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Women's education and the flourishing of the fine arts in eighteenth-century America

1. Female Vanity: the "pernicious sort of education" of "Dancing, Singing, and Dressing" [1]

The *Virginia Gazette* of February 17, 1737 contains an interesting article on the American Enlightenment ethos, namely the belief that human reason is the supreme guide to the understanding of both human and physical nature, and as such, the source of "the noblest Pleasures:"

> To know ourselves, and wherein the true Good and Happiness of our Being consists, is of the utmost Importance, since by this we are taught to pursue every Object according to its real Worth, as it has a Tendency to further and promote the great End of our Being; the perfecting of our Nature and Accomplishment of our Felicity. [...] In order to have a just notion of Happiness consider'd as a State of Mind, we must reflect on these Sensations we are affected with, whenever we imagine ourselves happy; and recollect what are the Objects that most naturally and constantly excite them. The Sensations of Happiness may be ranged under Two different Heads; either those that arise from external Senses, or those that arise from the Reflection of the Mind on itself.
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> The Pleasures that arise from the external Senses, may be improved either for the Perfection or Debasement of our Natures; we may by a right Improvement of the works of Nature, find infinite Matter of Joy and Pleasure. Nature affords a noble Spectacle and an ample Scene of Enjoyment to those who can relish and content themselves with its Wonders. But the Pleasures pour'd out upon the Creation, have been a Veil to hide true Happiness from the Eyes of Men, when they have not used them for the Advancement of the intellectual Pleasures, but have debauch'd their Taste for these, by an excessive Fondness for external Things, and giving a loose Rein to all the grosser Plea-

> sures of Sense, or the Visions of Avarice and Ambition, so as they are incapable of any sublime Exercise. Sensual Pleasure is like the bewitching Cup of *Circe,* which makes us lose our Reason, and as it were, transforms us into Beasts.
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> But the noblest Pleasures are the intellectual Ones; the Reflection of a virtuous Mind on its own Actions, is one of the great Springs of true and lasting Satisfaction. [...] The Happiness of the Mind then does, in this Life, depend principally in our making wise and proper Elections of Pleasure, freest from all Interruptions and Defects. [...] Gratifying our sensual Appetites, is productive of none but unruly Gusts of Pleasure, which therefore can't be true, especially since they are always and in an instant terminated in Satiety and Disgust. Vice and Folly are but convertible Terms with Evil and Misery; and as Contraries best illustrate one another, by the same Way of Reasoning, WISDOM and VIRTUE prove themselves to be our chiefest Good and Happiness; for, since the Love of Knowledge, Benevolence to Mankind, and the Reflection of the Mind upon its own Innocence and Integrity, are what affords us the calmest Delight, we can never be weary of the constant Exercise of them: They must be the most natural and sure Way to be happy.[2]

This emphasis on human reason which is the basic kernel of American Enlightenment thought, represented strictly speaking, an outgrowth of the British New Learning's belief in self-determination (one need only think of the interest stimulated by Francis Bacon's logic, Isaac Newton's physics and John Locke's psychology in American deists, such as Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen, Tom Paine, Philip Freneau and Elihu Palmer) and of the Scottish common sense philosophy (the defence of common sense empiricism) of Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. A third influence, not less important and significant in sociopolitical terms, was the importation of the French savants' claim (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, D'Alembert) that reason and social equality were the foundation of both individual happiness and social justice. [3]

Deism, in other words, represented in the American soil, the possibility of fighting against a worn-out orthodox Calvinist tradition and world-view which the Puritans supported, and the spreading of an optimistic faith in the power of human reason to confront social and political problems successfully.

In Elihu Palmer's own words:

> Deism declares to intelligent man the existence of one perfect God, Creator and Preserver of the Universe; that the laws by which he governs the world, are like himself immutable, and of course, that violations of these laws, or miraculous interference in the movements of nature, must be necessarily excluded from the grand system of universal existence; that the Creator is justly entitled to the adoration of every intellectual agent throughout the regions of infinite space; and that he alone is entitled to it, having no copartners who have a right to share with him the homage of the intelligent world. Deism also declares, that the practice of a pure, natural, and uncorrupted virtue, is the essential duty, and constitutes the highest dignity of man; that the powers of man are competent to all the great purposes of human existence; that science, virtue, and happiness are the great objects which ought to awake the mental energies, and draw forth the moral affections of the human race.[4]

Now, it is true that loyalty to orthodox Christianity still remained very strong throughout the century, but the power of deism was such that it "helped to awaken Christianity in the United States from its dogmatic slumber"[5] and focus its attention on ethical issues, such as the elimination of exploitation (slavery mainly), the emancipation of women, the fostering of universal education, the oppression of superstition and ignorance, the abolition of any economic, political or ecclesiastical privilege, the separation of church and state, the decentralization of government, the full dignity of freedom of conscience. The Deists' main goal, therefore, was the attainment of a human being's moral perfection both at an individual and a social level.[6]

From the point of view of women's emancipation, the coexistence of these two strains of thought (a dogmatic Christianity and a reformist Deism) gave shape to an ambiguous, ambivalent attitude towards her own education and definition as a human being: on the one hand, the tradition of puritan teaching required of woman the knowledge and application of the submissive female role defined in the Bible (let one only think of the remarks and influence of Cotton Mather's *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* published in 1692);[7] on the other hand, the reformist impulse of Deism spurred the opening of schools and academies for young ladies, together with an initial recognition of women's values and rights, as Benjamin Franklin's *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage* points out.[8]

