“NURSERIES OF GOOD AND WISE MEN”:
EARLY REPUBLICAN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE AMERICAN CITIZEN

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To My Mother

“Goodnight stars, goodnight air, goodnight noises everywhere.”
~Margaret Wise Brown (Goodnight Moon)
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Introduction

The impressions received in early life usually form the characters of individuals, a union of which forms the general character of a nation.
~Noah Webster

Children’s literature is inherently political; more than any other genre of literature, it reveals the dominant ideologies of its society. In “Ideology and the Children's Book,” Peter Hollindale writes that “ideology is an inevitable, untameable, and ultimately uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children” (27). These ideologies, moreover, often sustain existing power structures. Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer explain, for example, that ideology in children’s books “is always a matter of politics” because it consists of “ideas that support and empower particular segments of society, inevitably at the expense of other segments” (80).

Through uncovering and analyzing these layers both the literary critic and the casual reader gain insight into the ideals of children’s books’ authors, their cultural context, and the inequalities they often perpetuate.

Children’s books have had political motives for centuries. While a substantial body of children’s fiction has only emerged in the last two hundred years, schoolbooks have been instruments for socialization at least since the early modern period. Beginning in the sixteenth century, primers taught children the alphabet while indoctrinating them into the dominant ideologies surrounding the books’ production. American primers published before the War of Independence provide a rich example of the explicit and implicit ideologies in children’s books. Highly didactic in tone and
religious in content, they are instruments of discipline, training children to become literate but also to conform to the hierarchical structures of their society.

Eighteenth-century schoolbooks did more than express early Republican ideals; they also embodied the many tensions and paradoxes that America dealt with as it formed an identity distinct from Britain. Like a child, America sought to form an identity separate from its Father, and it strived to define itself through a process rife with contradictions about class, race, and gender.

The complexities of American identity revealed in early Republican schoolbooks are informed by eighteenth-century transitions in literature, religion, and social strata. In part because of these rapid changes in what Americans read, what they believed, and who they could hope to become, the focus of children’s schoolbooks was no longer as confined to the child’s filial and religious duty. Now the nation, particularly its paternalistic leaders, wielded authority over the child as well. The authoritarian culture of Calvinism far from vanished—it only morphed into an ideology more nationalistic in scope.

In both the Puritan and the Patriotic periods of American children’s literature, children were addressed as malleable, easily indoctrinated beings. This claim is true of all children’s literature; because children have not yet developed their adult identities, they are particularly susceptible to acculturation through the written word. Aidan Chambers explains that children haven't developed their own identity and so are unable to maintain distance from the texts they read; they haven’t learned how to become part
of a book “while at the same time never abandoning their own beings,” and in this respect Chambers calls them “unyielding readers” (93). In providing children with sympathetic characters to emulate, adults are able to mold the identity of the impressionable reader, and in doing so construct the citizens of their society.

Scholarship on the politics of children’s literature has navigated a wide range of time periods, but most research has been concerned with the last two centuries, when children’s literature became fully recognized as a distinct genre. Much has been written on the political aspects of nineteenth-century children’s literature, including Caroline Levander’s and Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s enlightening work. Lorinda B. Cohoon’s study of the construction of boyhood citizenships in nineteenth-century American periodicals has been particularly informative for this project, especially in its navigation of the multiple political, economic, and gendered dimensions to texts for children. As for the eighteenth-century child, Andrew O’Malley and numerous others have thoroughly written on the topic, but almost always with a focus on England. O’Malley focuses on middle-class ideology in eighteenth-century British children’s literature, while Stone, whose thesis has been the object of recent critique, chronicles the rise of the affective individual—and importantly the affective child—over the course of the Early Modern period.

Criticism of American children’s literature to date has offered significant insight on the construction of citizenship from the Civil War era onward. Children’s books published soon after the American Revolution, however, have in comparison
been underrepresented. I have decided to study the political motives and implications of children’s literature in late eighteenth-century America, when concerns over the education of citizens were never more urgent. The early Republican period is an especially rich period in terms of the politics of children’s literature; in the final decades of the eighteenth century, the education of the American child was explicitly designed to create orderly, obedient citizens. This authoritative focus of the period’s children’s literature embodies the tensions America dealt with as it defined itself, especially tensions between individual aspirations and communal duties. Many of the texts from this period are, like all children’s literature, about becoming individual selves.

However, in the late eighteenth century, the self was to a large extent formed through obedience to the family and the nation; the child’s individuality was given little value outside of his or her deferential and charitable relationship to society and the nation.

Despite the conservative nature of early Republican pedagogy and politics, many scholars have chosen to deemphasize its authoritarian content. Nearly every scholar of the early Republican period refers to the work of Jay Fliegelman, who in *Prodigals and Pilgrims* observes that “the bestsellers of 1776” share a plot in which children escaped parental bonds to become independent adults. He extends this observation to assert that the popularity of British texts like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Clarissa*, in which the child protagonist leaves his or her tyrannical father’s home, is a symptom of the revolutionaries’ escape from paternal bonds. Fliegelman narrows in on
Locke’s argument that the child has a natural right to freedom from parental tyranny and he is generally cited for his anti-paternalistic emphasis.

Like Fliegelman, Gillian Brown considers Locke’s significance for the Revolutionary narratives of filial and governmental independence, observing that “literature for children emerges in unprecedented numbers in the wake of Locke’s reformulation of consent” (17). Both Brown and Fliegelman focus on the figure of the child in adult writing, also neglecting to address the era’s many narratives in which children remain dependent on father figures. Brown analyzes “a new children’s literature in which parents are conspicuously absent, inept, or abusive” (23), and although she devotes a chapter on the *New England Primer* she does not discuss in depth the schoolbooks written after the Revolution and specifically for the new nation.

In focusing my study on early Republican children’s literature, I provide an eighteenth-century counterpart to studies of the nineteenth-century representations of the American child, and, among research on children’s literature of the late-eighteenth century, an American counterpart to the British perspective. I seek to better understand how the political elites’ compulsion to define and unify the American body politic materialized in their books for future citizens. That is, how did early Republican children’s schoolbooks construct American children? How did these texts conceive of the individual’s role in society, and how did their ideologies forward or conflict with the oft-cited ideals of Lockean liberalism?
Chapter One analyzes early Republican education in its transatlantic context, comparing the nationalist pedagogy of Noah Webster and Benjamin Rush to those of earlier centuries, in particular the Calvinist and Lockean traditions. My analysis of the philosophical influences on American political development is informed by a Republican revisionist approach, in which civic participation as theorized by Aristotle, Cicero, and Machiavelli was as important to America as Lockean liberalism. Chapters Two and Three perform readings of Webster’s popular schoolbooks, with an eye to how they constructed self-regulating citizens who desired earthly progress but not at the expense of obedience and deference to God, family, and their nation.

Children’s literature is addressed to the nascent adult, the citizen in the making. What remains to be answered, however, is what kind of citizen was ideal in the decades following the American Revolution. As the frequent male pronouns in the writings of Locke, Webster, and Rush anticipate, the implied reader of popular eighteenth-century children’s books was often a young white male, who was taught to defer to his social superiors while providing charity to his inferiors. Girls, on the other hand, were prescribed a distinct form of education to prepare them for Republican motherhood. Whether a young man or woman, the future citizen was taught to find his or her worth in their deference to the hierarchies of the citizenry. Somehow, these books had to balance the new political ideal of independence with traditional values of obedience. Of course, due to their race or class, many children could not hope to become citizens. It is
important, then, to look critically at texts written for children during the early Republic, asking what sorts of citizenship they uphold and why.
Chapter 1:

“A New Class of Duties”: Authority and Obedience in Early Republican Pedagogy

In the tumultuous years following the American Revolution, political elites saw education as a tool of social and political stabilization. In their proposals for educating the infant nation, writers including Noah Webster and Benjamin Rush describe children as impressionable patriots-in-training. Their proposals for widespread American education—hybrids of nationalist rhetoric, classical and Enlightenment pedagogy, and Puritan religious fervor—assert that public education will form the moral and civic fortitude of the young citizen. In turn, these virtuous, lawful citizens would stabilize the young nation; the characters of individuals, as Webster puts it, would form the character of the nation.

In composing their pedagogical treatises, Webster and Rush turned to a model of education written nearly a century earlier and intended for the young gentleman scholar: Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. As James Axtell explains, it was well known that “the book was written for the son of a country gentlemen, and that the children of the poor and the lower laboring members of society were never considered” (51). Despite their difference from Locke in geography and audience, the nationalist writers frequently cite Locke’s political and epistemological theories in their arguments for the centrality of education in the forming of a cohesive, governable body politic.
Despite Locke’s intended aristocratic audience, his educational philosophy was nonetheless perceived by the early Republicans as highly amenable to the concerns of their infant nation, for it linked the education of youth to the creation of a strong, stable body politic, consisting of a sturdy “club” of young gentlemen who would rule the American polis.

In Lockean pedagogy, the successful authority of the government was a corollary of successful authority in the patriarchal family. Locke links child-rearing to the welfare of the nation, in the introductory letter declaring, “The well educating of their children is so much the Duty and Concern of Parents, and the Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation so much depends on it” (80). He subsequently recommends that

Those therefore that intend ever to govern their children, should begin it whilst they are very little, and look that they perfectly comply with the will of their parents. Would you have your son obedient to you when past a child? Be sure then to establish the authority of a father as soon as he is capable of submission (109).

Locke illustrates the Enlightenment belief in education’s power to form the adult from the child, who is born as a *tabula rasa* and acquires his identity through experience. Thus how parents—specifically fathers—interact with their children has lifelong consequences for that child’s functioning in society. While Locke persuades the father and tutor to avoid tyranny, he also emphasizes the importance of patriarchal governance
so that the child is not only obedient when young, but also when “past a child.” Gillian Brown acknowledges the authoritarian emphasis of Lockean pedagogy, writing that “he regularly stacks the deck presented to the child. He frankly sets out to bring the child into accord with the parents’ wishes and values” (45). Brown points out that for Locke, “the child’s compliance is a temporary condition” (45). Yet Locke also recognized the life-long impacts of parental authority; otherwise, he would not have declared that the “Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation” depends on the parents’ authority over their children, for whom they are “their Lords, their Absolute Governors” (109).

