FROM THE STAGE TO SOCIETY: THE CHIASMIC STRUCTURE OF 18TH CENTURY FRENCH AND AMERICAN THEATER & THE ROLES OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Eighteenth-century French and American theater captured the trajectories of female power, reflecting and refracting changing concepts of gender and virtue in the context of emerging democracies. Despite each nation's embrace of democratic values, the theatrical traditions reflect different social constructions of and demands upon women. This study explores the confines and constructions of women's sexual roles both on stage and within society, discussing the French woman's relegation to virtuous submission and the American woman's attempt to harness equality. Through a critical analysis of eighteenth century plays situated in their respective sociopolitical contexts, we see a chiasmic structure in the evolution and disintegration of the Heroine — a simultaneous loss of power for French women and a surge of authority for American women.

As France transitioned from Old Regime decadence to a morally preoccupied republic, the status of the heroine shifted to reflect these cultural undercurrents. The strong women emblematic of Old Regime court life no longer graced the stage; instead, the heroines in French plays found themselves relegated to weak, modest maidens, mirroring the gradual displacement of women from the sociopolitical realm. Toward the end of the century, the heroine lost her voice completely, rendered dependent upon the invention of the male bourgeois subject. By contrast, the female protagonists on the American stage experienced an upsurge of power over the century. Although colonial plays reflected patriarchal tradition and female silence, later works captured women's economic and social progress. Increased influence in their homes and neighborhoods inspired mid-century plays centered on female domestic control. Following the American Revolution, female protagonists used revolutionary rhetoric to claim political autonomy.

Therefore, although women in both republics suffered similar civil restrictions and legal disenfranchisement, American women gained a momentum that French women surrendered: As republican rhetoric and enlightened thinking corroded Old Regime power, it simultaneously degraded elite women's authority. As the colonies developed an industrialized economy, colonial women assumed greater responsibility and agency within their communities. Despite their seemingly analogous political situations, American women's new position reflected an increase of power while formerly influential French women had lost their authority.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1794, British-American playwright Susannah Rowson concluded her script of the play, *Slaves in Algiers*, with a rallying cry for female power:

Well, ladies, tell me: how d’ye like my play?
The creature has some sense, methinks you say;
She says that we should have supreme dominion,
And, in truth, we’re all of her opinion.
Women were born for universal sway;
Men to adore, be silent, and obey.\(^1\)

Recognizing women’s capacity and rationality, Rowson’s epilogue suggests not only sexual equality, but also female domination – a subversion of early America’s traditional, patriarchal society. Despite her assertion, however, American women found their political status limited in all ways. The founders of the newly formed nation denied women suffrage, property, and autonomy, relegating their female counterparts to non-citizens. How, then, can we understand Rowson’s bold argument and its reception at the time? What inspires her confidence in female authority in a period of growing sexual inequality? And how does a play convey normative social values and sexual perceptions? Rowson’s play leads to a broader inquiry about the relationship between theater and politics in a period of revolutionary upheaval.

Through a study combining cultural movements, political history, and popular theater, we can understand the theater as a litmus test for social change and as the “most significant crucible for public opinion.”\(^2\) Using the shifting balance between heroism

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and virtue vested in the female protagonists as a lens, my thesis examines the implications of both the symbolic and actual representations of eighteenth-century women in France and America. Eighteenth-century French and American theater captured the trajectories of female power, reflecting and refracting changing concepts of gender and virtue in the context of emerging democracies. Though France and America had cultural similarities, each nation engaging in revolutions that championed enlightenment rationale and egalitarian virtues, these sister republics had divergent consequences for women. Despite each nation's embrace of democratic values, the theatrical traditions reflect different social constructions of and demands upon women. This study explores the confines and constructions of women's sexual roles both on stage and within society, discussing the French woman's relegation to virtuous submission and the American woman's attempt to harness equality.

As France transitioned from Old Regime decadence to a morally preoccupied republic, the status of the heroine shifted to reflect these cultural undercurrents. We see that the strong women emblematic of Old Regime court life no longer graced the stage; instead, the heroines in French plays found themselves relegated to weak, modest maidens, mirroring the gradual displacement of women from the sociopolitical realm. Toward the end of the century, the heroine lost her voice completely, rendered dependent upon the invention of the male bourgeois subject.

By contrast, the female protagonists on the American stage experienced an upsurge of power over the century. Although colonial plays reflected patriarchal tradition and female silence, later works captured women's economic and social progress. Increased influence in their homes and neighborhoods inspired mid-century plays centered on female domestic control. Following the American Revolution, female
protagonists used revolutionary rhetoric to claim political autonomy. Therefore, although women in both republics suffered similar civil restrictions and legal disenfranchisement, American women gained a momentum that French women surrendered: As republican rhetoric and enlightened thinking corroded Old Regime power, it simultaneously degraded elite women's authority. As the colonies developed an industrialized economy, colonial women assumed greater responsibility and agency within their communities. Despite their seemingly analogous political situations, American women's new position reflected an increase of power while formerly influential French women had lost their authority.

My thesis traces these trajectories through a trans-Atlantic investigation spanning the long eighteenth century. Rather than discussing each nation's theatrical and sexual evolutions through two separate chronologies, my thesis interweaves the bi-national investigation into an integrated argument. Though sociopolitical changes in each nation had opposite effects for French and American women, their parallel preoccupations with theater, gender, and society establish a framework for comparing the two cases. Both nations recognized the tension and relationship between theater and society -- inciting waves of anti-theatricalism; both nations also subjugated women despite the emerging language of rights and republicanism. Three common questions bridge my two national foci, their applicability demonstrating similar trends and anxieties. First, I explore the anti-theatrical arguments in each nation in order to clarify why was theater considered dangerous. Extending those anxieties to preoccupations about gender I ask: What makes that theatrical power prove "ill-fitting" to women and why would women's brandishing theatrical influence jeopardize French and American society? Finally, how would harnessing – or losing - that power change the
sociopolitical situation of women in each country?

We find the answers to these questions through a critical analysis of eighteenth century plays situated in their respective sociopolitical contexts. This study synthesizes theater history with secondary scholarship on French and American antitheatricalism, women in theater, and women in society. The central evidence lies within the plays; each character, plot, and theme proposes ideas that extend beyond the playhouse proscenium. These plays crystallize our understanding of trends, anxieties, and ideologies; a source of information and a pulpit for propaganda, popular, commercially successful theater captured prevailing concerns and resonated with the public. In addition to plays, I have drawn upon letters and treatises by enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot, as well as legal statutes instituted by colonial leaders, politicians, and theocrats.

Based upon my research, the historians who work on republicanism and literary scholars who work on theater have not engaged in a dialogue. Although available secondary materials only speak to facets of my study, available sources, such as books, articles, newspapers, and theater statistics, have affirmed a connection between the French and American situations. My main secondary source for background on Old Regime theater, Lenard R. Berlanstein's *Daughters of Eve*, demonstrates the effects of Rousseau's anti-theatricality and preoccupations regarding women. He provides insight into the social arguments regarding theater and stage actresses during the eighteenth century. Contextualizing the theatrical tradition of Old Regime France, Berlanstein traces the history of the French theatre from the popularity of elite hired troupes to the
establishment of permanent public theatres.  

Berlanstein also argues that actresses symbolized a form of dangerous eighteenth century femininity. Shifting his attention from the pit to the stage, he explores actresses’ construction as a social sub-group and as a threat to society. Emphasizing the power of French theater in relation to women, Berlanstein establishes the popularity of mid-century anti-theatrical arguments raised by figures such as Rousseau. Urging women to stay home, these men advocated that women become shielded from the public eye and detached from power. Berlanstein illuminates the actress’s association with seduction, libertinism, and irrationality. He captures the moral preoccupations guiding eighteenth century attitudes and anxieties surrounding women and the theater.

While Berlanstein focuses on the dynamic between gender and the stage, Susan Maslan’s *Revolutionary Acts*, broadens the study to include political change. Her book complements Berlanstein’s discussion of the influence of the actress and the theater upon French society. Addressing similar themes, Maslan develops Berlanstein’s argument in the political context of the French Revolution. She establishes theater’s relationship with the public, describing the tension that imbued French theater and its actresses with the influence to shape Revolutionary culture. She presents the Old Regime and Revolutionary theater as a charged political space that granted the audience a voice to express revolutionary ideas and endowed actresses with political and social sway.

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3 Historian Jeffrey Ravel enhances the study of theater publics through his use of statistical information to clarify the theatre’s interaction with and influence over the public in *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture 1680-1791*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
Her interest in theater and public opinion underscores Rousseau's critique, as she describes popular views of actresses and fears of their theatrical powers. Again, while Berlanstein discusses Rousseau's argument in relation playhouses, Maslan addresses the greater repercussions of female theatricality power upon politics and society. She emphasizes Rousseau's belief that theatricality was the central dilemma of modern life. He viewed women and the theater as a symbol for the larger moral degeneration of the country; theatricality on stage mirrored the theatricality of the court where women ruled over men. Her research presents the growing preoccupation in France regarding gender, spectacle, and morality - issues that influenced both the theatrical and societal roles played by women. By linking women's power on stage to women's influence over society, Maslan's argument clarifies how and why we see the simultaneous disintegration of women's power and the demise of the Heroine over the course of the century.

Secondary sources on America suggest similar themes, but a different trajectory in the evolution of women's social statuses and stage roles. Though antitheatricalism in the American colonies and, later, throughout the infancy of the United States, had a stronger religious foundation than their French counterparts, the arguments against the stage expressed the same anxieties. We note this phenomenon in Harrold C. Shiffler's article Religious Opposition to the Eighteenth Century Philadelphia Stage. Using newspaper articles, legislature, and petitions, Shiffler explores Philadelphia's anti-theatrical environment to contextualize the delayed emergence of a national theater tradition. Tracing the roots of anti-theatrical legislation in Philadelphia, Shiffler notes

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the preventative nature of such theocratic doctrines: petitions, laws and penalties passed in resistance to play-acting and attendance occurred prior to the construction of playhouses.

Historian Linda K. Kerber provides evidence that reinforces my argument concerning the upsurge of female power in plays and in the public. *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* reflects the larger sociopolitical stakes for women at the end of the eighteenth century. Organized chronologically, this book traces the trajectory of female citizenship in the United States from the pre-Revolutionary era to modern times. Their book alternates original scholarship with samples of primary documents and essays, each chapter concerning a different facet in women’s studies. While the latter sections explore implications of gender beyond my focus, the early-republic analysis provides not only a basic history of the attainment of women’s rights, but also highlights women’s sociopolitical ambitions; Kerber and De Hart link women’s increasing participation in public life with a growing need for political recognition and equality.

As a trans-Atlantic comparison, my thesis opens communication among gender, historical, and theatrical texts, seeking to situate theater in a political as well as an aesthetic context. Each comparative section offers a snapshot of a particular moment through a play and its reception. Organized chronologically into three sections -- early eighteenth century, mid-century, and the Revolutionary era -- and then, within each section, into two nationally focused subsections, -- France and the United States -- my thesis emphasizes common ideologies, values, and social predilections regarding gender, politics, and the stage.

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Each section provides relevant cultural and political history, as well as a description and analysis of a play representative of each nation and era. The first section, Heroines and Helpmeets on the Early Eighteenth Century Stage, compares French women's dominance in the Old Regime Court to colonial women's subservience in the home. The second section, Drama and Domesticity: Mid-century Concerns, emphasizes common antitheatrical anxieties and arguments regarding domesticity. I discuss the ways in which common themes bore opposite results for women in each country. The final section, Relegation and Republicanism: The Revolutionary Era, reveals the effects of republicanism as applied to gender and theater, namely the fall of the French Heroine during the French Revolution and the ascent of the American Heroine in the wake of a new nation.

Discussing a total of six popular plays, three French and three Anglo-American, this comparison of female protagonists and social backgrounds establishes a dialogue between nations, generations, and political trajectories. Although I only discuss six plays, their economic earnings and running times indicate their overwhelming success. Additionally, their thematic similarities with other eighteenth century plays I have seen and read – as well as with widely circulated literature – proves them representative of their respective culture and era. In tracing women's roles in each country, I argue that we see a chiasmic structure both on stage and in society – a simultaneous loss of power for French women and a surge of authority for American women.
HEROINES AND HELP-MEETS ON THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY STAGE

The first section of my study concerns the early eighteenth century, the first half of which is devoted to France. This subsection provides a background on the Old Regime and its understanding of theatricality and female political capacity. Opening with a history of the playhouse, this section contextualizes the theatrical tradition of Old Regime France, tracing the popularity of elite hired troupes to the establishment of permanent public theaters. Revealing the diverse social backgrounds of audience members, statistical information clarifies the unique nature of theater publics. This theatrical power guiding public opinion reinforces a setting in which elite women held power over society and the stage. Early plays that featured female protagonists were performed prior to proscriptive gender roles, granting women an autonomy later denied to female protagonists.\(^7\) These productions, therefore, not only alluded to the feminine potential for power, but also celebrated female dominance; they suggested awareness and tolerance of female political power and capacity for authority.

