



Mrs. Warren in 1763 by John Singleton Copley.

“A POLITICAL REVERIE” (Jan. 1774) by Mercy Otis Warren

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), from Plymouth, Mass., is usually not among the Revolutionary War intellectual figures we initially become acquainted with. And yet, aside *perhaps* for a few exceptional geniuses that might be named, the America of the time produced no more learned, capacious, and penetrating a mind. The sister of the prominent firebrand James Otis and wife of the relatively inconspicuous James Warren, Mercy was also fairly influential in and around Boston in the years leading up to Lexington and Concord. Overshadowed by Hancock, Joseph Warren, and the Adamses, however, and no doubt also because she was a woman, her part in helping to form the radical consciousness of the Bostonians has tended to be neglected. Part of the reason for this in retrospect, I think, is that not a few men found her intimidating; and although somewhat staid and old fashioned in her outlook and sensibility, it is no little astonishing how correct and prophetic she proved on so many points of fact and controversy. Much like her British contemporary, Catharine Macauley, with whom she corresponded, her grasp of the state of affairs between Britain and America, and her foresight respecting the future of the latter, shows her to have possessed a level of understanding that one would think only a historian with the benefit of decades or more of hindsight could ever have realized.

In company with Rev. William Gordon, Dr. David Ramsay, and John Marshall, she was one of the first to write an at length and comprehensive history of the American Revolution, and of these only Ramsay can vie with her for depth of insight and wisdom of retrospective reflection. At the same time, and allowing for occasional and pardonable lapses in her information or interpretation of specific isolated events, her version exceeds the rest in balance, clarity and orderliness of composition.¹

In addition to her very thoughtful history, Warren wrote poetry and several plays. The plays, emanating as they did from the pen of a conservative female whose day to day focus was ordinarily on family and domestic affairs, and though subsequently well spoken of by critics and literary historians, were never staged.² Respecting her poetry, her visionary verses on the future of America imparted a greater impact; preceding as they did the “Rising Glory of America” poems (Emory Elliott’s phrase; taken from a title of one ambitious such piece co-authored by Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge) of, for instance,

¹ All four historians, as is well known, were influenced by and relied heavily on the *Annual Register*, edited by Edmund Burke. Nonetheless, it is false, as some have done, to infer or ignorantly assume that these writers included no new or original material of their own. And in Warren’s case, we might add, she sought to bring to her task the universal perspective and classical erudition of Gibbon.

² For more on Otis’ stage compositions, see Cheryl Z. Oreovicz’s “Heroic Drama for an Uncertain Age: The Plays of Mercy Otis Warren,” included in *Early American Literature and Culture: Essays Honoring Harrison T. Meserole* (1992), edited by Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, p. 192; and also Moses Coit Tyler’s *The Literary History of the American Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 193-198.

Phillis Wheatley Peters, David Humphreys, Timothy Dwight, Philip Freneau, and Joel Barlow.³ Certainly none bettered Warren in such mantic mini-epic. As demonstration of which, the following is “A Political Reverie,” written in January 1774; that appeared in her 1790 volume (dedicated to Washington) *POEMS, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*,⁴ that reveals her at her most sagacious and uncanny. We see in such a work, that for some the events of Lexington came as no surprise whatsoever, and before shots were ever fired, there was already in place a reconciliation and peace movement that wished for and sought to avert what promised to be inevitable and impending bloodshed.

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As fairy forms, the elfin airy train,  
And sylphs, sometimes molest the learned brain,  
Delusive dreams the matron’s bosom swell,  
And, ancient maids, the fancied vision, tell;  
So beaux and belles see routs and balls in dreams,  
And drowsy preachers chop polemic themes;  
The statesman’s dream, in theory creates,  
New perfect forms, to govern broken states.

Logistic scribblers dream of sleeping souls,  
And dreaming bucks drown reason o’er their bowls;  
The doubting deist dreams of Styx and fate,  
Yet laughs at fables of a future state,  
’Till Charon’s boat shall land him on a shore  
Of which the dreamer never dreamt before:  
As sportive dreams infest all ranks of men,  
A dream, the visionary world, may read again.

[*This Reverie was first published January, 1774, previous to the breaking out of the Civil War, while America was oscillating between a Resistance by Arms and her ancient Love and Loyalty to Britain.*]<sup>5</sup>

Let Grecian bards and Roman poets tell,  
How Hector fought, and how old Priam fell;  
Paint armies ravaging the ’Ilian coast,  
Shew fields of blood and mighty battles lost;  
Let mad Cassandra, with dishevell’d hair,  
With streaming eye, and frantic bosom bare,  
Tell dark presages, and ill boding dreams,  
Of murder, rapine, and the solemn themes,  
Of slaughter’d cities, and their sinking spires,  
By Grecian rage wrap’d in evening fires;  
To bolder pens I leave the tragic tale,  
While some kind muse from Tempe’s gentle vale,  
With softer symphony shall touch the string,  
And happier tidings from Parnassus bring.