Locke’s focus on children’s literature as entertainment gives the illusion that the child has at least escaped Calvinist strictures on his reading material, if not its Patriarchal family structure. Arguing that the Bible is inappropriate because it is beyond children’s understanding, Locke proposes a wider variety of literature: “Some easy pleasant book, suited to his capacity, should be put into his hands, wherein the entertainment that he finds might draw him on, and reward his pains in reading” (242). Despite Locke’s argument for “pleasant” books—what Seth Lerer terms his “recreational epistemology” (106)—the discipline of the child persists; reading must also be “useful,” for it must not “fill his head with perfectly useless trumpery, or lay the principles of vice and folly” (242). In other words, books should “instruct through delight,” a phrase not original to Locke, but translated from the Latin *delectando monemus*. Thus even entertaining books had a moral purpose, not unlike their Calvinist predecessors. More than any other books for children, Locke preferred fables. These
“easy pleasant Book[s]” were central to the Latin grammar school and read by schoolboys in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Monaghan 307).

The Enlightenment insistence on the moral usefulness of education looks backward to Calvinist pedagogy even as it introduces a more recreational outlook. Locke writes that education should train the child to “deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way” (103). Here Locke suggests that the child is not entirely a tabula rasa subject to external construction, but rather has some inherent propensity towards sin. Lockean pedagogy is thus partially indebted to the Calvinist perception of the individual as inherently predisposed to sinful appetites.

The eighteenth century is often understood as a time in which the individual gained freedom from inherited social structures, and many scholars have interpreted Locke as an important influence on this transition. Lawrence Stone argues that “One of the most important intellectual innovations of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to place the selfish pursuit of pleasure in this world at the centre of human psychological motivation” (236), but Locke did not completely subscribe to the priority of the individual. Rather, in Locke’s support for patriarchal control of a child’s desire, which had important consequences for the state, we see an efficacious precursor to eighteenth-century anxieties over individual liberties.

In its authoritarian implications, Locke’s pedagogy informed the American tension between the individual and society while nicely incorporating itself into the
Puritan tradition. This tension was not, however, entirely new to the early Republic. As Lerer writes, “the Puritan settlers rejected the old image of a ‘fatherland’ to embrace a new world of rebirth and childhood,” and because “obedience to God the Father matched obedience to a paternal England […] the great tension in children’s literature of the Puritan cast lay between this need to reinforce authority and the stress on individual development” (83). A similar tension pervades Locke’s educational theory, in which the child is a malleable, independent individual yet must be socialized to obey authority.

Throughout the tensions between the individual and society lies a recurring emphasis on labor over leisure. Both Locke and the Americans who adapted his ideas viewed industry as a moral and political good. In liberal political theory, the individual’s role to society is bound up in questions of labor; to achieve economic independence for the benefit of society, the citizen must be industrious. “Liberalism,” writes Isaac Kramnick, “at its origin, is an ideology of work. It attributes virtue to people who are industrious and diligent and condemns as corrupt privileged aristocrats and leisured gentlefolk” (1). In Locke’s Second Treatise, for example, Locke asserts that God orders man to “‘subdue the earth, i.e. to improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour.’ God has given property to the ‘industrious’ and ‘labour was to be his title to it.’” (qtd. in Kramnick, 2). The Protestant God was thus very present in Locke’s liberal social theory and shared with the colonial Puritan tradition a conflation of property and divine intervention, a tradition
in which the materially prosperous considered themselves as God’s elect because they perceived their earthly blessings as a sign of God’s providence.

The materialism of Enlightenment pedagogy, expressed throughout Locke’s *Some Thoughts*, thus inherits Protestantism while influencing eighteenth-century American ideologies of labor and property. While the materialist drive of Enlightenment pedagogy might appear distinct from Calvinism, it was in fact integral to colonial society. Indeed, material acquisition was a moral ideal. According to Gillian Avery, “Puritanism had also a materialistic side,” in which “thrift, industry and the accumulation of wealth were the cardinal virtues, and poverty very nearly a crime.” This ideology “was part of New England from the very start, as was the detestation of idleness. Idleness was a lust of the flesh that brought both material and spiritual disaster” (15). Material prosperity was a sign of God’s blessing, yet could only be acquired through work. Conversely, idleness was a sin punished by poverty.

In America, self-employment allowed a man to control his destiny and thus “eventually stand for the public good.” The founders consequently condemned entrepreneurship, speculation and gambling, all occupations that profited from other’s misfortunes (Wood 73-75). Instead, individual economic gains were to be devoted to the country. As Webster pointedly declares, the child “must be taught to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the state. He must be indulged occasionally in amusements, but he must be taught that study and business should be his principal pursuits in life” (15). In early
Republican views on wealth, Puritan habits of industry and the belief in material
prosperity as a sign of God’s providence merged with an increased devotion to the state.
Moreover, this state is personified, as if it were a demanding father; it exerts its own
“wants and demands” (15). This personification not only encourages obedience, but
also provides the illusion that the states’ needs are consistent and self-evident, belying
the confused identity of the young nation.

All these dimensions—religion, patriarchy, and industry—were central to post-
Revolutionary education. In debating how to best govern the nation, political writers
and speakers became increasingly preoccupied with the challenges of allowing
individual liberty yet maintaining governmental control. After the Revolution, the moral
strength of the nation’s citizens gained a more overtly political significance, and thus so
did the education of its children. The infant nation’s Republican form of government, in
which the authority of the leaders rested upon the “consent of the governed,” depended,
according to liberal political theory, on the judgment and virtue of its citizens. Yet
America’s intellectual and political leaders expressed anxieties about certain segments
of the population. As Mark E. Kann explains, they associated “young white libertines
and all black males with lust, promiscuity, and rape; they identified vagrants, paupers,
and backwoodsmen with lawless anarchy; they worried that lower-class men and even
middling men harbored desires and jealousies that set them against substantial property
holders and eminent leaders” (xiv). The freedom of the citizen from tyranny was a
central part of the new nation's ideology; however, the elite were concerned about the
dangers of democratic freedoms, making the citizenry’s ability to discipline and regulate itself an urgent concern.

One solution to this problem was widespread education. In proposing systems for educating American children, the nation’s leaders were sensitive to a range of disparate influences. On both continents, the Puritan perception of children as degenerate gave way to a more fluid view influenced by Lockean epistemology. By the late-eighteenth century, Locke’s theory of the child’s mind as a *tabula rasa* upon which parental authority must write and Romantic visions of the child as natural,² and as innocent as nature, vied and mingled with Calvinism to create a multi-layered conception of the child. Children were thought of as obedient, honest, and pious, but also industrious and, not always subtly, upwardly mobile consumers--a secular consumerism not always distinct from Puritan spirituality.

The early Republicans cited both Calvinist and Enlightenment ideologies in their political arguments for education. While the two traditions might seem disparate, both traditions focused on individual material success as a moral achievement. While Locke argued for the individual’s right to “Life, Liberty, and Property,” Calvinism saw the individual’s prosperity as a sign of divine election. These individualistic strains of both Lockean and Calvinist ideology are threaded throughout early Republican pedagogy. These threads are, however, sacrificed to the “wants and desires” of the nation, foregrounding a pervasive tension between individual desires and socio-political duties.
For Locke, Webster, and Rush, the ultimate goal of eternal life through obedience to God is replaced with a hybrid goal consisting of religious, economic, and political consequences. The regulatory functions of children’s education in the newly independent nation, in part inherited from Locke and the colonial religious tradition, seems to contradict the simultaneous emphasis on individualism in the early Republic, a government founded on “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” A key to understanding the paradox of freedom and control is the concept of the self-regulating citizen, as noted by Fliegelman. The belief that the child, through learning to control his own desires, will become a self-regulating, selfless citizen was common to both Locke and American writers.

As for the child’s individual happiness, the very term “happiness” is commonly misinterpreted. Lawrence Stone writes:

When in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 Thomas Jefferson Substituted “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” for the previous Trio of “Life, Liberty, and Property,” as the three inalienable rights of manWhich it was the function of the state to preserve and encourage, he was thinking of happiness as defined by Locke as the basis of liberty, and in contradiction to the theologians like Pascal and Butler for whom this world was a vale of tears and misery, and for whom happiness could be looked for in the next (236).
However, while it is widely assumed that Jefferson adapted the trilogy “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” from Locke’s “life, liberty, and property,” it was actually lifted from Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, a text that conceives of individual happiness as the product of participation in society (Hamilton par. 6). Thus the phrase “pursuit of happiness” was not, as many believe, concerned solely with the individual’s material prosperity. Lorraine Smith and Thomas L. Pangle define the “Pursuit of Happiness,” for example, as “the liberty of every individual to decide for oneself the end of life,” but “less as ends in themselves than as means to the ever-increasing prosperity, comfort, health, liberty, and safety of society” (39). Drawing on the classical foundations to American politics, Carol V. Hamilton similarly explains,

> When John Locke, Samuel Johnson, and Thomas Jefferson wrote of “The Pursuit of Happiness,” they were invoking the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition in which happiness is bound up with the civic virtues of courage, moderation and justice. Because they are *civic* virtues, not just personal attributes, they implicate the social aspect of *eudaimonia*. The pursuit of happiness, therefore, is not merely a matter of achieving individual pleasure (par. 9).

The Greek term *eudaimonia*, which roughly translates to “happiness,” is more accurately described as a well-being. In Aristotelian philosophy, this well-being derives from one’s accordance with moral and intellectual virtue, moral virtue including
temperance and courage, intellectual virtue including wisdom and understanding gained through contemplation and scientific study (“eudaimonia”).

An important facet of the individual’s happiness was his deference to society, which served to stabilize a society ruled by an aristocracy. As the Republican revisionist J.L.W. Pocock defines it, “Deference is the product of a conditioned freedom, and those who display it freely accept an inferior, nonelite, or follower role in a society hierarchically structured” (517). Eighteenth-century political writers were acquainted with the term’s essential meaning, that “the voluntary acceptance of a leadership elite by persons not belonging to that elite, but sufficiently free as political actors to render deference not only as a voluntary but also as a political act” (Pocock 517). Leaders of the early Republic, without an aristocracy to mandate their rule, were “compelled to rely upon the expectation of deference to the exclusion of any other means of maintaining their status” (Pocock 523). Through this lens of classical deference, Webster’s hope that the American child will “lisp the praises” of Washington and other “illustrious statesmen” acquires another politically efficacious dimension.