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The theater in France rose to prominence against the background of an absolutist regime. Originally popular in the French court, stage presentations gained support through royal patronage. King Louis XIV sanctioned performances for public consumption during the seventeenth century, establishing the Opéra, the Comédie françaïse, and the Comedie italienne as royal companies. The players assumed the title of “the king’s actors” in exchange for subsidies from the crown and control over designated performance venues. Many of the shows channeled “centralized aristocratic culture” into a spectacle of Bourbon power, infusing the theater with the absolutist overtones of the court in Versailles.

Despite the royal influence, however, plays did not only cater to elite audiences. While the members of high society populated the luxurious box seats and mingled in the lobbies, the theater designated other areas for a non-noble public. The pit, or parterre, the space on the floor between the stage and the first boxes, was reserved for men of middling social status, including the younger sons of wealthy families, servants, merchants and artisans. The establishment of temporary theaters, such as those erected for festivals and seasonal fairs, also appealed to the French public, attracting lords and laborers alike.

Increasingly popular, the French theater enjoyed a surge in attendance throughout the eighteenth century. According to historian Lenard R. Berlanstein, roughly, “5,000 people regularly attended the theater and another 10,000 attended occasionally in Paris during the first half of the eighteenth century, when the capital had a population of about 400,000

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9 Berlanstein 11.
inhabitants.” In 1760, the royal government sanctioned commercialized theaters, such as
the year-round stage the Gaiétée, casting a net for an audience of greater size and diversity. As
Berlanstein affirms, “The doubling of theater seating capacity during the second half of the
eighteenth century (from 6,000 to 12,000 seats) suggests a proportional increase in the
audience.” As attendance and participation continued to grow, France witnessed the
establishment of more “little theaters” on the boulevard du Temple in eastern Paris, an area
considered the “premier space for plebian leisure by the end of the seventeenth century,”
such as the Ambigu-comique and the Associés in 1769, and the Delassements-comiques in
1785.

Beyond a source of amusement, the theater provided a realm in which lay people
could establish relationships beyond the social and political hierarchies of Old Regime
France. Despite the diverse social backgrounds of audience members, the theater public
constituted a community unto itself; an amalgam of the public and private, theater-goers
forged an ad hoc society, establishing, “temporary identities and cohesions in relation to
performances, to political events, and to each other.” While France, under the Old Regime,
relegated the public to spectators, the theatre endowed its audiences with the agency to
participate and to judge. As Susan Maslan affirms in her book Revolutionary Acts, “In the
theater the public could express its judgment immediately and actively.” A sharp contrast to
the role of the public during royal spectacles, in which the King compelled the audience’s
approval, the theater granted the audience the ability to think and to validate. While the Old

11 Berlanstein Daughters of Eve 10.
12 Berlanstein Daughters of Eve 10.
14 Berlanstein Daughters of Eve 12.
15 Maslan 7.
16 Maslan 2.
Regime did not offer spaces for political discussions or debates, plays incited discourse concerning social norms and cultural convictions, fostering a public sphere that both reflected and shook society.

Therefore, within this narrowly defined absolutist political culture, the theater offered a disruptive space imbued with political potential. As any force catalyzing sociopolitical considerations and repercussions, the theater was a site for controversy. While its proponents relished the opportunity to engage in the theatrical arena, its critics, oftentimes leaders of the Gallican Church, viewed the French theatre as a morally degenerative force. In 1657, for example, the Abbé d'Aubignac published his *Pratique du théâtre*, which characterized the playhouse as a site "endlessly troubled by young debauched men who only attended the theater to display their insolence...who often commit murders there." Describing the theater as a breeding ground for violence and vice, the church disparaged both the institution of theater, its performers (some of whom the Gallican church excommunicated for their vocation), and its patrons.

Although the audience enjoyed the freedom of the theater, the pedagogical aspect of the stage also proved troublesome for its opponents. Tying into sensationalist rhetoric, the 18th century philosophy that emphasized that external stimuli shaped the self, the theater threatened to pervert the moral instincts of its audiences. These critics feared that when

17 Raval 87.  
18 Berlanstein *Daughters of Eve* 58.  
19 For more on sensationalism, see the chapters 1-4 of Jan Goldstein's *The Post Revolutionary Self*, which address the mechanism and implementation of sensationalism during the Revolutionary period. A model of self reliant upon the interpretation of external stimuli, sensationalism echoed the Lockean conception of the mind as a blank state. Sensationalism, therefore, constituted an inherently passive self that lacked volition and agency. Considering a self whose constitution depends upon its environment, the possibility of an errant imagination, a championing of
actors conveyed ideas that questioned accepted norms, roles, and behaviors, they aroused the passions and curiosities of malleable minds in the pit. They suggested that the theater could instill empathy for vice and disregard for virtue.

If theatre was considered a powerful and corrosive force, then the conduit of this power - the actor or actress - harnessed the potential to manipulate society. French theater served as a gauge for the growing preoccupation with gender and morality. A backlash to Old Regime political corruption, Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century ushered a movement toward public morality. As the century progressed, this moral preoccupation emphasized and scrutinized the link between theater, women, and libertinism. While French society grew frustrated under the yoke of an absolutist political culture, its emerging civil order demanded transparency, ethics, and legitimacy.  

While the French Church had maligned actresses and other “public women” as sinners for centuries, French culture endowed such women with “greater prominence than elsewhere.” While women in early eighteenth century France lacked civil rights, elite women still exerted a cultural and sociopolitical authority through the court and the salons. As early as the sixteenth century, court life granted women of an upper social milieu “cultural ascendancy.” During the Enlightenment, elite women contributed to the exchange of ideas, knowledge, literacy, and sociability in the salons of France. They played hostess, held discussions, debated, and read books. Historian Dena Goodman writes,

dangerous creativity over reason, threatened the highly structured system of the Old Regime.

20 Berlanstein Daughters of Eve 59.
21 Berlanstein Daughers of Eve 1.
"Women were central to [French culture’s] understanding of sociability and civilization."\textsuperscript{23} Though still regarded as the weaker sex, these women exerted influence as patrons and cultural brokers -- they made and broke careers through their elevated social rank. Secondary in importance to social status, sex did not curb women from impacting court life and culture in Old Regime France, as Montesquieu writes, "the liberty of women [is connected] with the spirit of the monarchy."\textsuperscript{24} The court and the salons, therefore, embodied the prominent role of women in Old Regime society. This role nourished fears regarding feminine influence, strengthening the connection between female sensibilities, emasculation, and extravagance.

As several scholars emphasize, the stage became a target for the expression of this male anxiety. Attracting the gaze of the audience, the stage evolved into a public venue that showcased elite women’s power. Female actresses onstage intrigued theater patrons, but also incurred moral condemnation. Ill-reputed for their overt sexuality and, in some cases, associations with prostitution and libertinism, actresses were considered corrosive members of society. \textit{Histoirette de Mondory}, published by Gedeon Tallemant de Reaux in 1659, provided one of the earliest recorded criticisms of the immorality of French actresses. These complaints were only exacerbated by the Sun King’s institutionalization of theater as court ritual in the late seventeenth century. After his religious turn in 1680, a pious Louis XIV jettisoned the theatrical component of the court, sending his courtier who sough immodest company into Paris.\textsuperscript{25} Though considered indecent, barred from the community of Christians

\textsuperscript{25} Berlanstein \textit{Daughters of Eve} 24.}
based on their assumed licentiousness\textsuperscript{26}, these actresses adopted the roles previously filled by cross-dressed boys\textsuperscript{27}, quickly commanding the public’s attention.

Without the judgment of the court to moderate their behavior, male aristocrats in the city associated with theater women rather than more highly esteemed court ladies, engaging in “aristocratic libertinism.” Actresses became the consorts of men at the helm of sociopolitical power, attaining their own elevated social status. The attainment of actresses as lovers became a common practice of the elite, but also, an emasculating force. Critics considered actresses as the power-holders in these relationships, as “unruly women who had their way with important men.”\textsuperscript{28} As Berlanstein suggests,

French actresses thus joined the geisha of Japan, the hetaerae of ancient Greece, the xiaochu of Imperial China, and the courtesans of Renaissance Venice as a category of women expected to provide pleasure to the male elite...The libertinism of the second half of the seventeenth century had removed women from the pedestal but bestowed only a spurious sexual liberation on them...Theater women were well positioned to shift the balance of gender power in their favor.\textsuperscript{29}

Men of the ruling class surrendered their rationality to the beguiling artifice of female charm.\textsuperscript{30} As Montesquieu writes, “Each courtier avails himself of [women’s] charms and their passions, in order to advance his fortune: and then their weakness admits not of pride, but of vanity, luxury constantly attends them.”\textsuperscript{31} Women’s control thus fostered an environment in which they became the proponents of luxury and the judges of taste – and

\textsuperscript{26} Berlanstein \textit{Daughters of Eve} 23.
\textsuperscript{27} Berlanstein \textit{Daughters of Eve} 22.
\textsuperscript{28} Berlanstein \textit{Daughters of Eve} 2.
\textsuperscript{29} Berlanstein \textit{Daughters of Eve} 39.
\textsuperscript{30} For more on male rationality and female irrationality, see Thomas Laqueur, \textit{Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 59.
\textsuperscript{31} Montesquieu 102.
in which male courtiers depended upon female favor. Critics denounced that women emasculated these court men, rendering them weak and ornamental.

Theater produced at the turn of the century captures this debate surrounding women, theater, and morality. Though antitheatricalists condemned the playhouse, proponents of female power and the theater responded through publication and performance. Using plays to edify and instruct spectators, playwrights showcased heroic female protagonists. Harnessing theatrical power to a moral project, these plays argued that women’s strength and virtue were not mutually exclusive. Marie-Anne Barbier’s rendition of the Greek tragedy *Arria and Paetus* captures the seventeenth century recognition of female power. Written by a French woman playwright, *Arria and Paetus* not only demonstrates the capacity of actresses, female authors, and public women, but also served as a forum for Barbier’s feminist rhetoric. As Perry Gethner, editor of *The Lunatic Lover and Other Plays by French Women of the 17th and 18th Centuries* observes, “Because Barbier was so explicit in proclaiming her desire to exalt the noblest representatives of her sex, the language and behavior of its female characters is especially revealing.” This play channels female agency through the actions and speeches of its heroines, providing evidence of a tradition of female cultural authority in the French theater and society on the threshold of the new century.

Premiering at the Comedie-franciase on June 3, 1702, *Arria and Paetus* praises the determination of Arria, a young woman in the court of Emperor Claudius. Her father having recently been murdered by Claudius’ decree, she devotes her energies toward

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32 Faure 81.
33 Berlanstein *Daughters of Eve* 4.
coordinating a conspiracy against the Emperor's tyrannical rule. Her courage and self-possession, however, only attract Claudius's amorous attentions. Despite his betrothal to Agrippinia, a woman characterized by her "boundless energy, her indomitable will, and her consummate skill in manipulating people and in governing," and Arria's engagement to the upright consul Paetus, Claudius decides to conquer Arria's heart. Arria's refusal of Claudius only encourages his pursuit. Blinded by passion, he promises her the empire, and makes himself subservient to her will.

An embodiment of feminine fortitude, Arria resists the emperor's overtures, favoring loyalty to Paetus and filial piety over self-interest. She continues to conspire against Claudius, only involving Paetus once the situation grows precarious. When Claudius, discovers the intended mutiny, he threatens her life and that of her betrothed. Arria refuses to cower and resolutely declares, "My pity for the state would be a crime, and I prefer death to the foremost rank, if I must betray my family to gain it...Do you think death intimidates me, tyrant? Or believe your threats entitled to drag from me complaints that would be viewed as a lack of courage? ...My blood will arm a thousand men against you." Rather than submitting to his base desires, she commits suicide at the end of the play. Arria embodies the paradigm of female heroism based on classical models. She sacrifices her life for principles of loyalty and virtue. She is resolute in action and guided by devotion to family and the state.

Barbier's play captures two strains of feminine heroism, conveying a female multi-dimensionality lost to later French theater. Arria presents a version of heroism emphasizing altruism and honor. For example, when Claudius requests that she abandon

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36 Ibid 233.
the memory of her late father, she does not yield: “Sire, this great effort is not in my power, and in my sad heart all things yield to duty... virtue inspires it...Could I allow the man who caused [my father’s] death to lead me into such a guilty marriage? Would I bring shame to his ghost in Hades?” By contrast, Agrippina represents destructive ambition and tenacity, as one of the Emperor’s advisors cautions, “Sire, I admit, you should fear Agrippina, and her angry heart will know no self-restraint...For only greatness Agrippina longs. You were planning to make her empress; the promised empire has become her property. To keep it for herself she’ll stop at nothing.” Emboldened to the extreme, Agrippina characterizes the stereotypes of female sexuality – ruthless, unstoppable, and ultimately harmful.

Though Arria emerges as the nobler of the two heroines, both women further the argument for female rationality, intelligence, and drive. Despite their different approaches to attaining their goals, both women stand resilient in the face of adversity. They voice their demands and convictions without hesitation or apology, confident in their roles in the court.

