

Prodigals & pilgrims

The American revolution
against patriarchal authority
1750 - 1800

Jay Fliegelman



PRODIGALS
AND
PILGRIMS

*The American revolution against
patriarchal authority,
1750–1800*

JAY FLIEGELMAN

Department of English, Stanford University

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1982

First published 1982

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fliegelman, Jay.

Prodigals and pilgrims.

Includes bibliographical references and
index.

1. United States—Intellectual life—18th
century. 2. Literature, Modern—18th century—
History and criticism. 3. Literature and
history. 4. Parent and child in literature.
5. Family—United States—History—18th century.
6. Patriarchy—Psychological aspects.
7. American literature—Revolutionary period,
1775–1783—History and criticism. 8. American
literature—1783–1850—History and criticism.
9. Books and reading—United States—History—
18th century. I. Title.

E163.F58	306.8'0973	81-10179
ISBN 0 521 23719 X		AACR2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have incurred many debts in writing this book. Perhaps the greatest are to Albert Gelpi, who has encouraged and supported me in this work since its inception, and George Dekker, from whom I have learned so much, not the least of which is the fundamental importance of integrating intellectual and literary history. David Levin, Gordon Wood, Peter Shaw, Ronald Paulson, Thomas Moser, W. B. Carnochan, and Hugh Dawson all read the manuscript at its earliest stage of development and offered leads, comments, corrections, and invaluable encouragement. Professor Levin's painstaking criticisms, in particular, were all very much to the point. More recently, Jack Rakove, Max Byrd, and Mitchell Breitwieser helped me in several important matters. In addition, I have benefited from the counsel of five of my doctoral students: Jenny Franchot, Harold Hellenbrand, Wyn Kelley, Robert Levine, and Richard Silver. Finally, I have drawn so often on the expert knowledge and warm friendship of my fellow colonialists, Alasdair Macphail and Donald Weber, that no simple acknowledgment suffices.

Thanks of a different kind are owed to the expert staff of the Stanford Libraries, particularly Bill Allan and Jim Knox; Jean Marshall Simpson, who not only typed the first draft of the manuscript but deciphered and assembled it; Pauline Tooker, who prepared the final version with great expedition and accuracy; Susan F. Riggs, who prepared the index; and the staff of Cambridge University Press, who have been so supportive.

This book is dedicated to the two people who, by their example, showed me how to love. The enormous importance of such exemplary instruction is the subject of my book.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page vii
Introduction	1
 <i>PART I: THE IDEOLOGICAL INHERITANCE</i>	
1. Educational theory and moral independence	9
The Lockean paradigm in the eighteenth century	12
Rousseau and the new authority	29
2. The transmission of ideology and the bestsellers of 1775	36
The new paternity and the bestsellers of 1775	38
The pedagogues	40
The moralists	51
3. The familial politics of the Fortunate Fall	67
The prodigal as pilgrim: <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> in America	67
Two views of the Fall: <i>Clarissa</i> in America	83
 <i>PART II: FORMS OF FILIAL FREEDOM</i>	
4. The debt of nature reconsidered	93
The limits of gratitude: the argument applied	93
Franklin and the new order of the ages	106
Iconography: prodigals and parental tyrants	113
5. Affectionate unions and the new voluntarism	123
Wedded love and revolutionary ideology	123
From passive to active disobedience	144
6. Filial freedom and American Protestantism	155
The assault on Jehovah	156
Human accountability and the moral character of God	164
Protestant politics: liberty and sonship	174
The common ground: the necessity of rebirth	183
The triumph of nurture	188

PART III: THE CHARACTER OF THE NATIONAL FAMILY

7. George Washington and the reconstituted family	197
The power of example	202
The character of the father	208
The debt of honor and the greater good	214
Dissent and confidence	221
8. The sealing of the garden, Or the world well lost	227
The national family or the Christian family of nations?	227
The dangers of sentimental fraternity: the hardening of the heart	230
Ventriloquists, counterfeiters, and the seduction of the mind	235
From political to moral independence: the triumph of neutrality	248
The new family as the New World	259
<i>Notes</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	316

INTRODUCTION

In his 1977 study of the differing psycho-biographical profiles of Patriot and Tory leaders in the American Revolution, Kenneth Lynn concludes:

The men who broke with Britain in 1776 had been prepared by their upbringings to make a successful separation from their parents and to face with equanimity the prospect of living independently. The psychologically painful enterprise of overthrowing the father figure of George III and of breaking the historic connection between the colonies and the imperial *parens patriae* was led by colonists who had not been tyrannized over by their own fathers, and who in fact were accustomed to thinking of paternal authority as the guarantor of filial freedom and self-realization.