Within the concept of eudaimonia, the happy citizen was expected to participate in his civic responsibilities. That the early Republicans privileged society over the individual is a main tenet of the Republican revisionist school, which deemphasizes Lockean liberalism in favor of civic humanism’s position that humans “realize themselves only through participation in public life, through active citizenship in a republic. The virtuous person is concerned primarily with the public good, res publica,
or commonweal, not with private or selfish ends” (Pocock 165). Civic humanism, drawing on Aristotle, Cicero, and Machiavelli was, the revisionists claim, as influential as Locke to the development of the American Republic. Locke’s moral pedagogy “was not only motivated by a conviction that virtue is important for gentlemen; it also had a deeper and far more dynamic motive that virtue was the very fabric and basis for humanity. Man’s humanity is achieved within civil society” (Yolton 27). Just as Locke inherited and endorsed the morals of the religious tradition, so did he inherit the classical tradition and incorporate it into his philosophy.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the phrase “pursuit of happiness” has been popularly understood as a motto of American individualism, and numerous scholars have done little to complicate this assumption. While historians and literary critics have deemphasized the authoritarian foundations of Lockean political and pedagogical thought, fewer writers have discussed the persistent conservative, paternalistic threads throughout Lockean pedagogy. Locke’s patriarchal facets were, in fact, particularly suited to the American situation, in which the individual’s own motives were to be subordinated to the state. “Even Jefferson,” Wood writes, “despite his emphasis on guarding the freedom and happiness of individuals was more interested in promoting social unity and the public good” (473). The proponents of American education adapted the ideas of Locke in order to develop citizens who would pursue happiness but would more importantly serve society. This society, moreover, was unified in its ideology, which consisted of charity to others and allegiance to the state. A close reading of
Locke in tandem with early Republican education and literature reveals a patriarchal, regulatory impulse that often undermines popular conceptions that the “Pursuit of Happiness” seeks individualistic enjoyment.

Even education, one of the most clearly regulatory tools of the nation’s leaders, has been construed as forwarding the freedom of the individual. As Bernard Bailyn asserts, for example, American education has contributed much to the forming of national character […] What was recognized even before the Revolution as typical American individualism, optimism, and enterprise resulted also from the processes of education which tended to isolate the individual, to propel him away from the simple acceptance of a predetermined social role, and to nourish his distrust of authority (49).

The education of Americans, Bailyn claims, serves to encourage the individual’s entrepreneurship, to the extent of isolating him from society. This education in individualism, as Bailyn sees it, even encouraged a distrust of authority. Like Fliegelman, Bailyn assumes an anti-authoritarian thrust to the early Republic, in which citizens could freely define their social roles and were trained to do so. However, while in eighteenth-century America the social structure was certainly becoming more fluid, the nation’s leaders also saw the need to strengthen their authority. The elites feared changes in the social structure that would destabilize their position in society. Thus, in the early Republic the citizen’s trust and child-like affection for the nation’s father
figures was an important objective. And, of course, a means to that trust was through education.

Education could more easily have a nationalist focus due to the decreasing religiosity of the nation, in which “large numbers of Americans played no part in organized religious life” (Avery 420). The weakening hold of the Puritan church opened the door to social changes; by the mid eighteenth century a hybrid of Lockean pedagogy and the Puritan tradition served to discipline children for earthly roles as loyal subjects to the nation as well as God. American students were thus trained to obey moral and political laws while performing morally and politically efficacious acts of charity and deference.

In addition to obedience to the social order—ideals inherited from the Puritan culture—patriotic fervor was central to the new pedagogy. Webster’s fervently nationalist message that “As soon as he opens his lips, he should rehearse the history of his own country: he should lisp the praise of liberty and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen who have wrought a revolution in his favor” (42) embodies the early Republican goals of education. That the child will “rehearse” American history suggests he will internalize it through practice, maturing into a devout patriot with deference to his social and political superiors. Moreover, Webster’s declaration that the American child’s forefathers “wrought a revolution in his favor” suggests the ideal of sacrifice to society and posterity. In Webster’s view of early American history, that nation’s “illustrious heroes and statesmen” pursued their goals not for fame or fortune, but rather
for the nation. These narratives were meant not only to socialize the child to worship his forefathers; they also taught the child to internalize a social hierarchy and his subservient place within it.

This new emphasis on training American citizens led to “an unprecedented post-Revolutionary spate of speeches and writings on the importance of education” (Wood 473). Thomas Jefferson, for example, proposed a three-part sequence of public education, which would begin with three years of free elementary education for both all white boys and girls, followed by twenty regional categories for a select group of male students, and finally, “the state would support the best ten needy academic students at the university level, the aristocracy of talent” (473). At around the same time, essays by Webster, Rush, and others justified the establishment of national schools. While their focus on religion varied considerably, all established that education would train children to be happy, productive citizens of the American body politic.

While the ultimate goal of education, at least as it appears in Jefferson’s system, was to train a hierarchy of citizens, culminating in an elite stratum of college-educated aristocrats, to a greater extent than Jefferson and many of the early Republicans, Webster and Rush sought the education of “all” Americans. Their proposals for democratic education were inseparable from America’s attempt to distinguish itself from England and its aristocratic social structure. As Rush declares in his “Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools,” “where learning is confined to a few people, we always find monarchy, aristocracy, and slavery” (4). Plans for widespread education
were conceived as the antithesis to the aristocratic education of the Old World. As Wood and other scholars of the period have noted, many eighteenth-century Americans opposed “universal education,” preferring to maintain a rigid class structure and of course their place within it. That Rush defines America against “slavery” also, of course, suggests the early Republicans’ conflict around the system of slavery. Early Republic conversations surrounding education thus embodied many of the tensions Americans faced as they defined their government based on “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

Webster provides one of the most insistent arguments for a nationalist education. Prior to writing his schoolbooks, which included the three-part *Grammatical Institutes* (1783), *The American Spelling Book* (1788), and the *Little Reader’s Assistant* (1790), he wrote proposals for “universal” education of American children. As he writes in “On the Education of Youth in America,”

> Our constitutions of civil government are not yet firmly established; our national character is not yet formed; and it is an object of vast magnitude that systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country (45).
The character of the nation, like that of a child, is unformed and dependent on education for its development. Through education, American children would form “an inviolable attachment to their country,” as if the nation were a loving parent. As Courtney Weikle-Mills persuasively argues, the child’s relationship to the book itself mirrored his or her relationship to the nation and its laws: “Children’s books, which entailed both an extension of parental power and a translation of parent into text, acted as an intermediary step in this chain of political associations, creating an affective relationship that was training for, and enactment of, the citizen’s relationship to nation and law” (3). While in the Puritan primer, the child’s mind is called home to their eternal resting place, books about American history, Webster writes, will “call home the minds of youth and fix them upon the interests of their own country, and [...] assist in forming attachments to it” (65). The interests of a fatherly nation trump all others, including a child’s affective allegiance to his domestic home.

Home is a common motif in a wide range of children’s literature. Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer write that in many works of children’s literature, “a focus on home and away characterizes not just the settings of texts written for children but also their stories—from home away and back again—and their most characteristic meanings. There is a characteristic contrast between home and away from home, and a characteristic effort to give the setting identified as home or away thematic or symbolic resonance” (192). The recurring symbolism of home takes on a particularly political meaning in early Republican texts for children; the American child’s ultimate home is
the nation, to which he should fully devote himself. The nation again has its own “interests,” suggesting a cohesion that is far from real, for the country was very much divided by race, class, gender, and political ideology.

The ideal unity of the nation is affirmed by the texts, which in turn seek to create this elusive goal through subordinating the individual to society. As Rush’s “Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic” reveals, American education aimed for a uniform citizenry. Rush predicts that schools, “by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of people more homogenous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government” (11). In working to “fit” the individual into a “peaceable government,” Rush privileges society over the individual, and in doing so makes education a project of assimilation. Wood notes that “in their early attempts to invent their nationhood, Americans did not celebrate the ethnic diversity of America in any modern sense […] but rather their remarkable acculturation and assimilation into one people” (39). This apparently homogenous people, however, defined itself by rigid race, class, and gender distinctions, as evidenced by the limited scope of Jefferson and Rush’s proposals for education.

The homogenized citizenry also became unified through its mutual obedience to governmental authority. Throughout early Republican educational writings, terms like “uniformity,” “service,” and “duties” are prevalent, contradicting early Republican rhetoric of individual liberty. Rush writes,
The business of education has acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country. The form of government we have assumed has created a new class of duties to every American. It becomes us, therefore, to examine our former habits upon this subject, and in laying the foundations for nurseries of wise and good men, to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government” (9).

Schools for civic virtue were “nurseries of wise and good men,” training grounds for children to grow into responsible male leaders.

Rush’s “nurseries” should, he argued, contain religion. To a further extent than his contemporaries, Rush, a devout Presbyterian, insisted on the centrality of the Christian religion to American education and politics; he writes, for example, that “all its doctrines and precepts are calculated to promote the happiness and well-being of civil government.” (11). Within his emphasis on Christianity is a persistent strain of the Puritan idea of children as inherently sinful, evident in such statements as “Man is naturally an ungovernable animal,” (11) yet the more important thread is the political efficacy of religious ideals of self-discipline and sacrifice.

For late eighteenth-century Americans, patriarchal politics were inseparable from patriarchal Protestantism. According to Richard Brown, “To many revolutionary leaders, the idea of raising a wall of separation between Christianity and the new republican states seemed self-contradictory and ill-advised if the merger between knowledge and virtue was to flourish” (82). As in the Puritan period, morality taught in
the Church and by extension in the family resulted in morality across society as a whole, and thus a stable, governable citizenry. The religious strains in proposals for public education perpetuate a centuries-old Puritan and evangelical tradition in which earthly and heavenly Fathers oversaw society. Yet the boy citizen was also held to be an unruly being that deserved to enjoy learning but also required a religiously inflected discipline in order to develop into a lawful, self-disciplined adult. The early Republican proposals for education, then, are an amalgam of not only Enlightenment thought and nationalist political rhetoric but also an overt Protestantism steeped in the colonial religious tradition in which children were perceived as inherently sinful.

Whether its heritage was Calvinism, Locke or the Roman polis, patriarchy in both the family and the state persists in the rhetoric of the early Republic. Echoing Locke, Webster writes that “All government originates in families” (57) and that “a proper subordination in families would generally supersede the necessity of severity in schools, and a strict discipline in both is the best foundation of good order in political society” (58). The founders referred to public officials as “honored fathers” and “civic fathers” in order to “to make strong leaders seem more fatherly and caring, less dangerous and despotic. Presumably a powerful public leader wrapped in the mantle of benign fatherhood would appear to most citizens as a dedicated statesman who could be trusted to act for the good of his political family” (Kann 98). In a society not far removed from the patriarchal Puritan tradition, fatherly authority was familiar and
expected, so the analogy of ruler as father flowed seamlessly from the political and religious ideology of the colonial period.

Adapting Locke to the American situation, Rush and Webster’s writings thus merge Enlightenment and Protestant pedagogy. The writers differed, however, on the extent to which religion should be included in education. Rush, often quoted for his religious rhetoric, insists on the inseparability of Christianity and Republicanism, writing that “A Christian cannot fail of being a Republican [...] for every precept of the Gospel inculcates those degrees of humility, self-denial, and brotherly kindness which are directly opposed to the pride of monarchy and the pageantry of a court. A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teacheth him that no man ‘liveth to himself’” (11). The phrases “no man ‘liveth to himself’” and “self-denial” underscore the importance of utmost sacrifice and devotion to the state. In his espousal of Christianity as a political good, Rush forwards a deceptive critique of monarchy as a hierarchical political structure, opposing it to American ideals of “humility” that ultimately and similarly maintained an American form of aristocracy.