The men, however, appear as weak and spineless characters. While endowing her female protagonists with decisiveness and agency, Barbier portrays men as irresolute and powerless. Emperor Claudius vacillates throughout the play; though the ruler of a nation, Claudius’s heart renders him a pawn of passion. Even Paetus, despite his willingness to aid his beloved, lacks Arria’s courage and leadership. The male characters not only testify to the superior power of their female counterparts but also act as foils to the women’s dominance throughout the play and within society. Claudius entreats Arria, “One word from your mouth, and the storm is quelled. Indeed, you only have to mount the throne to end all pretexts for my overthrow. Fair Arria, give in to my just desires. If you don’t

37 Ibid 224.
38 Ibid 221.
39 Ibid 203.
value me, the whole state begs you." His deference to her authority reflects the female control in the Old Regime court. Claudius shows that powerful men, even emperors, fall prey to passion in the presence of a strong woman.

As the women grow bolder, the men appear weakened and swayed by love, spiraling into political ruin, emotional infirmity, and ultimately death. They are victims of their passions, and act with an irrationality attributed to women. Claudius himself admits to his infirmity, confessing, "I'd let my own [blood] flow a hundred time for [that of Arria]! To stop me it has all too loud a voice. I want to punish the ingrate, yet feel I love her, and my deferred blows fall back on myself." Agrippina’s treatment of Claudius, once aware of his betrayal, also alludes to his weakness. She taunts, "Yes, pity touches me for your lot, but more than your misfortune I pity your weakness... A condemned man's daughter holds your soul in bondage." Barbier’s portrayal of men reflects the debility of male elites. Perhaps a veiled critique of Louis XIV and absolutism, the relationship between Arria and Claudius renders the Emperor weak and effeminate. Highlighting the association between tyranny and emasculation, the Emperor is controlled by “feminine” passion rather than “masculine” reason. Failing to act rationally, Claudius degrades his authority. He surrenders his power to his all-consuming desire for Arria, seeking selfish pleasure over responsible governance. Through the fates of her male characters, Barbier captures a culture of elite men whose power lies crippled by dependence and cupidity.

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40 Ibid 233.
41 Ibid 247.
42 Ibid 203.
The play serves as a conduit for Barbier’s sexually egalitarian message as well as a recognition of women’s potential to rule; a power that emasculates men even as mighty as an emperor. A testimony to the weak men in the Old Regime court and of the influence of elite women and actresses, *Arria and Paetus* addresses the nuanced gender dynamics in early eighteenth century France. Barbier’s treatment of her female protagonists capture the extremes of women’s power. Through depicting two types of strong women – one self-sacrificing and righteous, the other single-mindedly ambitions – each representative of "good" or "bad" female power, Barbier suggests that French society embrace the virtuous heroine. Barbier’s play presents Arria’s womanhood as the alternative to the emasculating Agrippina prototype. She uses Arria as a vehicle to remind members of the audience about the virtues needed for just rule. She urges them also to resist tyranny and enslavement. By using a female heroine to convey this message, Barbier attests to the residual power of aristocratic women and to the memory of their acceptable influence during the Fronde.

**The Help-meets of Early Colonial America**

Shifting our gaze across the Atlantic, this section examines theater and conceptions of gender in the early American colonies. In the early eighteenth century, given the fragmented nature of the American colonies, it is difficult to offer general assessments of a collective opinion on sexuality and theatricality. Therefore, I focus on centers around the northern colonies that became the urban cradles of early American
theater, especially Boston and Philadelphia. In order to analyze our first colonial play, *Cato* (another play that is set in antiquity and illustrates Republican virtues and values), we must delineate assumptions about theater and gender in the colonies. The first part of this section describes the state of theater in early eighteenth century America. Comparing theocratic resistance to documented performances sheds light on the popularity of certain plays that adhered to the colonists' moral standards. The second part of this section connects theater to gender dynamics in the colonies though an exploration of women's sociopolitical limitations. We note how the colonial theater reflected and emphasized the female submission of colonial culture.

Since Puritanical and Quaker influences had previously discouraged the development of a strong American theater (although plays were performed informally), many plays were imported from the British stage. The popularity of certain plays suggests that their assumptions about gender resonated with the colonial audience. These play, especially those written in the British post-Restoration tradition, focused on feminine gentility, modesty, and submission. Their popularity in the colonies reflects the transmission of cultural and sexual norms that encouraged female silence and subjugation. These post-Restoration plays depict women as the weaker sex: powerless and quiet.

Despite the popularity of plays in Great Britain, American colonists greeted theater with a mixed reception. While residents of southern colonies such as...
Virginia and Maryland welcomed theater with little resistance, importing a taste for drama along with other English sensibilities, the Presbyterians of New England and the Quakers of Pennsylvania condemned the introduction of “profane stage plays.” United in their opposition, religious sects in the northern colonies denounced stage productions as frivolous, unproductive, and morally dangerous. The visual medium of theater also offended religious sects that were opposed to aesthetic representations. Puritan and Quaker antitheatricalists argued that watching a performance posed a greater threat than reading a play because of the inherent sensuality of visual representation. Authors of antitheatrical texts attacked the theater as a morally corrosive force. For example, Anthony Horneck, an influential Protestant evangelist and scholar, warned in his 1684 publication, *Delight and Judgment*:

> There is a great difference between reading a thing and seeing it acted with all the vanity and boldness, that usually attend it. In reading, a man’s serious thoughts are not dispersed or scattered but keep within the balance of modesty, and weigh things in the balance of reason, whereas being Acted to the Life, they naturally strike vanity into the mind, affect the sensual part, drive away seriousness, and leave an unhappy tincture behind them.

A breeding-ground for vice, idleness, and vanity, the theater represented a source of personal and societal ruin. Critics deemed its prohibition tantamount to the preservation of productive, peaceful living.

permission by the local authorities. Theater surfaced in the American colonies beginning in 1665 with the first recorded performance of *The Bear and the Cub* (staged by William Darby, Cornelius Watkinson, and Philip Howard) before an audience of British soldiers.\(^5^0\) Historians suggest that the colonial authorities introduced regulations prohibiting performance to placate the public opinion while allowing some play-acting to persist quietly. As theater historian Elbert N.S. Thompson asks, “How else can we account for the theatrical performances in New York in 1702 and again in 1732 or the performances given in 1714 and in 1749 in Boston and Philadelphia?”\(^5^1\)

The repressive atmosphere, however, discouraged the establishment of permanent theaters and troupes, in favor of temporary companies. Assembling for single productions of brief performances, these companies consisted of amateurs who acted for their own diversion; mixed companies comprised of leading professional actors filled out with amateurs; and – least commonly --full professional companies who subsisted primarily by performance.\(^5^2\) While professional companies encountered antagonism, student actors performed with little difficulty. As early as 1690, newspapers, pamphlets, and calendars document theatrical events held by “young scholars.”\(^5^3\) Hosted by colleges throughout the colonies, these productions seemed the

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\(^{50}\) Johnson 23.

\(^{51}\) Thompson 25.


\(^{53}\) Hornblow explains, “It is likely that there were scattered dramatic performances of a sort in all the Colonies many years before we have any records of them, particularly in the South where the prejudice against the stage was less violent than in the North, but singularly enough it is in the Puritanical New England provinces that we find the first records of public theatricals.”23.
exception to usual antitheatrical activity.\footnote{Johnson, \textit{The Colonial American Stage} 25.} Students not only showcased theater in regions that embraced performance, such as William & Mary in Williamsburg, but also launched productions in hostile territory: The University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Harvard Collage in Cambridge; and Yale College in New Haven.\footnote{Johnson \textit{The Colonial American Stage} 25.}

Colonists granted student productions a degree of legitimacy or tolerance often denied to professional companies. Viewed as an extension of education rather than a site for idleness, student theaters were often the first—and sole—venues for performance in New England.\footnote{The Virginia Gazette, 3 – 10 September 1736.}

Beyond characterizing the theater as the breeding grounds for corruption, the Puritan and Quaker opposition against the stage also reflected shared preoccupations with gender. The representation of a female actress bore social and political implications for these Northern colonial audiences. As historian Jean Marsden affirms, “This seeming equation between the image of woman on the stage and the woman in the audience becomes a source of cultural anxiety, especially... because the representation of women cannot be separated from a representation of their sexuality.”\footnote{Jean I Marsden, \textit{Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage 1660 – 1720}. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) 4.} Female sexuality proved a double-edged sword: Both a dangerous force and a necessary socioeconomic tool, female sexual drive was the means by which the power and property were transferred from generation to generation. Women were the vessel not simply for the male seed but for the legitimate lines of inheritance. Properly managed by patriarchal control, their fecundity ensured the orderly succession of
property and power from father to son, reinforcing the patrilinear structures underlying early modern colonial society.\textsuperscript{58}

Puritan society in seventeenth and early eighteenth century New England imposed a rigid hierarchical system to curb female sexuality. Carefully delineated, the boundaries that structured daily life enforced principles of orderliness and consistency that guaranteed the survival of Puritan towns. A theocracy built upon gender-specified roles, Puritan communities endowed men with authority over family governance, religion and politics. Women or wives, synonymous terms for Puritans, abided by their husband’s or father’s wishes and remained subservient while attending to household chores and daily tasks. These rigid definitions of sex and gender underscored all facets of Puritan life; though sex did not determine every community decision or interaction, it guided daily living and sexual expectations. All deviations from normative behavior and roles, all people who failed to meet the specified requirements of their sex, incited suspicion. For women, Puritan culture demanded that they fulfill their duties without overriding men’s authority lest they challenge the definitions of their sex.

The Puritans instilled this gender order to ensure that women’s exclusion from community leadership and family authority reserved these roles for men. The Puritans organized their societies in networks of vertical patriarchal relationships, casting the Father as the dominant figure in the family unit. The metaphor of the family created a society in which men managed as the "Fathers" of the community. Guided by duty and religious devotion to God, the ultimate "Father," male community leaders demanded adherence to their hierarchical socioeconomic system. When males assumed the dominant roles in relationships, Puritan women assumed submissive

\textsuperscript{58} Marsden 5.
positions. Taught obedience as both a legal duty and a religious requirement, women served as men’s ‘helpmeets,” aiding and honoring their male counterparts while handling the rigors of agriculturally based subsistence. As Carol F. Karlsen, author of *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman,* explains,

> The elevation of household heads to a godlike position within the family, and the importance of the family in maintaining a hierarchical social order, clarify the Puritans’ insistence on the worth and dignity of women... Godly men needed helpmeets, not hindrances... There was no place in this vision for the belief that women were *incapable* of fulfilling such a role. Nor was there a place in the ideal Puritan society for women who refused to fill it.\(^59\)

Defined and esteemed only in relation to men, women, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes "earned the dignity of anonymity.”\(^60\) Paragons of propriety and moderation, women worked within their socially sanctioned roles, wary to disturb the power dynamic.

Occupied with household tasks, women remained inside the home, and found themselves isolated from sociopolitical authority. Their dominion firmly rooted in cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, Puritan women faced an exhaustive list of chores.\(^61\) Completing their tasks under the cover and protection of their husbands, their legal "other halves," women undertook a discrete list of duties. Responsible for cooking, washing, sewing, milking, gardening, and feeding livestock, women assisted their husbands with physical labor.\(^62\) Whether as helpmeets or, in the absence of their husbands, “surrogate” or “deputy” husbands, women adopted positions that required

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\(^61\) Quoted in Ulrich, p. 40.
\(^62\) Ulrich 39.
strength but offered little compensation; where their husbands could attain political power and recognition, women earned the satisfaction inherent in good wifery.

Even religious groups that granted women some agency enforced political and economic restrictions. The Quakers, for example, offered women a social and spiritual equality inconceivable to New England Puritans. Recognized as equals before God, women led their own religious meetings and wielded authority over domestic matters. They regulated marriage, raised children, and instilled Quaker modesty into their communities. 63 Despite their unparalleled influence, however, Quaker men excluded women from fiscal matters, insulating them within the home. 64 Therefore, although Quaker women lived free of constraints within the domestic and spiritual spheres, they remained insulated from the economic and political realms; their power was carefully channeled away from the market, leaving power over wealth and property in capable, masculine hands.

As we have seen, despite conferring varying degrees of power, northern colonies enforced women's sociopolitical and economic exclusion. Relegated to social subservience, economic exclusion, and legal disempowerment, women in the colonies suffered civil deprivation. Although the colonies hosted a diverse array of ethnicities, post-Restoration British theater captured these groups' gender perceptions and sexual anxieties. Their roles as men's foils — whether "wives," "deputy-husbands," or "help-meets," — both on stage and in society, reflected and reinforced a weakness considered intrinsic to their sex. This assumption cut across ethnic and geographical lines. Given the moral restrictions that colonial theaters faced, we can assume that the plays that

63 Berkin 94.
64 Berkin 95.
were produced presented an accepted rubric for idealized womanhood. They showcased women who would make submissive, supportive, and virtuous wives.

