Back to the Future

Bruce Burgett, *University of Washington/Bothell*

The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic. By PAULINE SCHLOESSER. (New York: New York University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 243. $40.00.)

Perhaps the most familiar of the many commonplaces shared by scholars of the early republic is the one that mandates our return to the founding era if we are ever critically to engage our contemporary world. Pauline Schloesser is no exception to this general rule. In *The Fair Sex*, she seeks to intervene in current pedagogical, academic, and political debates by providing a counter-reading of the history and historiography of the early republic. Her focus is eighteenth-century social contract theory, which she deems the philosophical underpinning of American republicanism. Though that theory claimed to be universal in its scope, expressing the needs and desires of all humanity, its practice was exclusive from the start, omitting from participation those whose gender, class, or race made them unacceptable to the dominant group. Schloesser's critique of this familiar contradiction leads her to elaborate what she calls a "theory of racial patriarchy" (p. 13)—a theory that she intends as a corrective to histories concerned with gender, race, or class to the exclusion of the other terms.

This critique derives from two distinct approaches to eighteenth-century thought. Schloesser's indictment of the exclusions built into social contract theory is explicitly indebted to political philosophers Carole Pateman (*The Sexual Contract* [Stanford, 1988]) and Charles W. Mills (*The Racial Contract* [Ithaca, 1997]). Unlike Pateman and Mills, Schloesser also holds to normative claims whose genealogies lead back to the same Enlightenment texts and contexts. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communicative rationality," Schloesser contrasts "ideal speech situations" to "instrumental rationalities" wherein "ends are predetermined or coerced by one of more of the parties, and others are not allowed to debate or question those ends" (p. 4). From this perspective, she at once upholds the ideals of eighteenth-century revolutionary humanism and skewers their application. Ideally, all persons, regardless of gender, class, or race, should be entitled to speak freely, on any subject for any purpose, in public or private debate. In practice, that privilege was reserved primarily for white men.

As should be clear from even this brief summary, *The Fair Sex* makes large claims in a work addressed to an interdisciplinary audience of historians and political scientists. Yet, the book is probably best read as a specific intervention into the now twenty-five-year-old debate over the ways in which the American Revolution led to the empowerment of women. I say this for two distinct reasons, one theoretical, the other historical. *The Fair Sex* neither surveys nor synthesizes the substantial and ever-growing corpus of academic and nonacademic writings integrating feminist and critical race theories into diverse local, national, and transnational contexts. Second, the author takes as the starting point of her argument the classic studies of women in the revolutionary era by Mary Beth Norton, Linda Kerber, Jan Lewis, and Nancy Cott; "historians will find no surprising new evidence" (p. 9), she concedes. Put most succinctly, Schloesser faults those studies for their collective tendency to discuss

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what eighteenth-century writers called the “fair sex” without noticing the racializing work performed by the adjective “fair.” “Fair sex ideology,” Schloesser convincingly argues in a chapter that historicizes the etymology of the term, “situated white women instrumentally rather than as discursive equals capable of participating in an ideal speech situation” (p. 53). It did so by allowing the “strategic deployment” of the category “fair sex” to generate “a racialized sex group that lost consciousness of itself as bounded by race and class, retaining the memory of its identity as one based on gender alone” (p. 53). Repeatedly invoked in literary, political, and everyday discourse, “fair sex” ideology provided otherwise diverse and potentially resistant subjects with the language and incentive to “sign on to racial patriarchy”: “Fair sex parlance was a means by which individuals consented, explicitly and then tacitly, to the social order” (p. 53).

These important arguments comprise the great strength of Pauline Schloesser’s book. In support of them, she devotes a series of chapters to three elite northern women and their various negotiations with the racial patriarchy of the late eighteenth century. That system was unstable, potentially vulnerable to attack as a result of the egalitarian currents of the revolutionary age. How and why it overcame such threats is at the center of Schloesser’s concern. The first chapter of the series, a survey of Mercy Otis Warren’s life and writings, reveals the ways in which neglect of racial slavery compromised Warren’s commitment elsewhere to an “ideal of communicative rationality” (pp. 95, 113). In the second, a close reading of correspondence between Abigail Adams and John Adams suggests that Abigail’s revolutionary belief in “natural rights” during the 1770s gave way a decade later to the “language of fair sex ideology” (pp. 115, 145, 153), a transition that coincided both with her abandonment of criticisms of racial slavery and with her subordination to the requirements of John’s fast-rising political career. In the last, an overview of Judith Sargent Murray’s plays, letters, and magazine writings demonstrates that she, like Warren and Adams, “interrogates the concept of ‘natural’ rational equality only when it applies to gender within the European American community” (p. 159). While the choice of these three cases may seem arbitrary and limited, the question that animates Schloesser’s inquiry is less so. In each instance, she tells the story of an elite woman who moves from a more or less radical critique of racial patriarchy to a more or less passive acquiescence to it. Why and how, she asks in each chapter, do individuals with commitments to universalist ideals of natural rights, rational equality, and political participation become signatories to a racial-sexual contract that betrays each of those commitments?

Without a doubt, this is a significant political and historical question. But I was left unconvinced in the end that Schloesser’s “theory of racial patriarchy” usefully answers it. Her strongest synthetic claim is genealogical and appears toward the end of the study when she suggests that the origins of both “American feminism” and “feminist racism” can be “traced to the Revolutionary and founding period of American politics” (p. 189). Paraphrased perhaps a bit more strongly, feminists who talk about the history of gender without talking about the history of race replicate one of the dominant racial projects of the early republic. Beyond this, however, Schloesser’s political claims become more suspect. Her final pages foray into the field of late twentieth-century United States politics and culture, ranging from debates about affirmative action to the celebrity of tennis players Venus and Serena Williams, from the Republican Party’s 1994 “Contract with America” to

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Orlando Patterson's skepticism about the use of "Hispanic" as a census category. This epilogue concludes with Schloesser's hope that readers have been "provoked to think about" (p. 198) these topics. The pressing question is not whether we think about them, but how we do so. In response to this question, I am tempted to suggest that the commonplace with which I began this review may be part of the problem. It may be that the structural conditions underwriting the largely nationalist discourse of the revolutionary elite have shifted in ways that make an anatomy of that discourse of limited relevance to our everyday and political lives today. This is not to say that connections between the two historical moments should not be pursued, only that this pursuit requires a much more attentive analysis of structural elements that have changed alongside those that have remained the same.

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