So satisfying, indeed, was their experience with their fathers that it has caused me to wonder whether father-son relations in the Revolutionary generation did not mark a special moment in the history of the American family; certainly in no other period of our past can we find the top leaders of American society speaking as gratefully as these patriots did about the fathering they had received.¹

This book is a study of that "special moment in the history of the American family" and, more especially, of the ideology that underlies it.

By the middle of the eighteenth century family relations had been fundamentally reconsidered in both England and America. An older patriarchal family authority was giving way to a new parental ideal characterized by a more affectionate and equalitarian relationship with children. This important development paralleled the emergence of a humane form of childrearing that accommodated the stages of a child's growth and recognized the distinctive character of childhood. Parents who embraced the new childrearing felt a deep moral commitment to prepare their children for a life of rational independence and moral self-sufficiency.²

The sources of this reconsideration of family relations are many. Prime among them, however, is Locke's sensationalist epistemology and new understanding of the mind as a *tabula rasa*. Locke argued that a child's character is not inherited at birth but rather is "created" by the sum total of sense impressions and experiences written on the blank slate of his mind. Thus no longer was the fundamental responsibility of parents to restrain their children and render their fallen natures obedient to external authority—an attitude symbolized by the widespread use of swaddling clothes. Instead, parents must by their example and instruction seek to control those earliest impressions and influences that form a child's mind and character and must develop in their children the rational faculties essential to a proper evaluation of experience. In short, the success of nurture rather than the prescriptions of nature would ultimately determine the moral and spiritual character of a young man. (The education of women, as we shall see, was a different matter.) As Alexander Pope, who had his doubts about the new position, declared in his first "Moral Essay": "'Tis education forms the common mind / Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclin'd."³ The sacred responsibility of parents and teachers was to finish the work of creation begun by God.

In his popular poem *The Task* (1785), William Cowper, reflecting on that responsibility, asked a question that preoccupied his age:

Now blame we most the nursling, or the nurse?
The children crooked, and twisted, and deformed
Through want of care; or whose winking eye
And slumbering oscitancy mars the brood?

He answered without hesitation or qualification:

The nurse, no doubt. Regardless of her charge,
She needs herself correction; needs to learn
That it is dangerous sporting with the world,
With things so sacred as a nation's trust,
The nurture of her youth, her dearest pledge.⁴

Those deformed in character and twisted in thought (for surely Cowper intends his language to suggest moral corruption as well as physical disability) must not be asked to bear the responsibility for their own deformities. The rod of correction should be applied more appropriately to those negligent teachers and self-absorbed parents who permitted their children's "fall." Implicitly denying original sin, Lockean sensationalism and the new emphasis on education and nurture it generated temptingly suggested that personal faults of individual character might better be charged to the behavior of one's parents, the character of one's education, or the premature exposure to a corrupting society, rather than to one's own moral failings. Though such a view was fast becoming the received wisdom of the age, it might seem odd that it was

expressed by a Calvinist like Cowper, a man afflicted with a lifelong conviction of his own certain damnation. Yet even for those, or perhaps especially for those, who believed in man's sinful nature, the doctrine of the primacy of nurture, like that of a restorative divine grace, held, at some level, a deep and absorbing attraction.

