

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson: Libraries, Leadership and Legacy

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In the opening pages of Kevin Hayes's The Road to Monticello, Hayes describes the fire that destroyed Shadwell, Jefferson's family plantation in the Virginia Piedmont. It is appropriate that Hayes begins with the conflagration in which Jefferson lost "every paper I had in the world, and almost every book," as he wrote to his friend, John Page. Jefferson's Life and Mind, as Hayes' subtitle suggests, were woven together through reading and writing. And how did the man who defined himself and his legacy through the books that filled the shelves of his library, build that library? How did he acquire books—"in the absence of many North American booksellers," as David Emblidge asks? Jefferson made his purchases in the cities of the European and American Enlightenments—Philadelphia, London, New York, and Paris. He bought books closer to home—purchasing volumes from the libraries of fellow Virginians Peyton Randolph, Richard Bland, and William Byrd. In 1783, thirteen years after the destruction of Shadwell, Jefferson's library numbered 2,640 volumes. That number increased month-by-month, year-by-year, until Jefferson sold his library in 1815.

Jefferson's engagement with the Enlightenment rested upon a phenomenal command of his library. Instead of a single Enlightenment posited by scholars until recently, Jefferson engaged multiple Enlightenments, each with its own character and each with connections to the larger Atlantic world. Surely

as much as anyone on either side of the Atlantic, Jefferson participated in the English, French, Scottish, and German Enlightenments. He was also a primary contributor to his own country's Enlightenment. In equally striking fashion, Jefferson exemplified a signal characteristic of those who took part in these Enlightenments—a sustained and sustaining correspondence in which he and an astonishingly large circle shared political ideas, scientific information, social theory, and historical interpretations.

Frank Shuffelton takes as his point of departure recent scholarship challenging Henry Steele Commager's famous declaration that "the Old World imagined the Enlightenment and the New World realized it." Instead, as Shuffelton and other scholars have noted, the Enlightenment is more accurately conceptualized as a "republic of letters," as a conversation that encompassed the Atlantic world. This "republic of letters" was constituted in ideas that traveled in manuscript, in the letters and reports, and in pamphlets and books, in printed material that was available to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Thomas Jefferson shared the knowledge his library offered with a host of correspondents. In choosing books and pamphlets, he applied a three-fold criterion, as Shuffelton tells us—their potential usefulness, or practicality, their ability to further the growth of the mind, or the reason, and their effectiveness in stimulating the affections, or the sympathies, especially the capacity for pleasure.

The literature of the French Enlightenment more than met all three of these criteria. And Paris offered Jefferson a plethora of bookshops and book dealers, including Jean Claude Molini and Jacques-Francois Froulle. By the time he crossed the Atlantic once again in 1784, Jefferson had added more than 1,850 titles to his library. Jefferson's direct engagement with France's "age of reason"

began with Diderot's and D'Alembert's Encyclopedie, ou Dictionaire rasionne des sciences, des arts et des métiers. As Shuffelton tells us, Jefferson took from the Encyclopedie, rather than directly from Francis Bacon, the basic categories with which he organized his library—memory, reason, and imagination, which he applied to history, philosophy, and the fine arts, respectively. He then proceeded to Charles-Joseph Panckoucke's Encyclopedie Methodique, which had been designed as an enlarged edition of Diderot's and D'Alembert's Encyclopedie. Ambitious? Decidedly so. This Encyclopedie numbered one hundred and sixty-six volumes. Clearly, Jefferson considered these topically organized volumes crucial to his enterprise. Not only did he keep his subscription until he sold his library in 1815, but he also sent volumes to friends, including Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Francis Hopkinson, and Edmund Randolph.

