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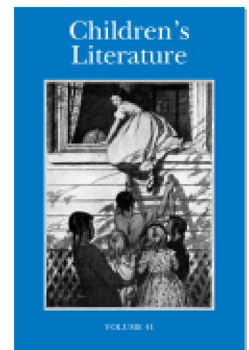

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Model Patriots: The First Children's Biographies of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin

Ivy Linton Stabell

George Washington had been dead only a few months when Mason Locke Weems completed and printed the first edition of his *Life of Washington* (1800), which went into twenty-nine editions before 1825 and created and popularized many of the central anecdotes of Washington's life and mythology, including the famous cherry tree story (Weems, *Washington* xx).[1] The cherry tree story has been a fixture in American lore for generations, and while scholars have examined this biography and discussed its role in shaping American identity in the early nineteenth century, most have overlooked the important fact of Weems's declared audience. Though the *Life of Washington* certainly attracted readers of all ages, Weems underscores his focus on "his young countrymen" throughout the work and on the cover of every edition from 1806 forward (Casper 23). This biography of the American patriarch, as were the other children's biographies examined in this essay, was carefully crafted to shape the ideology and behaviors of young Americans by illustrating practicable, civic-minded virtue. Weems styles Washington as the iconic American hero, whom "*Posterity*" shall hold as "*the founder of a great empire*" (1; original emphasis). However, Weems simultaneously encourages intimacy with the American patriarch; instead of venerating Washington and his public achievements, he instead professes to focus his biography on Washington's "private deeds" (3). Weems concludes his introduction by claiming that in these private virtues, "every youth may become a Washington—a Washington in piety and patriotism,—in industry and honour—and consequently a Washington, in what alone deserves the name SELF ESTEEM and UNIVERSAL RESPECT" (5; original emphasis). This idea of each young American reader "becoming" a Washington, of channeling reverence for his public deeds into a desire to imitate his private characteristics, is crucial to understanding the function of the patriot's biographies in the early republic, especially those written with children in mind.

The historical and cultural realities of early nineteenth-century America make children's biographies significant artifacts in the study of American identity and the expansion of nationalism in the early republic. At that moment, the political rhetoric of parent/child re-

lationships shifted, the children's publishing industry grew rapidly, and biographies—which not only identify key Americans to admire, but also outline how to admire them—were frequently written for the "rising generation" in order to instill values that would in turn ensure the state's survival. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin in particular became foundational to Americans' sense of their national origins, with these lives becoming essential and standard reading for adults and children alike. Washington became the national patriarch who not only led the Revolution and became the first president, but also resisted the pressure to take a third term, thereby ensuring the first peaceful transfer of power in the American executive office—a vital act for the republic. Franklin's popularity came slightly after Washington's rise; though never the national patriarch, he came to embody, partially by his own design, American potential. His humble middle-class origins and his remarkable success as statesman, merchant, scientist, and author made him an almost universal role model, whose example clearly served the purposes of a developing nation attempting to gain prominence on the international stage. Further, these men were the oldest of the Revolutionary leaders; their deaths in the eighteenth century meant that they, unlike the rest of the Founders, were not involved in the political division and personal enmity of the early nineteenth. These two figures were more distant and therefore more easily rendered as symbols, making their biographies ideal narratives to engage and broaden the nation's patriotic zeal.

Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these two men gained overwhelming cultural renown, becoming icons of American spirit and enterprise. Yet they were figures of the Revolutionary era, and in both cases key biographical details presented a problem for authors writing decades later in a culture anxious about the legacy of rebellion. Despite their distance from the war, early nineteenth-century Americans faced contemporary issues that threatened tangible division within the union: acerbic partisanship and its effects on the political process; westward expansion and the geographic and political transformations that accompanied this movement; and, most significantly, the malignant issue of slavery and its cultural and economic implications. Washington may have been a political hero, but he was also the general of a rebel army. Franklin charted the path of the American Dream, but only achieved success by breaking an apprenticeship with his brother and abandoning his family responsibilities by his clandestine flight to Philadelphia. While their roles in the birth

of the nation make their biographies important narratives, contributing essential examples of a life committed to public service, their participation in rebellion on a personal and national level makes their stories dangerous, especially for young readers. Children's literature, particularly in this period, was usually skittish about anything that smacked of disobeying adult authority; in these biographies, Washington's and Franklin's rebellions must be contained for the texts not only to fortify political stability but also to maintain parental authority. To ensure these hierarchies, children's biographers liberally edit (and in some cases create or efface) the details of these two lives, imposing narrative control over these supposedly nonfiction works.

Weems, the earliest of the writers explored here, was a master of creative license. Though he claims that "every youth may become a Washington," he also clearly points to Washington's personal, private virtues as the site for imitation, not his tremendous public deeds: "however glorious, I say, all this [his positions as general and president] may have been to himself, or instructive to future generals and presidents, yet does it but *little* concern our *children*. For who among us can hope that his son shall ever be called, like Washington, to direct the storm of war, or to ravish the ears of deeply listening Senates?" (4; original emphasis). Part of Weems's aim here is to acknowledge that many of his readers will not, even in adulthood, be eligible for military service or the presidency. But additionally, this introduction, so focused on American youth and their response to Washington, betrays its allegiance to adults—not only the one who wrote it, but those who published, purchased, and read the text as well, seeking not only a national role model but a tale of obedience as well. In directing the child reader to focus on Washington's "piety and patriotism," Weems skirts the issue of rebellion. The immense popularity of the *Life of Washington* has gained it some scholarly attention; it was, as Leonard Marcus notes, "the Washington exemplum against which American children would for generations afterward measure their moral worth" (11).[2] Yet its focus on children seldom has been discussed, and few of the other biographies here have gained any consideration at all. This essay begins the study these works deserve.