No less important to the eighteenth-century reconsideration of family relations than the new understanding of the growth of the mind and the consequent emphasis on nurture was what Lawrence Stone has recently described as the "growth of affective individualism."⁵ This ultimately political appreciation of the importance of personal autonomy and individual identity insisted upon the right and obligation of all children to become fully autonomous and self-reasoning adults. It also insisted upon the complementary responsibility of parents to encourage that transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Writing a year after the Peace of Paris, which ended the American Revolution, Immanuel Kant defined the term that would later be used to describe his age:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. . . . "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor.⁶

Though nonage or adolescence unnaturally protracted by moral cowardice was a shameful abdication of adult responsibility, the imposition of a protracted adolescence by one generation upon another was an even more pernicious violation of the laws of nature. Indeed, such an imposition of "perpetual guardianship" was, according to Kant, the ultimate tyranny, a blow to the very process of history: "An epoch cannot conclude a pact that will commit succeeding ages, prevent them from increasing their significant insights, purging themselves of errors, and generally progressing in enlightenment" (p. 378). Each generation must be allowed the full growth of its mind by being given an education that encourages an independence of mind; for as Kant concludes, "Man can only become man by education."⁷

Such a call for filial autonomy and the unimpeded emergence from nonage echoes throughout the rhetoric of the American Revolution. It is its quintessential motif. At every opportunity Revolutionary propagandists insisted that the new nation and its people had come of age, had achieved a collective maturity that necessitated them becoming in politi-

cal fact an independent and self-governing nation. Jefferson's first draft of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence reads: "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to advance from that subordination . . . to assume the equal and independent station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them. . . ."8 The language of the draft makes clear the generational or morphological argument that underlies the necessity identified in the final draft: "that political bands be dissolved." Like the revolution of the spheres or the changing of the seasons, "the course of human events" must also obey the laws of nature that required, in the language of Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Law*, that "the empire of the father . . . gives place to the empire of reason."⁹ For Britain to deny her child colonies "that equal and independent station" was to confess itself, in the popular phrase of the period, "an unnatural and tyrannical parent."

Most scholars have associated the familial rhetoric of the War with the ongoing rejection of seventeenth-century patriarchalism. Although that political theory had been almost vestigial by the time of its best-known formulation, Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (which later provoked Locke's *First Treatise of Government*), it was kept alive in America by such Tories as Jonathan Boucher. The theory asserted that kingly authority derived from parental powers that kings received as a special inheritance from the first father, Adam, and that were understood to oblige subjects to a lifelong filial obedience. Contrary to the impressions given by most historians, however, the sources of the antipatriarchal rhetoric and ideology of the Revolution were far from exclusively political. Rather, numerous widely read works of fiction and pedagogy popularized the new understanding of parental responsibility and filial freedom set forth by Locke in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, a work reprinted nineteen times before 1761.¹⁰ On the eve of the American Revolution such a constellation of ideas and values had already become an essential part of Anglo-American culture and, most especially, of English literature.

In *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (1976) Kenneth Silverman coins the term "Whig Sentimentalism" to describe "a pervasive idiom" preoccupied with images of violent attacks on youthful innocence, which "fused political theory with popular moral sentiment and which reached the colonies through a literary as well as political tradition." "Colonists," he concludes, "quoted Addison, Thomson, Pope, Milton, and Shakespeare as political authorities hardly less than they quoted Locke or Montesquieu. Even in nakedly political pamphlets it is often impossible to tell which is the nearer source of ideology."¹¹ Silverman's remark needs to be taken up seriously. Our received notions as to who were the most important transmitters of Enlightenment ideas

central to the American Revolution are in need of revising as much as our understanding of what constitutes a “political” text is in need of broadening. Only by so revising our frame of reference will we be able to appreciate the larger cultural context of the American Revolution.

That much remains to be done in this area is suggested by Henry May’s major study, *The Enlightenment in America* (1976). Though based on a contents analysis of eighteenth-century American libraries, May’s book neglects to address the ideology and values popularized by the most widely read literary and educational works of the period. And he is silent on the subject of Locke’s *Education*, which not only exerted a controlling influence on the familial themes featured in those bestsellers but also served in its various popularized forms as perhaps the most significant text of the Anglo-American Enlightenment.¹² For education was, after all, the art of “government,” as Locke made clear.¹³ The problems of family government addressed in the fiction and pedagogy of the period—of balancing authority with liberty, of maintaining a social order while encouraging individual growth—were the larger political problems of the age translated into the terms of daily life.