However, though the deistic claim of women's emancipation awakened and aroused the traditional public opinion, it *still* shared with the most orthodox Christians, the definition of woman in relationship *to* man, in her role in relationship *to* a male-governed society, instead of, in relationship *to* herself as an autonomous, independent human being.[9] Hannah More for example, who was appreciated in America and in England for her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809), together with Jane West and Maria Edgeworth, tried to get women to understand that the Marriage Act of 1753 represented an act of protection for them: a woman's exchange of "Possession of her Person" for legal "Maintenance" (financial support for her and her children) had to be regarded as the only defense for ladies without means.[10]

If one looks through the *American Weekly Mercury,* the *Pennsylvania Gazette,* the *Boston Evening Post* and the *Boston Gazette,* it is interesting to notice how the issue of women's education was at the same time dismissed and endorsed, according to these two basic strains of thought. On the one hand, either female education was considered useless because of her "natural Inability to distinguish nicely and think intensely," which in other terms, suggests the idea of women's intellectual inferiority,[11] or because it could arouse selfish love and vanity, as the "modern Education" of "Dancing, Singing and Dressing" displayed:

> Learning is the greatest Troubler of Society when in the Possession of a weak judgment. I would not be thought to flatter the Ladies so far as to suppose that in reality they possess any share of Learning; from a *natural Inability* [Italics mine] to distinguish nicely, and think intensely, they are excluded from making any Progress in the abstruse Researches, and solid Reasonings of the learned World. Besides they want the Advantages of Education; the long training that Men are familiar to undergo to dispose their Minds to receive true knowledge. They have no Opportunities of free Debate, which is the great Opener of the Mind, and Aid to good Learning from the friendly Collision of ingenuous Minds [...]. They are flatter'd into an Opinion of knowing much more than in reality they do; and 'tis ill Breeding to suppose a Lady's Opinion can, or ought to be corrected. However, they pretend to enjoy this Accomplishment, and the Affectation and Vanity of being esteem'd deeply read, will produce very bad Effects in the Capacity of a Wife.[12]

> Having mention'd the Ladies, I must beg Leave to make a few Remarks upon their Education, and to lament the Extravagances which are grown so fashionable amongst Them, that it would be ridiculous to propose a thorough Reformation. All we have to do with our Wives and Daughters, is to compound with Them, to limit their Vanities and Expenses within proper Bounds; and We should be much oblig'd to Them, if They would not exceed double the Composition. If We consider their modern Education (which consists chiefly in Dancing, Singing and Dressing) We cannot be surpris'd at that early Tincture of hereditary Vanity, which We see in the young Ladies of *Great Britain* [...]. We know that Beauties, like Kings, are utter Strangers to Truth from their Infancy. They are, as it were, born for a Looking-Glass, habituated to Flattery; and made in Love with Themselves, even before They are sensible of their own Perfection.[...] They are taught to look upon Pleasure as the chief Business of their Lives, and arbitrary Power the sole Aim of their Ambition; but whilst They are thus intent upon the End, how often do they mistake the Means? [...] All I would recommend to Them is, the Preservation of their natural good Sense and Sincerity. I would not look upon Them as Warriors and Heroines; but as Wives, Mothers, Sisters and Daughters [...]. To what are owing most of our late Separations and Divorces (which vastly exceed whatever was known before) but from this pernicious Sort of Education, and habitual Practice [...].[13]

On the other hand, women's education was completely advocated by those male reformers who replaced the flaws of their upbringing — "attachment to the external decorations of the body" — with "the more noble mental ornaments"[14] and by those ladies who underlined a deep desire of self-ownership — both in financial and intellectual terms — independently of constricting social roles such as, wife, mother, sister or daughter:

> I need not go about to prove that the Soul is of neither Sex, but has a Capacity, in both, of equal Improvement and Perfection: Why, then, are the Girls neglected, as if they had none at all, or such as are only fit to be employed in Trifles?— To be dresst, to be flatter'd, to be diverted, is almost the whole Business of those early Years wherein they ought to be instructed: And then, no Wonder, if ever after they are pleased with Flattery, and imagine Dress and Diversion to be the most important affairs of Life. The Mind, which is all a Blank at first, soon becomes, hereby, like a School-Boy's Blotting-Paper, cover'd all over with unmeaning Scrawls or useless Flourishes. If Parents wish to match their Daughters with Men of Sense, they ought so to qualify them, that such Husbands may not be asham'd of them in Company, or weary of them alone.—I don't mean that Girls should be taught the Lan-

> guages, and be made deeply learned, so much is not needful; but, I would have them understand their Mother Tongue, well enough to speak, and read, and write it perfectly well. Their Minds likewise should be furnish'd with a general Knowledge of Things, from such Books on every Subject as are most plain and easy [...] Was this Method once establish'd, there would soon fol- Iowa surprising Alteration in the Female World. Instead of idle Tales, Scandal, and Impertinence, which now debauch the Tea-Table, it would constantly be furnish'd with reasonable Discourses on polite and useful Subjects, the Faculties of the Soul would become enlarg'd by being us'd to think; and to spend an Evening with an ingenious Author, would be judg'd an Entertainment preferable to a Masquerade, or a Party at Quadrille. [...][15]