Equally notable in this passage is the politically themed argument for religious education. Rush values religion not as a road to individual salvation but for its politically efficacious lessons. Early Republican rhetoric thus combines political and religious rhetoric to associate obedience to God, family and nation as the triune responsibility of every American citizen. While in earlier periods of American history
the child’s ultimate superior was God, in Rush’s view God and the Nation are equally important:

Next to the duty which young men owe to their Creator, I wish to see a SUPREME REGARD TO THEIR COUNTRY inculcated upon them. When the Duke of Sully became prime minister to Henry the IVth of France, the first thing he did, he tells us, ‘was to subdue and forget his own heart.’ The same duty is incumbent upon every citizen of a republic. Our country includes family, friends, and property, and should be preferred to them all. Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is private property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it (14).

Rush’s passage acknowledges the affective nature of the child, as he “loves his family.” Yet his own “heart” must be trained for political devotion, to the extent that the “welfare of his country” supersedes his love for his family. He does not even “belong to himself,” but is the property of the nation; he is taught not to desire property but in fact to become property himself. Thus, while in Locke the family formed the foundation for a sound body politic, in the early Republican family not even filial devotion was as important as one’s obedience to country, a position of ultimate authority that partially usurped the role of God. The way to inculcate obedience was through widespread education of the infant body politic.
Prior to the War of Independence, the most widely read children’s books were concerned with teaching religion as much as basic reading. In *A Little Book for Little Children*, the author Thomas White lists that in addition to the Bible, children should read “often Treatises of Death, and Hell, and Judgement, and of the Love and Passion of Christ” (28). Whether a colonial child was a member of the urban elite or a poor farmer’s son, his education likely included *The New England Primer*, which was first published in the 1680s and was read through the eighteenth century. The Primer taught children not only how to read and write, but also how to behave in their patriarchal, Christian community; its contents were often religious, including hymns, prayers, and catechism, as well as lines such as “In the burying place may see/Graves shorter than I./From death’s arrest no age is free/Young children too may die” (Avery 29). Such emphasis on child mortality, and the religious obedience it necessitated, was characteristic of children’s books from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As infant mortality decreased, Puritanism weakened its hold, and the book trade expanded, the morbid religiosity of children’s books subsided.

Before the mid eighteenth century, children’s books socialized their readers into circumscribed roles, their lessons teaching children to fear their earthly and heavenly
father should they want eternal life. The eighteenth-century literary culture became increasingly diverse as Enlightenment and commercialist ideologies travelled to America via the expanding book trade, which introduced children to a widening range of exemplars through books such as John Newbery’s “pretty books” and Isaiah Thomas’s first American printing of “Cinderella” and “Little Red Riding Hood” in 1789 (Avery 61). Several texts by John Newbery were pirated in the colonies and widely read following the Revolution, as were fables. As Monaghan explains, “Aesop’s Fables were included in the wares hawked around by chapmen,” and Henry Dixon’s 1728 spelling books was the first to include them (307).

Fables were especially popular forms of literature in the eighteenth-century colonies in part because of their “truthfulness”; As Dodsley’s Fables states in its introduction, “Fable is the method of conveying truth under the form of an Allegory […] The sense of a Fable of the moral kind, ought always to be obvious at first view, that the introduction intended to be given, may have as early an effect as possible” (ix). Here, we see not only the eighteenth-century emphasis on moral education, but also an insistence on “truth,” despite the malleability of fables’ morals depending on their cultural context. As Nodelman and Reimer explain, fables “have been retold by many people, and Joanne Lynn points out that ‘those who retell the fables always manage to find ‘morals’ that mirror their own values’” (67). As the infant nation sought to form its identity through the education of its children, its leaders undoubtedly saw fables as a useful, morally instructive genre.
Virtue was not the only theme of eighteenth-century books for children. In contrast to the *New England Primer*'s focus on spiritual salvation and fables’ focus on moral “truths,” a major theme of some of the most popular books for children in the mid to late-eighteenth century was the child’s rise from humble beginnings. This plot would, of course, come into its own in the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman* and Horatio Alger stories. In books published by John Newbery and pirated by Isaiah Thomas, the most popular titles of which include *The Entertaining History of Giles Gingerbread: A Little Boy Who Lived Upon Learning* and *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*, poor children rise to a higher class status—acquiring their own coach and six—through industrious study and assistance from wealthy benefactors. The industrious independence of the children protagonists, that is, was not solely sufficient for their material success. The individual is part of society, and depends on acts of charity—both received and offered—in order to succeed.

In their dual focus on entertainment and moral education, the Newbery books adapt the Lockean philosophy to “instruct through delight.” One of Newbery’s earliest books, *The Little Pretty Pocket Book*, provides a rich example of the increasingly secular approach of children’s education and literature in the mid-to late-eighteenth century. The book, sold with an accompanying ball and pincushion and describing pleasant tales of individual success and material acquisition, is in stark contrast to more somber offerings like the *New England Primer*. In many of these books, reading is described as part of the expanding consumer culture (J.H. Plumb, in “The New World
of Children in Eighteenth Century,” charts the increased expenditure on children’s toys, books, and amusements, a trend that coincided with decreases in corporeal discipline and children’s labor, and also was encouraged by Lockean pedagogy). For example, in Newbery’s *The History of Giles Gingerbread*, “As soon as Gaffer Gingerbread had finished this story of Sir Toby and his coach, little Giles ran up to his father, and begged that he would give him a book, and teach him to read” (18). Further associating food and reading, the author writes, “Giles was fond of his book, and as his father gave him a new one every day, which he eat up, it may be truly said he lived upon learning” (26). Newbery even inserts advertisements for other books within his narratives, encouraging children to be consumers in the expanding literary marketplace.

Consumerism is not, however, the primary message of these stories and others like them. The introduction to *The Little Pretty Pocket Book* declares, in Lockean fashion, “Would you have a *Virtuous* son, instill into him the Principles of Morality early, and encourage him in the Practice of those excellent Rules, by which whole Societies, States, Kingdoms and Empires are knit together” (9). In the main text of the book, Jack the Giant-Killer writes letters to Master Tommy and Polly in which he promises them rewards for their filial obedience. Additionally aligned with Lockean pedagogy are the books’ fables, including one titled “Flying the Kite,” the moral of which is “Soon as thou Seest the dawn of day/To God thy Adoration Pay” (75). The classical and Lockean tradition of the fable and the religious didacticism of the Puritan
tradition merge in the Newbery books, sending a multi-layered, patriarchal message for their child readers.

Even the ostensibly consumerist messages of such books serve similarly moral purposes, as didactic passages encourage and temper materialism through prioritizing humility over achievements. In the anonymously penned *The Mother’s Gift*, a character named Mr. Allworthy,

a gentleman of large fortune, and excellent character, sent messages to all the little boys in the neighborhood, poor as well as rich, that they should come to his house the next day, and whomever had the best character from his parents, servants, and the neighbors, should receive from him a present of a good collection of entertaining and instructive books (22).

The boy who wins the “entertaining and instructive” books is not the haughty Master Smith, but Charles Nichols, who is awarded them because “he was so industrious at work, so fond of his book, so attentive to his parents, and so desirous of making everybody happy, that there could not be a better example for any children, whether they were rich or poor” (28). The moral of this story, a fable for the eighteenth-century child, is that “the poorest child, if he be good and humble, is far superior to the richest, who is naughty” (25). Its main lesson is that industry, obedience, and selfless behavior will lead to material rewards.
The moral of *The Mother’s Gift*, stated at the book’s conclusion, is that indulgent behavior will lead to ruin: “The Bustle we make in the Pursuit of the good Things of this Life, would almost lead us to imagine, that People expected to live forever [...] Sumptious living impairs our Health, renders our lives full of Complaints, and much shortens our Course here” (84-85). Within this lesson we see the co-existence of traditions: the phrase “that People expected to live forever,” contains hints of the Puritan emphasis on mortality, while the warning that “Sumptious living impairs our Health” sounds more like the scientific thinking of John Locke, whose aim for education was a “sound mind in a sound body.” The text motivates children to avoid “slothfulness” (85) not only because it is a spiritual sin, but also for practical reasons related to one’s corporal health and happiness. The story thus confusedly encourages children to desire wealth but at the same time to be content with their inherited class status.

In eighteenth-century children’s books such as these, industry is linked to their individual enjoyment to a greater extent than in previous centuries. Along with the literary transformations influenced by Locke, social and economic changes resulted in pedagogical texts that privileged virtues of industry and upward mobility. As Andrew O’Malley notes, “Republican bourgeois ideology posited an egalitarian and individualistic society in which the person with the most talent and drive succeeded, and this success was aided by a diligent observation of such virtues as thrift, self-denial, industry and, of course, education” (3). In the eighteenth century, class aspirations thus
became more clearly divorced from religious faith, and it was these secularized aspirations that drove the market for children’s literature. Increased commercial prosperity in the eighteenth century meant that parents had more money to buy books for their children, which they hoped would increase their children's odds of climbing the social ladder.

The social changes in England, and their impact on children’s literature, similarly occurred in America. According to Shelden S. Cohen, “Families who had acquired considerable fortunes through commerce or speculation, joined magistrates, physicians, and lawyers at the apex of the class pyramid, and paralleling these social changes was “intensifying concern over class status” (74). The new pedagogy encouraged an emphasis on individual aspirations; as Wood explains, the Puritan emphasis on physical discipline was superseded by an approach focusing on individual rewards; success in the classroom became increasingly based on competition and individual ambition (326).

The ideology of contentment within Puritanism still coexisted with the new individualism, for many New Englanders “continued to urge patience and contentment with one’s lot and to raise fears that too much stress on ambition could arouse envy and other harmful passions” (327). Of course, fears of ambition and envy became ever more relevant in the early Republic. Cohen writes that in earlier centuries “it was considered God's providence that there be difference classes--those who considered themselves among the ‘chosen’ few sought to display their wealth, including through private
education,” but in the early republic middle and lower classes refused to be subordinate to the old world concept of class (Cohen 74). However, as Wood points out, both impulses persisted into the late eighteenth century, leading to a tension between the conservative maintenance of existing class structures and the desire for social mobility.

