

Mercy Otis Warren and Her Role in Shaping the Revolution

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Mercy Otis Warren, born to a prominent Massachusetts family in the early years of the 18th century, was well acquainted with her intended place in New England society. A woman's sphere was in the home, overseeing domestic affairs and raising her children. Despite this fact, she used her talent for writing to become a political activist and an influential historian of the American Revolution. Although she has been highly regarded for her work, she continues to be overshadowed by the more prominent Founding Fathers. Many of these men were even her contemporaries and friends. It is imperative that historians recognize the impact of women throughout the major events of history. Without increased acknowledgement of Warren and her role in shaping the Revolution, history cannot gain a full view of the War for Independence, and the effects of dynamic women on the past will continue to be overlooked.

Eileen Hunt Botting addressed this oversight of history in her article, "Women Writing War: Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Mather Crocker on the American Revolution," by examining Warren's writing and the overall effect she had on society as a woman historian. As Botting theorized, Warren "represented the vital and active political roles of women in ensuring the justification of the Revolution as it unfolded, as well as the legitimacy of its constitutional outcome long after violence had ceased."¹ She argued that these roles served as models for future generations of women. Botting sought, through her research, to prove Warren's accounts to be "not only histories of wonderful color and texture but also profound works of political theory that raise and answer fundamental questions concerning the origins of authentic democracy."² In her analysis, she endeavored to authenticate Warren as a knowledgeable and credible historian well worthy of a more distinguished place.

¹ Eileen Hunt Botting, "Women Writing War: Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Mather Crocker on the American Revolution," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 18 (2016), 91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5224/masshistrevi.18.1.0088>.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

Martha J. King also confronted the frequent omission of Warren's work from history through her article, "The 'pen of the historian': Mercy Otis Warren's History of the American Revolution." She aimed to demonstrate that Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* was "one of the few great comprehensive histories of the Revolution" and that it was important "because of what it reveals about its author and her interactions with America's second and third presidents."³ Unlike Botting, whose questions focused solely on Warren's merits as a historian, King further explored both early and recent responses to Warren's work providing insight into why she has so often been overlooked throughout history. Throughout her research, King especially questioned the "roles of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson" and "their very different reactions to [Warren's *History*] and to the author upon its publication."⁴ This, she hoped, would reveal both Warren's reliability as a historian and the reasons for her frequent exclusion from history.

Botting approached research in a purely qualitative manner, choosing to analyze the written accounts of events surrounding the American Revolution through Warren's personal perspective. Throughout her article, she closely explored Warren's response to several major events leading up to the Revolution, including the Stamp Act Riot of 1765, the Boston Massacre of 1770, the Boston Tea Party of 1773, and the formal outbreak of the Revolution in 1775. This method provided unique insight into Warren's qualifications as a historian. By examining Warren's *History*, Botting revealed that Warren's work reflected "the exceptional merits of its author."⁵ However, it was unclear why Botting's analysis covered only Warren's *History* while

³ Martha J. King, "The 'pen of the historian': Mercy Otis Warren's History of the American Revolution," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 72, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 513, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.72.2.0513>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁵ Botting, "Women Writing War," 110.

neglecting her letters, pamphlets, and political plays. Only once did she reference Warren's additional writings by quoting from a letter written to promote female education in order to underscore "women's capability to serve as historians of the republic."⁶ Although Warren's *History* was her most comprehensive creation, it was not the only reliable source from which Botting could have drawn evidence to support her claim of Warren's deserved prominence.

King's research was also exclusively qualitative. Like Botting, she often drew from Warren's *History* to demonstrate Warren's legitimacy as a valued historian, arguing that this single work "was not a mere recitation of soldiers and statesmen" but rather an assessment of "the historical underpinnings of the war for independence and its moral legacy, and included character sketches of many of the leading players."⁷ However, King additionally analyzed Warren's correspondence with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to provide a much more in-depth exploration of her reception among contemporaries. In this manner, King provided insight into Warren's obscurity: "beginning on July 11, 1807, the former president [Adams] wrote a series of ten letters to Mercy Warren, attacking her skills as a historian, refuting her research, and challenging her family's reputation."⁸ By expanding her sources beyond Warren's *History*, King addressed her research questions much more thoroughly than Botting.