> Let all Gentlemen [...] take Care their Daughters be taught the most useful Part of Needle work, all the Arts of Economy, Writing, and Book-keeping, with enough of Dancing and *French* to give them a graceful easy Freedom both of Discourse and Behaviour: And when they have acquir'd these necessary Accomplishments in some Degree of Perfection, let them at the Age of fifteen or sixteen be put Apprentices to genteel and easy Trades, such as Linnen or Woollen Drapers, Haberdashers of small Wares, Mercers, Glovers, Perfumers, Grocers, Confectioners, Retailers of Gold and Silver Lace, Button & c. Why are not these as creditable Trades for the Daughters of Gentlemen as they are for their Sons; and all of them more proper for Women than Men? [...] If Women were train'd up to Business from their early Years it is highly probable they would in general be more industrious and earn more Money, than Men; and if so, what Woman of Spirit would submit to be a Slave, and fling herself away, as many are forc'd to do, merely for a Maintenance, because she cannot stoop to be a Servant, and can find no reputable Business to go into? [...][16]

And again, the very fact that female education opened up harsh arguments between relatives themselves, became an interesting subject matter for satirical caricatures of the times. As a matter of fact, the divergent male and female perspectives of "a thriving Tradesman and his Wife about the Education of their Daughter," became the kernel of a mocking poem, in the form of a dialogue, which appeared in the *Boston Evening Post* of December 10, 1744:[17] whereas the wife was concerned to send her daughter to a dancing school so as to "deserve an Earl", the husband curtly warned that he had "no dancing Money" and beseeched:

> Prithee, good Madam, let her first be able,
> To read a Chapter truly in the Bible,

That she may'nt mispronounce God's People, Popel,
Nor read Cunstable for Constantinople;
Make her expert and ready at her Prayers,
That God may keep her from the Devils Snares;
Teach her what's useful, how to shun deluding,
To roast, to toast, to boil, and mix a Pudding.
To knit, to spin, to sew, to make or mend,
To scrub, to rub, to earn, and not to spend,
I tell thee Wife, once more, I'll have her bred
To Book'ry, Cook'ry, Thimble, Needle, Thread,
First teach her these, and then the pritty [*sic*] Fool
Shall jig her Crupper at the dancing School.

The very fact that women's education became a hotly debated issue in journals and newspapers, spurred, in one sense, the use of this form of communication as a means, not only to express opinions and points of view, but also as an autobiographical vehicle to talk about one's own education, as in the case of Mrs. Matilda Markham: on July 1, 1769 The *Fatal Indifference: Or, the Interesting History of Mrs. Matilda Markham* was printed from her own manuscript in the *Providence Gazette.*

The clear tone of Mrs. Markham's autobiography was apologetic and guilt-ridden. She blamed the failure of her marriage on her vanity, her indulging in excessive admiration and praise, neglecting her familiar duties. She seemed to warn girls against repeating the same mistakes, which were the result of a "mistaken manner of education", and to ask for forgiveness and pity. In other words, Mrs. Markham's life story underlined the problems concerning women's correct upbringing: the discovery and development of one's own intellectual skills could be misused through an egotistical appreciation of them instead of being used for selfless, familial help and love. As she herself admitted:

> [M]y education had been elegant, but no way useful, and it rather served to increase my pride than to enlarge my understanding - instead of teaching me to be chearful [*sic*], humble and obliging, it rendered me sullen, froward and capricious, and therefore, instead of modestly endeavoring to obtain the esteem of those with whom I conversed, I laid an insolent claim to their admiration. [...] Alas! how severely has experience convinced me, that a single scruple of discretion outweighs all the benefits to be reaped from the French

> or the Italian; and how heartily do I wish that the hours which have been so prodigally lavished in the attainment of mere embellishments, had been wisely employed in the less fashionable studies of regulating a family. [...][18]

Of course, the issue of women's education was confronted not only in newspapers and journals but also in essays, pamphlets and treatises that gave more space to the explanations of methods and subject matters useful to a young lady's proper intellectual and emotional growth.

In other words, since "modern Education" was flawed in focusing female attention on "ornamental accomplishments" instead of on "principles and knowledge.:"[19] then the best remedy against the degeneracy of this phenomenon was held to be a thorough knowledge and mastery of the fine arts, like music, painting and poetry. As Mary Wollstonecraft suggested in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct in the Most important Duties of Life* (1788), "they [fine arts] would fill up the time, and prevent a young person's being lost in dissipation, which enervates the mind, and often leads to improper connections." [20]

2. The role of the fine arts in female education

At a meeting of the visitors of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia on 31st October, 1787, John Swanwick synthesized his thoughts on female education in a *Poem on the Prospect of seeing the fine ARTS flourish in AMERICA*. Unmistakably, in this poem, women's intellectual development was acknowledged as "gender (female) ownership" of the realm of the fine arts: "To you belong the pencil, and the lyre,/ [...] To guide the passions, and to conquer hearts" [21]:

> [...]
> *But chiefly you, ye fair! whom beau'n decrees,*
> *To charm, to soften, captivate, and please;*
> *To you belongs the pencil, and the lyre,*
> *The taste to fashion, and the soul t' inspire,*
> *The sad to chear, the thoughtless to restrain,*
> *To urge the timid, and to check the vain;*
> *Great is the pow'r of these engaging arts,*
> *To guide the passions, and to conquer hearts:*

These are the spheres of your supreme controul,
Who seek to lead and elevate the soul,
From low pursuits, and from desires uneven,
To peace, to joy, to harmony, and beau'n. [Italics mine]
Oh then, *neglect not music to acquire,*
So form'd to cherish the celestial fire; [Italics mine]
To fan devotion, friendship to improve,
And woo the mind to innocence and love:
Wide let its influence o'er the world extend,
And what it cannot conquer strive to mend:
Spring let it welcome, summer sports endear,
Delight the autumn, and the winter chear;
So shall the year to harmony be given,
And earth be found the proto-type of heav'n.