This book is a study of the broader cultural revolution in eighteenth-century England and America of which the American Revolution, in its rhetorical and thematic dimensions, was the most important expression. My subject then is not the American Revolution as such, but what I have called the American revolution against patriarchal authority—a revolution in the understanding of the nature of authority that affected all aspects of eighteenth-century culture. Because that antipatriarchal revolution was not confined to America, my study is necessarily comparative as well as interdisciplinary. It examines a constellation of intimately related ideas about the nature of parental authority and filial rights, moral obligation and personal autonomy, the character of God and the morality of Scripture, and the growth of the mind and the nature of historical progress. The book traces these ideas from their most important English and continental expressions in a variety of literary and pedagogical texts to their transmission, reception, and application in Revolutionary America and on through their various modifications in the early national period of American culture.

Much emphasis is placed on relating eighteenth-century literary history to social, theological, and political events in America. My purpose is to explore further the crucial point made a generation ago by Leslie Fiedler that, because of their shared eighteenth-century origins, “Between the novel and America there are peculiar and intimate connections.”¹⁴ As the American colonies had chosen to escape tyranny and moral corruption, declared their independence, and fled to God’s protective embrace; so, too, had a generation of sentimental heroes and

heroines, prodigals and pilgrims similarly fled. To understand properly the history of one set of rebels is to understand better the history of the other.

Though necessarily dealing with political and social history, it must be stressed that this work is fundamentally a study in intellectual and cultural history. It concerns itself with the primary language and paradigm with which Americans, in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, thought about the issues most central to their culture. It examines the history, logic, and limitations of that paradigm, the perception of reality assumed by it, and, finally, the ways such formulations, in part, determined and prescribed responses to certain situations.¹⁵ My purpose is not, however, to demonstrate an immediate or direct causal relationship between a set of ideas and a sequence of political or social events. Such overly insistent arguments are invariably unsatisfying; for the relationship between idea and event is intractably complex. Mine is the more manageable and, I hope, more useful task: to clarify the crucial thematic connections between key historical events and the important literary, pedagogical, theological, and political texts of the period under consideration. Though often seemingly unrelated, these events and texts all reflect the same overarching preoccupations of their culture. Certainly one such preoccupation in England and America in the last half of the eighteenth century was the deeply problematic character and uncertain future of traditional family relations. This work seeks to place that decisive moment in the history of the American family in its broadest cultural context and, by so doing, to illuminate the first great epoch in what may properly be called the natural history of American affections.

PART I

THE IDEOLOGICAL INHERITANCE

EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND MORAL INDEPENDENCE

English and American literature of the last half of the eighteenth century shared the same intense thematic preoccupation: familial relations. On both sides of the Atlantic, novelists, poets, playwrights, and anonymous authors of didactic periodical fiction joined together in an effort—an effort almost without historical precedent—to anatomize the family, to define “the familial, the parental and the social duties,” and to prescribe the terms of a new ideal relationship between generations.¹ For those who preferred their didacticism undiluted by the palliative of fiction, the novels of Richardson, Sterne, and Fielding, along with Chesterfield’s *Letters* and other related works, were “systemized and methodized” into popular volumes with such titles as *Sentimental Beauties*, *Moral and Instructional Sentiments*, and *Illuminations for Sentimentalists*. These collections—part anthology, concordance, and conduct book—arranged their entries under such characteristic subject heads as “parent’s duty to children,” “children’s duty to parents,” “gratitude,” “friendship,” and “power and independence”; for these, in short, were the great moral subjects of the age.²

The enormous demand for precepts and examples relating to these issues suggests that by midcentury a large segment of the Anglo-American reading public had become responsive to a shifting social reality. The values of that new social reality had to be formulated, and its challenges to long-established assumptions about the right relations between generations had to be answered and met. In recent years, demographic historians investigating American society in the second half of the eighteenth century have demonstrated convincingly that significant changes in traditional generational relations were indeed occurring at least on one side of the Atlantic.