By utilizing primary sources such as Warren's *History*, Botting validated her theory that Warren was a significant historian of her time and deserved much greater attention than has thus been afforded. She claimed that Warren, through her writings, defended "American women's capability to contribute informally to the realization of authentic republican citizenship through their educations and in particular their work as historians."⁹ Botting further asserted, by

⁶ Botting, "Women Writing War," 108.

⁷ King, "The 'pen of the historian'," 517.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 524.

⁹ Botting, "Women Writing War," 110.

quoting from Warren's preface to her *History*, that "being an analytical observer of the events of the Revolution enabled Warren (and, by implication, other colonial women) to develop 'a mind that had not yielded to the assertion, that all political attentions lay out of the road of female life.'"¹⁰ According to Botting's findings, Warren not only proved herself to be an esteemed analyst of the American Revolution; she also paved the way for women's inclusion into the fields of history and politics.

King, likewise, drew upon Warren's writings to support her findings. Instead of focusing solely on Warren's *History*, which was created for the masses, King expanded her research to include Warren's personal letters. This provided a more in-depth perspective of Warren's private opinions, including her own reflections on her *History*. King wrote that Warren "sent [Jefferson] the prospectus for her work of 'bold ambition,' for which she sought his opinion and approval."¹¹ Warren was clearly proud of her work and would ultimately gain Jefferson's full support. However, when Adams attacked and attempted to discredit Warren's *History* over his perceived misrepresentation, King wrote that Warren, in a letter to Adams, "accused her former friend of 'meanness as well as malignancy' and thought his correspondence was full of contumate anger."¹² King proved Warren to be a masterful historian of the American Revolution who was not easily swayed in her aim to present the truth, and she provided compelling insight into the potential reasons behind Warren's unintentional anonymity throughout history.

Botting concluded by stating that Warren's involvement as a historian confirmed "that women – if granted the opportunity for education, informal political participation, and the practice of public history – could and would contribute to the ongoing development of a coherent

¹⁰ Botting, "Women Writing War," 109.

¹¹ King, "The 'pen of the historian'," 522.

¹² *Ibid.*, 528.

conception of free and equal republican citizenship.”¹³ By committing her account to paper and filling it with analytical insights and opinions, Warren modeled to her readers that “women did, could, and should work as participants, witnesses, and historians of the cause of political independence as well as theorists of its legacies.”¹⁴ Botting referenced this influence throughout her article by comparing Warren’s views and writings to those of Hannah Arendt, a female historian writing on the American Revolution in the 1960s. In this manner, Warren’s impact became evident, thus supporting Botting’s conclusions in truth and credibility.

King asserted, in her conclusion, that Warren’s *History* “celebrates liberty as the expression of a virtuous citizenry and a value a republic must safeguard if it is to survive.” She further contended that a “history of revolution ‘faithfully transmitted to posterity’ was an important goal of Mercy Otis Warren when she took up the pen of the historian.”¹⁵ King’s use of correspondence in her research proved Warren’s dedication to the creation of a truthful account of events. It also revealed potential reasons for Warren’s obscurity by demonstrating Adams’s early opposition. In a letter to his friend Elbridge Gerry, he stated that history “is not the Province of the Ladies” and that Warren’s *History* contained many faults, including “Little Passions and Prejudices, want of Information, false Information, want of Experience, erroneous Judgment, and frequent Partiality.”¹⁶ As King successfully illustrated, Warren was a valuable historian who, despite her critics, remained true to herself and to her mission.

Mercy Otis Warren was indeed a worthy historian and political analyst. Both Botting and King supported this by providing compelling examples of Warren’s work. However, Botting focused primarily on Warren’s historical records, whereas King was more concerned with

¹³ Botting, “Women Writing War,” 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵ King, “The ‘pen of the historian’,” 531.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 529.

Warren's personal opinions. Warren's *History* was a significant contributing resource for both authors, yet both women also failed to examine her numerous political plays, anonymous pamphlets, and personal poems. King addressed these additional sources but did not analyze them for her article. These additional documents would likely provide even greater evidence of Warren's capabilities as a historian and an activist. Nevertheless, it is clear that Warren was a historian of credit. Her documentation of major events and her personal analysis of them, as demonstrated by Botting and King, showed incredible detail and insight, proving that she deserved a rightful place among distinguished historians of the American Revolution.

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