

## Mercy Otis Warren: The Woman Who Shaped the Revolution With Her Pen

By Neema P.

I learned about this contest through an online search using Google.

URL: <https://www.sar.org/george-s-stella-m-knight-essay-contest/>

Essay Text Word Count (Excluding Works Cited): 1,178 Words

## Mercy Otis Warren: The Woman Who Shaped the Revolution With Her Pen

A closer look at Mercy Otis Warren's dramatic sketches from 1772 to 1775 shows how strategically persuasive her writing was in shaping revolutionary public opinion. Sandra J. Sarkela, an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Memphis and an expert in early American rhetorical practices, elaborates that the sketches of Warren have combined rhetorical features of poetry, imaginative, emotional, and memorable, with the form of dialogues that made the ideas easier to digest and gave the characters a voice that added vocalic stress to the text (Sarkela 544). Warren applied political argument to certain characters so that the readers could feel the immediacy and the involvement in the colonial struggle. Her writings were published in the newspapers, reached a large audience, and even contributed to the mobilization of supporters of the radicals in Boston, proving that theatrical and poetic writing techniques could serve as powerful means of political persuasion unlike standard essays or orations. Through Warren's writing, she demonstrates that the American Revolution relied not only on weapons and leaders but also on those writers that influenced the conscience of the people and their togetherness. In this way, the pen of Warren was a weapon of revolution, which empowered republicanism long before independence.

A deeper look at Warren's early political writing shows that she used satire both to expose corruption and to rally colonists. According to Cheryl Z. Oreovicz, a literary scholar published in *Early American Literature*, Warren's first public works were dramatic political satires that "revealed the avarice, callousness, and treachery" of British officials in Massachusetts (Oreovicz 55). In *The Adulateur* (1772), she caricatured Governor Hutchinson and his allies, depicting their efforts to enslave formerly free people and turning the stage into a battleground for liberty (Oreovicz 55). Her follow-up, *The Defeat* (1773), urged resistance to

British rule and even staged the hanging of the villain Rapatio, just as Hutchinson “was hanged in effigy” in real life (Oreovicz 55). Her most sophisticated satire, *The Group* (1775), exposed the venality and self-interest of Loyalist elites on the eve of war (Oreovicz 55–56). Through these plays, Warren transformed political outrage into accessible drama and used satire to advance the revolutionary cause at a time when women had no formal political voice (Oreovicz 55). Her work shows how literature could influence public sentiment as powerfully as speeches or pamphlets.

In addition, beyond her political arguments and historical writings, Warren’s life and literary persona themselves embodied the spirit of revolution. In *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, biographer and award-winning American historian Nancy Rubin Stuart, an expert in Revolutionary-era women, portrays Warren’s transformation from a conventional colonial wife into a political writer as “revolutionary.” The once-quiet homemaker came to see her words as “as explosive as gunpowder,” and by the time of Lexington and Concord, she had become what Stuart calls the Revolution’s “secret pen.” Her political verse, satirical dramas, and later her book-length *History* advanced the intellectual and personal interests of independence and demonstrated that women could exert influence equal to men’s (Stuart 3). Stuart underscores that Warren’s voice helped shape both revolutionary ideology and the broader role of women in American political life. Her correspondence with leaders such as John Adams, Samuel Adams, and Thomas Jefferson shows her impact on policy and civic virtue (Warren, Letter to Adams). She argued that battlefield victories meant little without public confidence, evidence that women could influence revolutionary leadership beyond formal political structures.

Warren's historical writing ensured that the Revolution's ideological and moral dimensions were preserved. Her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* is a primary source written by a politically engaged contemporary who witnessed and corresponded with key figures, making it a reliable account of revolutionary challenges (Warren). Warren argued that liberty required civic virtue and ongoing public engagement. By documenting contributions from both men and women, she showed that intellectual and social efforts were as essential as military victories. Her writing proves the Revolution was a moral and cultural struggle as well as a military one.