Cultural critics have argued that American nationalism was built not only by the political theories and doctrines established in late eighteenth-century America, but also in the texts of popular culture, what François Furstenberg calls "civic texts."[3] Such publications—including "pamphlets, biographies, schoolbooks, sermons, political

orations, almanacs, newspaper reporting, broadsides, even material objects like ceramics and paintings"—"helped to produce a nationalism that promoted consent to the constituted political authorities and a sense of mutual political obligation" (20, 21). A large part of Furstenberg's *In the Name of the Father* centers on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century civic texts' construction of Washington as an American hero and patriarch who embodies the virtues necessary for the republic's survival, thereby offering an exemplar meant to inspire the public's consent to their government.[4] The children's biographies investigated here follow this model of seeking to cultivate patriotism in their audience.

My argument departs from Furstenberg's in two key ways. First, I contend that children's biographies as civic texts sought to do more than just capture Americans' political support, encouraging a particular kind of political, social, and even economic behavior founded in power hierarchies and emotions associated with the family. These works taught children how to be citizens in a capitalist market economy. As Carolyn Karcher observes, this behavioral model included an economic work ethic as well as political loyalty: "Along with schools, churches, and the myriad societies for the Promotion of Industry, Frugality, and Temperance that sprang up in the mid-1820s, children's literature served to disseminate the bourgeois work ethic so essential to capitalist production" (68). To this end, Benjamin Franklin was just as important in the cultural ideology of the early republic as Washington. He was the exemplar of industry and ingenuity to pair with the construction of Washington as selfless patriot.

Perhaps more importantly, in this essay I investigate what consent looked like as well as why it was sought. These children's biographies solicit more than mere submission to government authority without substantial rebellion or public discord; they demand a dutiful and loving bond akin to that of the family. Children's texts are works inhabited by adult concerns about the fate of the actual children reading the text, and by the symbolic weight of the child as representative of a community's future; thus they offer a vital genre for exploring a community's ambitions and fears. Further, children's biographies of the early nineteenth century illustrate a particular concern for the future of the infant republic's political structure, addressing this concern by presenting a kind of citizenship steeped in the steady and perpetual power hierarchies of the family. In these works, citizenship is equated with childhood, and centered on the practice of obedience, duty, and

affection. In examining how children's biographies edited revolution out of the Founders' lives—a narrative technique which underscores the fact that even these Revolutionary men were beholden to the ultimate sovereignty of the power structures and concepts of the republic—we see how these works supported the government of consent by first instructing the practice of obedience.

The Legacy of the Revolution

Biographies play an important role in articulating and shaping the moral and behavioral guidelines of communities, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, starting with Weems, political biographies targeting children entered the market, offering the lives of American-born paragons of virtue sacrificing and asserting themselves for the sake of the American military, government, economy, and society. These works popularized the life narratives of those who would come to be known as the Founding Fathers, arguing that core American values existed, these men exemplified them, and imitating such impressive characters would lead to both personal and national success. Scott E. Casper contends in his study of nineteenth-century American biography that "[b]iographers and critics [of the early republic] sought to proclaim America's glory and virtue to the world (and to America itself) and to instill the Revolutionary fathers' virtues in sons imperiled by their temporal and cultural distance from the founding" (6). These biographers worked to immortalize the Founders, to make them over into universal models of civic virtue and duty, applicable to every generation.

The difficulty of resurrecting the Founders is a familiar problem for twenty-first-century Americans; the perennial debate over the intentions and motivations of those who authored the Revolution and penned the Constitution emerges with any number of contentious issues, from tax policy to the Bill of Rights to the separation of church and state. But in the early nineteenth century, this distance was, as Casper notes, perilous, for it came not with the comfort of over two centuries of stable government, but a precedent of revolution and boiling controversy over the course and consequence of the fledgling nation. Before 1850, Americans faced wars with England and Mexico, rapid territorial expansion, increasing industrialization, and surging debate over state and federal power; concern for the success of the American experiment was widespread. Revolution-era intellectual Mercy Otis Warren, while lauding the new republican government in her *History of the Rise,*

Progress and Termination of the American Revolution (1805), registered deep apprehension for the fragile nation, advising that "[a]ny attempt, either by secret fraud, or open violence, to shake the union, to subvert the constitution, or undermine the just principles, which wrought out the American revolution, cannot be too severely censured" (696). Warren's call for "censur[ing]" disruptive forces underscores the fractious nature of the early national period.

During the Revolution years, parent/child relationships figured prominently in the rhetoric used to unify Americans and to illustrate both proper and abusive government. Loyalists like Isaac Wilkins used this language to undergird colonists' responsibilities to England, which he describes as a "kind and indulgent mother . . . whose arms are open to receive all such of her children as will return to their duty" (qtd. in Calhoon 121). Eighteenth-century authors challenging Britain's treatment of its colonies, however, used the model to expose Britain's failure as a parent to protect and nurture its young colonies. In his famously effective pamphlet, *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine evoked the oft-used metaphor to explain the structure of power and responsibility between Britain and its American colonies, accusing the former of negligent stewardship: "shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families" (23). In likening Britain to a bad parent with questionable intentions, authors like Paine made the case for rebellion and separation from unjust authority. According to these descriptions, such abusive, negligent, even brutal power is unnatural in a parent, thus justifying rebellion.[5]

After the Revolution, however, America, though still frequently styled as youthful, stepped into the parental role. Familial structure was crucial to the central ideology and functions of monarchy; the king "was the 'pater familias of the nation,' . . . monarchies, based on the presumption that human beings were corrupt, offered security and order. Left alone and free, people, it was assumed, would run amuck (sic), each doing what was right in his own eyes" (Wood 93). Revolutionary rhetoric figured the war as direct opposition to such an imperious attitude of a government toward its citizens. The new American republic was, in theory, founded upon the concept of the citizen's ability to consent. In this new context, the political rhetoric of parental authority shifted to reflect this more expansive notion of citizenship and how governing authority ought to preside over it, returning to the same parent/child metaphor to represent America as a benevolent parent. Later in his *Crisis* papers (December 1776), Paine casts the Revolution as a

question of ethics, evoking the memory of Britain's poor governance and calling on colonists to be a different kind of parent: "Not a man lives on the continent but fully believes that a separation must some time or other finally take place, and a generous parent should [say], *'If there must be trouble, let it be in my day that my child may have peace'*" (95; original emphasis). In this example, the new American republic is a government centered on the principle of duty to its citizens; America becomes a more supporting and protecting parent than was England.

