VENUS ON THE SOFA: WOMEN, NEOCLASSICISM, AND THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

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What did early national Americans mean when they articulated fears of “luxury and effeminacy,” those twin sins of a republic that idolized the classical virtues of manly self-restraint? This essay argues that the fear of luxury and effeminacy circulated not just as airy metaphor but as palpable reality, specifically in the figure of the female recumbent on the sofa. The article traces separately the careers of Enlightenment Venus, who especially in her recumbent form embodied fears of passion in a republic built on reasoned consent, and the sofa, a piece of neoclassical furniture that rose to great popularity at this time and was envisioned as both effeminate and luxurious in fictional and nonfiction writing. The essay then joins the two figures of recumbent Venus and the sofa, showing how they were mutually enabling, and how they entered into early national conversations about labor and race. It concludes by examining how two educated American women, the self-described Roman matrons Mercy Otis Warren and Martha Bayard Smith, incorporated the image of the supine woman and her implied sofa into fictional writings about classical polities in danger. By knitting political ideologies, imaginative worlds, and neoclassical objects, the essay suggests a way for historians to flesh out the intellectual history of early national women, showing how they could participate in a conversation about modern politics and classical antiquity from which we have assumed they were largely disbarred.

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When the abolitionist Juliana Tappan visited New York City in 1837 to protest the alarming expansion of slavery westward, she found few listeners for her message. One problem, she decided, lay with rich society matrons, whose minds were so stuffed with fashion and frivolity that they had no room for a political conscience. She summed up her disgust with one striking image. “Ladies,” she said, “sitting on splendid sofas, in the midst of elegance, looked at us, as if they had never before heard the word Texas.” Her remark came just five years after a South Carolina children’s magazine had recruited a similarly female-centered and sofa-bound image to contrast the laziness of boys and girls. “Little boys and girls are sometimes called slothful, because they are idle. Walter is slothful when he lies late in bed, and Lucy is slothful when she throws herself down on the sofa.”  

The words of Tappan and her contemporaries invite us into a curious but widely used metaphor for political participation in the new nation. This metaphor was not just the woman on the sofa, but specifically what women became when lying on the sofa: Venus, the symbol of reason’s failure, of delicious repose as the ship of state crashed into the rocks. Americans self-consciously trying to build a new Rome drew frequently from the example of classical antiquity. They saw that the activity of exemplary citizens—whether they were soldiers, orators, or farmers—was of paramount importance in upholding republics in ancient Greece and Rome. George Washington invoked this ancient tradition in a letter he wrote in 1779 as he prepared to lead the Continental Army into battle. “Shall we slumber and sleep then while we should be punishing those miscreants who have brought these troubles upon us, and who are aiming to continue them?” To men like Washington, the resting body suggested not just a moral menace (idle hands being the devil’s tools) but a political failure. Such contrasts between active, manly virtue and its presumed opposites, the effeminate vices of cowardice, idleness, luxury, and dependency, fill the writings of the revolutionary and early national eras. Especially common and enduring was the pairing of “luxury and effeminacy,” a link made with precisely the same words by John Adams in 1783 as by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. Abigail Adams even knit the two vices into one, casting luxury itself as a woman: “luxury with ten thousand evils in her train.”


The early national period—from roughly the 1780s to the 1830s—was the heyday of Venus on the sofa, the palpable embodiment of American fears of republican vice. I use the term “Venus on the sofa” because in images the recumbent woman was often termed a Venus. She might also be a supine variant such as Ariadne, Danaë, Musidora, Cleopatra, or Madame Récamier. But I will also use the idea of Venus on the sofa in the metaphorical way that Americans did in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to encompass a variety of meanings quite beyond the literal reclining Venus. The recumbent female, nude or clothed, seldom depicts “reality.” Rather, the form is an artistic genre and literary trope meant to carry various meanings. Its circulation in a wide variety of places in early national America—in print, paintings, statues, and the like—asks that we look beyond the traditional repositories of classical republican thought and explore the function of the aesthetic, the sensual, and the literary in creating and reflecting the notion that the classical past was immediately relevant to modern America.

At the most basic level, the image of Venus on the sofa can show how the symbolic dimensions of political power in the new republic were displayed and its rituals acted out by a category of people routinely excluded from the full rights of citizenship. In a republic whose government continued to deny women such basic rights as suffrage even as it bestowed them on an increasing number of white men, the image of the languishing woman both sanctioned the perpetuation of that exclusion while also offering a way for women to manipulate the negative stereotype. The sofa was something that was a part of women’s quotidian activity: they looked at sofas in catalogues, bought them, put them in their parlors, and then sat, lay, and read on them, either alone or with other people. This sounds so obvious as to be banal, but that physicality melded with a fully realized female imaginative world of sofas in the early national period. Sofas, and women reclining and sitting on them, populate novels, plays, short stories, and letters written by women; women and sofas also feature in paintings and engravings. In these images and stories, the sofa was sometimes about the dangers of luxury and seduction. But it could also be the platform for the activities of good mothers, dutiful wives, and virtuous female patriots. The ubiquity of Venus on the sofa in the early national period, both as lived reality and metaphor, can help us

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3 Musidora is a character in James Thompson’s pastoral poem The Seasons (1793), where she is compared to Venus espied by a man in the woods as she bathes. Musidora was painted by the American artist John Vanderlyn (and later engraved by Asher Durand). See Wendell Garrett, Neo-Classicism in America: Inspiration and Innovation, 1811–1840 (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 1991), 38.
to investigate how women might have actually lived the political ideology of republicanism, how they could have manipulated this quasi-misogynistic but also deeply seductive figure that had been freighted with political significance.