If in some fatal unexpected hour,
Your wealth should vanish, or your prospects lower;
How sweet the warblings of the tuneful lyre,
The hope to cherish, that might else expire;
Still in your cottage give to music place,
And let it check the tear that soils the face: [Italics mine]
Oh think how fleeting life, its woes not long,
Then calm their throbbings with a chearful song
So death shall bear your patient minds away,
To realms of endless bliss, of endless day!
But if propitious fortunes on you shine,
Add to their lustre all these arts divine;
Oh let them humanize and sway the breast, [Italics mine]
Which often hardens, where no griefs molest;
So shall like pity close your closing eyes,
And cherubs waft you to their native skies.

BOtl1 in the poem and in his *Thoughts*, Swanwick set music as the most important of the fine arts in "the education of [...] ladies,"[22] in that it "dispose[s] so much to morality and virtue", it is "not limited by time or country, but universal to the world, in all its parts and all its periods. It is the language of rapture, springs with invention and flows with devotion."[23] Music, together with drawing (painting) and writing (poetry), was seen in terms of a regenerating moral influence "over the hearts and manners of [the young ladies'] countrymen," a means to attain an ethical and aesthetic social improvement,

given that "the intention of a benevolent Deity, in adding women to the society of men" was "[t]o give *us* happiness, and to enable *us* to support the vicissitudes and misfortunes of the world."[24] [Italics mine]

In *The Polite Lady* (1798) an anonymous book which consists of a series of letters from a mother called Portia to her daughter called Sophia, music was praised again, in that "it c[ould] allay the violence of the passion, bring us down from the giddy height, and reduce us to a state of pleasing tranquillity, [...] it c[ould] soften and melt us into pity and compassion."[25]

The ennobling effect of the fine arts was also underlined by the tutor of Dartmouth College, John Wheelock, in his *Essay on the Beauties and Excellencies of Painting, Music and Poetry* (1774).[26] There again, of the two sister arts, music and painting, the former was regarded as the supremest, since "the art of PAINTING seems rather to be the improvement of an age, devoted to luxury and effeminacy. But the more noble art of MUSIC could humanize the savage breast of the rough *Arcadians*, and that, by its soft, refined melody. The graces of the one, tend rather to nourish a vitiated taste; but the sublimity of the other, invigorates the soul with great, with manly sentiments."[27]

Hannah More again maintained that the Hebrews, Egyptians and Greeks themselves "could more effectually teach their youth maxims of virtue, by calling in the aid of music and poetry."[28] Christian parents therefore, had to take these ancient "Pagan examples" seriously and see that their daughters learned "these arts" too, as "subsidiary to religion and to a system of morals much more worthy of every ingenious aid and association."[29]

The late 18th-century American common belief circulating in pamphlets and treatises was that the so-called "fashionable amusements" like dancing, playing cards and theatre-going were "not consistent with the general tenour of the Scriptures;[...] they [were] expensive; [...] they occasion[ed] loss of time; [...] they hinder[ed] the acquisition of valuable accomplishments, and unfit[ted] the mind for communion with God."[30] John Cosens Ogden affirmed in *The Female Guide* (1793) that a virtuous woman must never search for "amusement and dissipation" to banish discontent or "momentary"

dissatisfaction, because this would distance her from the pious and merciful model women of the Bible, and more precisely from the "thirty-first chapter of Proverbs."[31] Moreover, a few years later, Maria Anne Campbell added in her *Thoughts on Female Education* (1812) that if parents themselves did not "strenuously inculcate humility, obedience and self-denial" but simply "gratif[ied] an inordinate passion for dress and ornaments [...] they [would] lay the foundation of many subsequent evils through life."[32]

Therefore, a proper education had to give much importance to the study of the fine arts in that it would ultimately provide women with "internal strength and activity of mind" and allow them to be "capable to transact the business or combat the evils of life."[33]

But even the study, appreciation and expression of the fine arts could have its dangers. Hannah More, in tune with Rousseau and his analysis of the link between art, luxury and national decay in *The Social Contract*,[34] underlined that "an *excessive* cultivation of the arts has contributed its full share to the decline of states, it has always furnished an infallible symptom of their impending fall," [Italics mine] in that

> It is of the essence of human things that the same objects which are highly useful in their season, measure, and degree, become mischievous in their excess, at other periods, and under other circumstances. In a state of barbarism, the arts are among the best reformers; and they go on to be improved themselves, and improving those who cultivate them, till, having reached a certain point, those very arts which were the instruments of civilization and refinement, become the instruments of corruption and decay; enervating and depraving in the second instance as certainly as they refined in the first. They become agents of voluptuousness. They excite their imagination; and the imagination thus excited, and no longer under government of strict principle, becomes the most dangerous stimulant of the passions; promotes a too keen relish for pleasure, teaching how to multiply its sources, and inventing new and pernicious modes of artificial gratification.[35]