As American political power changed, biographical trends also adapted to new cultural needs. Eighteenth-century biographies emphasized the public deeds and historic achievements of their subjects, but as the nineteenth century progressed, biographies became more focused on private characteristics. Casper sees Weems as a transitional figure, at the beginning of the trend toward the private in American texts: "A direct relationship existed between the public and the private: the character that Washington cultivated in private life made his public successes possible" (74). Casper does not read Weems as a children's text, yet considering this young audience helps explain the entwining of public and private in this biography as well as other children's biographies of the period. By mingling public and private deeds in their narratives, authors like Weems temper their subjects' revolutionary status with copious anecdotes of private dutifulness.

The permeability of the boundary between public and private is evident in children's biographies. In her study of women's position in early American liberal democracy, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon challenges the strict division of public and private, arguing that "private subjects do not exist in advance of their entry into public debate with fully formed agendas ready at hand. I argue that public sphere culture . . . is not only directed toward monitoring the state, . . . but toward shaping or constituting private subjects who seek to emerge into public recognition" (6). Adults in the public space, authors, publishers, and consumers concerned with the affairs of the nation construct texts directed at children (and the adults who read with them) who inhabit the imagined private space. Ingesting such civic-minded works within the domestic space renders them inextricable from the political discourse of the public sphere, as such texts and ideologies help shape how the individual imagines and will later act within the public space. Dillon writes about women's attempts and ability to enter into and affect the public sphere, but childhood, especially upper- and middle-class white male childhood, is also a state of "seek[ing] to emerge into public rec-

ognition," hinging upon future participation. Even the female child of the early republic existed in the state of future participation through the concept of Republican Motherhood.[6] Thus, for the authors of these biographies, early nineteenth-century American children, though physically a part of the private space, represented the future public and their capacity for deeds that would later impact the political community. The ever present promise of emergence, of the blank slate waiting to be written upon, made the project of training children in the goals and practices of citizenship ever more consequential in the early republic.

George Washington and the Cherry Tree

In an era increasingly receptive to fiction, advice books like Lydia Maria Child's *The Mother's Book* (1831), compiled for "American Mothers, on Whose Intelligence and Discretion the Safety and Prosperity of our Republic so much Depend," recommended supplying children with nonfiction texts to remedy a proclivity toward fiction (xiii). Child advises, "it is well to encourage in them a love of History, Voyages, Travels, Biography &c. It may be done by hearing them read such books, or reading with them, frequently talking about them, and seeming pleased if they remember sufficiently well to give a good account of what they have read" (87). Her emphasis on encouraging the child's retention of the information in these books highlights her confidence that these nonfiction texts could shape citizens. Here, biographies are meant to be studied and repeated back to adult authorities who should oversee the child's education to reinforce adult dominance, a practice which underscores the public and private power hierarchies in a young child's life. For centuries, children were trained in literacy through memorization; by characterizing biography as material meant to be similarly retained, Child figures these life writings as an essential component of initiation into American culture.

The cherry tree story, first told in Weems's *Life of Washington* in 1806, was a biographical tale worth committing to memory, for its central event of young George's confession both evidences the American patriarch's superior moral virtue and demonstrates a child obeying parental proscriptions. Weems's biography has an episodic construction, stringing together scenes from Washington's life and offering narrative pronouncements on the virtues displayed in each installment. Each scene is both a pleasurable story and a didactic parable for young readers. Even within the text itself, Weems demonstrates the kind of

instructive repetition prescribed in *The Mother's Book*. On the page before the original cherry tree tale, young George receives some fatherly advice on the subject of lying:

> George, you know I have *always* told you, and now tell you again, that, whenever by accident you do anything wrong, which must often be the case, as you are but a poor little boy yet, without *experience* or *knowledge*, never tell a falsehood to conceal it; but come *bravely* up, my son, like a *little man*, and tell me of it: and instead of beating you, George, I will but the more honour and love you for it, my dear. (11; original emphasis)

By inserting this lesson before young Washington's transgression, Weems makes the argument against lying twice, first with parental warning and again with the example of young Washington learning and practicing his lessons. But even more important to the text's determination to uphold parental and political authority, Weems uses this lesson to outline and characterize the power structure of the home and nation. The child is "without experience or knowledge," a blank slate, requiring guidance and restrictions; the adult, on the other hand, is a benevolent administrator, who would "honour and love" truth telling instead of punishing falsehoods, though the reference to "beating[s]" reminds us that Washington's father still possesses brutal force.

This lesson and the clear dichotomy between adult superiority and child subservience hang over the cherry tree story. In Weems's original tale, at the age of six young George receives a hatchet, of which "he was immoderately fond," proceeding to chop "everything that came in his way," including his father's "beautiful young English cherry-tree" (12). (In an American parable, it probably does not hurt that the victim tree is English.) When father Washington confronts his son about the incident, asking "*do you know who killed that beautiful little cherry-tree yonder in the garden?*" young George utters the most famous line in Washington lore: "I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet" (12). Washington's father's response is full of sentiment. "Cry[ing] in transports," he exclaims, "run to my arms, glad am I, George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son, is more worth than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold" (12). Weems's prototype of the cherry tree story emphasizes father Washington's emotional response; his "transports" and praise of his son's "heroism" declare parental admiration as the

reward for honesty. Fatherly approval overshadows young Washington's destructive act, marking this story as a narrative of the heroic virtues of honesty and obedience to authority. While it may initially appear that George's crime is killing the tree, Augustine Washington does not forbid arboreal violence, only lying. Though he is destructive, young Washington follows his father's commands perfectly, and maintains the noble characteristics of our impervious national patriarch.