Venus on her sofa can also uncover the hidden world of female classicism in the early republic, showing that American women were centrally involved in the creation, dissemination, and eventual abandonment of classical republicanism as a politically charged concept. Even in the eighteenth century, American women did not just receive an embalmed classical tradition directed at men, a kind of second-hand, lesser infatuation with the ancient world that marked them as second-class citizens in the new nation and the transatlantic republic of letters. (Though of course they did that too, listening in as their older brothers were tutored for college, or squeezing in a brief look at Charles Rollin’s popular Ancient History [13 vols., 1730–38] between household duties). They also claimed their own classicism—a Rome of their own—peopled by a cast of characters and filled with an array of meaningful objects that simply do not appear in the classicism directed at men. Some women partook of this classicism through texts, as readers and writers, forging malleable and at times contradictory identities as wives, mothers, daughters, authors, reformers, consumers, and citizens. Just as importantly, they also fashioned and expressed these attitudes with things, the paraphernalia of neoclassicism that became much more affordable and widely dispersed during the decades after roughly 1790: paintings, coins, banknotes, sculpture, engravings, embroideries, book illustrations, furniture, clothing, and porcelain. Where a leading male early national architect like Benjamin Latrobe could forge his classicism through such popular works as James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s Antiquities of Athens (1762–1830), American women, more confined by domestic duties, could turn to an array of texts and images closer to home: domestic advice manuals, furniture guides, magazine articles, plays, and poems. The sofa was at the center of women’s classical imaginations, and it furnished them (quite literally) with a rich vocabulary with which to articulate their distinctive political position in the new Rome.

THE RECUMBENT FEMALE AS VENUS

Before turning to the sofa, let us look at ancient and modern notions of the recumbent female form. In the ancient classical world the ideal human figure was the standing male, the virile Apollo suspended between action and repose, his nudity the badge of his divinity. With a few exceptions (such as Etruscan tomb art),

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the reclining male was the unmanned male: a defeated Gaul, a dead Jesus, a dying Socrates, an unmanned Samson. Standing female nudity was much rarer than standing male nudity in the ancient world. The idea of a naked Aphrodite, a cult goddess imported from the East, remained something of a novelty even in the fourth century BCE, and her nakedness was taken as testament to a kind of oriental exoticism. Statues of standing female nudes became more commonplace by the fourth century BCE, but many still featured light draping of some kind. If the standing female nude was rare, the reclining female nude was almost wholly unknown in antiquity, except in erotica on vases and frescoes. A few examples of reclining clothed women existed, such as an Ariadne of the second century BCE, whose gown opens to reveal one breast. During the Middle Ages, female nudity of all kinds was submerged and the archetypal naked female became fallen Eve, her nudity the mark of the sin she bequeathed to her daughters.5

Only in the Renaissance did the legitimate female nude reemerge, a stylistic recovery embellished with a popular new pose: recline. It became common in the sixteenth century to refer to such recumbents as Venus, a classicizing pretext for both the nudity and the pose that probably helped to smooth these women’s reception. Recumbent nudes flourished thereafter in the paintings of such painters as Titian (Venus of Urbino and Venus and Cupid with Organist) and Poussin (The Sleeping Venus and Cupid), their popularity enhanced by engravings that circulated more widely than the original paintings. By the early nineteenth century, Americans had accepted that the female form “entirely without drapery” (as one writer in 1830 put it) was termed a Venus. In some cases recumbence alone—even clothed—identified a woman as a Venus: Alfred Mills’s miniature book, Pictures of Roman History (1811), identifies a clothed, recumbent Cleopatra as being “dressed like Venus” (Figure 1).6

Given that the recumbent female was often identified as a Venus, it might be useful here to outline Americans’ views about this particular classical goddess. Colonial Americans knew about Venus, the goddess of beauty, love, and generation, through classical literature and almanacs. They thought more about Venus than her Greek antecedent, Aphrodite, because they had more


exposure to Roman literature and art than to Greek. Venus figured prominently in that all-purpose sex manual and midwifery guide, *Aristotle’s Master Piece*, as the superintendent of sexual activity. In one image of a face in the book, her zodiacal symbol, the handheld mirror, bedecked the nose to show the ravages of syphilis, one of the “venereal” diseases that bore her name. But she did not achieve widespread popularity until the early national period, when she rose up alongside Eve as a new model of feminine beauty. For colonists deeply influenced by John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Eve had long been the model of feminine loveliness,
the fountain of desire within marriage. Milton thought her a “perfect beauty,” more radiant than a goddess. Yet Venus could offer something more in a new nation that needed new narratives. Needing neither Adam nor garden, neither tree nor Fall, Venus offered a pleasing alternative to Eve’s troubling trajectory. Lover to many, wife to no one, and mother of nations, Venus was womanhood emancipated from the narrative of sin, the empty vessel to be filled by republicans in the new Arcadia.

And fill it they did. We tend to think of Venus as an artistic subject, but in early national America she was perhaps even more popular in print, especially the magazines whose numbers and circulation now increased exponentially, reaching a new and growing audience of female readers. In these publications Venus assumed a number of forms, such as the doting mother of impish Cupid or benevolent Nature juxtaposed to objectionable Artifice (especially in female dress). Most importantly for our purposes, Venus appeared in these magazines as a threat to Enlightenment reason and republican self-government. Suggesting that sexual attraction was fundamentally unpredictable and ungovernable, Venus endangered a republic built on reasoned consent. Votaries of Venus, wrote an anonymous contributor to the *Massachusetts Magazine* of 1794, had “passions” that should “soon be brought under the easy dominion of reason.” The links between Venus and the ungovernable continued well into the nineteenth century. “Jupiter could not resist her—Mars was her slave,” asserted an anonymous essayist in the magazine *Lady’s Book* of 1838. As the incarnation of disarray, Venus was often cast as the frivolous opposite of brainy Minerva. In one essay in the 1807

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American Gleaner, Minerva berates Venus for not teaching Cupid to read or write. The seat of Venus’s charms lay not in her mind but rather at the center of her body, in her legendary girdle, the cestus of Venus, “Where centered all the power of love,” as one magazine from 1794 put it. The cestus of Venus was envisioned as a portable garment, a veil of artificial seduction that women could borrow from the goddess and wield for their own romantic projects.

