

# Defining virtue in colonial america



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The concept of virtue in colonial America was a multi-faceted patchwork of varied attributes and values. Its definition was complex and included a range of expectations from primarily women, who were perceived as the weak point in the social order of the new republic. Society's most virtuous women were sympathetic, pure, innocent, compliant, domestic, graceful, emotional and poised, along with a number of additional traits. Virtue was instilled in women during this time through a variety of cultural mechanisms, including literature, paintings and domestic creations such as samplers. One of the more explicit pronouncements of the importance of virtue to the new republic was Susanna Rowson's cautionary and sentimental novel, *Charlotte Temple*. Subtitled "A Tale of Truth," Rowson prefaced her work with an assertion that the fictitious story was "not merely an effusion of fancy" but rather a real life issue facing her respective society. Rowson saw her own role in the development of virtue in young women as extremely important. She claims to provide the "service" to "direct" young women "through the various and unexpected evils that attend [them] in their first entrance into life." Throughout the novel, Rowson presents the concept of virtue boldly and directly. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this is in her direct addresses to the reader. At these points in the book, Rowson turns away from the story and characters to expressly confront the reader. "Oh my dear girls," she writes, "... pray for fortitude to resist the impulse of inclination when it runs counter to the precepts of religion and virtue." (29) Rowson uses pithy yet memorable statements to convey the nature of virtue to readers, for instance: "Pleasure is a vain illusion; she draws you on to a thousand follies, errors and I may say vices, and then leaves you to deplore thoughtless credulity." (34) Rowson continues to describe the character Belcour as the

manifestation of this vice. “ He paid little regard to moral duties, and less to religious ones,” she writes. Rowson also added that he was “ eager in the pursuit of pleasure” and demonstrated other questionable personality traits. As a young woman, Charlotte embodies the perceived weakness of the new republic. The main character is naïve and easily deceived by charming men like Montraville. Thus, Rowson presents Charlotte as a bad example for all women. Her mistakes serve as admonishments for the book’s readers. In John Trumbull’s 1771 poem, “ Advice to Ladies of a Certain Age,” virtue plays a key role in the message conveyed to the women of colonial society.

Trumbull recommended women focus not on appearance — though this was important, as seen in artwork of the time — and instead realize the beauty of age. Trumbull saw beauty as fleeting and believed “ when beauties lost their gay appearance,” virtue would remain eternal. “ Virtue alone with lasting grace, embalms the beauties of the face,” he said. The poet also warned of the threat beauty presented to men because of its ability to diminish their rational sense. Because of this perceived threat, Trumbull warned women against the lifestyle of the coquette. This specific fear mirrored the universal concern of deception in colonial America and the new republic. Philip Freneau’s 1797 poem, “ Constantia,” describes a woman who has become “ sick of the world” and resolves to enter a convent to become a sister. The woman confronts a sailor who tells her that “ the shade” is where “ kisses freeze and love is snow.” The sailor advocates the Protestant valuation of love, marriage and family — three qualities that helped form the colonial definition of virtue. At the poem’s conclusion, Constantia falls in love with the sailor and thus conforms to the virtuous ideal of Christian domestic life. The centrality of virtue to colonial life was also evident in the visual arts. In many

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paintings of the time, women were activated through various domestic duties like sewing and childcare. In his 1729 painting, “Mrs. Francis Brinley,” John Smibert presented the woman holding a small child. She is also placed within the home, though a fruit tree — symbolizing fertility — is visible just outside. Most women painted by Smibert and his contemporaries were placed in a similar domestic setting, including “Mrs. Maria Taylor” by Charles Bridges (1724) and “Portrait of Catryna van Rensselaer ten Broeck” by Nehemiah Partridge (1720). Additionally, some images reflected the sentiments of Trumbull in his “Advice to Ladies.” Younger women were typically presented as idealized, while older women were at times depicted as more homely. Some older aristocratic women, however, were made to look more “beautiful” in their portraits. This reflected the higher value upper classes placed on appearance and aesthetic desirability. Cultural leaders of the time — like authors and artists — were not alone in their quest to define and spread the concept of virtue. Women themselves also confronted this task by making needlework samplers. Both the creation of as well as the final products themselves represented and reflected the centrality of virtue in 18th century society. Cynthia Burr’s 1786 embroidery sampler is a prime example. Burr, who was 16 years old when she created the artifact, would have been taught the value of domestic ability at a young age. Girls were instructed in the ways of the “domestic arts,” like needlework, housework and cooking, as these were seen as necessary to the social order of the new republic. As further evidence of the importance of virtue to young women in the new republic, Burr’s sampler featured the phrase, “Let virtue be a guide to thee,” in her sampler. The simple statement sits above a picturesque home, the women’s “sphere,” and is surrounded by flowers, which

symbolized fertility. Though the piece is fairly rudimentary in terms of its artistry and message, it demonstrates the manifestation of the virtue ideal in early American culture. The pervasiveness of virtue in colonial America is evidenced in nearly all facets of the culture of the time. From novels to poetry and from paintings to needlework, both visual and written representations gave weight to the issue. Such efforts to teach the ways of virtue were focused on women, who were seen as the weakest members of the new republic. If America represented a new “ Eden,” the colonists did not want to allow Eve — or American women — to be tempted by vice again. In many ways, the societal struggle to implant virtuous ideals into its women was a concerted effort by the masses to prevent another “ fall from grace.”