This potent scene of patriarchal authority, however, is one of Weems's few opportunities to illustrate the Washington family's secure father–son hierarchy, as Augustine Washington died when young George was only eleven years old. Within *The Life of Washington,* this death occurs directly after this chapter full of fatherly lessons and serves as a transitional moment between Washington's childhood and his adolescence. After describing the loss, Weems shifts quickly to describe Washington's intensifying worldly interests, particularly his inclination toward the military. Weems thus uses Augustine Washington's death to chart his biographical subject's trajectory from obedient child to independent actor, but he is careful to point out that such a development does not compromise Washington's patriarchal allegiance. Weems assigns to Washington an affectionate and deferential attitude, even in his grief: "The *memory* of his father, often bathed with *a tear*—the memory of his father now sleeping in his grave, was felt to impose a more sacred obligation to do what, 'twas known, would rejoice his departed shade. This was very happily displayed, in every part of his deportment, from the moment of his earliest intercourse with mankind" (18; original emphasis). In characterizing Washington's "intercourse with mankind" as evidence of his "sacred obligation" to perform his father's wishes, Weems aligns Washington's adult actions with the dutiful deeds of his childhood. Here, as in the cherry tree story, Weems establishes Washington's acceptance of patriarchal approval as the ultimate and eternal reason for his impressive adult life.

The early republic's increasing openness to fiction changed how biographies were told. Sometimes publishers put out full-length works like the *Life of Washington* for children, but frequently key elements of the biography were excerpted and set in collections with other biographical or moralistic tales.[7] The cherry tree episode was by far the most commonly extracted section of Washington's biography. As a stand-alone narrative, it not only illustrates his virtue and endorses filial submission, but also avoids any direct reference to his later deeds. This story suggests Washington's later service to the nation without pointing directly to his role in a political and military coup.

One such collection of virtuous tales was *Good Examples for Children* (1830), in which the cherry tree story appears first and is the only tale in which the protagonist is named. The version here, "Truth Commended," is nearly identical to Weems's. *Good Examples* appropriates the story to provide similar moral instruction in honesty. When this young Washington admits his misdeed, his father echoes the sentiments in the cherry tree ur-text: "Run to my arms! I forgive you for destroying my tree, since you had the honesty and manliness thus to tell the truth respecting it" (5). This father also dramatically forgives his son and successfully shifts the narrative's focus from transgression to precocious virtue. Though this anonymous author does identify the death of the tree as a crime needing "forgive[ness]," she also links Washington's probity with qualities he would be known for later in life. To call honesty "manliness" here or "heroism" in Weems underscores how these texts attempt to channel the child reader's potential admiration for Washington's military résumé into regard for his everyday valor, a virtue that remains in line with adult design.

Good Examples follows the cherry tree story with several others about generic boys performing good deeds. In "The Boy and the Looking Glass," which immediately follows "Truth Commended," a young boy playing with a ball breaks a mirror. When confronted by his father, the scene parallels Washington's famous confession: "'Father, I have broke the best looking-glass in the house! And I am very sorry for it.' His father looked kindly at him, and said, 'I would rather that all the looking-glasses in my house, should be broken, than that one of my children should tell an untruth'" (7). This exchange, which appears a mere two pages after the *Good Examples* version of the famous American legend, models what Washington's "honesty" and "manliness" look like when enacted in a nineteenth-century middle-class context. This translation of the cherry tree story creates a blueprint for middle-class readers to perform the correct American virtues outlined in Washington's story.

While these versions of the cherry tree story enact the narrative in order to cultivate patriotic allegiance to a patriarchal national hierarchy, later versions of the tale begin to bear overtones of intensifying American concern over political and cultural divisions among the states and increasing forays into the western frontier. The term "Manifest Destiny" was not coined until the end of the 1830s, but imperialist designs on new territories and the marked tension between anti- and proslavery factions led antebellum Americans to look westward. Though John and Jacob Abbott's version of the cherry tree story in *The Mount Vernon Reader* (1835) does not explicitly engage discussions of these concerns,

the cultural attention to expansion and its accompanying demand for a unified national purpose permeate the text.

The Abbott brothers' *Mount Vernon Reader,* also called the *Middle Class Reader,* links Washingtonian virtue, middle-class behavior, and American political interests. The *Reader*'s title and its frontispiece, an image of Mount Vernon, illustrate the prominence of Washington's story. "George Washington and His Hatchet" continues to assert patriarchal power; the Abbotts also stick close to the Weems plotline, though the confession scene moderates the elder Washington's emotions. Instead of pontificating on his son's virtues, this father merely "clasped him in his arms and said, 'My dear boy, I would rather lose a thousand trees than have my son a liar'" (177). While perhaps the honest and manly traits that Weems and *Good Examples* expound are implied here, the Abbotts' discussion of this confession takes a different tack. Instead of outlining the virtues Washington demonstrates, the Abbotts detail the troublesome path he might have chosen and its potential for personal and national consequences[8]:

> If little George Washington had told a lie then, it is by no means improbable that he would have gone on from falsehood to falsehood, till every body would have despised him. And he would thus have become a disgrace to his parents and friends, instead of a blessing to his country and the world. No boy who has one particle of that noble spirit which George Washington had, will tell a lie. . . . And therefore when a child tells a lie, you may always know that that child is a coward. George Washington was a brave man. When duty called him he feared not to meet danger and death. (177, 178)

The Abbotts' version of the cherry tree story places individual behaviors squarely in the context of national character. They equate Washington's honesty with masculine military bravery, and term the lying child a "disgrace" and a "coward."