Although it might strike us as a trifling matter, the pose of Venus—whether she was supine or standing—was of immense importance in shaping her reception and that of her variants. We can begin with upright Venuses. The most venerated statue in America from the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth was a standing nude woman, the celebrated Venus de Medici, housed in the Uffizi in Florence (Figure 2). An ancient Greek statue, the Venus de Medici was among the most copied statues of all time, widely known through casts and engravings. Her oxymoronic nickname, “Venus pudica” (modest Venus), reveals much about her appeal. Though entirely unclothed, she uses her arms strategically to conceal her breasts and pubic region. This gesture, what one writer in the Monthly Anthology of 1805 called the “modesty of the attitude,” helped to sustain her popularity. On the one hand it reflected her virtuous attempt to conceal her nakedness, while on the other it drew attention to those parts she apparently hoped to screen. It helped that her head (a different one than originally sculpted) was small, too: it confirmed what one American art critic in 1830 called her “imbecility of mind.”

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Medici Venus had a new rival, the first-century BCE Greek statue known as the Venus de Milo, discovered on the island of Melos in 1820 and installed in the Louvre in 1821. Her larger head and sturdy haunches attracted a new generation of admirers more sympathetic to female athleticism. But both the Medici and the de Milo derived much of their appeal


Fig. 2. A nineteenth-century engraving of the Venus de Medici. *Galerie Impériale et Royale de Florence* (1818). Library Company of Philadelphia.
from their upright carriage, which was believed to be appropriately modest and forthright.¹⁴

Upright Venus became central to the corseting debates of the 1820s and 1830s, cast as naturally, healthfully straight-spined women unfettered by too-tight stays. Anti-corseting tracts by physicians and moral writers showed the torso and head of a Venus viewed from front or back. Such images served to contrast the healthy, straight spine of the uncorseted Graeco-Roman woman with the sickly spine of the modern woman (Figure 3). Here was Venus in one of her many American incarnations, the “natural” woman juxtaposed to what the American physician Charles Caldwell called the “artificial insect waist” of the woman stuffed into a corset. His medical contemporaries concurred. “The most elegant woman that we ever saw, had never worn a stay or a corset,” wrote one contributor to the *Boston Medical Intelligencer* in 1825. “Yet, in the perfection and symmetry of her figure, she might have been modelled for a Venus.”¹⁵ By contrast, recumbent women

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strained at the edges of female propriety, their posture suggesting all manner of possibilities. The controversy surrounding Adolf Wertmüller’s Danaë (1787), one of the first female nude paintings exhibited in America, can serve as an example of a broader discomfort with the recumbent female form among both men and women (Figure 4). The subject was taken from Greek mythology. Danaë was the daughter of Acrisius, king of Argos; warned by an oracle that Danaë’s son would one day kill him, he locked Danaë in a bronze room, away from male company. Despite this precaution, Zeus, besotted with her beauty, entered the chamber as a shower of gold, impregnating her with her son, Perseus. Debate raged over whether Danaë, perhaps greedy for gold, readily accepted Zeus or whether she was taken against her will; this ambiguity was central to the appeal of the recumbent nude. Wertmüller’s version is a neoclassical take on the subject, simple lines substituting for the voluptuous roundness of Titian’s Venuses. Wertmüller had completed the painting in Paris, to the applause of the likes of Jacques-Louis David, and with the help of Charles Wilson Peale imported it into the United States in 1794. It was exhibited in Philadelphia beginning in 1806, and for years Wertmüller turned a considerable profit not only from this exhibited painting but from the several copies of it he produced. The crowds no doubt flocked in part

Fig. 4. Adolf Wertmüller, Danaë and the Shower of Gold. Paris, 1787. Oil on canvas, 150 × 190 cm, NM 1767. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
because the press told them not to. Commentators attacked the picture especially for its potentially disastrous effect on women, who were allowed to see it only on Mondays, in gender-segregated groups. Peale himself, while recommending the painting to artists, hesitated to show it to the general public: “I like no art which can raise a blush on a lady’s cheek,” he confided to Benjamin Latrobe. Thomas Cooper, a classically educated émigré from England and great supporter of shoring up classical learning in the United States, denounced the painting’s “wanton delineations” and “vulgar lasciviousness.” Copies in private homes caused anxieties as well. Harriet Manigault, visiting some friends in 1814, was astonished to find a copy of Wertmüller’s Danaë opposite the uncle’s upstairs bed, “very correctly” concealed behind a curtain. Yet the curtain could not hide what Manigault saw as the most shocking part of the painting: the pose. “The attitude of it is frightful; she is on the point of receiving Jupiter in the shape of a shower of gold.”

The recumbent female—especially nude—was thus much more than the object of proto-Victorian prudery. The product of the Enlightenment’s secularization of the Eve figure, the reclining Venus also captured preoccupations with nature and artifice, passion and reason, and authenticity and deception. But there is still more to recumbent Venus in the early national period. Keen observers of Wertmüller’s Danaë would have noticed that she languished on a piece of furniture that was at the cutting edge of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century fashion: the neoclassical sofa. It was this particular object that joined the airy metaphor of the recumbent female to the pragmatic particulars of American women’s domestic, intellectual, and political identities in the early republic.

THE NEOCLASSICAL SOFA

While Renaissance recumbents languished on daybeds and lawns, American Venuses from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries acquired a new and significant platform, the neoclassical sofa. After the mid-eighteenth century that

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Venus on the sofa acquired as much importance as the recumbent female herself, sometimes suggesting a Venus even when none was physically there. The neoclassical sofa did not just reflect reality but helped to create a reality of its own, as American women sewed the imaginative worlds evoked by texts into the material world they beheld with their eyes and felt with their bodies. A product and a producer of activity, the sofa both meant something and did something, reflected and created fears and desires, enabled and discouraged certain postures and activities.