The tension between individual and communal goals pervaded the expanding number of schoolbooks. The early Republican imperatives of raising a stable citizenry and forming a uniquely American literary identity led to new American texts for children, a process that paralleled the emergence of American literature for adults. As with adult fiction, it would be several decades until American writers would produce a significant body of uniquely American children’s stories. Schoolbooks, on the other hand, were widely published and read. While recreational reading material was imported from England before the Revolution and after the Revolution pirated by American booksellers, “what colonial America did provide for its children was schoolbooks,” which “were nearly all written by their own countrymen” (Avery 50). These texts included Anthony Benezet’s *The Pennsylvania Spelling Book* (1779) and Caleb Bingham’s *The Child’s Companion, The American Preceptor* (1794), and *The Columbian Orator* (1797), schoolbooks that became almost as popular as Webster’s (50).

The rest of this chapter will focus on Noah Webster’s books for American children,¹ because, as Leonard Webster writes, “Few writers who came of age in the Revolutionary War era responded with more fervor than Noah Webster to the rising
demand for original books by and for Americans” (12). In the years immediately following the Revolution, Webster’s schoolbooks constructed the American child citizen as they taught “him” to read, write, and speak. While the sole object of worship in the colonial primers was the sacrificial Christ, in post-independence schoolbooks the sacrifices of the revolutionaries are also made subject to the child’s awe.

Children’s books in Puritan New England civilized the inherently sinful child; those published in the early Republic sought a not dissimilar goal: to civilize him so that he would become a governable American citizen. In early Republican schoolbooks, patriotic stories of American history socialized children into their secular roles as American citizens; however, the religious focus on God’s eternal and temporal rewards for industry persisted. And although late eighteenth-century schoolbooks were in many ways uniquely American, they maintained ties to the Old World, adapting Lockean pedagogy and popular British children’s literature to an American audience.

One of Webster’s popular books was *The Little Reader’s Assistant*, published in 1791. While *The American Spelling Book* focused on basic grammar and the second and third *Grammatical Institutes* were addressed to adolescent children, *The Little Reader’s Assistant* provides the richest number of stories similar to today’s children’s literature. As the title page to *The Little Reader’s Assistant* explains, in addition to providing American schools with rudimentary grammar lessons, it also offers “A number of stories, mostly taken from the history of America” “A Federal Catechism, being a short and easy explanation of the Constitution of the United States,” “General Principles of
Government and Commerce,” and finally, “The Farmer’s Catechism: Containing Plain Rules of Husbandry, and Calculated for the Use of Schools.” Webster’s “number of stories, mostly taken from the history of America” serves the interconnected ideologies of patriotism, courage, and industry, while more overtly training the reader to worship his forefathers.

Throughout its accounts of American history and government, the text values industry and courage for the benefits it bestows upon society. As Webster declares in “General Principles of Government and Commerce”:

Money or a medium of trade is necessary in all great states; but too much is a greater evil than too little. When people can get money without labor, they neglect business and become profligate, idle, or vicious; and when they have nothing but money, they are poor indeed. Spain was ruined by its mines of gold and silver in South America […] the wealth of a country is its produce: and its strength consists in the number of its industrious inhabitants. A man cannot become rich, unless he earns more than he spends. It is the same with a country. The laboring men are the support of a nation (123).

Here, the focus on temperance within the British imports like *The Little Pretty Pocket Book* and *The Mother’s Gift* acquires additional, political import. The accumulative labor of individuals is vital to the financial health of the nation as a whole. Moreover,
Webster opposes American virtue to European profligacy in his contribution to the national identity.

Didactic calls to industry were especially layered in America for, in addition to being educated for labor, American children were often already manual workers. While Philippe Ariès charts the decreased necessity of children’s labor over the course of the early modern period in Europe, in America children were still vital to the widely agrarian culture; in fact, many Americans opposed public education because they needed their children to work. Children were thus valued for their labor as well as their affection. The virtues of labor remain central to narratives surrounding childhood, particularly in the Puritan influences on the early Republic.

In the colonial period to learn to read is to learn to be Christian; in the early Republic to learn to read is to learn to be an American. *The New England Primer*, Gillian Brown notes, evolved from its religious beginnings into a more nationalist text; she writes that after the Revolution, children still read the popular schoolbook, but now “presented new nationalist associations” (57). For example, W now stood for “‘Great Washington brave’ who ‘His country did save’” (57). The new nationalist focus of basic reading instruction was not limited to the revised Primer, but extended to textbooks, dictionaries, readers, spellers, geographies and histories.

Such educational texts worked both explicitly and implicitly to homogenize the English language and American education but also to distinguish among the diverse races, classes and genders included and excluded from the abstract citizen—the white,
property-owning male. Through idealistic tales of American history, the texts instill patriotic fervor through accounts of the “heroic” male feats of colonization. These hagiographies of the white male leaders and landowners of American history forward various values of Anglo-American cultural identity that are inseparable from gender and racial difference.

As in Webster’s proposals for education, religious instruction continues, though couched in a more secular framework than in most Puritan texts. In the *American Spelling Book*, which sold three million copies (Micklethwait 476), Webster inserts “Lessons of Easy Words to teach Children to read and know their duty,” which include lines such as “A bad man is a foe to the law;/it is his joy to do ill/All men go out of the way./Who can say he has no sin?” (54). The “law” to which Webster refers is not necessarily the religious law. In fact, because it is lower-case it more likely refers to political law. The “duty” of children is thus to obey the nation.

Children’s obedience is further connected with their value as affective beings, for their obedience is described as a result of their affections. Webster writes, “As for those boys and girls that mind not their books and love not church and school, but play with such as tell tales, tell lies, curse, swear, and steal, they will come to some bad end, and must be whipt til they mend their ways” (57). This passage might have been taken directly from the *New England Primer* in its didactic language; Webster instructs children to “Love not the world nor the things that are in/the world; for they are sin,” which contradicts the upward mobility of the late eighteenth-century texts, as it includes
the Puritan emphasis on the incorporeal. This Puritan disdain for the “things” of this world conflicts with the consumerist ideologies of many eighteenth-century children’s books, which persuaded children to behave and be industrious through providing the hopes of material rewards. But Webster, too, includes such tales, which reveal the tensions within his own approach to children’s education.

Webster’s histories ironically canonize individuals who left their countries for the sake of individual pursuits. Several stories in The Little Reader’s Assistant follow the familiar plot of masculine self-reliance. One example is “Captain John Smith, who first settled Virginia.” This story, like the roughly contemporary novel Robinson Crusoe and in fact much of eighteenth-century literature, follows a young man’s meandering journey to independence from humble beginnings. Not unlike Defoe’s characterization of Crusoe, Webster depicts Smith as having peripatetic, adventurous leanings: “he showed a strong desire of travelling, for he sold his books and satchel, with a view to quit school and seek his fortune at sea. The death of his father prevented him; he was bound an apprentice to a merchant of Lyn, but he soon left him and went to France (6). Similar to Crusoe, Smith eschews the school and economic stability for an unbounded life on the sea, and like Crusoe is held up as an exemplar for child readers. The values of self-reliance and individualism forwarded by the story of John Smith reveal the recurring tension between obedience to the Father, God and the Nation and the pursuit of one’s own inclinations.
The early Republican virtues of industry dovetailed with the virtues of charity. The ideal of charity both helped America differentiate itself from the Father country while also addressing the elites’ anxieties about the lower, “disorderly” classes. As Wood explains, “Americans prided themselves on their hospitality and their treatment of strangers, thus further contributing to the developing myth of their exceptionalism” (50). Humanitarianism was also, as J.M. Heale explains, perceived as a political deterrence mechanism. He writes, “Americans were becoming increasingly conscious of such problems as pauperism, drunkenness, disease and crime […] One way of confronting these fears was by humanitarian activity” (161). Although Heale focuses his study on formal charitable societies in late eighteenth-century New York, the early Republican emphasis on individual charity was equally a part of America’s developing identity elsewhere.

In Webster’s stories, the humanitarian values of Puritan and early Republican ideology merge in the ideal of charity. Several stories in The Little Reader’s Assistant instruct the child to be charitable to others. In the “Story of Charles Churchill, A Poet,” Churchill is “accosted by a female” under distress, gives her money and proceeds to provide charity to her family, purchasing “new and better lodgings for these distressed beings, and putting ten guineas into their hands took his leave of them” (79-80). Webster concludes with the moral of the story, “Where is there a little hero who would not do like Charles Churchill? Who would refuse to succor the distressed, when he is certain of being rewarded with the blessings and smiles of approving heaven? How
happy must than man be who can often reflect, that he has made some of his fellow men happier than they were before” (81). Churchill’s reward for his benevolence is the approval of heaven and his own happiness at helping another acquire earthly comfort. Thus the children’s story continues its Puritan emphasis on heavenly rewards while placing equal priority on the material happiness of the early Republican citizen.

In a similarly themed fable, “Honesty Rewarded,” Webster emphasizes the material rewards of virtue, adapting the conventions of the Newbery stories to an American framework. In this story, Perrin, a poor child who is sent to a charity house, stumbles across a bag of money, and rather than keeping it he gives it to the town vicar, who tells Perrin, “Heaven will bless you. We will endeavor to find out the owner: he will reward thy honesty” (28). No one retrieves the money despite advertisements, so the vicar tells Perrin to buy a farm with the money. A decade later, a man overturns his coach near the farm and mentions that he had lost a large sum of money at that very spot. Perrin offers the man the farm he had bought with the money, and impressed with the charity of a humble family, he tells Perrin to keep the farm, saying, “Your honesty deserves a better recompence, answered the stranger. My success in trade has been great, and I have forgot my loss. You are well entitled to this little fortune: keep it as your own” (28), the moral of the story, “Thus was honesty rewarded. Let those who desire the reward practice it” (29). Honesty was thus not only a question of moral and godly behavior, but also was conveyed as a means to material rewards. Like the Newbery books, in which a Coach and Six is the reward for industry and honest
behavior, in early Republican educational texts honesty and charity towards others is encouraged through suggesting to children that such behavior will lead to wealth. The underlying and ultimate aim, however, is to train children to be lawful, honest citizens.

While white children were taught to seek out their own material destiny through their own charity, they were also in a privileged position as the “inheritors” of the American land. The first chapter in The Little Reader’s Assistant is the “Story of Columbus,” which positions the explorer as a hero to be worshipped by the nation’s children. America, Webster writes, “is the goodly land which we inherit, and where we may enjoy plenty with peace and freedom. Let every child in America learn to speak the praises of the great Columbus” (5). The “we” of this story is again the white child, who “inherits” the nation, thanks to the heroic pursuits of his forefather Christopher Columbus. As Webster and Rush emphasize in their proposals for public education, American children should be taught to praise their forefathers. These patriotic tales are not, however, only about the child’s relation to his predecessors; they also help acculturate him into a hierarchical, deferential society in which Columbus and other “forefathers” are surrogates for the British monarchy.