The Abbotts' use of the bellicose language of "brave[ry]" and "coward[ice]" to describe the severe consequences of disobedience is not incidental. Charting the development of expansionist rhetoric, Amy Greenberg notes that while "[t]hrough the early decades of the nineteenth century, most Americans believed that expansionism would spread progress and enlightenment to all of mankind. . . . by the 1840s, however, Manifest Destiny's discourse had become largely martial in tone" (21). The Texas bid for independence, an armed con-

flict beginning the same year *The Mount Vernon Reader* was published, prominently asserted the connection between expansion and violence to the American public. Though the United States did not officially go to war with Mexico until the 1840s, the 1830s dispute between the antislavery Mexican government and Texas, a territory colonized by American slave-holders, simultaneously drew attention to the latter's possible incorporation into the US and intimated the potential for violent domestic conflict over the issue of slavery. To stifle these anxieties, "[t]he literature of Manifest Destiny obscured the ugly side of expansionism . . . by focusing on the unifying aspects of the endeavor," particularly, Greenberg argues, for American men (44). This insistence on national unity and patriotic bravery is evident in the *Mount Vernon Reader*'s cherry tree story, which argues that even actions in youth and in the domestic space have implications in the larger public world. The Abbotts draw a clear link between Washington's youthful virtue and his becoming a "blessing to his country and the world," suggesting that personal morality and civic virtue are one and the same and characterizing both the home and the nation as systems based on nobility and bravery, reliant upon assent. For the adults reading along with their children, these works fortify their own power but also demand their obedience to national ideology. They too must demonstrate the "bravery" and "nobility" the Abbotts note, or risk weakening the political system. Early faults might have changed Washington's course; the Abbotts show that children's behavior as future participants in the state has consequences that extend beyond the home—a loaded promise for a generation heading toward war.

Yet not all tellings of the cherry tree story register satisfaction with the American political system. Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney's *Tales and Essays for Children*, also published in 1835, explores new uses of this now familiar national narrative at a moment when women's voices, though powerful in abolition and other reform movements, were encumbered by shifting definitions of ideal womanhood. A heightened emphasis on domesticity in the 1830s depicted women as private beings, virtuous exemplars within the home, providing moral lessons rather than focusing on a civic education (7). But Nina Baym proclaims Sigourney a "Republican public mother," highlighting the author's continued use of the idea of maternal civic duty to claim a public voice, one she used more often than not for historical writing (70, 71). Notably, Sigourney frequently turned her public voice toward child audiences, working to shape the discourse surrounding the increasingly ingrained American historical narrative.[9]

As in the other collections discussed here, Sigourney's "Washington and His Mother" is but one of many stories in her book of moral tales.[10] Sigourney covers a broader history of Washington's life, though she concentrates on his relationship with his mother. She refers vaguely to his adult activities, mainly detailing the pride they brought Mary Washington. In this focus, Sigourney makes a clear departure from her contemporaries: "Sigourney certainly knew that many of the male authors who wrote about Washington were not particularly concerned with this relationship" (Parille 83). While the cherry tree tale does not hold the same narrative prominence in her discussion of Washington, Sigourney's adaptation of this classic American fable further illustrates the wide range of cultural work this myth performed for 1830s audiences:

> Once, from an act of impudence, in his boyhood, a considerable loss had been incurred. He knew that it would interfere with the plans of his mother and give pain to her feelings, perhaps awaken her severe displeasure. But he did not hesitate in his duty. He made to her a frank acknowledgement of his fault. She replied, while a tear started to her eye, "I had far rather this had taken place, than that my son should have been guilty of a falsehood." (80)

Though her allusion to the cherry tree story is oblique, this section of Sigourney's narrative evokes the same themes found in other versions of the tale. She does not mention the specific cause of the American patriarch's guilt, but like Weems and other authors, Sigourney uses this narrative to champion the founder's moral character. She too warns against parental "displeasure," and she likens honesty and obedience to "duty," though Sigourney's version significantly effaces the violence in this telling, as well as other versions' references to Washington's "manliness."

This version, however, features a mother, not a father, receiving Washington's confession.[11] While the same submission of child to parent—with all its political parallels—persists, this deviation uproots the cherry tree story from its position as a tale of orthodox American power gradations and plants the source of power in a female voice. Her limited description of young Washington's crime draws further attention to her chief alteration to the tale. Sigourney does not go so far as to call for further political upheaval, but her retelling of the cherry tree story significantly comes within a text that ascribes Washington's virtues to

his mother's influences, to "that honoured matron, whom the Father of this country so strongly resembled in person and countenance, in manners, and in mind" (86). In declaring Washington "the Father of this country," Sigourney avoids swapping Mary Washington for her son as a symbol of state power; but in asking readers to see the virtues of the national patriarch in light of maternal influence, she cultivates a more nuanced image of the origins of American identity, one acknowledging women's role in its construction. In offering an American matriarch instead of a father figure, Sigourney reminds her readers of the broad narrative possibilities of cultural mythology. Through a narrative created to reinforce the stability of a new democracy, this early antebellum adaptation of the Washington mythology demonstrates how American legends could once again play a role in questioning established notions of power and expanding democratic ideals.

Benjamin Franklin's Flight to Philadelphia

Washington's roles as the general of the successful Revolutionary army and the first national executive make him in many ways the iconic American hero, and certainly, thanks to Weems and many others, a well-crafted patriarch. But as Sigourney's cherry tree adaptation perhaps suggests, Washington's position as patriarch also renders him a remote and intimidating role model. He came from wealth and privilege, with English aristocratic roots. Though his story was shaped into an American legend, most of Washington's own words—with the notable exception of his 1796 Farewell Address, which was shaped largely by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay—never came into the public light, further distancing him from American citizens (Furstenberg 6).