The sofa, or “Grecian couch” as it was sometimes called, was just one manifestation of that spectacular resurrection of classical antiquity, neoclassicism. This simple, austere style of art, architecture, dress, and interior decoration dominated western Europe and America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the United States, neoclassicism not only coincided with the period of nation formation but was consciously deployed by several generations of artists and architects as the physical expression of new-found republican liberty, an emancipation from the baroque luxuriance associated with monarchy. Neoclassical motifs, while not the only aesthetic style available to Americans, were nonetheless popular, appealing to an ever-broadening population of consumers of both sexes. Although daybeds and couches appear before the revolutionary period in household inventories, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that elite Americans began to purchase upholstered neoclassical sofas for their drawing rooms. By mid-century, sofas had become the centerpiece of Victorian parlors, sold in catalogs at all prices along with matching chairs and tables in an increasing array of classical and non-classical styles. Their varied shapes suggested their diverse uses: some were meant for conversation, inclining their occupants toward one another, while others were meant for reading or reclining. But most popular in the early republic was the neoclassical sofa or Grecian couch, with its simple, sweeping lines and classical motifs, such as carved Greek keys, lyres, cornucopias, paw feet, and caryatids. It was covered either with richly hued (often crimson) damask, silk, or horsehair.17

Beyond style, some of the appeal of the sofa was sensual. The sofa was puffy and soft, a delight in an age that increasingly put a premium on physical comfort. It was a private relief for women squeezed into tight stays (though the term

“fainting couch” did not exist at this time). So compelling were the delights of the sofa that the English poet William Cowper enshrined it as the apex of English civilization in his poem “The Task” (1785), popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Household furnishing manuals recommended this neoclassical furnishing as an elegant, more comfortable replacement for earlier styles. One 1828 manual recommended that Americans with drawing rooms replace the “stiff, high-backed, undeviating chairs, and the clumsy, unwieldy tables of our grandfathers” with “the easy elegant curve of the Grecian chair and couch, which combined strength and lightness.” But the realities of furniture technology were such that comfort levels varied widely. Some couches were great clouds of pillows and soft silk; others were mahogany nightmares covered by horsehair bolsters “hard as logs of ebony.”

The very classicism that enabled the sofa’s popularity, however, also linked it to fears of debauchery, variously construed. First was the bacchanal. Designers of neoclassical sofas drew some of their inspiration from klinai, couches found in ancient Greece and Rome that became better known as archaeological digs, such as those at Herculaneum and Pompeii, uncovered the daily lives of the ancients. Klinai had been introduced into Rome from Greece and formed a highly prized feature of the Roman household. Although some were specifically for sleeping, more commonly they were arranged around three sides of a low dining table, following the Roman custom of dining while reclining (a practice that gave the Roman dining room the name triclinium). At first, following the Greek custom, women were not allowed to lie down on klinai to eat, but instead sat at their husbands’ feet for the evening meal. Later, however, women claimed a place next to men, and even slaves were allowed to eat recumbent on holidays. Americans might have been infatuated with many things about ancient Greece and Rome, but the practice of recumbent dining was not one of them. In fact, by the early nineteenth century the American middle-class dining room had become a forum for upright formality, a posture encouraged by high-backed dining chairs. The fact that ancient sofas had been once used for recumbent dining made them guilty by association with the sofa’s notorious role in orgies.


The neoclassical sofa also reeked another kind of debauchery: luxury. Luxury, of course, was in the eye of the beholder, but it was widely conceded in the early national period that the sofa not only embodied luxury but gave it that classical spin that rendered its opulence a particular threat to a republic modeled on Rome’s. Already in 1790 the *New-York Weekly Museum* told the story of a greedy, lazy young widow “educated in luxury” who gloats about her unearned wealth while “lolling one evening upon a damask sofa.” (Not coincidentally, the widow was named Sempronia, a name shared by the Roman aristocratic lady condemned by Sallust for her sexual rapacity and involvement in the conspiracy against Catiline.) Neoclassical sofas retained their association with luxury even as they moved down the social ladder into middling households by the 1830s, hastened by lower prices and technological improvements such as coiled springs that made them more comfortable and durable. In the 1820s a Moravian family in North Carolina still referred to “such luxuries as sofas.” So much more than just an upholstered bench, the sofa was often singled out for its particularly republic-threatening properties. Stratford Canning, the British foreign minister, was stunned in 1820 to behold the grandeur of Congress, which he had presumed would be the seat of republican austerity. “Instead of the venerable simplicity . . . the H. of Representatives, besides being stoved, carpeted, desked and sofaed in the most luxurious style, rivals and indeed surpasses the Legislature of Paris in decoration and drapery.”

Though it was mainly classical, the sofa might also be oriental. The word *sofa*, first used in English in the seventeenth century, was derived from the Arab word *soffah* and referred to the raised area of floor covered with sumptuous carpets and cushions found in Eastern countries. The word even in its earliest uses evoked the mystery and dissolute exoticism of the harem, the setting for the repose and allegedly promiscuous sexuality of the sultan and his veiled wives. Similarly, the word *ottoman* to describe a piece of furniture (rather than a person) entered the English language in the nineteenth century. The silks and other fabrics that covered many sofas were themselves products of the Eastern trade in luxury goods. Americans gleaned some of their notions about the exotic, Eastern sofa

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from the popular home furnishing and classical clothing guides of the English scholar amateur Thomas Hope. Hope drew from his Grand Tour experiences and considerable knowledge of classical archaeology to create a furniture guide that mimicked the forms of antiquity and the Orient. His *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1807) was among the most popular guides in America for recreating the neoclassical furniture style. Dolley Madison read Hope’s guides when she redecorated the White House during the Madison administration. In his furniture guide Hope described a “low sofa, after the eastern fashion,” picturing one strewn rakishly with a leopard skin (Figure 5). He also published *Costumes of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (1812), filled with neoclassical line drawings made from Greek and Roman statues and vases to help artists to draw ancient clothing accurately in their modern paintings. The book shows several ancients recumbent on sofas. In one plate, a “Syrian” woman reclines on a sofa, while another identified as a Bacchanalian scene shows a man and woman embracing on a sofa (Figure 6).\(^21\)

It was luxurious; it was classical; it was oriental. But what specifically made the sofa female, that crucial modifier in the dire republican equation “effeminate luxury”? The sofa’s popularity spanned the decades when the shift toward white, middle-class female domesticity—and its implied female leisure—was being

made. The role of women in popularizing that symbol of republican virtue becomes clearer when we understand that their leisure was a badge of familial success worth advertising in portraits and parlors even if it did not accurately portray the realities of their workload. Like the parlors that contained them, sofas began to achieve popularity in America during the decades of the transition to a market, wage economy after the Revolution. Sofas functioned ideologically as the opposite of manufactories and of the men who labored at machines; they positioned white, elite, and middle-class women as languishing non-laborers. The reality, of course, was far more complicated. Elite and middling women did work at home, despite the presence of servants or slaves; at the lower end of the economic spectrum, women by the early decades of the nineteenth century were working on machines and earning wages, such as the young women who worked at the Lowell Mills. But while women of all classes arguably worked hard, in the realm of ideas some white women’s work began to be dissociated from the symbols of economic value, such as property and wages. The soft, sinuous sofa rebuked the straight, unyielding, noisy gadgets of the machine age. The fabrics that covered it—silks and damasks—were those of women’s clothing. This overlap of person and object is captured in one of the earliest American paintings of a woman on a sofa. John Singleton Copley’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1771) shows a woman in a shiny
silk dress half-reclining on an equally glossy red damask sofa. The object and the woman are one idea.

