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Women's "Enlightened" Re-visions of a New World

Dorothea Steiner

My interest in the subject arises from the context of my current teaching of a literary survey course on the colonial and early national periods and a pro-seminar on "Utopia and Gender in America"; it furthermore goes back to an input given me at the 1998 Biennial EAAS Conference in Lisbon, "Ceremonies and Spectacles: America and the Staging of Collective Identities," in particular, Udo Hebel's focus on "New England Forefathers' Day Celebrations" (pub. 2000). Hebel's guest lecture in my survey course helped to frame the literary agenda with a cultural one which is inseparably linked to American self-definition and tribal and national consciousness as it evolves in the Eastern colonies between the early 1600s and the 1770s and 80s. The ways in which the United States "celebrates itself and sings itself" (to borrow Walt Whitman's phrase) and displays its own mythmaking by way of rituals, festivals, anniversary celebrations, etc. is a prominent way of making public what the country considered a Usable Past. This has led me to asking two questions: one, how well and in what ways the incorporation of the New England heritage – what Lawrence Buell calls "pilgrimism" (199) – into the national founding myths works, and what the resulting combined image-making does for the public image of America as New World "utopia achieved." I considered these questions in view of the classic issues reviewed in depth by James Oliver Robertson in his *American Myth, American Reality*, namely, "Mission and Destiny," "The Pursuit of Happiness," "E Pluribus Unum," and "The Power and the Glory." Every teacher of American literature and culture must rethink the genesis and persistence of such founding myths periodically and in different situational contexts. For me, the conference theme proved fruitful, as it invited me to review a long-standing interest of mine, to trace women's poetic attitudes toward the dominant vision from Puritanism through the Victorian Age. The result is nothing less than a set of re-visionings and, consequently, re-visions of the "high (American) argu-

ment" (Milton's term in "Paradise Lost"); in other words, a new, enlightened argument raised by America's female voices.

The poems from Anne Bradstreet, some anonymous poetesses of the 18th century, and Emily Dickinson sound the theme of rebellion; the Ladies of Seneca Falls provide the "Declaration of Sentiments"; that and a propaganda play from the Suffrage Movement, "The Spirit of Seventy-Six," respond directly to the "Declaration of Independence" as one of the prime model texts of the mainstream vision. What generated this ideology? Three things: that idealistic Europeans dreamed and made utopian projections of a better world, that "America" proved such an accessible New World for immigrants, and that some reasonable and liberty-craving thinkers eventually created a new socio-political republican reality to be shared by "all men." The combination of America as dreamed, found, and created constituted a vision so representative as to re-echo in presidential speeches through the ages and to shape presidential campaigns, as the recent one between candidates Bush Jr. and Gore proved. The revisionist side of this coin gains its particular momentum from the fact that we live in a post-feminist age, culturally as well as academically. It is an age in which feminism is more than ever politically not correct, where the female agenda has become subsumed by "gender studies." If this means that philosophical, social, and cultural concepts and realities are finally seen as basically gendered ones, it is a good thing. If it means no more than a new name for "not male" or anti-patriarchal, it is a misnomer. As a person growing up with American Studies since the early 1970s, I know that without the feminist movement in literary studies, literary criticism would not have been reshaped into Cultural Studies. A topic like this conference's seeks to study America from a broadly cultural perspective. To identify and analyze subversions of the quasi-universal "foundational myths" takes tools sharpened by the feminist insistence on women's equal rights to vision. With this equipment, one can approach such "shared Truths" and find them both mocked and shared.