One early success in both the British and colonial playhouses, is British playwright and author Joseph Addison’s tragedy *Cato*. First produced at Drury Lane in London on April 14, 1713, *Cato* marked "the grand climacterick of Addison’s reputation."\(^{65}\) Originally written in 1687 during Addison’s education at Oxford, *Cato* underwent revisions in 1700 and 1703. Peer and fellow playwright Colley Cibber reported that in 1703 he "had the pleasure of reading the first four acts privately with [Richard] Steele."\(^{66}\) *Cato* circulated in literary circles and enjoyed an enthusiastic reception from diverse audiences. Addison’s prominence furthered the play’s popularity and accessibility to colonial theater troupes. A success on both the British stage and in the colonies, *Cato* was considered a modern classic and a stock-piece in the colonial repertoire.\(^{67}\)

Promoting virtue and piety, *Cato*’s themes resonated with audiences in the morally preoccupied colonies. Though its first documented performances occurred in the south -- showings at the New Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina on November 11 and 18 and December 17, 1735 and a student production on September 10, 1736 at the College of William and Mary (The Virginia Gazette announced: "This Evening will be performed at the Theatre, by the young gentlemen of the College [of William


and Mary,], The Tragedy of 'Cato' — Cato had reached the northern colonies even earlier in the century via literary reception. While northern troupes lacked the authorization to hold official performances of *Cato*, informal readings spread knowledge of Addison's drama. In Pennsylvania, for example, the writings of Philadelphia and Burlington's John Smith suggest that *Cato* evaded the brunt of the Quakers' theatrical opposition. His use of a passage from *Cato* in a letter regarding his recent marriage ("When Love's well tim'd, 'tis not a fault to Love, The strong, the brave, the virtuous, and the wise, Sink in the soft captivity together." (III, i)) underscores the play's pertinence to colonial life, its pervasiveness throughout the colonies, and its relationship to early eighteenth century gender-dynamics.

Addison's *Cato* centers on the classical figure of Marcus Porcius Cato, the last of the Roman republicans. Renowned for his integrity and his dedication to justice, Cato clashes with the tyrant Julius Caesar, who banishes him to Utica, a city on the northern coast of Africa. Cato and his followers -- including his sons, Marcus and Portius, and Juba, the Prince of Numidia -- establish a society governed by morality, honesty, and dignity, virtues that resonated with the play's colonial audience. Learning of Caesar's impending attack, however, Cato calls the community to arms. Despite his efforts to safeguard Utica, Cato's advisors, Senator Sempronius and General Syphax, conspire to dissuade the Numidian army from supporting him. Cato's defense cannot withstand the advisors' clandestine scheming, nor can he overcome the brutality of Caesar's forces. As the enemy nears the city, Cato realizes that only his demise can prevent Caesar's onslaught. Sacrificing his own life to save his supporters, Cato dies.

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68 *The Virginia Gazette*, 3 – 10 September 1736.
69 Litto 432.
70 Litto 436,
by his own hand, allowing the Uticans to broker peace with the pacified tyrant.  

Although Cato’s central story concerns political and military action, the play’s romantic subplot makes for a compelling study of gender norms in the early eighteenth century. Like Arria and Paetus, Cato weaves a romantic sub-plot into the main story of political conflict and military conquest. Yet the contrasting depictions of feminine character could not be more striking. Addison portrays the play’s only female characters -- Lucia, daughter to Senator Lucius, and Marcia, daughter to Cato -- in relation to their male counterparts; while the men summon their strength to stave off Caesar’s invasion, the women take little notice of their turbulent surroundings. They remain politically passive, voicing no interest in civic duty. Instead, they fulfill their womanly purpose -- serving as the male figures’ love interests, potential wives, and devoted admirers. Their delicacy and quiet virtue reflected this era’s idealized femininity, conforming to male notions of ladylike submission and apolitical activity.

Although both of Cato’s sons desire Lucia’s hand in marriage, she favors Portius. She confesses to Marcia,

Sure, nature form'd me of her softest mould,
Enfeebled all my soul with tender passions,
And sunk me even below my own weak sex:
Pity and love, by turns, oppress my heart...
— O Portius, thou hast stol'n away my soul!
With what a graceful tenderness he loves:
And breathes the softest, the sincerest vows!
Complacency, and truth, and manly sweetness
Dwell ever on his tongue, and smooth his thoughts.

Ascribing her acute passion to her sex, Lucia expresses male conceptions of femininity. She is a victim to her desire and her love renders her irrational and

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72 Addison, I. vi.
sentimental. Lucia’s praise of Portius likewise establishes her as a foil to his manhood: while Lucia presents herself as emotionally and physically feeble, Portius remains even-keeled, thoughtful, sincere, and determined.

When Lucia realizes that her affections may pit the two brothers against each other, proving divisive to Cato’s family, she decides to forgo her marriage to Portius. Despite her desire, Lucia cannot validate a love that risks provoking fraternal conflict and political ruin. She laments,

At length I’ve acted my severest part  
I feel the woman breaking in upon me,  
And melt about my heart! My tears will flow.  
But oh I’ll think no more! The hand of fate  
Has torn thee from me, and I must forget thee.73

Although Lucia initially abides by her moral obligation, an enamored Portius convinces her to reconsider. Despite her noble intentions, Lucia’s will proves no match for male persistence. While she does demonstrate a female capacity for self-sacrifice, indicating a sense of public duty, Lucia fails to suppress her desires. She presents a depiction of womanhood that acknowledges women’s integrity, but that also showcases their inherent weakness. Her conviction crumbles under the onslaught of Portius’s declarations of love. He persuades Lucia to embark upon a covert romance, obscured from Marcus’s sight. Acquiescing, she consents,

Portius, no more! Thy words shoot through my heart,  
Melt my resolves, and turn me all to love.  
Why are those tears of fondness in thy eyes?  
Why heaves thy heart? why swells thy soul with sorrow?  
It softens me too much.74

Therefore, despite her ethical instincts, Lucia again associates compliance and debility

73 Addison, III, ii.
74 Addison, III, ii.
with womanhood. As she attempts to resist the “woman breaking” inside of her, she acknowledges that emotions were eroding her resolve. Her tears reflect a characteristically feminine loss of control — symbolizing that, regardless of her moral fortitude, she remains a member of the weaker sex. Unlike Arria’s exceptional fortitude, Lucia embodies typical feminine traits of frailty and indecision.

Despite Lucia and Portius’s efforts to conceal their union, Marcus quickly discovers that they have become lovers. Distraught, Marcus declares that he yearns for a noble death; bereft of love, Marcus rationalizes that life’s only purpose is to die for a worthy cause. When Marcus is slain in a battle against the duplicitous General Syphax (whom he kills prior to his own demise), Lucia and Portius are released to pursue their love. No longer blocked by Marcus, they can marry publicly and guiltlessly, reinforcing family rather than disrupting it.

Addison’s subplot concerning Marcia also cements notions of early Anglo-American womanhood. Characterized by her manners, mildness, and beauty, Marcia emerges as Cato’s paragon of female virtue. Attracting the eye of Prince Juba, Marcia’s fair beauty earns praise throughout the show. Addison addresses the public through Juba’s lovelorn accolades, reinforcing the image of idealized femininity held by the colonial audience. As historian Frederic M. Litto notes, “Addison gave a good many of the play’s scenes to Juba to rhapsodize upon the beauty of his beloved.” In one such passage, Juba exclaims,

- The virtuous Marcia tow’rs above her sex:
  True, she is fair, (oh how divinely fair!)
  But still the lovely maid improves her charms
  With inward greatness, unaffected wisdom,
  And sanctity of manners. Cato’s soul

Litto 44.
Shines out in every thing she acts or speaks,
While winning mildness and attractive smiles
Dwell in her looks, and with becoming grace
Soften the rigour of her father's virtue. 76

Although Juba praises Marcia as an outstanding example of her sex, noting her
"unaffected wisdom," and salutes her "tow'ring virtue," he attributes her noble
characteristics to her father. Juba suggests that she has not personally developed this
noble demeanor, but has, instead, inherited and perpetuated her father's legacy.
Attributing her unusual morality to "Cato's soul," Juba genders Marcia’s beauty as
feminine and her virtue as masculine. Thus, even while praising a woman, Addison
asserts patriarchal hegemony, describing masculine qualities embodied in a delicate
frame.

Juba, however, is not the only character to notice Marcia’s beauty.
Sempronius, one of the evil senators, also covets Cato’s daughter. While Juba’s
speeches belie sincere intentions, Sempronius is driven by lust. Whereas Juba seeks to
conquer Marcia through virtues, Sempronius intends to use force. His desire for
Marcia -- and his plan to dominate her -- attests to his aggressive and manipulative
nature. Plotting to ensnare Marcia, Sempronius depicts her as a sexual object. His
advances illustrate another representation of women – an image affiliated with female
submission to male desire:

Syphax, I long to clasp that haughty maid,
And bend her stubborn virtue to my passion:
When I have gone thus far, I'd cast her off...
How will my bosom swell with anxious joy,
When I behold her struggling in my arms,
With growing beauty, and disorder'd charms.
While fear and anger, with alternate grace,
Pant in her breast, and vary in her face? 77

76 Addison I. iv.
Sempronius’ description of Marcia as “haughty” or “stubbornly virtuous” underscores his scheme to diminish her status. Though she is Cato’s offspring, imbued with morality, Marcia remains marked as a woman. Weak and delicate, she is no match for the strong general. As a man, Sempronius can still use, discard, and ruin her. He takes pleasure in imagining her bewilderment, attributing fear and panting to the fairness of the female form.

Confirming male strength over female helplessness, Juba rescues Marcia before Sempronius can ensnare her. Though she meets a happy fate in the Prince’s arms, Marcia demonstrates female reliance on male heroism, assuming the role of the “damsel in distress.” Moreover, by marrying Juba following his victory, Marcia reaffirms her sex’s objectification. She does not present herself as a discerning bride, but as a prize claimed by the stronger man. As she swoons at Juba’s fortitude,

His air, his voice, his looks, and honest soul
Speak all so movingly in his behalf,
I dare not trust myself to hear him talk.78

Marcia alludes to feminine malleability and to Juba’s masculine prowess. She again elevates male power while comparatively degrading her own sex.

Addison’s Cato both reflects and extend British and colonial view of gender to the colonial theater public. Like the helpmeets in the Puritan communities and the wives in the mid-Atlantic, the women in his play assume their characters and achieve their goals only through the actions and attitudes of their male counterparts. Passive by nature, they

77 Addison III, vii.
78 Addison, I. v.
do not act, but *react*; they exhibit honor insomuch as they present themselves as dutiful daughters and desirable wives. Though virtuous, they lack the power to make decisions that guide the plot. They are essentially passive and consigned to resist male advances. Lucia and Marcia are Addison’s female protagonists, but they are no one’s heroines

**Drama and Domesticity: Midcentury Concerns**

The second section of my thesis transitions from the early 1700s to the middle of the eighteenth century. Though experiencing different sets of social, economic, and political pressures, both countries expressed anxieties about gender and theater. Their parallel preoccupations with the relationship among sex, stage, and society establish a useful framework for comparison. We can see the ways in which French and colonial American anti-theatrical arguments and promotion of female domesticity stemmed from a broader trans-Atlantic enlightened culture. This section investigates the theater debates in each country in order to determine why theater was considered dangerous. Extending those preoccupations to gender, I explore why that theatrical power proved “ill-fitting” to women. Linking these arguments to the popularity of the *bourgeois drame* in France and the colonies, we detect attempts to confine women’s power to the physical and apolitical realm of the home.

In a curious twist, the same anxieties had different results in terms of female heroism: As female protagonists became associated with domestic activity, we see the diminishing power of the French Heroine and the colonial Heroine’s tentative grasp on
authority. We can attribute this chiasmic structure to a change in comparative levels of gender and power. Despite the similar historical circumstances, domesticity demoted the French heroine from the court to the home while elevating the American heroine from patriarchal submission to household authority. We see this shift mirrored in society, as French women lost their influence over court life and salon meetings. Colonial women, conversely, exercised a newfound agency in the economic sphere and in neighborly relations. They experienced a social power denied to their mothers’ generation. This comparison suggests that, despite parallel cultural factors and sociopolitical repercussions, an understanding of these changes demonstrates radically different trajectories of female authority over the first half of the century.

**Old Regime Backlash and the Heroine’s Descent**

Theater critics in mid-century France shifted their focus from the pit to the stage, stressing the actress’s association with seduction, libertinism, and irrationality. These attacks reflected broader preoccupations with the dangers of women and theater. One of the most ardent opponents of the theatre was *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His 1758 letter to M. d’Alembert attacked the institution and function of the theatre, condensing anxieties into a concise argument. Responding to d’Alembert’s call for the establishment of a theater in Geneva, Rousseau developed a fierce critique that identified the theater as a realm in which imagination, distortion, and manipulation weakened moral resolution. Theater instilled exaggerated sentiments and passionate reactions in response to a series of fabricated scenarios. He posited that the theater dulled and
exhausted the spectator’s ability to experience real sympathy. By displacing the audience’s empathy on the fictional suffering of stage actors, the theater made it impossible to recognize actual pain.⁷⁹

Rousseau asserted that the theater estranged spectators from one another by directing their collective gaze toward the objectified actors. As he wrote, “People think they come together in the theatre, and it is there that they are isolated. It is there they forget their friends, neighbors, and relations in order to concern themselves with fables.”⁸⁰ For Rousseau, the theater eroded collective sentiments and disintegrated relationships. In contrast to those thinkers who conceived of the theater audience as a community that drew the individuals together, Rousseau insisted that “spectators foolishly seeking community in the theater are thus in fact doubly alienated: they are alienated from their fellows and from themselves.”⁸¹ His tirade against the “deception” of the theater provided a common strain in anti-theatrical discourse and captured concerns over a lack of political transparency in the Old Regime. Like the theatrical arena of the Court, the stage dazzled and deceived the public. Both environments bombarded the public with sensory images, overpowering the viewers’ capacities for judgment and critical thought. The same opacity that encouraged the public’s support of the monarchy fostered the audience’s sympathy with the actors. As an art that manipulated the imagination to incite passion, the theater weakened man’s rationality.