On the danger besetting an excessive cultivation of the fine arts, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson agreed. Moreover, what mainly worried Jefferson was the fact that encouraging a private interest in art would foster class divisions which consequently would undermine the principles of American democracy. Thus, the dilemma regarding the role of the fine arts in women's education was the

same as the role of the fine arts in American society: their study, knowledge and appreciation was good as long as they fostered but *did not* damage the principles of virtue and personal restraint, simplicity and equality, industry and frugality.[36]

Excess in the appreciation of the fine arts for their own sake would breed vanity, would reproduce what the colonies were trying to escape from: the old British rule, customs and traditions.[37] Benjamin Rush, for example, in his *Thoughts upon Female Education* (1787), after premising that "To be the mistress of a family is one of the great ends of a woman's being,"[38] affirms:

> It should not surprise us that British customs, with respect to female education, have been transplanted into our American schools and families. We see marks of the same incongruity, of time and place, in many other things. We behold our houses accommodated to the climate of Great Britain, by eastern and western directions. We behold our ladies panting in a heat of ninety degrees, under a hat and cushion, which were calculated for the temperature of a British summer. We behold our citizens condemned and punished by a criminal law, which was copied from a country where maturity in corruption renders publick executions a part of the amusements of the nation. *It is high time to awake from this servility - to study our own character—to examine the age of our country— and to adopt manners in every thing, that shall be accommodated to our state of society, and to the forms of our government.* In particular, it is incumbent upon us to make ornamental accomplishments yield to principles and knowledge, in the education of our women.[39] [Italics mine]

Before the colonies reached their independence, the Bishop of Cloyne, Berkeley himself, expressed his desire to see the arts flourish in the New World in opposition to European decadence, in his *Verses on the Prospect of planting ARTS and LEARNING in AMERICA,* which were published on the 1st of February, 1768 in the *Boston Chronicle:*

The Muse, disgusted at an age and clime,
Barren of every glorious theme,
In distant lands now waits a better time.
Producing subjects worthy fame:
In happy climes, where from the genial sun,
And virgin earth such scenes ensue,
The force of art by nature seems outdone,

And fancied beauties by the true:
In happy climes the feat of innocence,
Where nature guides and virtue rules,
Where men shall not impose for truth and sense
The pedantry of courts and schools:
There shall be another golden age,
The rise of empire and of arts,
The good and great inspiring epic rage,
The wisest heads and noblest hearts.
Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;
Such as she bred when fresh and young,
When heav'nly flame did animate her clay,
By future poets shall be sung.
Westward the course of empire takes its way
The four first acts already past,
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;
Time's noblest offspring is the last.[40] [Italics mine]

In a similar way, the criticism of the "pernicious education" of "Singing, Dressing and Dancing" ensued mainly from a sense of disdain of the bad influence of the morally corrupt Great Britain, and more specifically, the "Vanity" of "the young Ladies of *Great Britain."* Young ladies in America instead had "to exercise their taste and devote their leisure, not to the decoration of their own persons, but to the service of those to whom they are bound by every tender tie." In this way "they would not only help to repress vanity, but by thus associating the idea of industry with that of filial affection, would promote, while it gratified, some of the best affections of the heart."[41]

However, the irony involved in this charge against the corruption of European manners was that both before and after Independence, the New World was not so pure and candid, or so morally superior, as its thinkers claimed or pretended it to be. Indeed, as Margery Distaff complained, men were "so addicted [...] to *extravagant dissipations,"* that they "[were] racking their brains, in contriving how to *dissipate* their *time* and *money,* in what they call[ed] PARTIES OF PLEASURE" or *"injure[d] their fortunes* by GAMING in various ways."[42] A further telling "moral Description" of "the Times," supporting the unfoundedness of this charge, was given by the *Virginia Gazette* on February 21, 1773:

> The Effeminacy of our Manners, so often complained of by the Moralists of late Years, seems now to have risen to the utmost Height of Extravagance. The State of Corruption and Degeneracy which Doctor Brown, in his Estimate of the Manners of the Times, foresaw was to happen, has actually arrived; the liberal and manly Genius which distinguished our Ancestors appears to have fled from this Country. The first and capital Article attended to by the Aspirer after Fashion is that of Dress, which, in all its Variety of Excess and Ridicule, is too low for serious Animadversion. [...] Vanity lends her Aid to this unmanly Delicacy: Splendid Furniture, a sumptuous Sideboard, a long Train of Attendants, an elegant and costly Entertainment (for which Earth, Air, and Seas, are ransacked) the most expensive Wines of the Continent, the childish Vagaries of a whimsical Dessert, these are the supreme pride of the Master, and the Admiration or Envy of the Guests. Luxury is not idle in her Province, but shares with her Sister Vanity in the Labours of the Day. [...] The End of eating is not the allaying of natural Hunger, but the Gratification of sordid and debasing Appetite. Hence the most inflaming Foods, not those which nourish, but those which irritate, are adopted; while the cool and temperate Diets, that purify the Blood, are banished to inferiour Tables. In these fashionable Meetings, no Point of Morals, or of Taste in Arts or Literature, is ever canvassed. These are long since expelled from every modish Assembly. To speak any Thing that carries Weight and Importance is an Offence against good Breeding; the supreme Elegance is to trifle agreeably. [...] But as the present State of Splendour of Dress, Equipage, Furniture and Entertainment, is enormously expensive, what can so naturally create a Lust of Gold as the vain Ambition of Equality or Superiority in this System of effeminate Show? Hence Rapacity attends Profusion, until the Spirit of Avarice slides secretely into the Soul and impels the Man of Fashion to that Gaming, as a Trade which he had before adopted as a Pleasure. [...] It appears then, from this [...] Delineation, that Show and Pleasure are the main Object of Pursuit. As the general Habit of refined Indulgence is strong; and the habit of enduring is lost, as the general spirit of Religion, Honour and public Love are weakened or vanished, we may with Truth conclude that the ruling Character of the present Times is a vain, luxurious, and selfish Effeminacy.[43]