Like the British imports, Webster’s histories privilege industry over idleness. The industry that Webster encourages children to pursue through his stories of American history is a multifaceted one. In his histories of European conquest, the white man’s industry marks the European as superior to the Native. The concept of the “savage” was inseparable from European interpretations of the American physical
environment, which the Europeans transformed through their labor. In the landscape of colonial America, “men and women” were of European descent, while the “savage” American Indians were conflated with their threatening surroundings. Only the Anglo-American “civilized” the wilderness through his industry, transforming it into a “pleasant land” suitable for inhabitation.

Labor thus acquires import as a political instrument. In Webster’s texts the savage is the antithesis of what the Americans were instructed to strive for, industry and the related conquest of the American wilderness—and their own unruly selves—through physical labor. The land of plenty that Webster describes relies upon the common mythology of post-contact America as a virgin environment. “About three hundred years ago,” the story begins, “this country was not known to the people of Europe. Indians only lived here, and the face of the earth was covered with woods” (3). To own land is also to be civilized. The story thus refers to “savages” as not owning but merely implanting themselves upon the land. The “Story of the First Settlers of New England” similarly sets up a false dichotomy between European industry and American Indian wilderness. Webster writes, “this then wilderness, which abounded with beasts and savages […] Where tawny savages skulked along the narrow paths of the wood, there are men and women riding on horseback, or in chaises or coaches! […] Such is the effect of labor in this pleasant land” (15). The idealized America is one of aristocratic leisure; the beneficiaries of Anglo-American industry are not the farmers
who made up most of the American citizenry, but rather those privileged enough to ride horses and drive coaches.

While Webster’s histories imply a white male reader through describing what he is not, later passages provide more detail on the identity of the boy reader. Specifically, “The Farmer’s Catechism; Containing Plain Rules of Husbandry—and Calculated for the Use of Schools,” the final section of The Little Reader’s Assistant, is addressed to the farmer’s son. In the early Republic, the class identification of the farmer was changing as much as any other occupation. As they became more wealthy through productivity, they “glimpsed the prospect of improving their standard of living by consuming luxury goods that hitherto only the gentry had consumed” (324). While the story is addressed to the farmer’s son, primary sources suggest that boys indentured to farmers had little time to read and that farmers did not keep libraries of any notable size (Avery 53). There thus are disconnects between the goals of nationalist education and those who were actually able to access it.

“The Farmer’s Catechism” arguably dissuades the ambitious farmer through extolling the virtues of his current path. It begins with the following dialogue, which encourages the son to continue on his inherited career path:

Q: What is the best business a man can do?
A: Tilling the ground, or farming.

Q: Why is farming (or agriculture) the most necessary employment?
A: Because by tilling the ground, we obtain food, without which, we
could not live much better than the brutes.

Q: Why is farming the most healthy business?
A: Because labor and exercise are necessary to strengthen the body, to make it digest food, keep the blood in due circulation, and throw off any offending matter that might bring on disease. […]

Q: Why is farming the most innocent employment?
A: Because farmers have fewer temptations to be wicked than other men […] the face of nature’s works, all present to the husbandmen, examples of innocence, beauty, simplicity, and order, which ought to impress good sentiments on the mind, and lead the heart to God (129-130).

Here are many of the Lockean and early Republican ideals: employment, industry, health—Locke’s “a sound body in a sound mind”—and moral fortitude through the avoidance of temptation. Residing in this catechism are the interconnected themes of civilization, industry, and religious piety. Webster also instructs the reader that farming is the most agreeable employment because, while other professions depend on others for support, the “farmer’s estate is fixed and secure: he follows his plow, free from care, and whistles along the furrow” (130). Rush proclaims that, “A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the Republic, for his religion teacheth him that no man “liveth to himself” (11). Webster’s model farmer is ideal because he is independent. Yet through his work he also cultivates the land and benefits society; he serves but does not depend
on others. As in the narratives of colonization, it is an American ideal to own and control the land through industry.

Why would Webster feel the need to persuade his young reader to remain in his social role as a farmer’s son? The Revolutionary era, Fliegelman writes, saw the emergence of a growing class of “propertyless and mobile young men,” and land was being replaced by “more portable forms of capital” (5). This, of course, led to a rising merchant class that destabilized the traditional social hierarchies. Webster, who wrote so adamantly on public education, was nevertheless “convinced that men’s disorders and democracy’s excesses had to be tempered by a national government that was administered by a select few men. Indeed, many founders ranked democratic ideals secondary to what they considered the necessary leadership and authority of a small governing elite” (Wood 91). The social hierarchy of colonial society, based on leadership by “chosen” elite, continued in the early Republican aristocracy.

The privileging of an Anglo-American, patriarchal identity is common to both Puritan and early Republican children’s literature. In Webster’s emphasis on patriotism, the Christian catechism of the *New England Primer* transforms into a political catechism, again converting religious obedience to patriotic allegiance. In Webster’s educational texts, filial and spiritual obedience are subsumed by obedience to the American nation.

The construction of the American boy citizen thus relies on the inherited traditions and “heroes” of the past in order to look forward to the establishment of a
governable, industrious society. The industry of the citizen is indeed central to
Webster’s *The Little Reader’s Assistant* and *Farmer’s Catechism*. While Webster’s
versions of Columbus, Smith and their fellow “illustrious heroes” are courageous, they
also labor for posterity. The ideal of industry is a recurring thread through Puritan and
early republican culture; in both, it was valued not so much for its contribution to
individual pleasures, as because it led to a happy, virtuous society.
Chapter 3:

“The Pattern of All Good Wives”: Female Virtue in The Little Reader’s Assistant

Early Republican children’s stories about “illustrious heroes and statesmen” are predominantly about courageous men who established America not for individual fortune and fame, but for posterity. Where, then, were girls in these narratives? Women were considered vital to the strength of the American polis, but according to early Republican pedagogy, their ideal place was not in the front lines of exploration and battle, but in the home. In his “Education of Youth,” Webster states:

In the large towns of America music, drawing, and dancing constitute a part of female education. They, however, hold a subordinate rank, for my fair friends will pardon me when I declare that no man ever marries a woman for her performance on a harpsichord or her figure in a minuet. However ambitious a woman may be to command admiration abroad, her real merit is known only at home. Admiration is useless when it is not supported by domestic worth. But real honor and permanent esteem are always secured by those who preside over their own families with dignity (41).
As in the rest of his writings on education, Webster distinguishes American from British education, seeing an education in the “ornamental arts” as unsuitable to the American situation.

In line with his contemporaries, Webster considered men and women to be suited for distinct vocations and thus proposed that they be educated differently. Like their brothers, girls were also vital to the formation of a stable body politic. However, while boys were trained to be the future leader and “heroes” of the new nation, women were usually educated to fulfill patriotism within the domestic sphere alone. According to Linda Kerber, “Institutions for boys’ education seemed to flourish in the early Republic,” but the education of young women was a more piecemeal project (190). In 1798, Judith Sargent Murray wrote, “Female academies are everywhere establishing” (qtd. in Kelley 66), and they continued to do so throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Between 1790 and 1830, 182 academies were established for women in both the North and South, a process that paralleled the expansion of colleges for men. Arts including music, dancing, drawing, and needlework were central to female education, for they were valuable in training the elite young woman to live with gentility.

Her “schooling in refinement” was also a means to stabilize the changing class and political structures of the early Republic, in which the elites risked losing their place in the hierarchy. Mary Kelley writes,

Readily identifiable signifiers of privilege became all the more important
to a post-Revolutionary elite struggling to preserve the legitimacy of a rank-ordered society in the face of political democratization […] Not only did the ornamental and decorative arts serve as an emblem of elite standing, but the refinement they manifested was visible confirmation of resistance (69).

Girls’ education in the early Republic, like that of boys, had political motives that often were anti-democratic. Most white women lived in “poor or middling farm households” and were along with their daughters responsible for all domestic responsibilities, while the affluent minority would have help from servants or slaves (9). Girls’ experiences in the early Republic were extremely diverse; only urban daughters had the liberties of leisure; farm daughters were required to perform domestic tasks for their family’s survival, while urban girls “acquired domestic skills primarily so that they could eventually become good wives and mothers” (25). The educational focus for women thus was only relevant for the most affluent sector of society. While most girls only learned basic reading and writing, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the daughters of the elite living in towns and cities were “schooled in ornamental needlework, French, music, and dancing, the social accomplishments with which a lady marked her status,” and were often sent to “privately funded schools that offered a smattering of English grammar and composition, geography, natural philosophy, and history” (Kelley 36).
Male writers of the period forwarded gender ideologies in which women were, paradoxically, predisposed to be both self-indulgent and virtuous—their education in virtue thus simultaneously served to dissuade them from a natural propensity to dissipation and trained them to be a positive influences on their husbands and their children, and in turn positive influences on the young nation. The gendering of early Republican education aligns with eighteenth-century pedagogical ideals inherited from the Enlightenment. Locke intended his pedagogy for the boy scholar, and rarely addressed female education. In a rare recognition of the female gender, Locke writes that his methods “will not so perfectly suit the education of daughters; though where the difference of sex requires different treatment, it will be no hard matter to distinguish” (86). He does not, however, address the specifics of female education, nor explain how exactly daughters should be treated differently. Locke’s approach is consistent with his contemporaries in both Europe and the colonies, in which “the nature of the relationship between women and the state remained largely unexamined; the author’s use of man was in fact literal, not generic” (Kerber 15).

While many of the founders sought a more democratic education of the future citizens to fit the Republican form of government, the implied reader of popular American books remains, as in Locke, of the male gender if not of gentlemanly social status. While Webster and Rush wrote proposals for “universal” education, they proposed distinct pedagogical methods of educating the two sexes, distinguishing between education for the future American male citizen and future Republican mother.
In their proposals, Webster and Rush forward what Linda Kerber terms “Republican motherhood,” the late eighteenth-century ideology that women were to be educated for their roles as mothers and helpmeets to their husbands, a gendered approach to education that would in turn form and stabilize a nation of patriots.