Rousseau used his critique to attack Old Regime theatricality, but also to reinforce the solidification of gender norms that derived their legitimacy from nature. His

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⁸⁰ Rousseau 17.
⁸¹ Rousseau 49.
advocacy of women’s domestic virtue redefined gender expectations within French society.

As he insisted in his letter to Alembert,

...There are no good morals for women outside of a withdrawn and domestic life...the peaceful care of the family [is] the home are their lot... the dignity of their sex consists in modesty...shame and chasteness are inseparable from decency for them...when they seek men’s looks they are already letting themselves be corrupted by them, and ... any woman who shows herself off disgraces herself... [However,] with [the French]...the most esteemed woman is the one who has the greatest renown, about whom the most is said, who is the most often seen in society...who imperiously sets the tone, who judges, resolves, decides, pronounces, assigns talents ... and whose favor is most ignominiously begged for by humble, learned, men. On the stage this is even worse.82

The theater epitomized and exacerbated Rousseau’s concern about the reversal of gender propriety and the corruption of the nature of womanhood. For Rousseau, the stage magnified a spectacle in which a woman could best her male counterpart. Here, the actress represented the pinnacle of female empowerment and danger. As the mid-eighteenth century shifted conceptions of gender, from, as cultural historian Dror Wahrman describes, gender-play and fluidity to one of gender-panic and impermeability, the normative roles of each sex fell within a rigid structure.83 While women had exerted public power during the seventeenth century through the salons and the court, the enlightenment emphasis on inherent physical and emotional difference relegated women to the private sphere.84 As Berlanstein affirms, “Civil society constituted the crucial link between political organization and notions of manhood and womanhood... all of which brought men together, empowered them, and accentuated the exclusion of women from the public

82 Rousseau 49.
84 Laqueur 22.
sphere. This idealized feminine virtue required that women embody the weaker, subservient sex. Compounded by legal statutes that denied women access to and control of property, women’s legal dependence reinforced their social submission. The publicity and dominance, therefore, of theater women, challenged enlightened views of sexual propriety and virtue.

Building upon a several decades worth of anxiety, Rousseau’s letter condemned the immorality of actresses and the theater. According to Rousseau, theater women exploited their femininity to assume a power that was not their own. Corrupt and unnatural, actresses both degraded feminine virtue and jeopardized the morality of their audiences. Declaring that stage women gained power by assuming false identities, commanding public attention, and catering to the sympathies of their audience, Rousseau presented women as the most dangerous type of actors. Seducing male audiences with their artificial charms and beauty, Rousseau continues, women on stage garnered control over men’s emotions:

Whatever she may do, one feels that in public [woman] is not in her place; and her very beauty, which pleases without attracting, is only one more fault for which the heart reproaches her... When they take on the masculine and firm assurance of the man and it turns into effrontery, they abase themselves by this odious imitation and dishonor both their sex and ours.  

By entreating men’s ears and capturing their hearts, actresses subverted gender norms.

By the middle of the century, when Rousseau crystallized the argument for women’s confinement to the private sphere, the theatrical genre of the bourgeois drame rose to prominence. The bourgeois drame attempted to channel the power of theater into morally edifying directions. Promoted by writers such as Diderot, whose Le Fils naturel in

85 Berlanstein 4.
86 Rousseau 88.
1757 and Le Pere de famille in 1758 introduced the genre, the bourgeois drame rejected the convention that stage heroes had to be actual heroes. Since antiquity, plays -- especially tragedies -- cast their protagonists as princes and kings, but the bourgeois drame located stories in the daily lives of ordinary people, moving the action from the court into the home. Heroism became an attainable virtue rooted in dignity and emotion, best channeled through the "two ideal heroes," the mother and the wife.\(^8^7\) The bourgeois drame thus created a new role model for women: domestic, maternal love. Diderot comment's on Racine's Iphigénie in a passage in the Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, affirms maternal importance: "If the mother of Iphigénie behaved for one moment as the Queen of Argos and the wife of the Greek commanding general, she would seem to me the least worthy of all creatures. True dignity, that which strikes me, which astounds me, is the tableau of maternal love in all its vérité."\(^8^8\) Despite a favorable view of women, however, the bourgeois drame required male heroes such as the loving father or the stalwart groom. Therefore, while many drames cast women in the roles of daughter, mother, servant, and governess -- important positions in the home, and integral relations to the family -- these heroines were endowed with a moralizing power at best.

Cenia, a drame that premiered at the Comédie-française on June 25, 1750, highlights the waning of feminine heroism in favor of private virtue. Capturing the increasingly popular discussion of morality, Cenia's domesticity and emphasis on family and marriage removes women from the throne and grounds them in the home. Written by

\(^{8^7}\) Peter Szondi and Harvey Mendelsohn, On Textual Understanding and Other Essays: Volume 15 of Theory and History of Literature, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) 117.

\(^{8^8}\) Denis Diderot, Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, 1757.
Madame Graffigny, a friend and contemporary of Diderot and Rousseau, *Cenia* encapsulates many of the *philosophe’s* ideas and social reforms.  

*Cenia* centers on the household of Dorimond, a recent widower and kind father who dotes upon his daughter, Cenia. A wealthy man without a male heir, Dorimond’s estate will become the property of Cenia’s future husband, an enviable position to attain. Seeking financial riches, the villain Mericourt, a confidant of Dorimond’s deceased wife, pursues the young Cenia as his fiancee. When Dorimond appears reluctant to sanction the marriage, Mericourt resorts to blackmail, revealing that Cenia is not Dorimond’s legitimate daughter, but a foundling adopted by his late wife. Though Mericourt threatens to destroy her reputation, Cenia refuses to submit to his blackmail; she chooses a life of poverty in a convent rather than succumbing to his demands.  

Learning of her illegitimate birth, Cenia does not attempt to claim Dorimond’s fortune, despite Mericourt’s efforts to cast her as a conspirator. She calls herself unworthy of assuming the role of the upright Dorimond’s daughter. A paragon of virtue, she rebuffs Mericourt’s schemes, “You should blush, but for the imposture to which you wouldn’t be ashamed to make me a party! Me, deceive the best of men! Me, usurp a family fortune! You horrify me...I will only follow my duty.” Reinforcing the *drame’s* emphasis on family virtue, Cenia’s language of duty, *devoir*, outweighs her desire, personal or material. Cenia remains steadfast and righteous, despite her distress.  

Cenia’s morality reflects, in part, the careful education of her governess, Orphise, a displaced noblewoman forced to descend the social ladder after being abandoned by her

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90 Cenia in Gethner 311.
spouse. A moralizing force, she says to Cenia, “It is from this moment that you need me, to help you bear with courage the sacrifice that you are going to make of your preference to virtue.”

Orphise represents a mid-century depiction of female “heroism” – namely, the capacity to embody and to instill virtue. Conforming to Rousseau’s notion of the maternal figure as educator, Orphise advances the argument for female childrearing and homemaking; it is her place and natural task.

Graffigny channels her advocacy of feminine virtue through Orphise’s lines as if she were composing a treatise on female morality. When the governess imparts advice to Cenia, for example, Graffigny’s voice emerges:

By bearing witness to the truth, you make your innocence forever illustrious. Glory is the reward of virtue...It is often at times of direst misfortune that you must revive your courage. Often lamenting softens it...Beware of losing your self-esteem; discouragement is the poison of virtue...[flatter yourself on] the loftiness of yours soul, on the nobility of your heart, on your feelings.

Praising innocence, virtue, and courage, Graffigny stresses a new set of admirable female qualities. We see that by the middle of the eighteenth century, female agency has been recast in the language of virtue and denial. While Barbier’s Arria possessed these traits, they appeared as secondary or passive to her active display of power. This shift marks the evolution from female empowerment to maidenly modesty. Although the portrayal of women characters remained favorable, the ways in which they embodied integrity assumed different forms.

Additionally, when Arria salvaged a threatened morality by committing suicide, Cenia’s “obligatory happy ending requires ... saintly, philanthropic men who will relieve

91 Ibid 299.
92 Rousseau writes in his treatise on education, *Emile*, “The earliest education is most important and it undoubtedly is woman’s work...the right ordering of the family depends more upon her.” 5.
93 Ibid 316.
the plight of the oppressed.” Clerval, the young man who loves Cenia, discovers that she is the daughter of Orphise, separated from her mother during infancy. This connection explains the natural maternal bond that Orphise has always felt for her charge. Clerval convinces Orphise’s husband to return to his newly reunited family, reuniting the dismembered family and restoring the women to their rightful stations in the social hierarchy. Once her father acknowledges her, Cenia’s reputation is restored and she is free to marry Clerval, whom she has always admired. Saved from ruin, she earns the reward of a life of domestic tranquility.

Although Cenia enjoys a better fate than Arria, she lacks the agency to resolve her crisis on her own behalf. Ready to relegate her life to a convent, a civil death if followed, she suppresses her own desires rather than disgracing Dorimond or provoking scandal. While Graffigny presents this sacrifice favorably, Cenia’s reliance upon Clerval to salvage her family and future suggests the increasingly difficult and constrained roles that women confronted by the middle of the century. This conception of feminine virtue provides a weak substitution for the heroism championed half a century earlier.

Acceptable Authority in Colonial America

Shifting our attention to the American stage at mid-century, we hear echoes of the antitheatrical discourse identified in France. This shared hostility linked the two countries and their theatrical traditions. This section also addresses the establishment of national theaters in the colonies and the role of religion in fomenting opposition.

94 Ibid 283.
Considered immoral by Quakers, Presbyterians, and other Protestant denominations, theater faced critics who mobilized secular support for their religious campaign. The Protestant attack on the theater parallels Rousseau's Calvinist opposition, reinforcing the relevance of this trans-Atlantic comparison.

While several of the American colonies experienced anti-theatrical movements, this section concentrates on Philadelphia, a city that became a hotbed of anti-theatrical controversy and debate. While amateur theater troops acquired growing acceptance in the southern colonies, many of Philadelphia's residents resisted the establishment of theater companies into the middle of the century. Though the concerns of Quakers and Puritans reflected traditional reservation, their arguments against the stage gathered new arguments in mid-century preoccupations. Fearing theater's ability to incite idleness, impiety, and crass behavior, the discussion of the theater as a pulpit for virtue (and vice), echoed Rousseau's anti-theatrical arguments.

The theater debates in Philadelphia featured an ebb and flow of pro- and anti-theatrical movements: a century-long series of petitions, laws, and repeals. William Penn, the colony's Quaker proprietor, declared stage plays an "offense against God

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95 For more on Quakers' political control in relation to the establishment of theaters in Philadelphia, see Heather S. Nathans, *Early American theatre from the revolution to Thomas Jefferson: into the hands of the people*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 16.
98 Shiffler 214.
(which incited) People to Rudeness, Cruelty, Loosness and irreligion." In fact, even before theater supporters and companies initiated pro-theatrical arguments, the Quaker political assembly enacted three separate bans against plays and other forms of amusement in 1700, 1706, and 1711, although these laws were ultimately overturned by the British crown.

Even after the repeal of formal legislature against theater, hostility toward performance art dominated sermons, articles, and assembly discourse. One comment in the *Philadelphia Gazette* on March 19, 1754 captured mid-century fears. The author of this letter, known only under his pseudonym, A.B., emphasized the immoral nature of the stage. He denounced play-acting as a violation of Christian values:

> Should I pretend to give a View of the Wickedness of the Theatre? I should not know where to begin, or to what Length the Subject Would carry me. For whether I insisted on the Lewdness or Impiety Of most of the Plays Themselves; on the infamous Characters of the Actors and Actresses; on the scandalous Farces they commonly tag The gravest Plays with, or, above all, on the inhumanly imprudent Dances and Songs, with which they lard them between Acts; I say, Whichsoever of these Particulars I insisted on, each of them would Furnish Matter for a great many Pages; and much more, if I should Enter upon a full view of them all.

Critiquing theater’s beguiling the senses, “enchanting deceptions,” the opposition resonated with the audience’s religious preoccupations. The theater as a pulpit for virtue and vice echoed the anti-theatrical arguments we just saw across the Atlantic.

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100 Shiffler 215.


during this time in France — paralleling Rousseau’s argument in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Arts*. Though theater proponents emphasized the theater’s ability to promote virtue for its audiences, they failed to allay the concerns of religious official about its “Monster wrong.”