Not Caesar’s name, nor Philip’s bolder son,  
Who sigh’d and wept, when he’d one world undone;  
Who drop’d a tear, though not from pity’s source,  
But grief, to find some bound to brutal force,  
Shall tune my harp, or touch the warbling string;

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<sup>3</sup> Though be it noted, John Trumbull’s “Prospect of the Future Glory of America” (1770) antedates all of them (including Warrens’ “Reverie.”)

<sup>4</sup> pp. 188-194.

<sup>5</sup> *Ed. Note.* Warren’s brackets.

No bold destroyers of mankind I sing;  
These plunderers of men I'll greatly scorn,  
And dream of nations, empires yet unborn.

I look with rapture at the distant dawn,  
And view the glories of the opening morn,  
When justice holds his sceptre o'er the land,  
And rescues freedom from a tyrant's hand;  
When patriot states in laurel crowns may rise,  
And ancient kingdoms court them as allies;  
Glory and valour shall be here display'd,  
And virtue rear her long dejected head;  
Her standard plant beneath these gladden'd skies,  
Her fame extend, and arts and science rise;  
While empire's lofty spreading sails unfurl'd,  
Roll swiftly on towards the western world.

Long she's forsook her Asiatic throne,  
And leaving Afric's barb'rous burning zone,  
On the broad ruins of Rome's haughty power  
Erected ramparts round fair Europe's shore;  
But in those blasted climes no more presides,  
She, o'er the vast Atlantic surges rides,  
Visits Columbia's distant fertile plains,  
Where liberty, a happy goddess, reigns.

No despot here shall rule with awful sway,  
Nor orphan's spoils become the minion's prey;  
No more the widow'd bleeding bosom mourns,  
Nor injur'd cities weep their slaughtered sons;  
For then each tyrant, by the hand of fate,  
And standing troops, the bane of every state,  
Forever spurn'd, shall be remov'd as far  
As bright Hesperus from the polar star;  
Freedom and virtue mall united reign,  
And stretch their empire o'er the wide domain.  
On a broad base the commonwealth shall stand,  
When lawless power withdraws its impious hand;  
When crowns and sceptres are grown useless things,  
Nor petty pr[a]jetors<sup>6</sup> plunder here for kings.

Then bless'd religion, in her purest forms,  
Beyond the reach of persecuting storms,  
In purest azure, gracefully array'd,  
In native majesty shall stand display'd,  
'Till courts revere her ever sacred shrine;  
And nobles feel her influence divine;  
Princes and peasants catch the glorious flame,  
And lisping infants praise Jehovah's name.

But while methought this commonwealth would rise,  
And bright Millenian prospects struck my eyes,  
I wept Britannia, once Europa's pride,  
To fame and virtue long she stood ally'd;

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<sup>6</sup> *Ed. Note.* Evidently referring to Royal Governors, such as Thomas Hutchinson.

This glorious queen, the mistress of the isles,  
Torn up by faction, and intestine broils,  
Became the prey of each rapacious arm,  
Strip'd and disrob'd of every native charm.

Strong and erect, like some fair polish'd tower,  
She long defy'd each neighb'ring hostile power,  
And sent her brave and valiant sons in quest  
Of foreign realms, who by no fear repress'd,  
The sinking cliffs of Europe's happy shore,  
They left behind, new climates to explore.

They quitted plenty, luxury and ease,  
Tempted the dangers of the frozen seas --  
While hope's lost breezes fann'd the swelling sails,  
And fame and glory spurn'd the ruder gales,  
And smooth'd the surge that roll'd from shore to shore,  
A race of heroes safely wafted o'er.  
Who pitch'd their tents beneath the dismal shade,  
Where wild woods roar'd, and savages betray'd;  
Cities they rear'd around barbarian coasts,  
And planted vineyards o'er the barren wastes.  
In Britain's lap the rich produce was pour'd,  
(Which heaven, benignant, plentifully shower'd,)  
'Till she, ungrateful, join'd an impious band,  
And forging shackles with a guilty hand,  
Broke the firm union whence her vigour grew,  
Dissolv'd the bands, and cut the sinews through.

Here a bright form, with soft majestic grace,  
Beckon'd me on through vast unmeasur'd space;  
Beside the margin of the vast profound,  
Wild echos play'd and cataracts rebound;  
Beyond the heights of nature's wide expanse,  
Where mov'd superb the planetary dance,  
Light burst on light, and suns o'er suns display,  
The system perfect, nature's God had laid.

This scale of altitude presented whole,  
The various movements of the human soul;  
Starting, I cry'd -- "Oh! sacred form forgive,  
Or me from yonder nether world remove; --  
Has freedom's genius left Britannia's shore?  
And must her sleeping patriots live no more?  
Arise, ye venerable shades! inspire,  
Each languid soul with patriotic fire;  
'Till every bosom feels a noble flame,  
And emulates a Locke, or Sydney's name."