Of course, if Americans had been so pure and candid as they claimed to be, they would have run no risk of being corrupted by the manners of their European fellowmen. But it is also true that, despite the "deplorable" results of a false education of many young ladies (see the case of Mrs. Markham), American women were seen by Europeans themselves as different from ladies of the Old World. "Polly," as a matter of fact, was the generic name given to the American woman by French officers during the American Revolution

(1776-1783). Taking its premise from Benjamin Franklin's "Story of Polly Baker," "Polly" became the paradigm of "republican virtue, natural beauty, simple mores, common sense, thrift, conjugal fidelity, maternal tenderness and patriotic elan."[44] French officers' accounts juxtaposed the natural woman of the New World and the artificial woman of the Old World with the purpose of praising the former while downplaying the latter: the American woman was preferable because she did not use cosmetics, powder or wigs; she had simple and genuine manners. The French woman instead, was fond of gambling, spectacles and cabal, not to mention the frivolity of her character and her sterile selfishness.[45]

Giving all these examples, it must be clear by now, how complex and ambiguous was the American attitude towards the Europeans, and in this specific case, towards the fine arts. On the one hand, music, painting, poetry were held to be indispensable for the attainment of a perfect balance between ethics and aesthetics, for the improvement of the intellectual and human side of a human being and consequently of a whole society; on the other hand, music, painting and poetry (among the most important fine arts) represented "an old heavy yoke" which Americans had to get rid of and replace with a "new one," if they wanted to assert their own moral, political religious and aesthetic independence. And of course, this attitude could but give rise - according to the "moral reflections" of a "late writer" in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1767 - to "pride, envy, and jealousy, [...] set[ting] man against man and nation against nation:"

> It has been the misfortune of mankind to regard arts, sciences and commerce, not as they ought to be considered, the universal means of procuring reciprocal advantages, and communicating reciprocal pleasures, but as the partial end of gratifying *private* ambition, and promoting solid *self-interest.* Hence, in part, have risen pride, envy, and jealousy, which have set man against man, nation against nation; hence the causes of dissention have multiplied, with the increase of knowledge; hence the desire of gain has swelled, with the accumulation of riches; hence the views of traffick have enlarged, with the extension of commerce; hence those odious distinctions, which have inflamed animosity; hence the boasted superiority of intellect, the vain pretention of excelling in taste, the usurped prerogative of power; hence creatures of the same species, endowed by nature with the same faculties, neglect and despise those of less cultivated talents, or improved fortunes; hate and envy

> those of superior arts, and larger acquisitions; a deadly rivalship takes place of a generous emulation: Hence men, unknown to each other, level the gun, and lift the sword, against the breast of the stranger and innocent. [...] Nothing is good, with respect to us, but from the *use* we make of it; abuse will turn blessings into curses: Thus arts, sciences and commerce, from whence we might reasonably expect the greatest pleasures and advantages to the human race, by the opportunity they afford of interchanging friendly offices, and promoting reciprocated interests, have on the contrary proved the most fertile source of keen animosity and endless contest.[46] [Italics mine]

In a new nation, such as America was, full of hope and confidence about economical, religious and political prosperity, the role of the education of young women was held to be fundamental. Since the general American opinion was in tune with Rousseau's thought, that the decay of states was brought about by a general depravity of manners,[47] woman began to be considered the focal point of moral regeneration.[48] She had "to be favoured with an education properly calculated for opening the understanding, enriching the mind, and the promotion of virtue"[49] and as such, she had to be regarded as "the source for increasing the numbers, the wealth and prosperity of a country,[...] preserving purity of morals."[50] A belief, which a few years later was maintained in *Thoughts on Female Education (1831)* by Mrs. Townshend Stith, when saying: "where the women of any country are degraded and ignorant, the human race will degenerate. And history informs us, that the degree of mental cultivation, among our own sex, in any age or nation, affords an excellent measure of the state of civilization among men."[51]

To the attainment of this objective, the study of the fine arts, especially in academies, was thought to be vital for young women. If this belief put together reformists as different as Hannah More and her model of evangelical femininity, Mary Wollstonecraft and her belief in rational womanhood,[52] Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, Joseph Pilmore among the most prominent figures of the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia,[53] it also highlighted the underlying dilemma connected with the issue of women's emancipation: the danger that an *excessive* female fondness for music or poetry or painting could become a real threat to the disruption of traditional domesticity, family roles and social stability:

> But, though a well-bred young lady may lawfully learn most of the fashionable arts, yet it does not seem to be the true end of education, to make women of fashion *dancers, singers, players, painters, actresses, sculptors, gilders, varnishers, engravers,* and *embroiderers* .[...] The profession of ladies, to which the bent of their *instruction* should be turned, is that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families. They should be therefore trained with a view to these several conditions, and be furnished with a stock of ideas, and principles, and qualifications, and habits, ready to be applied and appropriated, as occasion may demand, to each of these respective situations [.][54]

1 *Boston Evening Post,* no. 219 (October 15, 1739), p. 1.