Benjamin Franklin, on the other hand, found popular appeal in his humble origins and declared them openly, confirming himself to be "the youngest Son of the youngest Son for 5 generations back" in his *Autobiography*, another hugely popular text of the nineteenth century (3). His father was a dyer, not a gentleman, and in his early days Franklin knew the disappointments of a limited income. Early biographers, as well as Franklin himself, emphasized his trajectory from humble origins to renowned statesman, famed inventor, and author. Scholars of the *Autobiography* frequently note the author's self-conscious use of his own life writing to outline a standard of behavior for new generations of Americans: "[Franklin] designs his *Autobiography* as a means

of instructing his successors—that is, future generations of American youth—in the art of transforming themselves into virtuous young adults, successful businessmen, and, eventually, public-spirited citizens of the new republic" (Larson 220). Franklin makes his instructions to successive generations plain by addressing the *Autobiography* to his own son. Not only does this set up the self-improvement narrative as a tool for American youth, but it figures Franklin as a learned father figure rather than the erring youth featured in much of the narrative, an emphasis children's biographies accentuate as they work to distance him from his youthful indiscretions.

Franklin's biographers, like the biographical subject himself, recommended the same path Larson notes, from virtuous youth to success in business and public service, a tale of American meritocracy which supports all power structures and aspects of American society, making Franklin's life both marketable and politically effective. These biographers relish repeating *Autobiography* anecdotes of Franklin saving his money for books and his success in the Philadelphia printing industry, but to do so they also must acknowledge his flight to Philadelphia, a major event in Franklin's life which poses a real threat to the stability of any family, domestic or political. The prevalence of Franklin's *Autobiography* and the notoriety of the statesman's history made it impossible for these biographers to ignore this "erratum." Franklin himself freely acknowledges this failing in the *Autobiography*, as he explains his abrupt departure from Boston: "this I . . . reckon one of the first Errata of my Life: But the Unfairness of it weigh'd little with me, when under the Impressions of Resentment, for the Blows [his brother James's] Passion too often urg'd him to bestow upon me. Tho' he was otherwise not an ill-natur'd Man: Perhaps I was too saucy and provoking" (17). While Franklin admits his role in the problem, citing his behavior as the possible cause of his brother's distemper and ultimately terming the event one of his "errata," he remains indignant about "unfairness," allowing space for the reader to interpret the event as both a mistake and a just rebellion. In order to eventually celebrate Franklin's success, children's biographers cannot commemorate his flight to Philadelphia without comment, as it so directly challenges adult authority and the patriarchal structures of capitalism; instead, they must either denigrate his deception of his family or characterize his apprenticeship in Boston as truly oppressive. By portraying Benjamin Franklin's departure either as disobedience or as a response to extreme conditions, these biographies use his story to describe the rare circumstances required for warranted revolution invariably championing family and communal duty.[12]

The narrator of *Stories About Dr. Franklin Designed for the Instruction and Amusement of Children* (1829) injects a gently authoritative tone into the biography in order to steer its "little readers" toward the proper reception of Franklin's transgression (4).[13] The narrator declares her purpose in the first chapter: "I think they should be able, when asked, to mention some of the great men, that have lived in America. It is honorable to a country to have great men; and becoming all, even children, to know something about their lives and actions. Great men in a nation make that nation more respectable—more thought of by other nations" (4). This narrator declares the "honor" of shared national history, and when this text calls for virtuous, patriotic behavior from its readers, *Stories About Dr. Franklin* offers him as a model of this behavior. In describing Franklin's youth, the narrator pursues a particular characterization of the industrious learner, who "met with daily interruptions and discouragements; yet . . . pressed on" (14). This narrator outlines the rewards of such perseverance, notably mentioning that Franklin became "rich" and that "[s]everal universities in England and Scotland conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws" (5, 66). By asking child readers to follow Franklin's example, and by situating his story as beginning in financial hardship and obscurity and ending in wealth and fame, this narrator, like so many other tellers of Franklin's tale, figures his rise not only as an archetypal American progression, but as an achievable one: "the cultural values associated with Franklin and promoted in all forms of print media were being instituted as national values theoretically attainable by most people" (Mulford 421). The virtuous Franklin is the dominant figure in this tale of meritocracy.

This text seeks to appropriate Franklin's story as an American prodigal son tale, using the narrator's protective persona to interpret these events. After developing a relationship of kindness toward the reader through earlier anecdotes, the narrator introduces the rebellion by professing an authorial honesty for the good of the reader: "I must now tell my readers something which I might conceal" (16). This narrator uses an acknowledgement of her textual control and the implied profession of a good-faith representation to pilot the reading of Franklin's denouncement of parental authority. She inserts her own reading of Franklin's actions, chastising him for his wrongdoing, but ultimately forgiving his transgressions. The text begins by indicating his regret: "When Franklin came to be a man, he confessed that he did wrong, and was sorry for it, though he always thought I believe that his brother did not treat him well. This was probably very true" (16). The text men-

tions Franklin's culpability, but places greater blame on his brother. However, it treats the departure from his family much more gravely:

> This determination he made without consulting his father. In this he did wrong. Parents should always be consulted, especially by children under age. They generally know what is wise for children, to do, even better than children do themselves. Besides they have a *right* to direct in all cases which are lawful. In this instance, we must condemn young Franklin; and indeed all who do as he now did. (17; original emphasis)

While she is careful not to discredit Franklin's perception of his brother's treatment, in discussing his response to this conflict the narrator chastises Franklin, but softens her criticism by couching her assessment in a discussion of filial duty rather than of his specific deeds. This narrator chooses to err in favor of supporting the adult authorities rather than risk encouraging children to follow Franklin's direct example.

As in his work on Washington, Weems too is an activist narrator in his *Life of Franklin* (1815), conspicuous in his attempts to guide his reader's interpretation of his subject. Early in the biography, before Franklin has done much more than express an interest in reading and poetry, Weems claims that he has "gain[ed] for himself a name as lasting as time, and dear to liberty as the name of Washington" (23). Weems's faith in Franklin's virtues persists into the narrative of young Benjamin's elopement, and his narrative guidance, instead of correcting the biographical subject, justifies Franklin's decision. Long before he reaches the moment of Benjamin's flight, Weems eliminates his culpability by linking his apprenticeship with a state of tyranny:

> How a man pretending to religion [James Franklin] could reconcile it to himself to make so hard a bargain with a younger brother, is strange. But perhaps it was permitted of God, that Ben should learn his ideas of oppression, not from reading but from suffering. And to the galling sense of this villainous oppression, which never ceased to rankle on the mind of Franklin, the American people owe much of that spirited resistance to British injustice, which eventuated in their liberties. (19)

Weems takes Benjamin's side in the dispute with this older brother, again drawing direct parallels between the biographical subject and the history of the nation. Both Franklin and America must overcome oppressive authority structures in order to achieve liberty and the more democratic success implied by that liberation.