The feminist discourse of the 1960s evolved from women's double recognition that they were part of the culture while at the same time also being apart from it. This made them challenge cultural definitions by giving evidence from history or, rather, from "her story," those unburied bits and pieces strung together. In the American founding myths, women only seemed included: that "all men are created equal," that they were "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; and that "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the con-

sent of the governed . . .", every American can read in the "Declaration of Independence" (Jefferson, *Heath I*, 919-920).¹ This statement about equal "human rights" and opportunities, however, could easily be identified as gender- and color blind. Neither women nor any non-whites could claim these rights; yet, at least white women were expected to share the patriotic pride in them and feel the exceptionalism of the young nation thus self-assertively self-defined. American women's "dream" of equality was "deferred" (Langston Hughes' term) until 1920, postponed on behalf of the more pressing need for the Negro's emancipation from slavery. (While the 15th Amendment was passed in 1865, the 19th Amendment had to wait another 55 years). In the year of independence, 1776, women did not need to see the text in full to sense that they were not considered fully "human" (my emphasis). Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams, one of the founding fathers and 2nd President of the United States, entreated her husband on March 31 of that year to "Remember the Ladies" (*Heath I*, 905). She warned him of the risk of putting "unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. . . . If particular [sic] care and attention is not paid to the Laidies [sic] we are determined to foment a *rebellion* [sic; my emphasis], and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation" (*ibid.*). Hers is an "enlightened" vision educated in a climate that had abolished belief and trust in absolute authority, whether divine or political. Her voice uses the vocabulary of law and order, central to republican and democratic thinking and her reference to rebellion follows a strict logic: nobody needs to obey a law that excludes them; the "light of reason" made women see, i.e., recognize that the problem lay with gender.

Women's sensitivity toward the underpinnings of maleness in the concept of *humanity* is something that predates the Age of Reason considerably. The "composite biography" which Cheryl Walker constructs from women's literary voices in *The Nightingale's Burden* (69) results from their shared experience of exclusion from power and a denial of the authority of their own experience within the patriarchy, including the "patriarchy of letters" (my term). When Adrienne Rich and others demanded a "sisterhood" in the 1960s, she meant that women needed to feel related as by blood ties. What runs in their common history is the adoption of male-defined standards and concepts; women needed to learn to "think connectedly" as "feminists" (Rich, "The

¹ My choice of referring to the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd ed., for most texts quoted instead of to original editions should indicate the usefulness of this class text in our studying American cultural questions at large.

Antifeminist Woman," 78) in order to develop a historical awareness of their own as a first step toward understanding their place in history; or rather, in "his(s)tory and "herstory" – that second story, which was a new world to discover as a space for articulation. In the best tradition of Abigail Adams, this was a rebellious act born of a raised consciousness. Once it was recognized as sharable, one could link women's voices over the ages. Rich threatened, "when we dead awaken," women's writing will entail a whole "re-vision" ("When We Dead Awaken"). If sight means sense perception, the subsequent mental act of looking is called in-sight. Analysis of the seen and interpretation of the data make up the act of re-visioning; if this leads to a corrected version of an earlier vision, the revision of a previously held "Truth," it is a subversive act. Truth, then, loses its absolute, universal validity. To apply this to the present agenda: if the female group of "the governed" raises such a voice of correction (in Abigail Adams' terms), the system itself is under attack. And yet, the new truth is nothing until it gains a public; only then can it become unsettling.

"Unsettling" is a term that has a particular ring in a world newly settled. Used as a key figure in the American mythological carpet, it takes us straight to the key experience of the first founders: by settling the land, they meant a civilizing act. That was their "pilgrimist" mission, one ever recoverable through memory and public ritual and hence, undying. The covenant had bound the pilgrims to the new shore, their "promised land"; it bound them together in a common destiny, as a human community under God in an experiment of living "in the wilderness" (cf. Bradford, "The Mayflower Compact," *Heath I*, 251). This tribe saw itself following a typological course in God's Providential plot; it was taken for granted that the settlers were in consent about this project. No gendered interpretation was considered; some of "the governed," however, expressed doubt and raised a semi-private voice.