In supplying these friends with volumes of the Encyclopedie, Jefferson was acting as an agent, disseminating the French Enlightenment to other American members of the “republic of letters.” But if he was an agent for France, Jefferson was still more the American patriot, challenging the “swarm of nonsense,” as he bluntly characterized what he considered erroneous descriptions of the United States. Indeed, and as we know, the acclaimed Notes on the State of Virginia was his contribution to “get[ting] the facts right,” as Shuffelton characterizes Jefferson's fierce determination. One of those “facts” was slavery. And in this regard, he was overly optimistic. “I flatter myself it will take place there at some period of time not very far distant,” he wrote G. K. van Hogendorp. Residing in Paris at the time he penned the letter Jefferson could let his imagination range more freely, as Shuffelton remarks. Yes, he could and he

did. Annette Gordon-Reed's insight concerning Jefferson and the enslavement of Africans is telling in this regard. "Certainly," she says in The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family, "Jefferson's years in Paris were among the happiest in his life in part because he could live there as an enlightened aristocratic gentleman without depending on the labor of enslaved people." In Virginia, that was not possible. But, as Gordon-Reed also notes, "Jefferson arranged his personal life to minimize the reminders of his entanglement with African slavery. He took to the mountain with his wife, surrounded himself with enslaved people—some of whom, his wife's blood relatives, he could treat as something other than slaves." Still, Jefferson, as we know, was deeply enmeshed in the institution. David Konig strikes an appropriately cautionary note—in taking an incremental approach, Jefferson focused on "modest" goals.

If Jefferson's primacy in the "republic of letters" rested on a phenomenal command of his library, if he generously shared that library with men of equal standing, he did not restrict himself to the male luminaries who populated his Atlantic world. Jefferson was deeply concerned as well with those much closer to home—his daughters and their opportunities for an enlightened education. And that concern would be crucial in "Fashioning Martha Jefferson as Republic Daughter and Plantation Mistress" as Billy Wayson titles his essay. Wayson begins with Jefferson's letter to Marbois, the secretary of the French legation. "The plan of reading I have left for her is considerably different from what I think would be most proper for her sex in any other country than America," he told him. Jefferson surely thought so. And as Wayson shows, there were circumstances that made his daughter's adolescence "considerably different" from her contemporaries in Virginia. At the same time, recent research suggests

that the informal schooling, or what we can discern as Jefferson's "plan of reading" may well have reflected larger trends in the education of elite women. Families who counted themselves members of British America's elite introduced schooling that went beyond reading, writing, and ciphering. Beginning in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, those who resided in towns and cities had daughters schooled in ornamental needlework, French, music, and dancing, the social accomplishments that Martha studied while in Philadelphia. Women who shared Martha's status were also sent to privately funded schools that offered a smattering of English grammar and composition, geography, natural philosophy, and history.

Some of these elite families went further, installing a much more extended education in which their counterparts in Great Britain were being instructed. Published in 2008, Sarah Fatherly's Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies introduces us to the learned women of eighteenth-century Philadelphia. In this path breaking study, she has identified the British model of schooling that was adopted by the city's privileged families in the decades Martha Jefferson resided there. Daughters in these families accumulated the cultural capital encoded in history, natural philosophy, literature, and the classics. They immersed themselves in belle lettres, or polite letters, reading volumes such as those collected in the 109-volume edition of British poets Jefferson purchased for Martha. They conducted scientific experiments and read with enthusiasm texts Jefferson would have included in the "graver sciences." They took lessons from British prescriptive literature, which circulated widely in British America. The Female Spectator, the Tatler, the Spectator, and the Young Gentleman and Lady

Instructed schooled them in the cultivation of taste, another form of cultural capital that distinguished them from the lower sorts.

In 1769, twelve years before Jefferson penned his letter to Marbois, Robert Skipwith asked him to recommend volumes for a gentleman's library. Both Shuffelton and Wayson have commented on Jefferson's choices. This letter along with Jefferson's response nearly five decades later to a request for books appropriate for a gentleman's lady tell us much about the degree to which Jefferson gendered education. Let me focus on fiction, perhaps the most contested literary genre, whether the reader was male or female. In writing to Skipwith, Jefferson recommended the novels of Smollett, Richardson, and Fielding as well as Sterne's Tristram Shandy. Anyone who pondered the subject could not help but come to the conclusion that "the entertainments of fiction are useful as well as pleasant." He did not wish to say he was opposed to these pleasures, but, as he observed wryly, there would always be someone who would inquire: "Wherein is it utility?" To which Jefferson responded "everything is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue." As far as Jefferson was concerned, "everything" meant exactly that. Examples of vice, if well done and well written, could prove salutary as illustrations of virtue: "when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice." Whether we are stirred to admire virtue or abhor vice, he insisted, "every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions."