Though Weems seemingly invites discussion of rebellion instead of avoiding it, in linking the terms of Franklin's apprenticeship with the abuses of King George Weems depicts the event as more metaphorical than literal. Weems's Benjamin has not run off because of simple sibling rivalry, as he has in other biographies; his departure is because of "villainous oppression" which is very rare, but when it occurs must be vigorously resisted. Reading Benjamin's position in his brother's shop as an unappreciated author and as political cover for James's controversial printings, David Waldstreicher aligns the younger Franklin's situation with that of the oppressed American colonies: "Instead of making him more of a man, as apprenticeship might ideally have done, it made him more of a thing, a cipher, a mystery known only to members of a family" (50). For Waldstreicher, Franklin's apprenticeship amounts to distinct infringements upon his autonomy, as deleterious as the colonists found their ties to Britain. In order for Weems to justify Franklin's behavior, he must describe his Boston circumstances in the strongest Revolutionary rhetoric of "suffering" and "libert[y]."

Yet while Weems validates Franklin's claim to mistreatment throughout the early chapters of the biography, he eventually returns to the patriarchal hierarchy so prominent in his *Life of Washington*. Weems's Franklin returns from Philadelphia to his family's bosom, decked in the trappings of his printing success, yet determined to offer a mea culpa to his father. While Benjamin acknowledges his fault in abandoning his family, he claims to have done it for his father's own honor and well-being: "I could not bear the thought of living on an aged father now that I was able to work for myself. I determined to leave Boston and seek my fortune abroad. And knowing that if I but hinted my intentions you would prevent me, I thought I would leave you as I did" (57). During this conversation, "Ben could clearly see that the soul of his father was breathing an ejaculation of praise to God on his account" (58). In this, another of his emotive scenes, Weems gets to have his rebellion and deny it, too. While he allows Franklin the right to leave behind mistreatment for independence and autonomy, in this largely fabricated reconciliation scene Weems recontextualizes Franklin's success as done in his father's name, thus drawing him back in line with paternal—and, by implication—political authority.[14] Franklin senior is another compassionate and wise male authority; his power, not that of the oppressive older brother, is the true guide for young Ben. In this scene reasserting Franklin's deference to his father, Weems again subscribes to the same conservative, antirebellion narratives of other patriot biographies of this period.

The Life of Benjamin Franklin (1832), a Peter Parley text, also attempts to recast Franklin's rebellion into a political metaphor befitting the turbulent antebellum period. Written in the era of the nullification crisis and heated debates over states' rights and federal authority, this biography, even while maintaining patriarchal authority, shifts its attention to other power struggles within the domestic sphere. Like some other works, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin* attempts to diminish Franklin's misdeeds by sweeping past the event of his departure with limited commentary. While this version does not let Franklin off the hook, it blames his decision to leave on a technicality. When it comes time to renew his indentures to his brother, young Benjamin takes the opportunity to leave: "His father opposed his removal, and took side with his brother in the dispute. Benjamin sold his books to furnish the means of paying his passage, went privately on board of a sloop, had a fair wind, and in three days found himself in New York, three hundred miles from home, at the age of seventeen" (25–26). The disagreement occurs precipitously, without discussion of the implications of Franklin's departure.

Alongside the other biographies discussed here, the rendition of Franklin's early rebellion in this version is relatively plain. Yet this text is distinctly different from the others in one key way: it places extraordinary emphasis on Franklin's relationship with his brother. Like many others in the Peter Parley series, it includes questions for the reader. At the bottom of each page, these questions direct further contemplation of the Franklin biography, and many of these ask readers to consider Benjamin's relationship with his brother: "What were the difficulties between the brothers?" "What happened at this time to James Franklin?" "What unfair advantage did he [Franklin] take of this discharge? What course did his brother pursue on this occasion? His father? Benjamin?" (23, 24, 25). Additionally, one of the three frontispiece illustrations is titled "Reconciliation of Franklin with his Brother," an image which features an adult figure, presumably James Franklin, patting the head of a younger Benjamin.

The questions in this text allow the reader to assign fault on either side of the disagreement; the narrator asks the reader to recognize the "unfair advantage" Franklin took, but by also asking for reflection upon James Franklin's response, it invites consideration of his role in the matter. In terms of the adult/child power dynamic, the Franklin of this biography is clearly in the wrong; he disobeys his brother's wishes and his father's commands. Though the narrator does not dwell on

Franklin's infraction, his father's authority is clear when in the next chapter, young Benjamin must return from Philadelphia to seek his father's assistance in setting up a print shop. However, the narrator indicates that his father, in addition to discussing his son's future, attempts to "restor[e] harmony between the two brothers," a project which fails (34). While James Franklin certainly appeared in other biographies, in this interpretation of Franklin's story the primary familial struggle has shifted from the assertion of adult authority to an anxiety over fraternal discord. This brotherly disagreement displeases Franklin's father, who, though still the most powerful figure, is unable to resolve their conflict. This biography is a more clearly antebellum text, written in a political climate ever more concerned about the threats of fraternal dissension, of a union increasingly divided in two.

The Peter Parley biography seems unconvinced as to how this tale will end; it both declares the reconciliation a failure and illustrates reunion. As the nineteenth century progressed, the cultural images of Washington and Franklin were adapted to new purposes as the cultural and political concerns of the ever expanding and evolving nation changed. The versatility of Washington and Franklin's narratives, used as allegories of the Revolution, as reinforcement of the Manifest Destiny of American government and society, and to register the anxieties of conflicting fraternal interests in the antebellum era, illustrates the iconic role these biographies hold in American mythology. By so vigorously modeling dutiful behavior to parental and national authorities, these children's biographies work to construct proper citizenship as affectionate obedience, an attitude necessary to the perennial project of preserving the nineteenth-century nation.