To hear it is an "unsettling" experience, as it questions the consensus. Anne Bradstreet, Puritan woman, poet, and mother addresses a Letter "To My Dear Children" (from the Andover MSS., first published in 1867) in which she reports on their arrival on the "Arbella" in Boston in 1630 in these words: "After a short time I . . . was married, and came into this country, where I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose" (Bradstreet, *Heath I*, 313). Her heart rose in rebellion! She writes with a purpose, for others to learn from her experience – this is best Puritan tradition. In her response to the wilderness, Bradstreet, surrounded by church and colony builders who were enthusiastic about this mission, spoke out with honest aversion. She dissented and could have been banned from the colony had she

been overheard: the commonwealth's uncontested purity, after all, safeguarded the success of God's project with His people. Bradstreet's skeptical voice would have endangered the authority of the vision: later in the Letter, we find the following reasoning: "That there is a God my reason would soon tell me by the wondrous works that I see, . . . But how should I know He is such a God as I worship in Trinity, and such a Saviour as I rely upon? . . . why may not the Popish religion be the right? They have the same God, the same Christ, the same word. They only interpret [sic] it one way, we another" (ibid., 314). Pre-feminist literary historiographer Roy Harvey Pearce, in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), came to this conclusion: "Mrs. Bradstreet is, above all, gentle, genteel. . . . she lacks . . . a characteristic Puritan insistence on fixing once and for all the meaning of the event as that meaning is somehow bound up in a communal experience" (24). The message is clear, Bradstreet cannot be called the "founding father" of American poetry because she lacks a commitment that her male colleagues share – the commitment to subdue the wilderness by all means, even at the expense of tolerance and aesthetics. It is with this in mind that we should read her confession in "The Author to Her Book" (*Heath* I, 293) that her "child" (the book) is "fatherless" (l.22) and so the mother must assume full responsibility. That the child is dressed "in rags" (l.5) and "hobbling" (l.16) fills the mother with so much disgust, however, that she sends it "out of door" (l.24). A bad mother indeed who scorns her own child. But this mother explains the child's imperfection with her own "feeble"-mindedness (l.1), a profound critique of the lack of culture and inspiration in the new world. Yet, this is not the only thing that can depress a creative mind like hers; in her "Prologue" (*Heath* I, 291-92) she adds the misogyny of the patriarchy which prescribes: "my hand a needle better fits" (st.5). This Puritan woman, unable to participate in governing and in governing souls, has her own agenda – it is called woman and/as poet. This, however, was peripheral to a consensus theory about colonial mythmaking.

Jumping ahead some two-hundred years, we hear Emily Dickinson's voice raised in its private rebellion, again a tone and message that could be considered unsettling if it did not seem so girlishly tame. But that is Dickinson's idiosyncratic subversiveness. Her poem No 251 reads:

Over the fence –
Strawberries – grow –
Over the fence –
I could climb – if I tried, I know –

Berries are nice!

But – if I stained my Apron –
 God would certainly scold!
 Oh, dear, – I guess if He were a Boy –
 He'd – climb – if He could! (J 251)

The female speaker asserts her desire and skill but does so in full awareness of its impropriety. A woman does not do the same things as a man, even if she may – even be better. The absolutist character of the patriarchal order, which designed “separate spheres” for the sexes and was the guardian of feminine purity, is emphasized by her giving it serio-comical divinity. The whole becomes absurd in that God is said to punish a girl for staining her apron. Stain she would, in fact, her femininity and, for a “true woman,” this means, her very virginity (cf. Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood”). Future mothers were brought up to be models of virtue, they don’t seek adventure; they were not supposed to overstep boundaries. If they did, where would the whole consensus theory about the sexes go?

How does all this really relate to American foundational myths? By the early Victorian Age, virtue – in the days of a Benjamin Franklin a category denominating public ethical behavior in terms of citizenship, duty, discipline, and philanthropy – was heavily feminized (cf. Ruth Bloch’s “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue”). And the more men “pursued happiness” outside the home, the more they did so in a style of “aggressive individualism,” the prototypical American masculinity trait, as Carol Kolmerten points out in “Utopian Visions within a Patriarchy” (5); after all, “. . . the building of a nation did not require purity and morality for its builders . . .” (*ibid.*).² If we ask ourselves on what public images America’s fame as a nation of progress, on what its success story rests, it is exactly that image of the strong, daring male

² Robertson quotes a story about the young George Washington told by the popular “Parson” Weems, the “parable of the cherry tree,” which according to him “shaped the minds of generations of Americans throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” It goes like this:

“George Washington, as a little boy, was given a hatchet for his birthday. Tempted by this shiny new tool, George went out and practiced chopping on one of his father’s cherry trees. When the tree was found dead. . . , George was asked by his father if he had done it.
 “I can’t tell a lie, Pa; you know I can’t tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.”
 “Run to my arms, you dearest boy,” cried his father in transports.”