The womanly sofa also suggested that republicanism’s “effeminate luxury” had clear racial boundaries. The sofa, as it turned out, was the berth of specifically white womanhood and so formed a visual and ideological counterpoint to black female slaves. By the early nineteenth century certain visual conventions were emerging to depict slaves in paintings and prints. Among the most common was the slave hoisting a hoe in the field, the picture of toil and drudgery. While black women were by definition primitive bodies at work, the sofa outlined the contours of leisure for white women. It is rare indeed to find an image of a recumbent black woman in this time period, even rarer to find a black woman recumbent on a sofa. This dichotomy was amplified in early nineteenth-century paintings of lounging white women attended by black women, who act as exotic but secondary props in the scene. In literature, lounging women were often explicitly described as being white. One story in an 1829 edition of the Philadelphia magazine The Casket contrasts an “industrious” character with a bored woman who “languidly seated herself on the sofa, and drew her beautiful white hand over her face, to conceal a yawn she could not overcome.”

But we should beware too neat a dichotomy, for black women were also believed to possess an innate, “primitive” sexuality. Why were they not the natural occupants of the sofa, the platform of debauched and exotic sexuality? Here the matter of pose becomes important. The convention of associating female recline with luxury and leisure (rather than poverty and labor) seems to have worked against black Venuses being pictured recumbent on sofas more often. Black (“sable”) Venuses begin to appear in British and French literature and prints in the late eighteenth century, their beauty and sexuality explicitly compared to white or “Florentine” Venuses, suggesting the growing concern in a multiracial empire about the erotic possibilities of a black, female labor force. Yet it is striking that these images show sable Venuses as upright, not recumbent, as in


23 Among the few depictions of a black woman lying on a sofa that I have found in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a satirical English print, its humor derived from the incongruity of the idea that a black woman could languish on a couch. James Gillray’s Philanthropic Consolations after the Loss of the Slave Bill (1796) attacked the leader of English abolitionism, William Wilberforce, by situating him on a sofa next to a bare-breasted, smoking black Venus lounging in a boudoir. Richard Godfrey, James Gillray: The Art of Caricature (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 11, 218; for an example of a black woman attending a white odalisque, see Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Odalisque with a Slave (1839–40); “The Long Day,” Casket 3 (March 1829), 136.
Thomas Slothard’s engraving *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*, which appeared in Bryan Edwards’s civil and economic history of Jamaica in 1794 (Figure 7). Probably the best-known black Venus in circulation...
at this time was the Hottentot Venus, a name given to the Bushman woman Sarah Bartmann, who was exhibited in Europe beginning in 1810 and continued to excite interest even after her death in 1816. Envisioned as the embodiment of rapacious black female sexuality, the Hottentot Venus was nonetheless always pictured upright, not recumbent. She tended to appear in profile, too, the better to reveal the enormous buttocks for which she was renowned, and which were believed to be monuments to her primitive sexual urges. A version appeared, for example, in Josiah Nott and George Glidden’s *Types of Mankind* (1854), where the profile enabled a comparison of the buttocks to the bumps of a camel (Figure 8).24

Ultimately, the female sofa contained within it a truth that could apply equally to both white and black women: that both were subordinate in a patriarchal system that deprived all women—to varying degrees—of rights on the basis of sex alone. The etymology of the word *odalisque* illuminates the overlapping categories of woman and slave. By the nineteenth century the word often referred to a female recumbent nude, but it had entered the English language in the seventeenth century as a word meaning *slave* or *concubine.*25 The fusion of the idea of woman (especially wife) and slave was, of course, one of the foundations of nineteenth-century feminists’ assaults on such practices as coverture and the limited franchise. Here it was incarnated in the visual field, in images, in literature, and in the lived reality of white and black women in North and South. The white woman lounging on the sofa and the upright sable Venus had something in common, after all, despite their different poses, props, and hues.

The feminine sofa not only posed men less frequently than women, it drew attention to men’s failures as men. Kenneth Ames has shown that “tipping”—leaning backward slightly in a chair—became a way for nineteenth-century men to thwart the convention of stiff chairs and impose the dominating presence of a man in a room. But while tipping a chair might be masculine, lying down—especially on a sofa—was not. In paintings, engravings, and in print, men rarely appear on sofas; when they do—as in a family portrait intended to display the


family’s respectable domesticity—the man (often the father) is seated upright on the sofa or stands behind it. Until about mid-century, picturing a man recumbent was a way to make him effeminate, a juxtaposition strikingly revealed in a political cartoon from roughly 1838. The image attacks the ineffectiveness

Fig. 8. The Hottentot Venus. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (1854). Stanford University Libraries.
Fig. 9. A political cartoon from roughly 1838 condemns American soldiers’ ineptness in the Seminole War by showing a soldier recumbent in a tent, fanned by an Indian maiden, as though in an oriental harem. Winterthur Museum 1975.0003.

of American soldiers in waging war against the Seminole Indians by showing a soldier recumbent in a tent, fanned by an Indian maiden as though they were in an oriental seraglio (Figure 9).26

Exotic, luxurious, debauched, and effeminate, the sofa became a perfect vehicle for commenting on the French in the early national period. This convention had a long history. Preliminary contributions to the sofa literature had in fact been French: the first fictional account to make the sofa the forum for erotic activity was an early anti-clerical pornographic tract, Abbé du Prat’s Vénus dans le Cloître (1672). Here, young nuns pounce upon the sofa for erotic initiations: “Assieds-toi sur ta couche comme tu étais, je vais fermer la porte sur nous,” says one to another. Better known in the English-speaking world was Le Sopha (1745), by the French writer Crébillon-fils, published in London in English translation as The Sopha: A Moral Tale (1781). In this bizarre yarn, Brahma punishes a dissolute man by forcing his soul to transmigrate into a sofa; from this new vantage point he observes the passionate goings-on of women and men in the oriental seraglio. “There are few chaste women on the Sopha,” he says, setting the tone for adventures to come.