2 *Virginia Gazette,* no. 82 (February 17, 1737), p. 1.

3 See Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic,* Lawrence (Kansas), Kansas UP, 1992, p. 15, pp. 23-25. Paul Merrill Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America,* Athens (Georgia), Georgia UP, 1984. Donald H. Meyer, *The Democratic Enlightenment,* New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976. As to the relationship between French *philosophes* and woman's condition, see David Williams, "Condorcet, Feminism and the Egalitarian Principle," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture,*5 (1976), pp. 151-63.

4 Elihu Palmer, *Principles of Nature; or, A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species,* New York, [s.n.], 1806, chapter XXV.

5 Kerry S. Walters, *op. cit.,* p. 44.

6 *Ibidem,* p. 34.

7 Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion,* Boston, Kneeland and Green, 3rd ed., 1741.

8 Benjamin Franklin, *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage,* Philadelphia, B. Franklin, 1746. See also, Mary Sumner Benson, *Women in Eighteenth Century America: A Study of Opinion and Social Usage,* New York, Columbia UP, 1935, chapter IV. Lousie S. Boas, *Woman's Education Begins: The Rise of the Women's Colleges,* New York, Arno, 1972. Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in America,* New York, Octagon Books, 1966. Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society,* Chapel Hill, North Carolina UP, 1970.

9 "The Importance of *Education* must be allow'd of the utmost Service to Youth, by forming their *judgments,* and instilling those Ideas, which ought to be the Rule of their future Conduct. How shocking then is it to consider, that many of our modern young Ladies are deficient in this material Point? That their Knowledge should extend no farther than knowing how to *dress* and *dance well,* and where a *Patch* may be placed to Advantage? This is often productive of the greatest Unhappiness; for when these Ladies marry, without any other Accomplishment than a pretty face, which (being the most *volatile)* ought to be esteem'd the *least Qualification,* tho' ever so *charming,* in what a sad Condition is the poor Husband? Instead of a Friend to alleviate any Misfortune that may befall him, she is a continual Torment; always anxious after Baubles, till at last she becomes insufferable: And here a *Separation* is the only

Thing that can yield him any Quiet; when if her Parents or Guardians had taken due Care of her Education, all this might have been prevented. For thus prepar'd she would not be incident to the many Crafts of our Sex, and would learn not to prefer a gay Coat to a Man of Sense. How amiable is the *Opposite* of the foregoing Character? To see *Prudence* with *Complaisance* and *good Nature* in a Form so pleasing and agreeable, attended with a *Sweetness* which the wisest Men are incapable of attaining". *Boston Evening Post,* no. 469 (July 30, 1744), pp. 31-32.

10 As to the different standpoints maintained by the two principal groups of Enlightenment feminists the "Matriarchs" — (Hannah More, Jane West and Maria Edgeworth) and the "Democrats" (Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays) — see Eve Tavor Bannet, "The Marriage Act of 1753: 'A most cruel law for the fair sex,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997), pp. 233-54.

11 "That Woman that is unjustly censured by her own Sex to lack good Sense, seems to me to be the best disposed to give Comfort in the married State: She is reproached with Weakness for those Reasons which I think raises her Value to the Men. She is said to want Spirit, to be a tame, helpless, dispassionate Creature; that she is a sad Manager, and would quickly undo any Husband: The Constriction of this is, she has too much good Understanding to thwart and perplex her Husband in Affairs, which she is sensible he knows much better: That she has the Discernment to discover a much larger Capacity in him, and implicitly gives up her own judgment to the stronger Mind. [...] *American Weekly Mercury,* no. 559 (September 17, 1730), p. 1.

12 *Ibidem.* See also, Sydney Geo. Fischer, *Men, Women and Manners in Colonial Times,* Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1898.

13 *Boston Evening Post,* no. 219 (October 15, 1739), p. 1.

14 *Essex Journal,* no. 20 (May 4,1774), pp. 11-12.

15 *Pennsylvania Gazette,* no. 1185 (August 29,1751), p. 22.

16 *Boston Gazette,* no. 1052 (March 17, 1740), pp. 11-12.

17 *Boston Evening Post,* no. 488 (December 10, 1744), pp. 12-21.

18 *Providence Gazette,* no. 286 (July 1, 1769), pp. 11-12.

19 Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education,* Boston, John W. Folsom, 1787, p. 19.

20 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct in the Most Important Duties of Life,* Dublin, W. Sleater, 1788, pp. 29-30.

21 Taken from John Swanwick, *POEM on the Prospect of seeing the fine ARTS flourish in AMERICA,* in *Thoughts on Education Addressed to the Visitors of the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia,* Philadelphia, Thomas Dobson, 1787, p. 35.

22 *Ibidem,* p. 13.

23 *Ibidem,* p. 18.

24 *Ibidem,* p. 26. It may be interesting to notice that a later female perspective on the importance of music in woman's education completely reversed Swanwick's standpoint: Mrs. Maria Anne Campbell, as a matter of fact, held painting or music as a personal soothing relief, a way to regain energy and then, "return to [...] active duties with encreased satisfaction." Maria Anne Campbell, *Thoughts on Female Edu-*

cation, Albany, Websters, 1812, p. 17.

25 [Charles Allen], *The Polite Lady: or, a Course of Female Education,* Philadelphia, Garey, 1798, pp. 30-31.