Halfway through the eighteenth century, when loopholes in anti-theater legislature permitted the showcasing of some plays, American colonies like Philadelphia oversaw the establishment of permanent theaters. Governor Hamilton granted the Lewis Hallam Theater Company a license with conditions that catered to the opposition’s lingering anxieties, ensuring that nothing “indecent or immoral” would be presented. 103 Careful not to arouse further criticism, producers selected plays that adhered to standards of propriety and sentimental appeal. As Harrold Shiffler writes, “[Douglass, the Douglass Theatre Company Manager] made attempts to give the plays on his program a character which would be appealing to those who may be uncertain about the morality of the theatre.” 104 The plays that achieved popularity, therefore, championed characters whose virtuous conduct would allay lingering Protestant uneasiness about the dangers of the stage.

The selection of plays conformed to colonial society’s developing ideals regarding gender roles. Whereas early eighteenth century women -- especially those in northern Puritan communities -- worked quietly within the home, aiding their husbands in household tasks, mid-century colonial women witnessed the beginnings of an industrialized, mechanized economy. Under the market’s expansion, colonial women switched from a tradition of bartering to a culture of consumption. They left

103 Shiffler 216.
104 Shiffler 220.
their homes to sell goods for capital rather than to solely trade for subsistence. Women networked with neighbors, selling their wares to others. Reliant upon each other, women exercised a greater influence over their homes and within their towns, filling essential roles for family and neighborhood survival. Whereas previously, their work had impacted their families exclusively, their duties now extended beyond the walls of their homes. Though their work remained centered on domestic concerns, their narrow latitudes of authority began to broaden.

They established a female network centered on the market, domesticity, work, and families.\textsuperscript{105} This mutual commercial reliance perpetuated the importance of neighborly interaction among women, and encouraged a lifestyle of interdependence. Embedded within the vertical patriarchal structure, horizontal relationships encouraged socially regulating bonds and relationships. Placing the success of their families and their fates in each other’s hands, a reliable reputation became women’s currency. Creating a culture of surveillance, women monitored each other’s actions, carefully enforcing standards of propriety and ethical business upon each other. Operating within a new set of dynamics, women commanded their homes, visible and vital to society.

The changing status of women found its way onto the stage in didactic mid-century plays. Women’s newfound socioeconomic power and the simultaneous emphasis on morality gave rise to plays in which women acted as vessels of virtue, living as homemakers and hard-working wives. Though still legally abiding under patriarchal and religious authorities, mid-century female protagonists catered and

contributed to this evolving model of the active colonial woman. They portrayed women who balanced a greater control with moral restraint.

The first play performed in a Philadelphia theater, British playwright David Garrick’s wildly popular *Miss in her Teens; or, The Medley of Lovers* addressed mid-century concerns about female agency and marital harmony. *Miss in her Teens* was written in 1747 and premiered in conjunction with a performance of *The Fair Penitents* on April 15, 1754. Staged by the nation's first regular company of comedians, *Miss in her Teens* opened at the New Theater, the store-house of Mr. William Plumstead at the corner of the first alley above Pine Street in Philadelphia.

A highly publicized -- and groundbreaking -- event, the establishment of a professional comedic troupe of actors intrigued supporters and aggravated opponents. While the company acquired funding and achieved notoriety, the voices of theatrical dissent exploded in rage. Revitalizing the temporarily tamed opposition, anti-theatricalists distributed pamphlets and published editorials that galvanized their forces. They made, as early nineteenth century theater critic William Dunlap writes, "every effort...to show the evils attendant upon plays, and players, and playhouses." Despite their efforts, the governor of Philadelphia had already sanctioned the play's performance, and the show did, in fact, go on.

On the opening night in April of 1754, the curtain rose on a large and buzzing crowd. Catering to an economically diverse audience, the theater offered various

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106 *Miss In Her Teens; or, The Medley of Lovers* originally premiered January 17, 1747 at the Covent Garden in London. This comedic piece was once of the most popular farces on both sides of the Atlantic during the eighteenth century. As historian Harry William Pedicord notes in *The Theatrical Public in the Time of Garrick* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1954), 199, from 1747 to 1776 alone the play was presented at least 125 times at Drury Lane Theatre.

107 Dunlap 32.
seating arrangements and prices: box seats cost six shillings; standing in the pit cost four shillings; the gallery, two shillings.\textsuperscript{108} While this arrangement exposed theater to people of all classes and stations, this diverse audience made the theater a prime site for ideological conflicts.

Given the tense climate, it was no surprise when antitheatrical protests erupted in the pit and disrupted the play. Dunlap recounts,

[The night of the performance of \textit{Miss in her Teens}, the house was, as might be expected from the excitement, full to overflowing. In the course of the evening a great tumult was occasioned by the discovery of one of the unfriendly petitioners in the pit. He was considered a spy, and peace was not restored until he was hustled out.\textsuperscript{109}]

Despite the interruption, audiences embraced Garrick’s farce, which became one of the three most frequently staged pieces in the American colonies between 1751 and 1774.\textsuperscript{110} The governor added six nights to the original twenty-four performances granted to the players. Thus, the troupe held possession of the town until July, as their thirty nights, three in each week, occupied ten weeks.\textsuperscript{111}

A farce in two acts, \textit{Miss in her Teens} emphasizes the importance of marriage and the home. Borrowed from a French play \textit{La Parisienne}, written by seventeenth century playwright Florent Carton sieur Dancourt, \textit{Miss in her Teens} features a simple plot enlivened by romantic intrigues and humorous characters.\textsuperscript{112} Captain Loveit, who has been serving on the Continent, returns to his beloved Miss Biddy Bellair, a young woman who lives with her aunt in town. During his absence, Biddy’s aunt has arranged for her marriage to Sir Simon, Captain Loveit’s aging father. Meanwhile,

\textsuperscript{108} Dunlap 32.
\textsuperscript{109} Dunlap 33.
\textsuperscript{110} Johnson and Burling 67.
\textsuperscript{111} Dunlap 33.
\textsuperscript{112} For more information on the play \textit{La Parisienne}, see Elizabeth Stein, \textit{David Garrick, Dramatist}, (Kessinger Publishing: Montana, 2005) 76.
Biddy, as a diversion, has engaged the interests of two suitors, one foppish named Fribble and one braggadocio, called Flash.\textsuperscript{113}

Upon learning of Captain Loveit’s return, Biddy’s excitement reflects male assumptions regarding female frivolity and emotional instability. She exclaims,

"[This has] put me out of my Wits – I am all over in a flutter. – I shall leap out of my Skin – I don’t know what to do with myself....I am ready to faint – I’d give the World I had put on my Pink and Silver Robings to-day...I can’t eat a Morsel! –I don’t know what’s the matter with me – my Ears tingle, my Heart beats, my Face flushes, and I tremble every joint of me – I must run in and look at myself in the Glass this Moment."\textsuperscript{114}

Conforming and reinforcing male stereotypes of feminine irrationality and vanity, love-struck Biddy appears unhinged. She describes a series of physical sensations that register emotional turbulence. When she regains her composure, however, we note a coquettish capability lacking in earlier female figures.

She arranges a meeting in which she convinces the men to duel one another, thereby extricating her from their tangled web of affections. When Captain Loveit, the first to arrive, hides in Biddy’s chamber, Fribble and Flash struggle to woo an underwhelmed Biddy. Fribble recites some verses he has composed for her, singing and cajoling. Flash, Fribble’s “macho” foil, boasts his brawn and masculinity. When Biddy proposes that the two men duel each other for her love, however, each blanches at the thought of danger. When Captain Loveit overhears shouting from beyond Biddy’s doors, he rushes to the scene, demanding to know the cause of the commotion. Biddy explains that the two men are his rivals for her heart – claiming that they have


\textsuperscript{114} David Garrick, Miss in her Teens; or The Medley of Lovers, (New York: Charles Wiley and H.C. Carey et. All, 1747) 14.
irritated her and disturbed her family.

Captain Loveit recognizes Flash as an army deserter who fled for England at the beginning of his military campaign and demands his surrender. His spirit defeated, Flash exits, ashamed. Captain Loveit likewise degrades Fribble, calling him a “species too despicable for Correction.” The Captain’s treatments of the other male characters offer a spectrum of masculine identities to both amuse the audience and to identify an appropriate version of manhood — Loveit’s own balance of strength and sensibility. The suitors dismissed, Captain Loveit retreats to Biddy’s chambers while she confronts her betrothed, the newly arrived Sir Simon. Biddy explains that she cannot marry him since she loves another man. Although Sir Simon initially greets Biddy’s explanation with anger, his wrath quickly subsides once he realizes that Biddy intends to marry his son. At this point, Captain Loveit emerges, to his father’s amazement. Sir Simon immediately congratulates the Captain on his impending marriage to Biddy, his anxieties at ease knowing the patriline will continue through his son.

Like Cenia in the French Drame, Biddy’s world revolves around the home and a marriage plot that rehearses the dilemma of making the appropriate marital decision. Biddy, though at times clever, capable, and even conniving, remains a passive character. Although her scheme reflects a degree of authority — rejecting her guardian’s arrangements and manipulating the suitors in order to secure her marriage to Captain Loveit — Biddy’s power is confined to the home. She reacts to her bolder male counterparts; she manipulates their drives and actions to ensure her happiness — rather than asserting her own agency.

115 Garrick 32.
Despite her capacity for quick thinking, decision-making, and word play, her adherence to domesticity ultimately ensures the comedy’s happy ending. Regardless of female calculation, her ability to incite change depends on male action. As the epilogue declares, “Find the young lover is the best physician; And without helps of art or books of knowledge [Husbands] cure more women, faith, than all the college!” A critique of educated ladies, the epilogue suggests that women find security and purpose through matrimony. As we observe with Biddy, her engagement provides the cure for her flightiness and frivolity. Garrick’s presentation of Biddy speaks to a generation of men preoccupied with female power. Biddy’s success arrives through her betrothal to a “real” man – a virile, young soldier. Garrick’s female protagonist’s role is clear: She is unsettled alone and grounded through matrimony.

While Biddy’s character reflects mid-century aspirations to female domesticity, and while her sentimentality bespeaks an inherent weakness, we must note that she is not bereft of power. She represents the new colonial woman, who, despite her domesticity, impacts and shapes her environment. Biddy showcases an authority and a decisiveness that earlier female characters, such as Marcia and Lucia, lacked. A generation earlier, popular female figures in the theater abided by men’s rules. Unlike Biddy, who pursues her ambitions (albeit ambitions that secure her place in the home) Lucia and Marcia dedicated their lives to supporting men. Modeling the behavior of proper “help-meets,” they were careful not to upset male society or to interfere with political wellbeing. Biddy, by contrast, places herself in the center of the household action; she makes others compete for her attention and refuses to succumb to male pronouncements.

38Garrick 34.
Though the displacement of the French heroine from the court to the cottage drained her of agency, the promotion of the American female protagonist — the acknowledgement of her individual desire and home-making capacity -- marks a gradual empowerment. Despite the French and colonial protagonists’ seemingly equal confinement to the household, domesticity meant different things for each culture. Although women lived under restrictions, in the colonial case, these margins were less rigid, offering measures of flexibility that were disappearing in France. Although domesticity corresponds to a diminution of French female agency, it increased the colonial heroine’s latitudes of control. She has gained in authority compared to her predecessors on the colonial stage.

RELEGATION AND REPUBLICANISM: THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA

The final section of my thesis explores Revolutionary-era plays in both France and the United States, describing how theater became part of a republican discourse regarding gender roles. In the wake of these sister revolutions through which France and America cemented their cultural and political similarities — lending monetary, military, and ideological support -- we note divergent consequences for women. Although women in both republics were disenfranchised, they experienced opposite paths of progress: French women had lost their once influential voices, while American women were exercising their voices for the first time. We see the final phases of the French heroine’s decline and the American heroine’s ascent on the theatrical and political stages of their
respective countries. This comparison investigates how surrendering or assuming political power changes the sociopolitical situation of women in each country.

Victimized Virtue in the French Republic

Toward the end of the century, the capacity for feminine agency in France had been reduced to a fraction of its former glory. During the Revolution, the demand for morality, coupled with a revitalized masculine public sphere, encouraged female political silence and established a weaker female protagonist. The growing preoccupation in France regarding gender, spectacle, and morality – issues that influenced both the theatrical and social roles of women -- eroded women’s power as seen in the demise of the heroine on the revolutionary stage.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of August 26, 1789 shattered the Old Regime’s feudal restrictions and established the principle of equality before the law. The visionaries of the new France, however, neglected to specify the recipients of this liberty, inciting a five-year debate over citizenship. The universal claims of the Declaration generated arguments for female enfranchisement. Women activists and their supporters lobbied for liberties ranging from the right to bear arms to the freedom to divorce.¹¹⁷ The goals of the Revolution, however, had

only been achieved for some of men; the women of France still bore the chains of a legal, economic, and social feudal system. The subjugation of women violated the proclaimed ideals of universal citizenship and the national conception of freedom and liberty. Revealing the contradictions between Enlightenment theory and application, the exclusion of women from the declaration bespoke a tension between rights and Revolution.\textsuperscript{118} As historian Shanti Marie Singham writes, "For the men of the revolutionary assemblies, it was clear that the empowering clauses of the Declaration did not apply to women. Political and scientific thought in the eighteenth century has conspired to paint a picture of women as biologically different and naturally inferior to men."\textsuperscript{119} Although some men reaped the rewards of a system based upon natural rights and opportunity, women were relegated to social, legal and economic dependence.

