

WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

A STUDY OF OPINION AND SOCIAL USAGE

BY

MARY SUMNER BENSON

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN THE

FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK

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PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to show certain aspects of the position of women in eighteenth-century America—in theory and in fact. Such a treatment of theoretical material is almost of necessity confined to women of the upper and middle classes. Advice offered women presupposed at least a bare competence and the opportunity for a conventional education however meagre that might be. Few writers, if any, concerned themselves with the appropriate accomplishments or peculiar moral duties of women of laboring families or on the frontier. Letters and journals written by women themselves usually represent educated and leisure classes; hence our knowledge of women in the lower ranks of society is relatively incomplete and offers a wide field for further investigation.

The first six chapters of the essay deal primarily with the theoretical aspects of women's position. When education attained any considerable proportions it was inextricably bound up with theory. For this reason it has seemed best to treat most phases of feminine education in the section on theory though individual schools often represented actual attainments as well as ambitious plans. The material selected for the study of the European background represents only a portion of the literature on the subject in England and France, but it is that part known to have been available in eighteenth-century America through reprints and importations, or to have been read and discussed by Americans. Comparatively little attention is given to the European background of the ideas of the Mathers and their contem-

poraries. There was such influence through books and through direct contact, but the books which they read had little bearing on American developments after 1730, and it has seemed best to emphasize the material which influenced writers who like Franklin and Rush had lasting effect in shaping feminine education in America.

This essay was begun as a treatment of opinion on women's position as set forth by contemporary theorists, but since their ideas alone gave an inaccurate picture it seemed wise to include the later chapters which deal with women's life as reflected in legislation, in the activities of women themselves, and in the comments of prominent Americans and travellers. Such personal narratives are sometimes colored by the peculiar ideas of the writers but taken collectively they show how far the views of the theorists were carried out in everyday life. This part of the study, touching on a variety of topics, is of necessity somewhat general but it is hoped may pave the way for more specialized work on particular phases of feminine activity.

For the use of rare material the writer is indebted to the officials of the New York Historical Society, the Library of Congress and the Massachusetts Historical Society. Mr. V. H. Paltsits of the New York Public Library was most kind in permitting the examination of the Hawley manuscripts. The resources of the New York Public Library, especially in early newspapers, periodicals and Americana generally, have been invaluable. Much interesting material is in the library of Union Theological Seminary and in the educational collections of Teachers College. The author is most grateful to the officials of the rare book room at Yale University for permission to examine the manuscript diary of Esther Burr.

This study is the outgrowth of a seminar paper undertaken at the suggestion of Professor Dixon Ryan Fox of

Columbia University, who read the manuscript at an early stage and has been most helpful with advice and criticism throughout the work. Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University kindly read the completed manuscript. To Professor Evarts B. Greene of Columbia University, whose suggestions, criticisms and encouragement have been most generously and constantly given, the writer offers her deepest gratitude and thanks. The work could never have been undertaken without this assistance and advice but for any errors and inaccuracies the writer alone is responsible.

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