The sofa is placed in a cabinet, a place of “hypocritical luxury,” where many a woman “gave herself up to pleasure, but knew not what it was to love.” The narrating sofa was just one of a whole genre of stories of “speaking objects” that flourished in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, featuring favorite items of the burgeoning consumer market such as fans, mirrors, wigs, umbrellas, pincushions, and stagecoaches. The sofa was the only novelty to feature explicitly as a prop for love. The genre was durable in America: *Godey’s Lady’s Book* printed a number of such stories throughout the nineteenth century.27

Americans’ simultaneous horror and fascination with French sofa-bound dissipation was exemplified not only in their obsession with the scandalous sexual shenanigans of the court of Louis XVI, but in their interest in the debauched, imperial grandeur of the later Napoleonic era. A central figure in the mythic construction of the Diréctoire as a decadent cultural form dominated by women was the legendary Juliette Récamier. Mme Récamier consciously fashioned her image, delighting in the contrast between her austere, white neoclassical gowns, which portrayed her as the image of feminine modesty, and the iconography of erotic repose implied by her pose on the sofa. The best-known image of Mme Récamier was Jacques-Louis David’s painting of her made in 1800, where she is shown reclining fully clothed on a neoclassical couch, bare feet peeking from under her neoclassical gown, Greek ringlets tumbling carelessly about her face. The American press followed the movements of Récamier and others in the Napoleonic court with great interest. In 1806 a number of American magazines reprinted a report of her admirable retirement from the “circle of fashion,” her abandonment of the “dissipation of courts” in favor of “fulfilling her first duty, that of a wife.”28

For all the talk of white women lolling listlessly on the sofa, it is clear that women were active consumers and producers of the image and the reality. The luxurious sofa gave elite and middle-class women a place to read and rest, to converse and dream, all in the setting of the parlor, a place at once homely and public. We can venture further still to explain the perpetuation and durability

of the image. Venus on her sofa suggests the existence in the nineteenth century of a sense of white women’s bodily passion. The sofa was a place to seduce and to be seduced, and women’s attachment to this piece of furniture suggests that they encouraged this particular use for it. Pornographic works from the 1840s and 1850s prominently featured a Venus or Cleopatra in recumbent romps on the sofa. Most of such “obscene” images were made by men for men, and were kept under lock and key in bookstores (Figure 10). Yet as we have seen, similar images—with less explicit erotic content—circulated generally in works available to women, suggesting that the female consumers (and sometimes producers) of this literature found the image provocative as well. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz has observed that there likely did not exist a unitary “Victorian sexuality” of passionlessness for elite and middle-class white women. Rather, nineteenth-century Americans may have “expressed competing sexual frameworks and perhaps accepted into their own lives and practiced messages from more than one.”

The sofa was part of

Fig. 10. An illustration from “The Loves of Cleopatra, or, Mark Anthony and His Concubines,” from Venus’ Miscellany (July 11, 1857). Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University.
the physical incarnation of such competing frameworks: it was both appealing and unsettling, both desirable and sinister. These contradictory qualities made it more, not less, dazzling as the center of the parlor.

VENUS AND THE ROMAN MATRON

We can now turn to two educated women to investigate how this contradictory figure—of allure and danger, of nature and artifice, of reason and passion—formed part of an imaginative and physically palpable world of female classicism steeped in political and moral implications. Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814) of Massachusetts and Martha Bayard Smith (1778–1844) of Washington, DC, both enlisted the female recumbent in their published writings. Neither Warren nor Smith would have identified themselves as a recumbent female, still less as a Venus. On the contrary: as elite, white, educated women in the new republic, they preferred to think of themselves as Roman matrons. Dignified, pious, courageous, and long-suffering, the Roman matron had emerged as an ideological, literary, and pictorial convention in late eighteenth-century America, capturing the imagination of scores of American women even into the early twentieth century. Like so many appealing figures, the Roman matron transcended the local: she was as appealing to Northern women as to Southern, as important to Abigail Adams (1744–1818), a self-styled Portia, as to Louisa McCord (1810–1879), one of the antebellum South’s most impassioned defenders of slavery, whom Hiram Powers sculpted in bust form as a Roman matron in 1859. The Roman matron could really be almost any woman plucked from the Graeco-Roman past. The variety and range is astounding, from the famous to the totally obscure. Among the most popular were Andromache, the mourning widow of Hector; Penelope, the waiting, weaving, ever-faithful wife of Odysseus; Constantia, mother of the Emperor Constantine; Livia and Portia, long-suffering wives of Roman politicians (itself a major subcategory of Roman matrons); the Sabines of early Rome, loyal to their captors for the sake of peace; and Spartan mothers, who sent their sons to battle with the injunction to return either holding their shields or dead upon them. As with Venus recumbent, the pose of the Roman matron was key: in images, she either sits or stands, the embodiment of literally upright womanhood.30

But though I have juxtaposed them here, the important thing is that Venus and the Roman matron were not mutually exclusive categories for women, either as models for self-fashioning or as metaphors for political ideologies. Just as allegorical classical figures like Liberty and Britannia might look essentially identical while suggesting radically different political meanings depending on their timing and context, so Venus and the Roman matron worked most powerfully as part of a number of classicized identities women might assume at specific times for specific audiences. Both Mercy Otis Warren and Margaret Bayard Smith might identify publicly and privately as Roman matrons, but in their writings both meditated on the figure of the recumbent woman, summoning the archetype for service in the political dramas of the young republic.