The seraph smil'd ineffably serene,  
And shew'd me truth, inscrib'd on her bright mien:  
She said -- "The glow from breast to breast is spread,  
From sire to son the latent spark's convey'd;  
Let those bless'd shades rest in their sacred urns,  
Lie undisturb'd -- the glorious ardour burns,  
Though far transferr'd from their lov'd native soil.

Virtue turn'd pale, and freedom left the isle,  
When she stretch'd out her avaricious hand,  
And shew'd her sons her hostile bloody wand;  
United millions parried back the blow,  
Britain recoil'd, and sadly learnt to know,  
Cities with cities leagu'd, and town with town,  
She trembled at her fate when half undone."

Think not this all a visionary scene,  
For he who wields the grand, the vast machine;  
Who bids the morn from eastern ocean rise,  
And paler Cynthia cheer the midnight skies;  
Who holds the balance -- who stretch'd out the line --  
O'er all creation form'd the grand design,  
Ten thousand worlds to scatter o'er the plain,  
And spread new glories through his wide domain;  
Who rules the stars, and taught the rolling spheres  
To measure round the quick revolving years;  
At awful distance from his radiant throne,  
Suspended, this terrestrial ball hangs down;  
Yet still presides and watches o'er the fates,  
Of all the kingdoms that his power creates.

Ere he winds up the closing act of time,  
And draws the veil from systems more sublime,  
In swift progression, westward throws the bowl,  
'Till mighty empire crowns the spacious whole.

Then this far distant corner of the earth,  
Shall boast her Decii's and her Fabii's birth;  
When the young heroes, wondering, shall be told,  
That Britain barter'd worth for lust of gold;  
How, lost in luxury, her silken sons,  
Forgot her Edwards claim'd the Bourbon crowns;  
That tyrants trembled on their tott'ring throne,  
And haughty monarchs fear'd Britannia's frown.

But ah! how tarnish'd her illustrious name,  
Despoil'd of wealth, of grandeur, and of fame!  
Buried beneath her complicated crimes,  
A sad memento to succeeding times:  
Dismay'd, she yet may lift her suppliant hand,  
And ask protection from this injur'd land;  
Whose peaceful sons will draw oblivion o'er  
Unnumber'd wrongs, and [e]rase the blacken'd score:  
Yet heave a sigh, and drop tire tender tear,  
And weep Britannia's punishment severe;  
When they researching o'er some future chart,  
Scarce find the seat of mighty Brunswick's court;<sup>7</sup>  
For neighbouring states may seize the venal isle,  
And Gallic princes distribute the spoil.  
The lion, prostrate on the naked strand,  
May see the lilies waving o'er the land;  
May see Columbia's embrio pendants play,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ed. note.* In Hanover.

And infant navies cut the wat[e]ry way;  
Fame's outstretch'd wing may on the eastern gales  
Leave the proud Thames, and spread her whiten'd sails.

While rising empire rears her purple crest,  
Triumphant commerce hails the gladden'd west,  
And steers her course to Zembla's frozen pole,  
Or lands in India, free from the control  
Of base, monopolizing men, combin'd  
To plunder millions, and enslave mankind.  
From Florida to Nova Scotian shores  
She pours her treasures and unloads her stores;  
Round all the globe she fails from sea to sea,  
And smiles and prospers, only when she's free.

But here the sweet enchanting vision fled,  
And darken'd clouds flash'd lightnings o'er my head;  
The seraph solemn stretch'd abroad her hand,  
The stars grew pale beneath her burnish'd wand;  
On her pale front disgust and sorrow hung,  
And awful accents trembled on her tongue.

Behold! she said, before these great events,  
Absorb'd in tears, America laments;  
Laments the ravage of her fruitful plains,  
While crimson streams the peaceful villa stains.

The weeping matron sighs in poignant pain  
O'er her last hope, in the rude battle slain:  
The bleeding bosom of the aged sire,  
Pierc'd by his son, will in his arms expire;  
For death promiscuous flies from ev'ry hand,  
When faction's sword is brandish'd o'er the land;  
When civil discord cuts the friendly ties,  
And social joy from every bosom flies;  
But let the muse forbear the solemn tale,  
And lend once more, the "*Grecian painter's veil*."

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For the complete text of *Poems Dramatic and Miscellaneous* (1790), see:
<http://www.archive.org/details/poemsdramatican02warrgoog>

While for Warren's *History of the rise, progress, and termination of the American Revolution. Interspersed with biographical, political and moral observations* (1805):

Vol. 1
<http://www.archive.org/details/historyriseprog01unkngoog>

Vol. 2
<http://www.archive.org/details/historyriseprog02unkngoog>⁸

⁸ The pdf at that link (at the time of writing this) is in error. For the .pdf, as such, of volume 2, see instead:
http://books.google.com/books?id=7RwTAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22mercy+otis+warren%22&hl=en&ei=WY37TaQSh9CwA7718N8F&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

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