In training young women to be responsible mothers, the early Republicans addressed their preoccupation with disorderly citizens. In fact, the early Republican anxiety was especially applicable to women, partly because in the patriarchal Puritan belief system, Eve, a woman, was responsible for Original Sin. Women were often considered to be selfish and self-indulgent, and at risk of neglecting their domestic duties and through frivolous spending, threatening their family’s financial stability (Kann 18). The patriarchal belief system in which women are innately disorderly continues the gender ideologies within the Puritan belief in Original Sin. A popular poem about the Garden of Eden, which the young Thomas Jefferson copied into his diary, describes Eve as a “Destructive, damnable, deceitful Woman!” who “long’d to go astray; Some foolish new Adventures needs must prove, And the first devil she saw, she chang’d her Love” (24). The patriarchal and traditional interpretation that Eve’s lustfulness caused Adam to sin and thus led to the biblical Fall was common during both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As the early Republicans perpetuated Puritan gender stereotypes, so did they rely on gender ideologies inherited from the Greeks and Romans. Kerber writes that the republican ideology “made use of the classic formulation of the Spartan mother who
raised sons prepared to sacrifice themselves to the good of the polis” (188). Romans and Greeks educated their children for their social roles, and the mother was held especially responsible for her children’s education. Locke also contributed to early Republican views on women’s political roles, writing in the Second Treatise that “The first society was between man and wife, which gave beginning to that between parents and children; to which, in time, that between master and servant came to be added” (qtd. by Kerber 189). According to Locke, women should have the right to their own property, but while he assumed a role for women in political society, he did not propose one in further detail (189). As Kerber claims, it was up to America “to justify and popularize a political role for women, accomplishing what the English and the French enlightenment had not” (199). The early Republican project of forming a national identity thus involved defining a new, American role for women.

Webster and Rush employ the non-generic masculine pronoun in describing the American child, seeing girls’ education as preparation for their roles as mothers, a role in which they would train their sons to be good citizens. In his “Thoughts Upon Female Education,” Rush writes:

The influence of female education would be still more extensive and useful in domestic life. The obligations of gentlemen to qualify themselves by knowledge and industry to discharge the duties of benevolence would be increased by marriage; and the patriot—the hero—and the legislator would find the sweetest reward of their toils in the
approbation and applause of their wives. Children would discover the marks of maternal prudence and wisdom in every station of life, for it has been remarked that there have been few great or good men who have not been blessed with wife and prudent mothers (51).

Here (elite) men are active citizens, fulfilling the ideals prescribed by educational texts. They are educated, industrious and benevolent, and through their patriotism they are heroes. In contrast, women serve to reward their husbands for their “toils,” which they passively applaud while influencing the domestic sphere alone. The plot of upward mobility so common in the eighteenth century is the domain of the boy citizen, while the girl can only hope to assist in her husband’s career. The masculine self-reliance illustrated by the histories of Christopher Columbus and Captain John Smith omit women’s influence.

In some of the early Republican writings, we see the type of education enjoyed by elite, white girls. In addition to grammar and penmanship, girls should, Rush proposed, learn geography and “some instruction in chronology,” which “will enable a young lady to read history, biography, and travels, with advantage, and thereby qualify her not only for a general intercourse with the world but to be an agreeable companion for a sensible man” (51). The eighteenth-century girl was to be educated but only to a point; her education should only be enough to prepare her for domesticity. According to Kerber, “The Republican Mother was an educated woman who could be spared the criticism normally addressed to the Learned Lady because she placed her learning at her
family’s service” (228). Citizenship was limited to the property-owning male, so women’s role in politics was homebound.

Gendered conceptions of girl’s education were inseparable from the eighteenth-century criticisms of fiction.1 Webster criticizes novels as improper reading material for women, writing that “young people, especially females, should not see the vicious part of mankind” (71). Rush adds that instead of reading novels, girls should study history, poetry, and moral essays. These more “useful” texts will, according to Rush, “subdue that passion for reading novels,” the subjects of which “are by no means accommodated to our present manners. They hold up life, it is true, but it is not yet life in America” (29). Reading materials for children were to provide them with a realistic portrait of America. They were also to only provide positive examples for her to emulate, with Rush’s “especially females” suggesting the assumption that woman were more impressionable than men.

As in his proposals for male education, Webster conceives of female education as vital to a strong citizenry. He writes, “In a system of education that should embrace every part of the community, the female sex claim no inconsiderable share of our attention […] Their own education should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind, such sentiments of virtue, propriety and dignity, as are suited to the freedom of our governments” (68). Webster’s argument for female education as preparation for motherhood exemplifies Republican motherhood. As Kerber explains, “The notion that a mother can perform a political function represents the recognition
that a citizen’s political socialization takes place at an early age, that the family is a basic part of the system of political communication, and that patterns of family authority influence the general political culture” (283). The eighteenth-century conception of the family as a foundation to society, an idea inherited in part from Locke, helps to justify the interdependence of women’s maternal and political roles.

These gender distinctions occur throughout eighteenth-century children’s literature imported from Britain. In The Little Pretty Pocket Book, Newbery shares with Tommy and Polly the story of a boy whose “Learning and Behavior purchased him the Esteem of the greatest People, and raised him from a mean state of life to a Coach and Six, in which he rides to this day.” But he also tells the tale of “a little Lady” who “learns her Book to Admiration, works well with her Needle, and is so modest, so willing to do as she is bid, and so engaging in Company, that my lady Meanwell has made her a Present of a fine Gold Watch, and declares that she shall ride in her own Coach” (75). This “little Lady” is “modest,” “willing,” and “engaging,” her characteristics all focused on her behavior towards others.

Through serving her society through engaging demurely with company and obsequiously following orders, she is provided with individual, material rewards. The narrative’s implicit ideology is not, however, that gold watches and coaches should be the focus of life; rather, the book seeks to create docile female citizens through bribing them with material rewards. In both of these stories, the acquisition of property takes center stage as the reward for good behavior, but the behavior for which they are
rewarded differs significantly: the boy is studious, while the girl employs herself in domestic docility.

The most well-known “pretty book” with a female protagonist is *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*. Miss Margery Meanwell, who earns the nickname Little Goody Two Shoes through her good deeds, begins the story as a poor urchin—so poor that she wears only one shoe. She is studious, however, and through her eager learning of the alphabet becomes educated enough to teach other children. But the story doesn’t end by praising her career as the ultimate reward for her work; rather, she acquires her own coach and six by marrying into wealth, her role as a teacher calling to mind “Republican motherhood,” as Little Goody Two Shoes’ education is valued as a means for the education of other, notably poor, children.

The plot of *Little Goody Two Shoes* becomes a template for similar American versions, including the stories in *The Little Reader’s Assistant*. The ideals encouraged by Newbery’s text are taken up in a variety of Webster’s children’s lessons, ranging from grammar exercises to “moral” essays and all consistent in their depiction of the ideal young woman. Even ostensibly unbiased lessons in grammar forward a dichotomy between courageous men and amiable girls. Webster provides examples such as “Brave men; virtuous women” (70), demonstrating the distinct characteristics recommended for boys and girls. Even more overtly, Webster writes in Rule V: “the relative pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, gender and person, that “1. This is the boy, who studies with diligence; he will make a scholar. 2. The girl, who sits by you, is very
modest; she will be a very amiable woman” (73). Here, the distinction between the sexes is clear: boys are hard workers characterized by their intellect, while girls sit passively, always agreeable. Boys and girls were encouraged to pursue intellectual virtues, yet women were to do so in a different way than boys. That the boy “studies” while the girl “sits” perpetuates the traditional dichotomy of male mind and female body.

This late eighteenth-century expectation that the girl should be passive and amiable is elaborated upon in Webster’s *Grammatical Institutes*. Here, Webster provides not only grammar lessons but, of course, lessons in “proper” conduct. In an essay on female behavior, Chapter XI of Part I, titled the “Character of a young Lady, Webster writes that the ideal “young Lady” “prepares herself for managing a family of her own, by managing that of her father. Cookery is familiar to her, with the price and quality of provisions; and she is a ready accountant. Her chief view, however, is to serve her mother and lighten her cares. She holds cleanness and neatness to be indispensible in a woman” (29). Service to others, in the home, is the persistent task requested of the girl reader; her education in mathematics is only meant as preparation for managing her domestic sphere. The sentence, “she holds cleanness and neatness to be indispensible in a woman,” echoes the focus on self-regulation within Lockean and early Republican pedagogy; through learning to regulate herself and her domestic sphere, women would help to regulate the nation.
The generic “young lady” in the *Grammatical Institutes* acquires a face and a name in the stories within *The Little Reader’s Assistant*. While this schoolbook frequently instructs an implied Anglo-American boy reader, teaching him to be courageous, industrious, and benevolent to his social inferiors, it contains almost as many examples of girl characters. These stories also instruct the girl reader to be benevolent to the poor and honest to her neighbors, though they provide no adult female role models for girls to emulate. In contrast to images of the active, industrious male, Webster mostly writes about girls who are either the victims of American Indian attacks or selfless servants to their husbands and families. Through its boy and girl characters, *The Little Reader’s Assistant* thus uses grammar and reading lessons to reaffirm and extend late eighteenth-century gender roles.

In their genre, the stories echo the moral exemplum of the Puritan primers, which showed the rewards of good behavior and the disastrous—and often mortal—consequences of the bad. The “Story of a Young Cottager” provides an example of the rewards for virtuous behavior, its plot echoing that of *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* and the other Newbery books. In this story, Rose’s generosity leads to a wealthy [sic] young farmer being charmed with her virtues, offered her his heart, his hands, and his fortune. Thus was Rose raised from poverty, by her virtuous and good conduct, and now lives in wealth and plenty—the joy of her husband, and the pattern of all good wives (48).
The phrase “heart, his hands, and his fortune” suggests that of all these offerings, the man’s wealth is the most desirable. The familiar plot is all here: a girl acts virtuously, and through doing so becomes wealthy but only through the generosity of a wealthy husband. Her “virtues” of service to society are rewarded. The Puritan disdain for poverty, and the ideology that one can change his or her circumstances through moral and industrious behavior, continues in this text.

The ideology of Republican motherhood is evident throughout Rose’s tale. Like Little Goody Two Shoes, Rose is a positive influence on society, using her knowledge to educate her community. For example, when Rose’s father says, “What will the town say, when my own family becomes a charge upon them? I am sure we are poor enough already, and want help more than we are able to give it,” Rose responds, “our minister tells us to do all the good we can, and pity those that are in distress […] it will not cost us but little to let the miserable old man lodge a few nights in the house; and besides, the minister says, God will return us fourfold, what we give to the poor” (47). As in “The Story of Charles Churchill, a Poet” charity has self-serving objectives, as the charitable will be rewarded, both on earth—in this case, through marriage to a wealthy farmer—and in heaven. The Puritan emphasis on charity and God’s role in one’s life is again present. While Christopher Columbus and Captain John Smith left home to explore “new” worlds, suggesting that boys can choose to do so, too, the geographical freedom of the young woman is far more limited, confined to her town where her highest hope is to marry a wealthy husband.
Girls were also, Webster suggests, able to play courageous roles in their society. In “Story of a Girl, Eighteen Years Old,” a young woman saves fifteen women and children from an Indian raid during the Philip’s War by holding the door tight while they escaped to a nearby home. The story concludes with, “This noble action deserves to be recorded to the honor of the girl who ran the risk of her own life to save her friends, and to the honor of the female sex, who often discover the heroic, as well as the amiable, qualities of the mind” (22-23). Courage was an important quality for both male and female citizens to embody, as it would help bolster American fortitude. The italicized “amiable” simultaneously demonstrates, however, that women in this period were assumed to be amiable more than heroic, brave, or any of the similar labels Webster applies to his male heroes. That the girl was willing to sacrifice her life for her fellow Americans further suggests the early Republican expectation that citizens would sacrifice themselves to the state.

