

**BOYS DON'T MAKE PASSES (AT GIRLS WHO WEAR GLASSES):
GENDER, VISION AIDS, AND PERSONA
IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC**

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Introduction

On September 22, 1840, 22-year-old Elizabeth Payson Prentiss of Portland, Maine wrote moodily to a friend, “I am always wondering if any body in the world is the better off for my being in it.” She hoped that she was a comfort to her correspondent, and was concerned that she could cause him pain by consoling him unskillfully. There was a pause written into the letter, and then she admitted what was perhaps the cause of her irritability. Prentiss, wrote, “Mr. ---- talked to me as if he imagined me a blue-stocking. Just because my sister wears spectacles, folks take it for granted that I also am literary.”¹ Prentiss’s frustration lay in the negative connotations of the derogatory word, “bluestocking,” which referred to dangerously literary females, but her phrasing was revealing. She used the fact that her sister wore spectacles as synonymous with being a literary woman, both in her eyes and the eyes of those around her. Prentiss’s sister took a deliberate risk in wearing spectacles; by doing so she publicly marked herself—and her family—as transgressing traditional gender boundaries. In America’s Early Republic, a time of uncertain and transitional gender roles between the end of the American Revolution and 1850, when the submissive Enlightenment woman was becoming the Republican Mother, women like Elizabeth Payson Prentiss’s sister actively altered gender roles and created personas for themselves through the choices that they made about visual aids.

Spectacles as material culture provide a window into changing gender norms during the Early Republic. However, most studies on spectacles tend to be traditional

¹ Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, “Letter from Elizabeth Payson Prentiss to George Shipman,” September 22, 1840, *The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Payson Prentiss* (New York: A.D.F. Randolph, 1882), 573, in *North American Women’s Letters and Diaries*, <http://www.alexanderstreet2.com/NWLDlive/> (accessed January 9, 2008). Elizabeth Payson Prentiss (1818-1878), a Congregational minister’s daughter, was born and grew up in Portland, Maine.

material histories. Often presented as guides for collectors or catalogues of museum collections, these volumes are generally written by opticians and go into great detail about the construction and changing styles of eyeglasses, sometimes pointing out unusual and particularly interesting pairs. One of the most complete of these is *Spectacles and Other Vision Aids: A History and Guide to Collecting*, a gigantic volume by J. William Rosenthal, M.D., that delves into a variety of topics, such as how to examine historical artifacts, the history of glass and development of optical lenses, Chinese and Japanese spectacles, different types of European visual aids, spectacles in art, and a myriad of other subjects. His chapters are short, but informative. Other books on visual aids, like *Spectacles: From Utility Article to Cult Object* by B. Michael Andressen, provide only a short, if useful, introduction to older forms of eyeglasses before launching into an evaluation of modern glasses. Wolf Winkler's *A Spectacle of Spectacles: Exhibition Catalogue* describes a British museum exhibition of 1988-9. Most resources, like these, focus primarily or solely on European and Asian visual aids, and several are translations of German or French works. An excellent pictorial resource for American eyeglasses is the eyeglasses collector's book *Eyeglass Retrospective: Where Fashion Meets Science* by Nancy Schiffer, which has a large section on the McAllister opticians of Philadelphia. Its presentation is similar to a museum display, with a wealth of visual information and short, informative captions.

The best resource for information on American spectacles, however, is *antiquespectacles.com*, run by David A. Fleishman, M.D. This website features a virtual museum, scholarly articles on spectacles, references for study, and other resources for collectors, historians, opticians, and others who are interested in the study of vision aids.

Surprisingly, although American visual aids themselves have attracted a fairly large amount of scholarly attention, only one recent work has provided a true social history. Dr. Katherine Stebbins-McCaffrey's dissertation, *Reading Glasses: American Spectacles in the Age of Franklin*, provides a view of visual aids hitherto unexplored. One of her most cogent arguments is that in the eighteenth century, spectacles and eyeglasses were simultaneously barriers between viewer and viewed (primarily man and woman,) and lenses to overt, illicit sexuality that reinforced masculine dominance.

Recent work in women's and gender history has uncovered intricate complexity in post-Revolution gender role shifts. In *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (2006), Catherine Kerrison shows that a dearth of public documents written by women does not denote inactivity on their part; rather, in the most rigidly hierarchical gendered society in early America, southern women actively shaped their own roles in society. Mary Beth Norton's book *Liberty's Daughters* (1980) describes women's Revolutionary involvement within changing but rigid social expectations. Rosemarie Zagari traces changing ideas about women's inherent inferiority to men and political potential from the seventeenth century, through post-Revolutionary acceptance in the realm of party politics, to a severe backlash in views about women's abilities in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when once again, women came to be viewed as the weaker vessel.² Kate Haulman uses the term "culture wars" in her article, "Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia," to

² Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007), 1-7.

describe the back and forth of heated debate over fashion and gender.³ A complex shift was occurring; while America entered the Revolution, conceptions of masculine and feminine ideals moved away from the foppery and luxury of the early eighteenth century, which came to be viewed as feminine and dangerous. Historian Linda Kerber puts it concisely: “Effeminacy was associated with timidity, dependence, and foppishness—even homosexuality. It was associated with luxury and self-indulgence....”⁴ Women were expected to both remain within the domestic sphere and to make themselves useful to their country, a conflicted philosophy that generated the concept of the Republican Mother, a model of sensible femininity who was also politically savvy—in order to educate her sons to be virtuous citizens of the new republic. Women actively shaped this role, however, by accepting or resisting it, and those who needed visual aids had the additional power to manipulate stereotypes and use their spectacles or quizzing glasses to mark themselves as effeminate, matronly, or academic.

³ Kate Haulman, “Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 62, Issue 4, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/62.4/haulman.html> (accessed February 7, 2008).

⁴ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 31.