As the definitions of and restrictions on gender solidified, their application to the political realm juxtaposed Old Regime emasculation to republican manhood. By encouraging women's exclusion from the public sphere, men safeguarded the virtue of the nation, removing traces of irrationality and corruption. As historian Madelyn Gutwirth writes, "Rousseauist familialism had become in the decade preceding Revolution so prevalent, so insistent, that it can be seen as a quasi-religious dogma, embracing all statements about women."\textsuperscript{120} Enforced in all facets of French society,

\textsuperscript{118} For more on republican contradictions in Revolutionary France, see Joan Scott, "Only Paradoxes to Offer," ch. 1.
\textsuperscript{119} Singham 139.
Rousseau’s demand that women model lives of propriety and domesticity encouraged revolutionaries to relegate women to the private sphere. 121

The establishment of a rigid definition of gender roles and norms aimed to limit the impact of actresses on a morally preoccupied French society. This transfer of control that occurred with the dismantling of the Old Regime imbued the rising male bourgeoisie with the power to influence society and to establish a new set of values. Mita Choudhury’s article Despotic Habits offers a useful context for understanding the diminution of the French Heroine. Though her case study focuses on a trial instigated by nuns in the 1740s, her exploration of gender dynamics reveals women’s loosening grip on power in France, setting the “stage” for their ultimate deprivation of agency in later decades. Her article analyzes a lawsuit waged by a group of fifteen nuns against their abbess, whom they claimed, “grossly mismanaged the affairs of the abbey.” 122 The men to whom these nuns entrusted their claims assumed authority through their female clients’ argument, “denouc[ing] female power at the same time that they justified their female clients’ efforts to assert themselves.” 123 The lawyers transformed the nuns’ struggle transformed into a validation of masculine right and power as they “saved” the dependent women. Though focused on the courtroom rather than on the theater, Choudhury’s article establishes parallels between gender and power that defined the legitimate political voice as masculine.


123 Choudhury “Despotic Habits,” 36.
We see this ideology on the stage where the venue in which women had once enjoyed public influence became a pulpit for condemning their potency. Moreover, the theater acquired renewed importance during the Revolution.124 As Susan Maslan insists, revolutionary theater was “the most significant crucible for public opinion.”125 The playhouse was a site for public expression – a precursor to the democratic public sphere. In this volatile context, the characters, plots, and ideas proposed by the theater carried weight as social and political commentary. A site that crystallized the gender disorder feared by antitheatricalists, the stage represented a host of social ills reminiscent of Old Regime decadence.126 The theater served as a reminder of Old Regime decadence, female prominence, and moral corruption, forces to be curbed by masculine control. Denouncing the prominence of the female spectacle, critics of the theatre such as Rousseau not only attacked actresses, but all women who challenged domesticity.

The moralizing tone of the French Revolution catalyzed the transformation of feminine heroism into virtue on the stage. Mirroring the decision to deny women rights, the portrayal of idealized femininity in the revolutionary theater silenced women. During the Terror, Jacobin leaders grew preoccupied with the women’s political forces. Closing women’s clubs in 1793, Jacobin leaders stifled the burgeoning

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124 As Maslan writes in “Susannah at her Bath: Surveillance and Revolutionary Drama,” in *Eighteenth Century Studies* 34.3 (2001) 424, “Revolutionary politicians understood theatricality to be one of the monarchy’s most potent tools in the exercise of power; theatrical self-presentation exalted the personal authority of the king while it mystified and deceived the subject onlookers.”


126 For more information on the perceived sexual power of women in the Old Regime, see Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1992), 89 – 124, in which she argues that the Queen represented the dangerous influence of women over men.
movement for women’s empowerment. Championing male rationality as the “natural and inevitable result of social progress,” the new order denied women any political role. Later, in the early years of the nineteenth century, the Napoleonic Code would place even more severe restrictions upon women.

Theater, too, reinforced to this masculine revolutionary order, cementing the dominance of the bourgeoisie man through plays and their protagonists. Women no longer appeared as capable, independent heroines, but helpless, dependent maidens, who awaited their male saviors. Though prior heroines embodied virtue, later female characters demonstrated a passive form of it. They lacked the strength to guide or enforce ethical action. While once reflecting — even celebrating — female power, the replacement of the virtuous heroine by the virtuous victim diminished women’s voices from a shout to a whimper. The vaudeville play, _La Chaste Suzanne_ premiered in Paris during the Terror in 1793, a phase of the revolution obsessed with the attainment of virtue. Although women had written _Arria and Paetus_ and _Cenia_, two male playwrights Jean-Baptiste Radet and Desfontaines-Lavallée wrote _La Chaste Suzanne_ to proscribe feminine behavior. Modifying the biblical story of Susannah and the elders, _Le Chaste Suzanne_ proposed a virtuous “heroine” devoid of all power.

In the play, Joachim must leave his wife Suzanne at home when summoned to lead the armies of Israel. Modest and virtuous, Suzanne remains within the confines of her house, venturing outside only to bathe in the garden. Already, we note the impact of the male campaign for female domesticity: While _Arria and Paetus_ takes

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127 Berlanstein 8.
128 The Théâtre du Vaudeville was constructed in January of 1791, producing mainly parodies of plays performed at the elite theaters. For more information on eighteenth-century vaudeville, see Philip Robinson, “Les Vaudevilles: un médium théâtral,” _Dix-huitième siècle_ 28 (1996), 437-47.
place in the Emperor's palace and *Cenia* is set in a bustling, more “public” home, *La Chaste Suzanne* places - and shields - the protagonist within the private realm. Alone, fenced in, Suzanne's proper niche deprives her of interaction with the public sphere.\(^{129}\) Her female person and influence is safely tucked away within her husband's property.

Unbeknownst to Suzanne, however, two of the elders of Zion, Accaron and Barzabas, have positioned themselves to gaze upon her naked body. Confronting a surprised and exposed Suzanne, the elders threaten blackmail unless she complies with their demand for sexual favors. Incensed at her resistance, the elders malign Suzanne, blackening her name before the public. Alluding to her alleged “infidelity” and questionable activity, the elders put Suzanne under surveillance. Monitoring her actions, they propagate another rumor: they assert that they have observed Suzanne consorting with an unidentifiable young man, insinuating adultery.

Although the elders fabricate these charges, their accusations damage Suzanne's purity and her husband's reputation. Brought before a tribunal, Suzanne faces a hostile, male audience. The elders demonstrate their power before the court: Renowned for their commitment to justice, no one dares question the elders' claims. The tribunal says, "You [Accaron and Barzabas] have been elevated to the dignified position of judges by the people's suffrage; the people chose you from among all the

\(^{129}\) This is following a Habermasian consideration of the pubic and private spheres, characterizing domestic life as a “doubling of the private sphere” or the “interior domain” (*Intimsphare*) that differentiated the domain of the family from the more “outer” private sphere of civil society. For further elaboration, see *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1989) 28-9.
sages of Babylon.” During the trial, Suzanne shows little resistance, periodically exclaiming, “Oh, Heaven!” Incapable of defending her honor, Suzanne passively allows the elders to tarnish her name. The judges find her guilty on trial in the public square and Suzanne resigns herself to death by stoning.

She is saved, however, by the intervention of Daniel, a young lawyer whose investigation reveals the elders’ slander. Uncovering the plot, he saves Suzanne’s life and repairs Joachim’s standing, restoring her chastity and negating his “cuckoldom.” Despite her innocence, however, the elders still blame Suzanne for tempting them. Dazzled by her beauty, Barzabas maligns, “It’s you, yes you, who have made me guilty, too adorable beauty.” As Maslan argues, “The play ...celebrates spectacle, the same theatrical power revolutionaries associated with the monarchy, when it acquits Suzanne...Suzanne seduces the spectators even as she struggles against the elders’ aggression.” Through the elders’ actions in La Chaste Suzanne, Radet and Desfontaines-Lavallée confirm Rousseau’s fears about the female spectacle; female beauty misleads wise men through irrationality and lust.

Pure but helpless, Suzanne presents a shell of the heroine’s former glory. Her “victory” bears neither sociopolitical nor communal repercussions. Pertaining only to her chastity and her husband’s reputation, Suzanne does not affect the state, as seen in Arria and Paetus, nor the community, as captured in Cenia. She does not contest her sentence or attempt to save her own life. Instead, she depends upon the

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130 Jean-Baptiste Radet and Desfontaines-Lavallée La Chaste Suzanne, II.ii. “Vous avez été élevés a la dignité de juges par le suffrage du people; il vous a nommés entre tous les sages de Babyline.”
131 Radet and Desfontaines-Lavallée La Chaste Suzanne, II.ii. “O, Ciel!”
132 Radet and Desfontaines-Lavallée, La Chaste Suzanne, I. vii. “C’est vous, oui, vous, qui me rendez coupable, beauté trop aimable.”
133 Maslan 209.
legal skills of a man, reaffirming the potency of masculine rationality rather than feminine wiles. With proof of her innocence, Daniel - not Suzanne - validates Joachim before the public domain; like the legal counsels in Choudhury’s study, the male lawyer in *La Chaste Suzanne* harnesses a power once vested in feminine, Old Regime influence.

Moreover, the elders’ accusation of Suzanne’s infidelity reflects a revolutionary-era anxiety about husbands departing for war. Nearly sentenced to death, Suzanne’s narrow victory reveals male skepticism regarding the female capacity for loyalty, commitment, and integrity. The men on the tribunal doubted her character without question; her word as a woman was not sufficient to prove her innocence. Her sex rendered her untrustworthy and unreliable. No heroine, Suzanne is a victim, dependent on the courage of men to restore her reputation. Her eventual salvation did not incite change or affect the community. Rather, it restored her innocent reputation and thereby her husband’s honor, protecting the legitimacy of his heirs. She did not champion her spirit, but rather protected a culturally mandated virtue.

**The Birth of the American Heroine**

While the women in post-Revolutionary France suffered a loss of power, the American post-Revolutionary period witnessed a swell of female authority. Though American women suffered the same sociopolitical injustices as their French counterparts, their efforts during the Revolutionary War and the achievement of republican government
initiated a centuries-long dialogue on rights regarding citizenship and equality.\footnote{For more scholarship on women’s arguments in the citizenship debates, see Linda Kerber’s \textit{Women’s America: Refocusing the Past, Volume V.}, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000.}

Susannah Rowson’s \textit{Slaves in Algiers}, a three-act play written in 1794, not only advanced the state of the American theater, but asserted women’s participation in the nation’s cultural progress. When earlier plays, especially those written in the British post-Restoration tradition, focused on feminine gentility, Rowson’s work catered to the American stage, pioneering roles that championed women’s political capacity.\footnote{For examples of Post-Restoration British Theater, see Jean I. Marsden, \textit{Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage 1660 – 1720}. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).} Aligning sexual equality with republican ideology, Rowson advocates women as both deserving of and fit for citizenship. Emphasizing the female protagonists’ private and public virtue, Rowson insists that morality entails women’s involvement in public life, rather than a relegation to the domestic sphere. Rowson portrays the women in \textit{Slaves in Algiers} as American heroines, imbuing her characters with ethical agency, patriotic zeal, and courageous action.

Readily adopted into the developing canon of American theater, \textit{Slaves in Algiers} reflects the character of the post-Revolutionary American stage and psyche. Rowson wrote at least five original plays between 1794 and 1810, but her foremost dramatic and social contributions stem from \textit{Slaves in Algiers}. \textit{Slaves in Algiers} was printed and circulated throughout major cities, in addition to becoming a stock piece in the repertory of the New Theater Company in Philadelphia.\footnote{Doreen Alvarez Saar, “Susanna Rowson: Feminist and Democrat,” as seen in \textit{Curtain Calls, British and American Women and the Theater 1660 – 1820}, eds. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991) 232.} \textit{Slaves in Algiers} opened on June 30, 1794 at the
New Theater in Philadelphia and, two years later, toured in New York City and Baltimore. Following the tours, *Slaves in Algiers* resettled in the Federal Street Theatre in Boston. The duration and frequency of the show’s run affirm the play’s impact and popularity. Catering to a wide audience, *Slaves in Algiers* continued to attract theatergoers, suggesting a broader interest in its topic of female autonomy.

The play’s feminist message immediately provoked criticism, especially from English theater critic and political journalist, William Cobbett. William Cobbett’s pamphlet, *A Kick for a Bite; or Review upon Review*, written in 1795, denounced Rowson’s play and demeaned her character. He criticized her advocacy of women’s rights in *Slaves in Algiers*, writing, “Sentiments like these could not be otherwise than well received in a country, where the authority of the wife is so unequivocally acknowledged.”

Cobbett’s comment identified a link between theater and the politics of gender, revealing that the show’s success indicated a tolerance for demonstrations of female agency.

