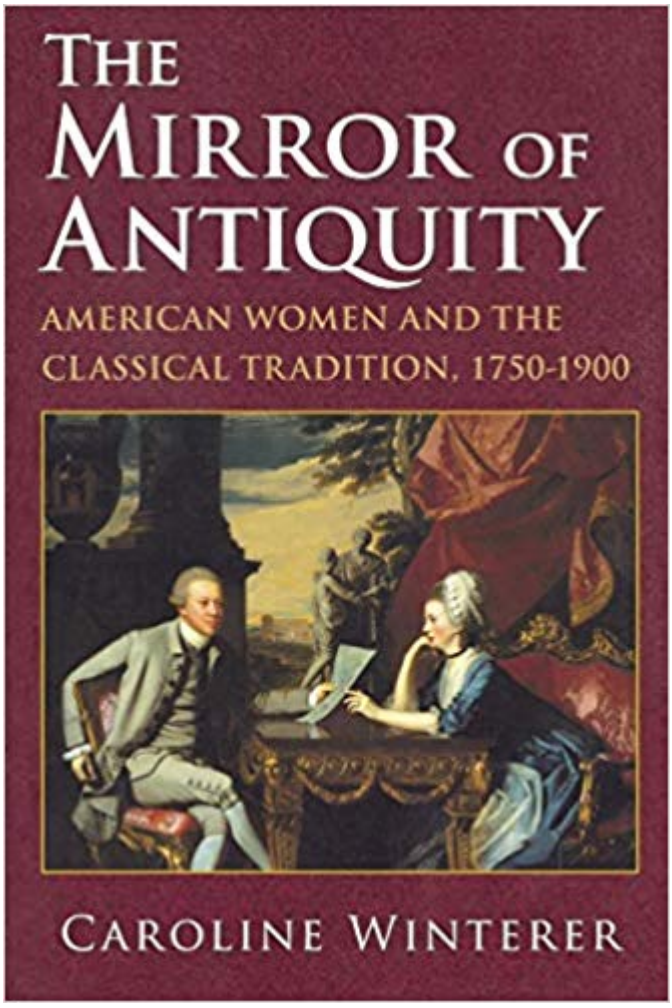
Early American Women and the Classics



With the publication of *The Mirror of Antiquity,* Caroline Winterer has cemented her status as one of the leading experts on the classics in early America. Remarkably prolific, she has published an impressive array of insightful articles on various aspects of American women's evolving relationship to the classics. While incorporating into *The Mirror of Antiquity* the findings of these articles and, to a lesser extent, the discoveries of her equally superb book, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (2002), Winterer adds much previously unpublished material as well.

The most fascinating portion of *The Mirror of Antiquity* is Winterer's thoughtful discussion of the conflicting demands of eighteenth-century American society on aristocratic women. Winterer writes, "Ancient history was acceptable for women, but the classical languages (especially Greek) were not; admiring the heroism of Cicero or Scipio was acceptable, but tying the heroism to prescriptions for modern statecraft was not; reading about ancient orators was acceptable, while declaiming aloud less so. A woman's conversation should be ornamental but not instructive in its own right; she should have learning

enough to take an interest in her male companion's conversation, but not be so learned as to surpass his grasp of the subject. The precarious balance between feminine frivolity and petticoat pedantry was so difficult to achieve that magazines and books rushed in to fill the void with advice" (14-15). Affluent women were expected to acquire this moderate degree of knowledge with little or no formal schooling in the classics.

In the nineteenth century the educational opportunities of upper- and middle-class women increased considerably. In fact, the United States became the only nation to establish large numbers of female academies and colleges that taught the Greco-Roman classics. Classical education led to the formation of female reading societies and other social networks that proved crucial to the reform movements that rocked antebellum America.

Meanwhile, the founders' preference for the Roman republic gave way to the Jacksonian glorification of Athenian democracy. As a result, college students, both male and female, studied the masterpieces of Athenian drama, including Sophocles' *Antigone*, for the first time. The play proved ripe with meaning not only for the question of women's proper role in society but also for the controversy concerning the classical theory of natural law, one of the principal ideological tools of the abolitionist movement.

Nevertheless, Rome did not fade completely from American thought. A number of abolitionist editors compared runaway slave women with Roman heroes who had also risked death on behalf of liberty. By contrast, the legend of Cornelia, the mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus who once responded to a frivolous lady's request to see her jewels by presenting her sons, continued to provide dual lessons in motherhood as the appropriate focus of women's lives and in frugality. Ironically, the latter lesson was often inculcated through depictions of the story on various mass-produced luxury items, such as silk embroideries and fans.

Indeed, the love-hate relationship between the Industrial Revolution and the classics is one of the most interesting aspects of nineteenth-century classicism. While the simplicity and frugality taught by the classics were often marshaled to combat the materialism of the industrial age, it was the new factories and railroads that filled middle-class homes with classical knickknacks for the first time and steam-powered presses that churned out inexpensive new editions of the classics and periodicals that discussed them in detail. Even ordinary homes were now adorned with classical objects, such as small statues, busts, and urns, as badges of taste and culture. Tables, mantels, teapots, pitchers, ewers, urns, candelabra, and even stoves were richly ornamented with caryatids, cupids, griffins, scrolls, columns, cornucopias, garlands, satyr masks, lyres, grapevines, and other classical motifs. Greek decorative motifs, employed on a large scale for the façades of the neoclassical buildings that dominated every county seat, were also used on a small scale for windows, cornices, and fireplaces, according to a very high standard of craftsmanship. Inexpensive English translations of the classics,

combined with cheap journals that obsessed over the details of ancient life, now allowed even uneducated women and men to become conversant in Greco-Roman history and literature.

Meanwhile, an increasing popular interest in classical mythology proved liberating for American women. The focus on mythology by such women as the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller demonstrated how the expansion of classical interest beyond political history and theory, the great preoccupations of the founders' age, to encompass drama and poetry could give politically disfranchised women and others focused on self-improvement a greater connection to the classics than had been possible in the eighteenth century.

Winterer's rumination on the Statue of Liberty brings a fitting close to the book. The classically educated Emma Lazarus dedicated a poem entitled, "The New Colossus" (1883), to the robed icon with the strikingly classical features. The poem that famously ends, "Give me your tired, your poor . . ." actually begins with a declaration of American superiority to the ancients eerily similar to the numerous proclamations of American nationalists over the previous century. The poet's very obsession with antiquity, in a poem dedicated to a neoclassical icon, lends an ironic tone to her declaration of independence from the ancients. In short, like her forebears, Lazarus doth protest too much.

I have only one caveat to add to my praise for this excellent book. The subtitle's end date of 1900 is misleading. Three-quarters of the book concerns the period 1750-1820; only about ten pages of the work regard the post-Civil War period. Winterer's focus on the late eighteenth century is certainly defensible, since the classicism of American women in this period has been explored far less than that of the nineteenth century (in stark contrast to studies of the classicism of American men, which have tended to focus on the founders). But, in view of the few pages devoted to the late nineteenth century, an end date of 1860 in the subtitle would have conveyed the content of the book more accurately.

Nevertheless, *The Mirror of Antiquity* is the best treatment of American women and the classics from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century ever published. Lucid, thoughtful, and well researched, it is certain to become its own object of study, a classic.

Further Reading:

For more information on the education of American women in the nineteenth century, see Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, 1985); Christie Ann Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1994); Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 401-424; and Mary

Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2006). For more information about classical decorative motifs in middle-class American homes see Wendy A. Cooper, *Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840* (Baltimore, 1993).

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