Notes

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[1]The 1800 edition spanned only 80 pages, and the cherry tree story did not appear until the fifth edition in 1806. In his introduction to the Harvard University Press edition (1962), editor Marcus Cunliffe states that Weems's publisher, the prominent Philadelphia printer Matthew Carey, bought the copyright in 1808 and, despite the author's protests, kept the text unchanged thereafter (xiii–xx). Cunliffe's edition, which I cite in this essay, uses the 1808 ninth edition as the authoritative text.

[2]Excerpted and in full, Weems's *Life of Washington* was an extremely popular nineteenth-century text. Abraham Lincoln famously counted it among the most influential books of his youth, and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) describes protago-

nist Ellen Montgomery's fascination with it. Scott E. Casper cites these two prominent examples as evidence of *The Life of Washington*'s pervasiveness in nineteenth-century American culture (75–76).

[3]Furstenberg lays out two kinds of civic texts. He calls pamphlets, broadsides, school primers, and other common pieces of material culture "popularizing" texts, works that illustrated national icons and political concepts for the American masses (233). The second kind are "canonical" texts, of which he identifies the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Washington's Farewell Address as the most important (233). These works achieved canonical status through publication and discussion throughout the nineteenth century. When I use the term "civic texts," I am using his first definition, that of popular artifacts of early nineteenth-century American material culture, of which children's biographies are an important part.

[4]The notion of consent has garnered much debate among scholars of the American Revolution. Though, as Furstenberg notes, "all political regimes depend to some extent on popular loyalty," his study focuses on how Washington becomes the central figure that cultivates national support both for the new government and for slavery (16). While Furstenberg studies how the concept of consent was deployed and manipulated throughout the slavery debate, my interest in consent concerns how children's texts prefigured and fashioned adult political action by modeling submission to authority structures for the child.

[5]Jay Fliegelman's foundational study *Prodigals and Pilgrims* offers an extended examination of the parent/child rhetoric permeating Revolutionary texts. More recently, Caroline F. Levander has written about the parent/child origin story and the use of the symbolic child in constructing American racial hierarchies and national identity.

[6]Republican Motherhood, though discussed by many scholars of American history and literature, is best defined in Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic*: "The Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life. Dedicated as she was to the nurture of public-spirited male citizens, she guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic. Political "'virtue,' . . . could not be safely domesticated in eighteenth-century America; the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality" (11).

[7]Publishers reproduced the cherry tree story and other elements of Weems's biography throughout the nineteenth century. In addition to the examples discussed in this article, Cunliffe finds the cherry tree story in Anna Reed's *The Life of George Washington* (1829), Reverend E. C. M'Guire's *The Religious Opinions and Character of Washington* (1836), John Frost's *Pictorial Life of George Washington* (1854), and Morrison Heady's *The Farmer Boy, and How He Became Commander-in-Chief* (1864) (xxi–ii).

[8]Both Lorinda Cohoon and Jani L. Berry argue that the power relationships in Jacob Abbott's series books correlate with national concerns about political power and civic responsibility. Berry observes that when the child characters' play requires distributing power, the texts endorse a republican system in which "the leader is one chosen from within the group rather than an externally imposed power" (102). Cohoon's reading of the 1840s Jonas books argues that Jonas and his friends turn to the law to resolve disputes: "Abbott's negotiation of the possibilities of legal peace between relatives might be read as a way to understand another set of close but contentious relationships, those between the states during this time" (46). In this essay, I note a similar shift toward the discussion of fraternal relationships during this period.

[9]Lorinda Cohoon's recent essay in *Enterprising Youth*, on Sigourney's discussion of citizenship in nineteenth-century children's periodicals, attends to both Sigourney's public concerns and her writings for young audiences.

[10]In addition to "Washington and His Mother," Sigourney published "The Filial Virtues of Washington," in *The Boy's Book; Consisting of Original Articles in Prose and Poetry* (1843). The two biographies are nearly identical.

[11]Anna Reed's *Life of George Washington* also swaps Washington's father for his mother. Her tale also changes the crime; instead of chopping down a cherry tree, young Washington tries to tame his mother's horse and winds up killing it in the process.

[12]In an examination of twentieth-century children's literature of the American Revolution, Eric Tribunella argues that representations of the Founders as flawed figures who could not live up to their own ideals engenders ambivalence rather than reverence for these figures. Ambivalence, he argues, "has fueled the struggles that have sought to actualize those promises that are the legacy of the founding generation" (99). The biographies explored in this article are of an earlier generation, works still striving to establish Franklin and Washington as paragons of particularly American virtues. Yet these authors' obvious efforts to conceal and recharacterize elements of these men's lives illustrate that these nineteenth-century biographers were well aware of the potential for ambivalence in their narratives.

[13]Lydia Maria Child also published a biography of Franklin in 1829, the first entry in her *Biographical Sketches of Great and Good Men*, though the work also appeared in the 1 March 1827 edition of the *Juvenile Miscellany*. Her biography, however, is brief, and diminishes the impact of the flight to Philadelphia in his life: "Whatever might be the causes of complaint, they became so irksome to him, that he absconded from Boston" (*Biographical* 11). Child's evasive narration of this episode is notable, but I have not discussed her work here because Karcher examines the text in *The First Woman in the Republic*, her critical biography of Child.

[14]In the *Autobiography*, when Franklin returns home to solicit his father for assistance in setting up a Philadelphia print shop for Governor Keith, his request is refused. Franklin makes no mention of his father's "ejaculation of praise to God," though he notes that he received financial advice and "some small Gifts as Tokens of his [father's] and [his] Mother's Love" (25).

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