A historian, poet, and playwright, Mercy Otis Warren was among the most learned women in an age that continued to deny even elite women a higher education. Raised in Massachusetts, she had received a limited classical education as a kind of extension of her brother James Otis’s tutoring, erudition that she put to use through several plays in support of the revolutionary effort. In her long correspondence with both John and Abigail Adams, she frequently signed herself “Marcia,” the Roman wife of Cato the younger and a name that matched Abigail’s sobriquet of “Portia,” wife of the Roman senator Brutus.

In 1763, the American painter John Singleton Copley painted her and her husband, James Warren, as part of a pair of portraits. Tending lovingly to nasturtiums, Mercy Warren poses here as the standing Roman matron, the devoted wife and womb of patriots (she bore a son the year before and after she sat for Copley).31 After the Revolution, Warren remained deeply fearful that the republican experiment would founder without adequate vigilance against vice and tyranny, the corrosers of republics. Her didactic play The Sack of Rome (1790), dedicated to President George Washington, was one of two plays that she published at this time that depicted the triumph of misrule and the downfall of the champions of liberty. Set in a Christianizing fifth-century Rome besieged by barbarian invaders from northern Africa, the play articulates the standards of republican political theory, casting virtuous Roman citizens as bulwarks against imperial decline. Identifying Rome as female, Warren links the city to America’s political state “in the dark days of her affliction.” Her two heroines are variously virtuous. One is Ardelia, the wife of a Roman citizen, identified as “the first and fairest matron left in Rome.” The other is Edoxia, the wife of

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But scratch beneath the surface of these heroic Roman matrons and a driving metaphor emerges: the female recumbent, here cast as feminine Rome, lying down to be raped by Carthage, the city she had once so triumphantly conquered. Warren describes female Rome as a place where virtue “reclined,” leaving Rome “faint and languid . . . in luxury’s lewd lap.” Recumbent Rome, contaminated by “soft, effeminate, luxurious sloth,” was easy prey for the attack of the Vandal king based in Carthage. Warren described this invasion by analogy to a woman raped: “Rome prostrate lies beneath her conquering lord.” The metaphor of white female languor was widely used as a metaphor for the historical cycles of rise and fall presaged by classical views of history. For Warren, political decline stemmed from various factors defined as “effeminate,” most especially luxury and vice. Through the figure of the female recumbent as the city of Rome, Warren mapped the individual vices of women onto national political states.\footnote{Warren, \textit{Sack of Rome}, 88, 43, 83, 30.}

For Margaret Bayard Smith fifty years later, the woman recumbent remained a compelling image for elite, white, politically minded women in the new republic. In a series of short stories published in a women’s magazine in the early 1830s, Smith uses the sofa as part of a rich, fictional world in an imagined Roman past. In this she was one of legions: history writing became a favorite genre for American women in the early republic. Greece and Rome beckoned as venues distant in time and place, a strategy that allowed female authors in both North and South to critique politics, slavery, or women’s confined roles through the indirection of historical fiction.\footnote{Nina Baym, \textit{American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).} But in other ways Smith opened the door of a new era for the sofa.

Smith’s stories were published in the early 1830s, at the moment when the image of the recumbent female began to move from the realm of classical republican metaphor to the world of palpable domesticity, from a prop for commentary about the state of the republic to a new place at the center of a morally didactic but politically oblique Victorian parlor. The transition was slow and uneven. Women and sofas—and women on sofas—remained commonplace in the American literary and pictorial landscape through the period before 1870, so commonplace in fact that it can be difficult to discern any kind of trajectory for Venus on the sofa. But the 1830s are a useful breaking point for understanding the political culture of the early republic and the place of middling and educated women in that culture.
In the decades before 1830, women close to political men, such as Dolley Madison and Catherine Louisa Adams, could exert political influence through marriage and social position, activities that Catherine Allgor has termed “parlor politics.” Though not wielding the ballot, they participated in politics behind the scenes, in the mixed-gender setting of the parlor and salon, much like the salonnières of Enlightenment France. Here the sofa could be a platform for conversation between men and women, but it could also raise fears of effeminate influence and luxury, corrodors of independent male citizens. Such parlor politicking was on the decline, though, by the late 1820s, as middle-class women, in growing numbers and in both North and South, took up a new strategy of indirect, moral persuasion through voluntary organizations rather than through parlor politicking.35 Reflecting on the end of one world as she beheld the dawn of another, Smith can show how the woman on the sofa could be envisioned less as a redoubtable symbol of “effeminate vice”—the vestige of an earlier age steeped in the metaphors of republicanism—than as the center of a domesticated, female world of benevolent political intent.

Like Warren, Margaret Bayard was born into an elite political and revolutionary family. She received an education typical for a girl of her station at the Moravian Young Ladies’ Seminary in Pennsylvania before marrying her second cousin, Samuel Harrison Smith, a Republican, and moving to the new, neoclassical federal city, Washington, DC, in 1800. Here this modern Roman matron remained an avid reader with a particular interest in the history of ancient Greece and Rome. Her choices reveal the conventions of gender and classicism that characterized the period. Since most women did not learn Greek or Latin, they read English or French translations of ancient texts. In 1809, Smith visited Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and borrowed from him what she called “Greek romances.” “He took pains to find one that was translated into French,” she recalled. In her fiction, she footnoted authoritative works like Basil Kennett’s _Roman Antiquities_ (first published in 1697 and a staple of college and private

libraries into the nineteenth century) and Cicero’s *De senectute* (which she called “On Old Age,” probably because she had read it in English translation).36