26 John Wheelock, *An Essay on the Beauties and Excellencies of Painting, Music and Poetry,* Hartford, Eben Watson, 1774, p. 5.

27 *Ibidem,* p. 7. It is highly probable that the preference given to music in women's education depends on the same qualitative impact of music and woman *on* man: relief, inspiration, rest, calmness, harmony. See the poem "On Music", published in the *Boston Chronicle,* no. 139 (October 23, 1769), p. 348.

28 Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education,* New York, Evert Duyckinck, 1813, vol. 1, p. 50.

29 *Ibidem.*

30 Hannah More, *On Fashionable Amusements,* Andover, Flagg & Gould, 1815, p. 9.

31 John Cosens Ogden, *The Female Guide,* Concord, George Hough, 1793, pp. 6-7, p. 18.

32 Maria Anne Campbell, *op. cit.,* p. 13.

33 Erasmus Darwin, *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education,* Philadelphia, John Ormrod, 1798, p. 11.

34 See also, Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society, the Formative Years 1790-1860,* New York, George Braziller, 1966, p. 33.

35 Hannah More, *Strictures on the Female Education, cit,* pp. 36-37.

36 See also, William Howard Adams, "The Fine Arts," in *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Bibliography,* ed. Merrill D. Peterson, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986, pp. 199-214. And again, Neil Harris, *op. cit.,* p. 35.

37 "[F]emale education should be accommodated to the state of society, manners, and government of the country, in which it is conducted. [...] This remark leads me at once to add, that the education of young ladies, in this country, should be conducted upon principles very different from what it is in Great Britain, and in some respects different from what it was when we were a part of a monarchical empire." Benjamin Rush, *op. cit.,* pp. 3-4.

38 The very fact that in the end, the education of young ladies was promoted by male reformers in view of personal advantages, is exemplified by Benjamin Rush's words: "I know that the elevation of the female mind, by means of moral, physical, and religious truth, is considered by some men as unfriendly to the domestic character of a woman. But *this is the prejudice of little minds,* and springs from the same spirit which opposes the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of our republics. If men believe that ignorance is favourable to the governance of the female sex, they are certainly deceived; for a weak and ignorant woman will always *be governed with the greatest difficulty.* [...] It will be in your power, LADIES, to correct the mistakes and practice of our sex upon these subjects, by demonstrating, that the female temper can only *be governed* by reason and that the cultivation of reason in women, is alike friendly to the order of nature, and to private as well as publick happiness." [Italics mine] *Ibidem,* pp. 23-24.

39 *Ibidem,* pp. 18-19. See also Miss Ann Negus's "Oration," *ibidem,* pp. 29-36.

40 *Boston Chronicle,* no. 8 (February 1, 1768), p. 70. See also Irma B. Jaffe, "Ethics and Aesthetics in Eighteenth-Century American Art," in *The American Revolution and Eighteenth-Century Culture,* ed. Paul J. Korshin, New York, AMS Press, 1986, pp. 157-99.

41 Hannah More, *Strictures on Female Education, op. cit.,* p. 48.

42 *Boston Evening Post,* no. 1782 (November 20, 1769), p. 41.

43 *Virginia Gazette,* no. 1121 (February 21, 1773), p. 1.

44 Mary Durham Johnson, "Polly à la Francaise: A Study of the French Officers' Views of American Women During the American Revolution, 1776-1783," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 3, no. 1 (September 1976), pp. 26-27. As to Benjamin Franklin's story: "Polly Baker, an unwed mother of five bastards, defended herself in a courtroom against charges of immoral conduct. She attributed her plight to poverty and inequitable laws and argued that the court should commend her for following the Lord's dictum 'increase and multiply.' In the end, the court dismissed the charges, and one of the jurors (who chanced to be the bastards' father) announced his intention to marry Polly and make her a respectable member of society."

45 *Ibidem,* p. 31.

46 *Virginia Gazette,* no. 820 (February 5, 1767), p. 1.

47 "Every new piece of intelligence from England is more alarming than the last. Luxury, venality and cormption, are arrived at that enormous height, that Great Britain, like ancient Rome, seems ready to sink under her own weight. We have little reason to expect a redress of grievances from the present temper and disposition of the British Ministry or Parliament; the first have gone too far to retract; their own safety depends upon procuring the approbation of Parliament for the violent and oppressive measures they have pursued; this or an impeachment, is the only alternative. [...] They must ruin America to screen themselves." *Virginia Gazette,* no. 36 (May 4, 1769), p. 1.

48 As to the fact that by the end of the eighteenth-century, both in America and Europe, women came to play a significant role in the domestic and social spheres, see Patricia Sexton, *Women in Education,* Bloomington (Indiana), Phi Delta Kappa, 1976, ch. V.

49 Joseph Pilmore, *An Address on the Importance of Female Education,* Philadelphia, Robert Smith, 1788, p. 6.

50 John Cosens Ogden, *op. cit.,* p. 22.

51 Mrs. Townshend Stith, *Thoughts on Female Education,* Philadelphia, Clark & Raser, 1831, p. 19.

52 For the relationship between Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft, see Mitzi Myers, "Reform or Ruin: 'A Revolution in Female Manners'," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture,* American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies 11, (1982), pp. 199-216.

53 See also, Ernest Cassara, *The Enlightenment in America,* Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1975, ch. VI.

54 Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, cit.,* vol. 1, p. 45.