Robertson concludes that this boy’s disobedience toward the parent pointed to his future as a national leader who helped to shape American myths: “the myth calls upon the energies of the child challenging the parent” (11). Recalling Dickinson’s statement, one needs to point to the double standard in the culture.

on the frontier, engaged in taming the wilderness and pushing westward – with violence against nature and all human obstacles. National mythmaking has its icons, and they are not female, not domestic. The “Manifest Destiny” of the New World has a male face; the whole myth of “Virgin Land” would not hold with a female-dominated imagination. The Garden of Eden was tilled by Adam; the New World Gardens are only typologically removed from this first Eden. It is important to note, though, that in the course of the 19th century women, by engaging in social and moral reform, were able to step out into the public realm, whereby they regained the older connotation of “*virtus*” for the concept of virtue. This was useful, as they tied into this reform their own gender-specific reform movement, that for women’s rights.

The American Eves, called Ladies of Seneca Falls, carried on the (semi-) private, emancipatory work of subversion of their literary sisters into the public domain and they did so very effectively. They undertook a literal sentence-by-sentence critique of the most sacrosanct text of America, the “Declaration of Independence,” to reveal that the Founding Fathers’ rhetoric betrayed the very spirit of democracy. E. Stanton called their revision – fittingly and wittily –, “Declaration of Sentiments” (*Heath I*, 2035-2037). It starts with the words:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for *one portion of the family* of man to assume among the *people* of the earth a *position* different from that which they have *hitherto occupied* . . . a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that *all men and women* are created equal; . . . that to secure these rights governments are instituted . . . (my emphasis).

In this version, governments are not “instituted among men,” as in the original; the other changes are noteworthy, too, as they all aim to show how severely “man” has violated what one could call, the “family sentiments.” This general introduction is followed by a catalog of severe charges in which the old He, i.e., the King of England, is replaced by the generic He, i.e., Man versus Us, i.e., Women. The tone of this is completely serious, it is equally passionate with anger and idealism and matches the original in every respect. The insurrection of the “weaker sex” is on the same level as that of the colony ready for independence from a tyrannical monarch. I take a side-glance at what happens in utopia when the gendered vision of reform enters; this happened first in mid-19th century with Margaret Fuller speaking out, and again, around the turn of the 20th, with Charlotte Perkins Gilman. At her

time, when American mythmaking was strong in terms of internationalizing the national identity, Gilman creates, with *Herland* (1915), a radical vision of a better world, indicating that a new harmony can only materialize if the sex-and-power struggle is exterminated at the root, in other words, if males disappear. Another version is given by Margaret Fuller in her feminist-utopian treatise of 1844, "Man vs. Men, Woman vs. Women" (renamed *Woman in the 19th Century*). Here, reform aims at reforming both sexes from within and in their social relations. As a first step, however, the male must be "enlightened" in terms of the "great moral law" (*Heath I*, 1715). This requires his consciousness-raising so that he may see his two prime national failings: "American Slavery. American Ladies" (*ibid.*, 1718). Only in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood can "this land carry out the principles from which sprang our national life" (*ibid.*, 1731). To Fuller, America's system-building reality has failed the founding ideals. Lincoln will agree shortly.

