully projects her own advanced thinking about freedom, democracy, and the equality of people. In the closing lines of the play, she prophesies victory and a free country:

BRUTUS. ... While thou my country, shall again revive,
 Shake off misfortune, and thro' ages live,
 See thro' the waste a ray of virtue gleame,
 Dispell the shades and brighten all the scene,
 Wak'd into life, the blooming forest glows,
 And all the desert blossoms as the rose.
 From distant lands see virtuous millions fly
 To happier climates, and a milder sky.
 While on the mind successive pleasures pour,
 Till time expires, and ages are no more .

(V,iii)

Although her work appears to be an expression of her own political stance, it can also be argued that an early feminist consciousness is inscribed in her plays. Especially in *The Group* Mercy Warren offers a feminine perspective on the villainy of the Tories by referring to the wives of Simple and Hateall. In an attempt to expose the Tories' inhumanity and brutality, Warren

highlights some of the women's experiences of the Revolution. As the play suggests, women's domestic interests are affected by the war. Simple's unquenchable thirst for glory makes him insensitive to his wife's predicament who: "weeps, — and urges my return to rural peace and humble / happiness, as my ambition beggars all her babes" (I,i).

Also, unscrupulous Hateall does not hesitate to sacrifice his wife in order to gratify his own ego: "I'll not recede to save from swift perdition / My wife, my country, family, or friends" (I,i).

I believe that these references to the female domestic realm can be read as a site where the male notion of women as objects, as mere commodities whose feelings and desires are unimportant, is questioned. The eighteenth century marital system condemned married women to financial, social, and legal dependency. The concept of "femme covert" placed both the person and the property of woman in the hands of her husband. In *The Group*, the wives of Simple and Hateall lack personal freedom and passively endure their husbands' abuses. The inequalities existent in the marriage system are subtly hinted at in an attempt to emphasize the idea that only men as villainous and unscrupulous as the Tories do not regard women as equal companions whose thoughts and needs should be taken into consideration. Morality, political ideology and women's sphere become inextricably linked since it is made quite clear that domestic happiness depends upon civil and political virtue, upon republicanism.

Mercy Warren was unique as a woman and as a writer. It would certainly be a mistake not to give her credit for being a pioneer female dramatist who employed a traditionally male dramatic subgenre, the political farce, and dealt with issues alien to her "appropriate" sphere. She was successful in her work and politically influential during her time. According to Brown, Warren "was universally supposed to have a special skill in that dangerous pastime of analyzing human nature and relegating virtues and vices to the little niches set aside for them by human intelligence" (160). The truth is that Mercy Warren was a fortunate middle-class lady who had the opportunity to receive the benefits of education, and was constantly encouraged to write by her husband and friends. She was a particularly sagacious woman, fully aware of the political and social changes that were taking place at that time in America. Her devotion to the Revolutionary cause and democratic principles is evident in her plays. However, the ideological context of her work falls in with the traditional eighteenth-century definition of "woman's sphere." Her status as a morally superior woman, a protector of domestic and public virtue, is prevalent in her work. Although she tackles political and social issues, she does so without calling attention to herself and in accordance with her prescribed feminine behavior. Gender becomes an essential component in Warren's plays, not as far as her choice of subject matter or dramatic form is concerned, but as regards her approach and treatment of the various historical

events. Her plays indisputably reveal Warren's fusion of patriotic sentiments, her ethical and cultural background, as well as her awareness of her gender position in the American society of that time.

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Notes

I would particularly like to thank Savas Patsalidis and Elsie Sakellaridou for their most valuable suggestions and advice.

1. Mercy Otis Warren's best propaganda plays are *The Adulateur* (1773) and *The Group* (1775). She also wrote a third one, *The Defeat* (1773), which, unfortunately, is an incomplete and fragmentary dramatic work. It appears that Warren did not finish composing it. Furthermore, some scholars have credited her with two more satires, *The Blockheads; or, The Affrighted Officers* (1776) and *The Motley Assembly* (1779). However, Warren's authorship of both these plays has been seriously questioned since there is no proof that she wrote either of them. She also wrote two tragedies in blank verse, *The Sack of Rome* and *The Ladies of Castile*, which were published in 1790.
2. New England Puritans were particularly hostile to all theatrical activities and sternly affirmed their opposition to stage plays by placing restrictions and inhibitions on all public entertainments.
3. Quite a few male dramatists followed her example and employed the satirical farce as a dramatic form for propaganda purposes. The most well-known are Hugh H. Brackenridge's *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill* (1776) and *The Death of General Montgomery* (1777), and John Leacock's *The Fall of British Tyranny* (1776).
4. Although Warren's plays are excellent examples of the patriotic writing done in the period of the American Revolution, they never reached the stage. The truth is that these plays were intended primarily for reading and are not at all dramatic. Paul L. Ford argues about *The Adulateur* and *The Group* that "in neither is there any plot; the scenes are shifted without rhyme or reason, and there are no women in the cast" (680).
5. According to Elaine Showalter, "women have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society" (11). Therefore, as a 'subculture' women have been denied the economic and social status enjoyed by men, they have been excluded from academic education, and they have been forced to adopt the language, as well as the cultural and social conventions of the dominant male group. Consequently, the few women writers had no other choice but to become the imitators of male literary tradition and appropriate the masculine genres.
6. Although Weedon's study focuses on women's fiction, it is safe to expand her argument to include female dramatic creations. More specifically, the very few 19th-century American female playwrights, such as Sidney F. Bateman, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Julia Ward Howe, deal with domestic and personal relations rather than political matters.
7. There was a particularly fierce polemic against women who exhibited intellectual

- capacities, against female writers. Writing, and more specifically writing for publication, posed a serious threat to the early patriarchal American society. By publishing her work, the female author jeopardized her integrity and exposed herself to the public eye. She actually called attention to herself through her work, thus contravening the most important feminine quality, modesty. For more details see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), as well as Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse* (N.Y.: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1988).
8. In 1805, Warren completed a three-volume history of the Revolutionary War entitled *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*, ed. Lester Cohen (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1989).
 9. The Boston Massacre was the upshot of a series of brawls between British soldiers and colonial citizens incited by the Americans' protest against the right of Parliament to tax the colonists in matters of trade. On 5 March 1770, British troops fired on the agitated crowd and killed five civilians.

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Μια από τις πιο διακεκριμένες δραματουργούς του Αμερικανικού θεάτρου, η Mercy Otis Warren, χρησιμοποίησε με επιτυχία τη σατιρική φάρσα με απώτερο σκοπό να συμβάλει στην πολιτικο-κοινωνική αναμόρφωση κατά τη διάρκεια της Αμερικανικής Επανάστασης. Όμως, παρά το θαυμασμό και την ηθική επιβράβευση από τον άνδρα της και τους στενούς της φίλους, η Warren δυσκολεύτηκε να εναρμονίσει τους ρόλους της ως γυναίκα από τη μια πλευρά και ως συγγραφέας από την άλλη. Γνωρίζοντας πολύ καλά τις υπάρχουσες κοινωνικές προκαταλήψεις ενάντια στη γυναικεία λογοτεχνική έκφραση, ο μοναδικός τρόπος να δώσει απάντηση στο μεγάλο δίλημμα που τη βασάνιζε ήταν να κρύψει τη γυναικεία της ταυτότητα δημοσιεύοντας τα έργα της ανώνυμα.