Likewise, Mercy Otis Warren shaped Revolutionary-era thought through political writings that defended republican ideals. A distinguished legal historian, Lawrence J. Friedman, and an expert in American political history, Arthur H. Shaffer, noted that Warren criticized the Federalist Party, especially Adams, for abandoning the Revolution's republican vision (Friedman and Shaffer 198). They also highlight her belief that the nation depended on virtuous citizenship, which is why she urged Americans to be guided by a unifying, transcendent principle (Friedman and Shaffer 201). Her *History* thus offered both criticism and a moral appeal, aiming to preserve the Revolution's ideals of truth, liberty, and patriotic commitment (Friedman and Shaffer 199). Warren's work significantly influenced political discourse by confronting leaders and reinforcing the ideological foundations of independence.

Warren's Anti-Federalist writings also reveal her deep commitment to popular liberty. Jennifer González, a researcher for the Law Library of Congress, explains that Warren feared excessive centralization of power and argued for a Bill of Rights to safeguard individual freedoms and state authority (Gonzalez). Her critiques shaped public debate during the Constitution's ratification, prompting citizens to reconsider federal power and personal liberty.

By insisting that government embody civic virtue, Warren's Anti-Federalist work helped influence the development of the Constitution, including protections later reflected in the Bill of Rights.

The philosophical depth of Warren's writings reinforces the Revolution's broader significance. Historian Megan Marie Russo notes that Warren believed "a republic requires much more than 'passive obedience' on the part of its citizens...How could a citizen sacrifice his own interests for the sake of the public good if he has not first developed those habits which impel him to curb his own 'interest or appetite'?" (Russo). This view helps highlight how Warren feels that liberty is attained through moral discipline and being an active citizen, not through blind faith in leaders, as she argues that the independence struggle was not a one-time event.

In conclusion, the contribution of Mercy Otis Warren to the American Revolution shows that ideas, writing, and civic participation were equally important as the military intervention in the attainment of American independence. Warren influenced the thinking of the people through her plays, letters, historical descriptions, and the Anti-Federalism commentary and even helped to carry the ideological essence of the newly-created nation. Scholars such as Friedman, Shaffer, and González emphasize her ability to challenge powerful leaders, advocate for virtue, and defend individual liberties. The importance of women is also noted in the work by Warren as it was revealed that intellectual leadership was the key to the success of the Revolution. Throughout her works of literature, Warren was a strong advocate of unity, civic virtue, and the duties of citizenship. Warren's work explains that persuasion and civic participation played a crucial role in keeping the

Revolution going. Her legacy helps people to remember that the Revolution was not solely fought on the battlefield but also constructed via the influential ideas that she expressed, ideas which have shaped American political thought up to date.

Essay Text Word Count (Excluding Works Cited): 1,178 Words

## Works Cited (MLA format)

- Friedman, Lawrence J., and Arthur H. Shaffer. "Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1975, pp. 194–215. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/364658>.
- González, Jennifer. "Mercy Otis Warren: The Secret Muse of the Bill of Rights | in Custodia Legis: Law Librarians of Congress." *Blogs.loc.gov*, 15 Dec. 2022, [blogs.loc.gov/law/2022/12/mercy-otis-warren-the-secret-muse-of-the-bill-of-right](https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2022/12/mercy-otis-warren-the-secret-muse-of-the-bill-of-right).
- Oreovicz, Cheryl Z. "Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814)." *Legacy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1996, pp. 54–64. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25679185>.
- Russo, Megan Marie. "Mind Your Manners: Mercy Otis Warren on the Character of the American People." *Online Library of Liberty*, 28 June 2022, [oll.libertyfund.org/publications/reading-room/2022-06-28\\_Russo-Mercy-Otis-Warren-Founders-Manners](https://oll.libertyfund.org/publications/reading-room/2022-06-28_Russo-Mercy-Otis-Warren-Founders-Manners).
- Sarkela, Sandra J. "Freedom's Call: The Persuasive Power of Mercy Otis Warren's Dramatic Sketches, 1772-1775." *Early American Literature*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2009, pp. 541–68. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27750149>.
- Stuart, Nancy Rubin. *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*. Beacon Press, 2008.
- Warren, Mercy Otis. "Founders Online: Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, 5 July 1775." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, [founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-03-02-0035](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-03-02-0035).
- Warren, Mercy Otis. "History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American

Revolution - Thomas Jefferson's Library | Exhibitions - Library of Congress.”

*Www.loc.gov*, 11 Apr. 2008, [www.loc.gov/exhibits/thomas-jeffersons-library/interactives/history-of-the-american-revolution/](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/thomas-jeffersons-library/interactives/history-of-the-american-revolution/).