Like other elite women during the administrations of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, Smith circulated in a wide network of political and personal relationships through both formal, public ceremonies and the private, more egalitarian forum of the drawing room and salon. Many of these drawing rooms were fitted out in the latest neoclassical style, attended by women wearing the simple, Greek-style gowns that completed the classical aesthetic. Dolley Madison made a career of dressing as a neoclassical goddess during her husband’s administration; portraits of elite women during this era, like that of Louisa Catherine Adams, show that the simplicity of neoclassical dress could be achieved through luxury—diamond tiaras, velvet gowns.37 Smith confessed to her sister in 1807 that she feared that these “splendid” neoclassical drawing rooms—where public and private matters joined in a mixed “mob” of men and women—threatened her with “the dangers of dissipation.”38 Yet the same drawing room was also for Smith the scene of serene groups of men and women who gathered on sofas and chairs around her hearth in the evening, where genial conversation relieved the stiffness of public society. She gave a precise rendering of the effect of a moral, congenial use of the sofa after a private evening at the White House, sitting on the “sopha” with Thomas Jefferson, his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph, and her husband, Samuel Harrison Smith, nearby:

I was seated on the sopha which he and Mrs. R. occupied and Mr. Smith close by me, and almost fronting him. You know the effect of such a disposition of places on the free flow of conversation, and I am certain that had he been on the other side of the chimney we should not have heard half so much.39

For Smith, the sofa-centered neoclassical drawing rooms of elite Washington society afforded her—and other women in her circle—a chance for political and social influence.

Such political influence, however circumscribed, was nonetheless on the decline by the early 1830s, and the sofa began to be a place where women might


38 Quoted in Teute, “Roman Matron,” 94, 105.

39 Smith, *First Forty Years*, 50.
with increasing propriety read and instruct, and where even a man might with less self-consciousness recline to read or sleep. Margaret Bayard Smith, now in her early fifties, reflected on this shift in a series of six short stories that she published in the early 1830s in Sarah Hale’s *Ladies’ Magazine*. Most of the stories were set in first-century Rome during the reign of Nero (54–68 CE), an emperor notorious for plundering the national treasury, apocryphally fiddling while Rome burned, and for murdering not just his wife and mother but his famous teacher, Seneca. Smith saw in imperial Rome’s material corruption, flagging patriotism, and “general corruption of morals” a parallel with Jacksonian America. “In no period in Roman history,” she informed her female readers, “did a darker gloom invest the aspect of society, than in the time of Nero, ‘when virtue,’ in the words of Tacitus, ‘was a crime that led to certain ruin.’”

In her stories, Smith locates the bulwarks against republican decay in an idealized Roman household dominated by women and their classical paraphernalia. In Smith’s villas, Roman matrons—often widowed and grieving, always virtuous—are the pillars of republican society, candidates for heroism far more deserving than men. “Allowing however the devotedness and fortitude of these heroes to be greater than that of the Roman matron—were not their supports greater? Were they not more than rewarded for temporary pain by immortal glory?” Smith looked back nostalgically to her own days as a young Washington wife, circulating in elite society, to call for a return to the days when both men and women participated in learned, political conversations:

The social circles of Rome, at least those of the higher classes, were always composed of both sexes. Virtuous and learned women mingled with statesmen and philosophers, and imparted to society that refinement which they alone can impart . . . They had ceased to be the slaves, and had become the friends and companions of men. But it is with regret, the historian relates, that virtuous women were as rare as virtuous men. Arria was one of the precious few, who in a time of general corruption of morals exhibited the qualities that have made the epithet of *Roman matron* a title of honor.

Such days seemed long over: Smith reflected ruefully on the narrowing of women’s opportunities to a smaller, more domesticated circle. “The world!—She has no

43 Smith, “Poetus Thrasea,” 341.
world, but the little spot over which her affections hover,” she wrote in one story.  

Here the sofa is practically a character in and of itself. Smith envisioned these Roman sofas in salons like the ones she had known in her younger Washington days, places where both men and women repaired to enjoy one another’s company. In one piece she describes a “couch beneath a marble shade” where men and women “enjoyed the mingled pleasures of sense and intellect.” Another role for Smith’s sofas was as the locus of dreamy reverie. Servilia, a “Roman daughter,” sinks into a couch, from where she witnesses a “mystic scene” in which a voice from a magical “cloud of vapor” alerts her that “Virtue shall be rewarded.” In another story, a virtuous Roman matron goes to her garden grotto and chooses a “mossy bank or couch” in lieu of “the more costly ones of art” to “indulge in sweet reveries.”

Finally, sofas for Smith helped to create not just Roman matrons but specifically Roman mothers. One of Smith’s stories, entitled “Arria, or the Heroism of Affection,” in fact takes place entirely at the feet of two sofas, the twin poles of a neoclassical world. Arria, the wife of the politician Paetus, who had been condemned to take his own life, was one of the favorite exemplars of female Roman virtue in early national America. To exemplify the Roman ideal of wives predeceasing their husbands, Arria plunged the dagger into her own breast, saying, “It does not hurt, Paetus.” Smith’s version of the story concerns Arria’s decision to stay by the side of her dying son rather than her husband, a move Smith applauds as one in which “nature triumphed over the heroism of affection.” On one sofa languishes Arria’s ailing husband, on the other her sick son—a shocking gender reversal for the sofa, but one that Smith uses to accentuate Arria’s heroic, civic-minded maternity.

For educated women like Mercy Otis Warren and Margaret Bayard Smith, the sofa and its implied Venus became distinctively female ways to enter classically steeped conversations about politics, domesticity, and intellect in the early national period. Against Cincinnatus the warrior and Cicero the orator, Venus on the sofa offered American women a language with which to meditate on their own problematic place in the new republic. The sofa became part of a fully realized neoclassical domestic interior in which objects might evoke the political dramas

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45 Smith, “Poetus Thrasea,” 341, 342.
46 Smith, “Roman Sketches: Servilia, or, the Roman Daughter,” *Ladies’ Magazine* 6 (1833), 13–14.
47 Smith, “Poetus Thrasea,” 344.
49 Smith, “Arria,” 293. The sofa is also a centerpiece of some of her stories not set in Rome, such as *A Winter in Washington.*
of ancient Rome. Increasingly knowledgeable about the history, literature, and material remains of the classical world, whether through formal schooling or informal reading, women such as Smith and Warren speculated about how this interior might be linked to a young republic modeled on an ancient one. Though they might amble into the grandiose spaces of public, neoclassical architecture, they also found meaning in the neoclassical furnishings closer to their everyday concerns. These objects can reveal an unsuspected world of American women’s links to the politics of the new republic.