Rowson contextualizes the appeal for women’s rights by incorporating current events. She wrote the play in reaction to Algerian pirates capturing American ships and pressing 180 American sailors into slavery. The United States’ first post-Revolutionary military challenge, the Algerian piracies affronted the nation’s newfound autonomy. While the United States won sovereignty from Great Britain in 1776, the States suffered regional and cultural divisions. Still a hodge-podge of peoples, the American population feared public defeat at the hands of a nation less powerful than the British. Facing humiliation and political ruin, the struggle against the Algerians jeopardized the fragile sense of American unity.

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Rowson harnessed public outrage in her play and tapped into nationalist sentiment to counteract anxieties about identity and unity. Her work, however, had greater impact as a response to sociopolitical currents than as a critique of current events. Through her combination of American angst and the demand for national legitimacy, Rowson -- whom Linda Kerber calls one of the, "central architects of the new female ideology of the new republic"\(^{138}\) -- manipulates popular culture to convey radical ideas about the situation of women. Invoking a "captivity narrative,"\(^{139}\) *Slaves in Algiers* transcends the theme of Algerian piracies to reflect upon the tyrannical control of men over women in post-Revolutionary America. Despite women's participation in the Revolution and their contributions to society, Rowson lived in an America that deprived all women of the rights inherent to its constitution. During the Revolution, women asserted control over their estates, aided the American militia, and demonstrated a collective capacity for civic action and decision-making. They signed petitions, participated in boycotts, and pledged oaths of loyalty. These women regarded themselves as patriots despite their sex; they also considered themselves worthy and deserving of citizenship in the new nation.

Despite the United States' egalitarian ideology, legal practice enforced narrow perimeters of suffrage. Kerber's essay on *The Republican Mother and Woman Citizen* discusses citizenship debates regarding Revolution-era women. She highlights the implications behind the Constitution's "We the People," and notes the contradiction inherent in the American gender-bias. Patriarchal roots had warped the Federal Convention members' otherwise non-hierarchal, non-gendered language. Striking yet another parallel with France, the generation of Revolutionary men in America ruptured

\(^{139}\) Saar 234
the traditional relationships between kings and subjects, and between fathers and sons, yet they failed to transgress the hierarchy between men and women. They propagated the master-subject relationship through gender, endowing the husband with patriarchal power over his wife. Men asserted their dominion in civic matters and over their homes, excluding women from participation in the new political regime. Denied rights to own property and no representation in the polity, women were dependent upon male leadership. As in France, women's legal dependence highlighted a paradox between republican rhetoric and political practice.

In *Slaves in Algiers*, Rowson pits the oriental, archaic notion of female subjugation against the democratic tenet of "universal" liberty, thus associating republicanism with female rights. The four female protagonists Rebecca, Olivia, Fetnah, and Zorina personify republican virtues of morality, patriotism, and equality. Rowson presents the enslaved women as Christian, freedom-loving heroines, in contrast to the men who are exotic, tyrannical oppressors. By connecting the situation of women to the conditions of slaves in a foreign land, Rowson reveals the continued oppression of women despite guarantees of egalitarianism. Advocating female equality, she challenges the ideological coherence of American political ideology.

The play focuses on the captivity of the beautiful Olivia, her father, Constant, and her fiancé, Henry. Sold by Algerian pirates to the unscrupulous Dey, Muley Moloc, Olivia is separated from her beloved, and must ward off the Dey's lascivious advances on her own. Olivia's long-lost mother, Rebecca, and brother, Augustus, are also slaves.

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in Algiers, held hostage by Ben Hassan, a Jew. Though her ransom has been paid, Hassan desires Rebecca as his wife, and refuses to release the American woman. Rebecca’s rejection of his proposals emphasizes her virtue, while her speeches - rooted in republicanism - reflect her strength: “No man should be a slave...Let [women] assert our own prerogative, be free ourselves, but let us not throw on another’s neck the chains we scorn to wear.” She advocates a republic in which no man or woman restricts another’s freedom. Her words capture the promises of democracy, revealing the discrepancy between ideology and application. She rejects the admonitions and threats of a patriarchal captor, espousing her desire for independence and liberty.

As Linda Kerber’s essay suggests, characters such as Rebecca make a compelling argument for women’s social construction as the “Republican Mother.” While men uneasy with female power denigrated strong women as “manly” and “unfitting,” those whom Kerber calls Republican Mothers were the only group of strong women spared male criticism. While the Republican Mother did not brandish political autonomy, bound by marriage and denied citizenship, her elevation to a paragon of morality made strides for females. Women could now contribute to society through cultivating patriotism – in the home and in the community – and through safeguarding virtue. As Kerber writes, “Those who shared the vision of the Republican Mother usually insisted upon better education, clearer recognition of women’s economic contributions, and a strong political identification with the Republic.”

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142 Kerber, Republican Mother, 118.
with the republic shifted the female domain from the household to civic culture, enmeshing the roles of active mothering and educating with citizen-building. Consistent with Kerber’s model of Republican Mother as Educator, Rebecca spends her captivity teaching American values to Hassan’s daughter, Fetnah. She preaches the rights of women and praises liberty. Rebecca’s teachings resonate with Fetnah, an unwilling concubine to the Dey, inciting her to pursue freedom. Fetnah attributes her new mindset to Rebecca’s republican ideology as she says in the first act, “It was [Rebecca] who nourished in my mind the love of liberty, and taught me woman was never formed to be the abject slave of man. Nature has made us equal with them, and gave us the power to render ourselves superior.” Encouraged by American social and religious ethics, Fetnah falls in love with a free Christian slave, Frederick, who is aiding Henry to organize an escape. She violates her loyalties to her father and decides to help the captive Americans. As Fetnah romanticizes, “[Rebecca] came from that land, where virtue in either sex is the only mark of superiority. She was an American...take me to that charming place where...women can do just as they please.” Here, Fetnah rejects filial obedience in the name of a higher truth. Her loyalty to the republican cause overrides her loyalty to her father and kin, demonstrating a female competence for committed citizenship. Through Fetnah’s radical decision, Rowson proposes that virtue has no sex.

The added support of Zorina, the Dey’s newly converted Christian daughter, strengthens the American resistance, as well. Zorina ignores her father’s wishes, rejecting Algeria’s patriarchal structure in favor of “American convictions.” Joining the captives’

143 Rowson, 2.2.
144 Rowson, 2.2.
escape efforts, her work as a messenger allows the family to forge a means of communication. When Zorina reveals Henry’s dangerous plan, however, Olivia decides to exchange her freedom to the Dey for that of her beloved and her family. Rather than degrade her values by submitting to the Dey, Olivia plans to commit suicide prior to the marriage ceremony. Before she can execute her fate, however, the slaves in the city stage a rebellion. Toppling the Dey’s power, the slaves’ revolt forces the corrupt leader to reckon with his own immorality. Realizing the error of his ways, he releases the prisoners. Free to enjoy the liberty granted by the slave revolt, the characters reunite and rejoice at the play’s conclusion.

Though the male captives plot an escape and the slaves’ actions save Olivia’s life, the women emerge as the play’s heroines. Their enactment of republican thought reinforces their morality and courage, while their male counterparts, underdeveloped “stock characters,” engage in failed attempts and idle talk. Furthermore, despite a happy ending, Slaves in Algiers diverges from the typical marriage-based comedic conclusion. Though the play does contain love stories, marriage is never discussed. Rowson portrays her female characters, regardless of marital status, as independent and freethinking women. Through their denial of traditionally prescribed roles in the final scene, Rowson cements the female characters’ subversion of the patriarchy, as seen throughout the entire play.

This undermining of male dominance fuels Rowson’s egalitarian demands. In fact, at the end of her play, Rowson pushes for female control, as the play’s epilogue reads, “Well, ladies, tell me: how d’ye like my play? The creature has some sense, methinks you say; She says that we should have supreme dominion, and, in truth, we’re all of her opinion. Women were born for universal sway; Men to adore, be silent, and
obey.” Though, in reality, hard-won civil liberties were still denied to women, Rowson’s play opens an imaginative space for their attainment. As demonstrated in the women’s patriotic fervor in *Slaves in Algiers*, women’s relegation to non-citizens did not impede their involvement in the state. Thus, while still relegated to subservient positions, women adopted the language of equality that would eventually secure their rights.

*Slaves in Algiers* presents the new vision of the American Heroine at the turn of the nineteenth century. When female protagonists were confined to domestic roles, their triumphs seemed inconsequential. Rowson’s women, however, earned the title of heroines. They not only resolved the show’s dilemma on their own merit, but also demonstrated the potential for female empowerment beyond the stage. Rowson’s emphasis on universal natural human rights suggests the construction of a genderless citizenship in which the criteria for suffrage did not exclude women. By enmeshing arguments for sexual equality in the language of patriotism, Rowson made her message consistent with American values. Although previously denied a public role and voice, Rowson’s heroines demand female autonomy and make it inextricable to republican ideology. In asserting the strength of republicanism, they establish a collective female voice. The Heroines idealize an America in which womanhood and freedom were not mutually exclusive.

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145 Rowson, epilogue.
CONCLUSION

Despite the new American model of republican femininity, old paradigms haunted and inhibited women’s efforts to secure citizenship. During the American Revolution and the Early Republic, Addison’s *Cato* that premiered in 1736 was revived to great applause. The play’s symbol of resistance to imperial rule resonated with the American revolutionaries and their cause. A favorite play of George Washington, *Cato* was referenced, quoted, and produced with greater frequency than ever before.\(^{146}\) As we may recall, *Cato’s* plot linked two causes: political liberty and female virtue. Thus, although *Cato’s* promoted democratic ideals, its renewal reasserted a version of womanhood suited to masculine tastes. The play’s revival at the end of the century reinforced the association between republican politics and republican domesticity, encouraging women to return to their traditional behavior as quiet, unassuming, and docile. Noah Webster, eighteenth century American lexicographer and author of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, used the play to align female virtue with subservience and, in so doing, undermined generations of women’s advancement. His chapter on modesty, for example, praised the meek virtue of *Cato’s* Marcia, writing,

> The author of Cato, who is known to be one of the most modest and most ingenious person of the age we now live in, has given virtue a delicate name in the tragedy of *Cato*, where the character of Marcia is first opened to us. I would like to have all ladies to have a mind to be thought well bred, to think seriously on this virtue, which he so beautifully calls the sanctity of manners.\(^{147}\)

\(^{146}\) Litto 28.  
\(^{147}\) Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking*, (Hartford, 1796), 181 – 184.
Webster’s tribute to Marcia advocated that women embrace their former roles. He reified an ideology that championed masculine independence at the expense of feminine dependence. Plays such as *Cato* sought to empower and to unite men. They showcased the vitality of a male republicanism by contrasting male protagonists from weaker female foils. Similarly, many elite men promoted male leadership by demoting female competence, banning together to suppress women’s growing autonomy.

The newly-formed United States, however, did not maintain the early colonial culture and political climate. Sixty years had passed since *Cato*’s original production, and, within that time, women had demonstrated themselves as indispensable agents of the economy and members of their communities. Their active involvement during the Revolution not only reaffirmed their importance, but also signaled a capacity for citizenship. The obsolete model proposed by Addison’s *Cato* clashed with the new, female-fashioned American womanhood. The coexistence of Addison’s women and Rowson’s women on the American stage bespeaks an ideological tension and a debate over women’s rights that would continue for centuries.

Although men in the early Republic did not recognize women as legal equals, male involvement in this conversation indicated a positive step for women’s advancement. The existence of a discussion over sexual equality granted American women a space to express their arguments — an opportunity that was denied to their French counterparts. When the Jacobins closed the French women’s political clubs in 1793, they silenced what had been a powerful and persuasive female voice. By eliminating potential Agrippina-types, the Jacobins also jettisoned a place for women like Arria. Proposing a country of dutiful “Cenias” and chaste “Suzannes,” French
republicans eliminated any space for political women. Even after the French Revolution had ended and a new regime began under Napoleon Bonaparte, women did not regain their collective voice. Forbidden from exerting any control over public and familial matters, successive governments under the Directory and Napoleon ensured women’s civil death. The Napoleonic Code codified their powerlessness into law, legally enforcing women’s vulnerability and dependence. In contrast to their Old Regime predecessors, they could no longer publish novels or plays under their own names. They lost both political capacity and an authorial voice for contesting this loss.

Women in these sister republics had arrived at seemingly similar places in the political sphere: neither had achieved the vote, status as property owners, or social equality. Beneath the surface, however, their respective prospects were radically different. American women channeled social, political, and economic changes to their advantage. They adapted with colonial and national demands to become consumers and patriots in their own right. Their promotion from servile helpmeets to republican mothers manipulated traditional gender roles and forged an argument for sexual equality. French women living under the Napoleonic Code, however, had lost their political influence and civil authority. Over the century, the masculine backlash against the Old Regime, advocacy of the domestic sphere, and establishment of the Republic, stripped women of their power and then denied them a space to protest. Heroic, capable women were reduced to modest, domesticated maidens. As French women faced the turn of the nineteenth century, they had become victims. When the American Heroines rose to the stage, the French Heroines faded into a distant memory.

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