_The Little Reader’s Assistant_ provides no adult female role models for the girl reader, but surely not for a lack of examples. Indeed, the most action that occurs for girls in the schoolbook is their captivity by the American Indians. While Columbus and Smith are active explorers, girls are often passive victims, though Webster encourages them to be heroic when in the service of their families.

More often, in Webster’s stories and in eighteenth-century children’s literature as a whole, the girl is portrayed as passive. In Webster’s “Story of Sarah Gerrish,” a seven-year-old girl is taken captive by the Indians. During her captivity, Webster
writes, “they kindled a fire, and the young Indians told her she was to be roasted; but
the little girl, bursting into tears, and throwing her arms round her master’s neck,
begged him to save her, which he promised to do, if she would behave well” (27). This
passage, in which the protagonist looks to a powerful male figure for her salvation,
perpetuates a paternalistic structure to gender relations. The courage of Columbus, John
Smith and other “heroes and statesmen” of early America is not emphasized nearly as
much in this captivity narrative. Gerrish is ultimately “restored to her friends,” but only
through her luck and “good” behavior” (27). This conclusion echoes eternal
consequences of bad behavior in Puritan children’s texts, for this story suggests that
through behaving well—importantly towards her “Master”—Sarah is able to avoid
murder by the Indians.

Captivity narratives were acceptable to Puritan culture because they were based
on “truth”; thus the frequency of captivity narratives in The Little Reader’s Assistant
perpetuates the centuries-old Puritan criticism of the “sporting lie.” Gillian Avery writes
that “America made its own contribution to heroic legend—the Indian captivity story.
Treating of almost supernatural endurance than courage, incorporating moments of
tenderness, tragedy and triumph, it was not only true but uplifting, and must have made
stories like Fortunatus and St. George and the Dragon irrelevant” (26). While the
“pretty books” and novels were criticized as inappropriate for American girls, the
captivity narratives were based on the “truth” of their Anglo-American history.
Through the popular eighteenth-century captivity narratives, Americans forwarded textual “evidence” of Anglo-American superiority. While many readers understandably interpret the narratives as examples of colonial stereotypes, the captivity narrative also placed women in an oppressed position. The genre contains the ideologies of the dominant, paternalistic culture, though couched in the language of “true history.”

The captivity narrative, born out of the Puritan tradition, forwards Anglo-American ideologies: views of the American Indian as savage; the idea of women as weaker than men; and the fear of the American wilderness, which the Puritans sought to pacify through their industry. The only Puritan aspect Webster exhumes from the “Story of Sarah Gerrish” is its overtly religious didacticism, yet even this is implicit. Left to fend for herself in the wilderness, Gerrish is out of her “proper” domestic domain as a future Republican mother. From Webster’s depictions of “proper” girlhood, we know she would be better off at home preparing for her domestic role, or if at school, sitting “amiably” next to the boy scholar.

That *The Little Reader’s Assistant* is addressed to Anglo-American girls obfuscates the real diversity of America. Webster’s masculine narratives of colonization perpetuate a dichotomy between Anglo-American civilization and American Indian “savagery,” and the female-focused captivity narratives do the same. Even white women were provided varying accesses to citizenship due to their differing roles in the social hierarchy; while farmer’s daughters were educated for their family’s survival,
girls in the urban elite were educated to be genteel Republican mothers. The category of the female citizen was, like American citizenship in general, limited to a small segment of the population. Most girls were limited in their education because of their race, gender, or social standing. Even Anglo-American farmers’ daughters, for whom *The Little Reader’s Assistant* was intended, often missed schooling because of their domestic chores and undoubtedly had less access to books than more affluent young women.

Webster’s approach to American pedagogy and history homogenizes the American girl’s experiences in the young nation. In the classroom she is docile, and in the wilderness she is a victim. Webster also provides few alternatives to these social roles, in line with the gendered pedagogies of his contemporaries. While the schoolbook provides her with an education beyond domestic duties, the outcomes of this education are limited to domesticity. Perhaps, like Margery Meanwell in *Little Goody Two Shoes*, she will study to become a schoolteacher. She is far less likely, however, to become an ambassador like Franklin or an explorer like Columbus. Unlike the boy scholar sitting beside her, she is instructed to worship, but not to emulate, these “heroes.” More than her brothers, the early Republican girl sacrificed her individuality for the sake of the political society.
Conclusion

Children’s books are addressed to persons who are developing awareness of themselves and their culture, and in the process discovering who they are and hope to become. As Susan Ang puts it, children’s books are “often about being or becoming, about the quest for self-hood and identity, the attempt to discover what it is that makes an individual person or thing indubitably him or herself” (5). Children’s literature of the eighteenth-century both confirms and conflicts with Ang’s claim. While children today and in the early Republic have all been “finding out what they are and want to be,” the options available to them have differed considerably. Nodelman and Reimer discuss the distinct Americanness of this theme, writing, “the characters in many American children’s novels take it for granted that anyone, no matter how humble, can improve his or her lot in life and achieve a dream. That basic, unquestioned assumption is what defines them as Americans” (119). In the early Republic, the dreams of even the white male citizen were limited by the state; women’s goals were confined to the domestic sphere; and slaves and American Indians were not citizens at all.

Schoolbooks from this period are, in fact, not about “what it is that makes an individual person or thing indubitably him or herself.” Rather, they are about what makes an individual person a “good” member of society. In the early Republic, the child was part of a larger community to which he or she should sacrifice his or her own
desires. Early Republican texts including *The Little Reader’s Assistant* also serve as illustrative precursors to the nineteenth-century children’s books that are of interest to Sanchez-Eppler, Levander, and other scholars of the period. In turn, Sanchez-Eppler’s three-pronged description is exceedingly relevant to the early Republican period:

> [Children] are objects of socialization: taught to conform to social expectations by child-rearing experts, by parents, by schools, and by didactic stories; they are forces of socialization: ideas about the child are invoked in a wide range of cultural and political discourses in attempts to reform, direct, or influence the nation: they are children, individuals inhabiting these roles as best as they can (xv).

Through a thorough study of American children’s literature, we learn more about the nation’s concepts of citizenship. Because children, specifically, have not developed themselves as individuals, they are particularly susceptible to being socialized through literature. Books written intentionally for children have increasingly become the object of literary scholarship. More than any other genre of literature, books written for children reveal the dominant ideologies of their society. Children’s literature seeks an ostensibly benign product—the happy and productive citizen. But texts for children contain agendas and traditions other than their most apparent ones, and through uncovering and analyzing these layers we can see how the literary representations of children say more about the adult’s ideals and hopes than those of the own child, and also provide important insight into what the society is like.
Perhaps more than any other era, the early Republic dealt with an abundance of tensions: between secularism and religiosity, between the individual and society, and between inequality and universal liberty. Children’s books from the period, as does all children’s literature, reveal the tensions within the society’s dominant ideologies. Thus the schoolbooks of the early Republic were both Calvinist and Lockean, individualistic and communitarian. They reflected the current class, race, and gender hierarchies of their society but also what the leaders of that society wished it to become.
Notes to Chapter 1

1 Thank you, Seth Lerer, for an enlightening and engaging conversation during your visit to Georgetown University in March 2010.

2 A thorough study of eighteenth-century children's literature must acknowledge the influence of Rousseau, who along with Locke was one of the era's most important educational writers. However, while Lockean ideas of education and childhood were clearly influential in the early Republic, Rousseau's concept of the child as an innocent product of nature simply did not take root in America as it did in Europe. A study of educational texts and literature in the early Republic reveals that Rousseau's views of the child as an innocent savage, exceedingly popular in Europe, were suppressed by the founders' civilizing impulse, evidenced in their desire to civilize not only disorderly men but also the children who would grow into the nation's future citizens. According to Richard Brown, “For Adams and Jefferson—indeed, the entire generation of revolutionary leaders—the success of liberty and of republican government and society rested on the crucial equation of virtue and knowledge. As they saw it, Rousseau's notion of a virtuous (and ignorant) savage was absurd because a benighted, informed people could not be virtuous, just as a virtuous people could not be ignorant” (81)
Throughout all these characterizations, they were also citizens. Indeed, since the classical period children have been educated for their political roles; in Greek and Roman culture, children’s education trained them for public life. “Antique literature,” Lerer writes, “centered on the making of the child as citizen” (Lerer 18). In both Europe and America, one of the most popular literary forms for children was consequently the fable, which often had politically efficacious morals. Fables were particularly conducive to a young nation; as Gillian Brown points out, they help a society form a cohesive identity through providing “the certainty of cultural prescription” (135).

Notes to Chapter 2

1Webster frequently called his market’s attention to the importance of the writing and reading of American texts; as Micklethwait puts it, Webster was a “fervent nationalist,” who “wanted American students to rely on American books (particularly if their patriotism persuaded them to buy his books)” (10). His motives were thus political but also economic, as the Revolution both diminished British supplies and sparked antagonism towards British texts. Moreover, like many of his consumers, Webster himself aspired to achieve a higher social status but “never did succeed in joining the ruling class” (15).

2For more on the false assumption that the Native Americans were a non-agrarian
society, see William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England.*

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Notes to Chapter 3

1 Drawing on Kerber, Courtney Weikle-Mills assigns the label “republican childhood” to her idea that republican citizenship was understood in terms of the private, domestic, and “woman-dominated” sphere, so that the child and her book became the intermediary between the mother-child relationship and public ideas of citizenship. More simply, the affectionate relationship between a child and her book was training for the relationship between a citizen and national law. While the relationship between a child and his primer was training for his relationship with God, the hierarchy in the early Republican period changed at least partly to that between the child and the nation.

2 For examples of women’s diverse roles in the colonial and Revolutionary period, see Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America.*

3 In the words of Susan Howe, captivity narratives forward “an equally insulting stereotype, that of a white woman as passive cipher in a controlled and circulated idea of Progress at whose zenith rides the hero-hunter (Indian or white) who will always
rescue her. Moreover, the genre itself is an artifact of male dominance, for originally the popular captivity narratives “were simple first-person accounts of a real situation,” but as they became more popular “were increasingly structured and written down by men, although generally narrated by women” (Howe 89-90, 96).
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