This is not a new story. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, women chose a variety of tones and styles in their critical responses to this "failure of '76" (my term), thereby favoring the satirical conventions of neoclassicism. Thus, the suffragist play by the Curtises, called "The Spirit of Seventy-Six" – fittingly produced at the Centenary, in 1876 –, seeks to capture the spirit of enthusiastic liberation that women felt at having achieved their "pursuit of happiness" by way of freely choosing their careers, voting, and dumping the whole domestic realm of chores on the men. Of course we laugh at this extreme exaggeration of female rights claimed at the expense of men, the farcical turning-of-tables; but at the same time we see how exploitable the founding myth was to allow extreme male-centeredness and become politically suspect by creating a most undemocratic reality. It was easy to fight the enemy abroad and shed outside tyranny; it was difficult to fight the tyrannized enemy within. The fact that this propaganda play is part of a collection titled *On to Victory* (ed. Friedl, 55-82) indicates not only that women fully shared both the spirit and diction of their country which had fought a War of Independence and won it, but also how much war, violence, and hostility were implanted in women's minds so that they could play the victory-game at all. Satire had it that the perfectly internalized national ideology must, of course, bounce back on both sexes, as true equality can never be built on the victory of one sex over the other. What makes us laugh in this play is how small and helpless the males become during the females' triumphant liberation, but what makes us smile wryly is the insight that the founders' gender-blind idealism, in fact, led to such an absurdity as an "equality" that never was one. Of course, if we read the story of America's mission to erect a

model society in the “city upon a hill” (Governor Winthrop’s term) against this failure, the whole tradition becomes shaky and all later founders’ ideals mere white male fantasies.

This is, in fact, quite appropriate, as the female voices raised in verse from the 1730s through the 1770s make a great point of education – in other words, of their sharing in an overall development of this modern, better world, America – for the advancement of Man. This should have particular resonance in view of women’s enormous social responsibility as educators in the home. As wives of public figures and mothers of future leaders – how could they be deprived of the opportunity for mental improvement – thus, less for their own and more for the common good! This is, at least, what they drive home to the men, that it is highly “un-reasonable” and even violates their own virtue, Duty. Duty is surely one of the public virtues in the 18th century and related to the root concept of masculine “*virtus*” (cf. Bloch). Women’s words are meant to have a boomerang effect for men, as they unravel the irresponsibility resulting from this unreasonableness. The satire drives home with a vengeance when they tell men how the founding myth apparently allows them to alienate women from their “inalienable rights.” That the stronger sex should need the weaker to make this contradiction clear seems scandalous. Women’s thus “enlightened vision,” creates a tension; but one which predates the birth of the Enlightenment proper by far; it is a vision accompanying women’s daily experience in a gendered world. That women writers often chose anonymity, is readable as another sign of sexual inequality they were acutely aware of: that of freedom of speech and authority of the pen. To give just two examples:

“The Lady’s Complaint,” of 1736 (*Heath* I, 710), st.2, reads:

They plainly can their thoughts disclose,
Whilst ours burn within:
We have got tongues, and eyes, in vain,
And truth from us is sin.

The poem “Verses Written by a Young Lady, on Women Born to be Controll’d!”, of 1743 (*Heath* I, 710-711), closes with this stanza:

Oh, cruel pow’rs! since you’ve designed,
That man, vain man! should bear the sway;
To a slave’s fetters add a slavish mind,
That I may cheerfully your will obey.

Here, the rhetoric of unequal rights and unfreedom is heightened by a sardonic tone and by her linking it with the race issue; no less than an analogy is suggested with the fate of the Negro. Whether this is politically correct in today's view is not the point here. The analogy carries, as both white women and all blacks were the white man's property and at his mercy. As we know, the nation eventually solved the problem of the discrimination of both, color and gender, by adding amendments to the Constitution. It did, however, not solve the lack-of-equality issue so that extreme internal violence broke out in the 1960s, when it was found – this time by all non-male non-whites – that the “spirit of '76” – and that of all Founding Fathers combined – had still not come alive. Together, enlightened feminists and ethnic minorities gave their “Gettysburg Address,” reminding the nation of the need to complete the mission and fulfill America's destiny. President Lincoln had done just that in 1863, when shouting out loud that “Four score and seven years” have passed and the work of “our fathers” is still “unfinished” (*Heath I*, 2022). It is remarkable how his reference to “this nation, under God” (*ibid.*) echoes the pilgrims' words. The “finishing” is the job of a nation reborn, thought Lincoln. The utopian goal of the national agenda is thus clear; the New World can only be “revised” in a joint victory of men and women over inequality. If that materializes, the world can finally look up to America and recognize it as a beacon.

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