The following findings have been shown to obtain in one or more American communities during the period immediately preceding the Revolution: (1) the growth of a newly emergent class of propertyless

and mobile young men, many of whom were either drawn away from home by increased opportunities for nonagricultural work or forced away by the practice of partible inheritance, which divided paternal land into individual plots too small to be economically viable forms of patrimony; (2) the gradual replacement of land as the primary medium of value by more portable forms of capital, further permitting generations, once obliged to share the same land, to live now farther apart; (3) increased premarital sex and a sharp rise in premarital conceptions, and last (4) a declining emphasis—both social and legal—on the necessity of parental permission and approval in the question of a child's marriage.³

In his *The Evolution of American Society, 1700–1815*, James Henretta sees declining parental authority and the decreasing extent of generational cohabitation—inferences implicit in all the preceding—as an index of the evolution in the last half of the eighteenth century of a new understanding of paternity:

Underlying all . . . was a new conception of parental duty and authority. Fathers had begun to consider their role not as that of patriarchs grandly presiding over an ancestral estate and minutely controlling the lives of their sons and heirs, but rather as that of benefactors responsible for the future well-being and prosperity of their offspring. . . . Once the farm had been an end in itself; now it was the means to another and a more important end. The tendency for parents to find the fulfillment and justification of their own lives in the success of their children marked the appearance of a new and different type of family life, one characterized by solicitude and sentimentality toward children and by more intimate, personal and equal relationships.⁴

This new equitable relationship, as David Hackett Fischer has shown, is iconographically represented in the changing composition of the eighteenth-century family portrait in America. Whereas before 1775 virtually all extant family portraits present the father standing above his seated family, after that date the vertical or hierarchal composition gives way to a horizontal or equalitarian composition in which all family members are shown on the same plane.⁵

The emergence of this “different type of family life” is reflected in the history of the word “family.” Prior to the eighteenth century the word—consistent with its Latin root *familia*, itself a derivative of *familus*, or servant—most frequently denoted an entire household. The following sentence appearing in a volume published in 1631 is representative of seventeenth-century usage: “His family were himself and his wife and daughters, two mayds and a man.” “Family,” in the King James Bible, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, means an extended family—“a large kin-group ostensibly synonymous with tribe,” or the kin-group of a common father extended over several generations. Only sometime in the early eighteenth century does its modern sense of “a

small kin-group usually living in one house,” what is now called a nuclear family, definitely emerge and begin to predominate. As late as the early part of the nineteenth century, however, James Mill still felt obliged to offer this definition: “The group which consists of a Father, Mother and Children is called a Family.”⁶

In the most important modern treatment of a long-neglected subject, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of the Family*, French historian and archivist Philippe Ariès traces the rise of modern familial relations to what it has become fashionable to call “the discovery of childhood.” In the medieval society of western Europe, Ariès argues, “children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, not long after a tardy weaning . . . about the age of seven.”⁷ Consequently, such a society had neither a conception of nor a vocabulary for late childhood or adolescence as we know it. The very idea of a morphology of emotional and intellectual growth was an alien one.

The emergence in the late sixteenth century of a new and insistent emphasis on the social function of education would eventually, Ariès argues, break down the generational fluidity of European society and change family relations radically. Those who were to introduce this new view of education, at least in France, were not the Renaissance humanists but the Renaissance moralists, who passionately opposed the Church’s subordination of family obligation to the quest for personal salvation. The moralists, who emphasized family education and worship in their teaching and writing, saw the two as intimately related:

They taught parents that they were the spiritual guardians, that they were responsible before God for the souls, indeed the bodies too, of their children.

Henceforth it was recognized that the child was not ready for life, and that he had to be subjected to a special treatment, a sort of quarantine before he was allowed to join adults (p. 412).

Such a recognition, Ariès argued, “would gradually install itself in the heart of society and transform it from top to bottom”:

The family ceased to be simply an institution for the transmission of a name and an estate, it assumed a moral and spiritual function, it moulded bodies and souls. The care expended on children inspired new feelings, a new emotional attitude, to which the iconography of the seventeenth century gave brilliant expression. . . . Parents were no longer content with setting up only a few of their children and neglecting the others. The ethics of the time ordered them to give all their children, and not just the eldest—and in the late eighteenth century, even the girls—a training for life (pp. 142–3).

This life as well as the next had to be properly prepared for.

The process Ariès describes was greatly intensified by the spread of