When Jefferson prepared his list for a gentleman's lady in 1818, he still considered reading integral to an elite education. He looked to Martha, the daughter whom he had educated, to help him compile a list of books. Jefferson

did recommend “Pope, Dryden, Thomson, Shakespeare, and the French Moliere, Racine [and] the Corneilles.” The Spectator also appeared on the list, as did the Tatler and Guardian. He also believed history to be integral to an education. Ironically, Jefferson recommended Buffon’s natural history, which he had so pointedly criticized in Notes on the State of Virginia. None of the eighteenth-century male novelists were cited. And there was little doubt that Jefferson was convinced that much of the world of literature should be divided on the basis of gender. Having defended novels as improving as well as pleasurable for gentlemen, he lamented them as “a great obstacle to good education” for their female counterparts. The barrier was none other than the “inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed.” The potential consequences were disturbing, to say the least. Too great a fondness for fiction made for “a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real business of life.”

Obviously, as far as Jefferson was concerned, gender should play a role in shaping any education that went beyond the rudimentary reading, writing, and ciphering. However, those of us who practice cultural history and literary criticism should take care lest we treat gender as too blunt an instrument. As Jeanne Boydston has cautioned us in her path breaking “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis” (Gender and History, 2008) this analytical category has all too often functioned as a set of universalized premises. And when it been applied in this fashion, we have flattened complex historical processes and meanings. We have fostered uniformity in the very history whose resistances and irregularities we seek to understand. Boydston asks us to take pleasure in

unraveling the variability of human experience. She invites us to greet irregularities as signals to be pursued rather than as exceptions to be set aside.

In looking at Jefferson's perspective, we should take Boydston's counsel and look to the continually shifting context in which gender is being constructed. Jefferson provides a particularly telling example in this regard. As a participant in the multiple Enlightenments of the eighteenth century, Jefferson relied not only on the "reason" celebrated by Bacon, Newton, and Locke but also on the "affections," or the sympathies, that Scottish moral philosophers Hutcheson and Shaftesbury brought to the fore. Encouraged to look within, to connect with the empathetic self, individuals were told to attend to the "affections." The man or woman of sensibility, who was installed as an ideal, had "a mind subordinate to reason, a temper humanized and fitted to all natural affections," as Shaftesbury told readers of the aptly titled Characteristicks (1711). Shaftesbury and Hutcheson also posited an inherent moral sense that enabled human beings to distinguish between right and wrong. As Hutcheson told readers in A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy, which he published in 1747, "what is approved by this sense, we count as right and beautiful, and call it virtue; what is condemned, we count base and deformed and vicious." But if God had implanted this moral faculty, it was the responsibility of human beings to cultivate their natural disposition to virtue. In embracing the vocabularies and behaviors of a sensibility that elevated the "affections," those who counted themselves members of a transatlantic elite taught themselves to honor feeling. Jefferson, who embraced Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, echoed their convictions in his letter to Skipwith. Speaking at an historical moment in which Scottish moral philosophy held sway, Jefferson could recommend all sorts of fiction and say

with confidence “every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions,” as he told his friend.

In Great Britain, the meaning attached to sensibility had taken a negative turn well before the end of the century. The subject of increasing criticism, sensibility was detached from reason and came to be tagged as excessive and, still worse, effeminate emotion. Newly independent Americans, instead of dismissing the “affections,” began to calibrate them differently. Those upholding sensibility installed one of Western culture's oldest binaries, the “true and the false.” Those infected with a “false” sensibility were emotionally self-indulgent. They were hypersensitive and at least troublesome, or, if fully diseased, disgusting. Displaying the inordinate delicacy, they refused the call to improve self and society. Women, who were considered most vulnerable to these forms of solipsism, had to be protected from any fiction that might generate a “false” sensibility. “True” sensibility was a study in contrast. Grounded as much in rational discernment as in the “affections,” this was a sensibility fortified by moral strength and poised to take action in civil society. In 1818, the year that Jefferson prepared his recommendations for a gentleman’s lady, these convictions had taken hold. Little wonder, then, that Jefferson was apprehensive about “inordinate passion prevalent for novels.”