Boys Don't Make Passes at Girls Who Wear Glasses: Gender, Vision Aids, and Persona in the Early American Republic

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BOYS DON’T MAKE PASSES (AT GIRLS WHO WEAR GLASSES): GENDER, VISION AIDS, AND PERSONA IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

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**Introduction**

On September 22, 1840, 22-year-old Elizabeth Payson Prentiss of Portland, Maine wrote moodily to a friend, “I am always wondering if any body in the world is the better off for my being in it.” She hoped that she was a comfort to her correspondent, and was concerned that she could cause him pain by consoling him unskillfully. There was a pause written into the letter, and then she admitted what was perhaps the cause of her irritability. Prentiss, wrote, “Mr. ---- talked to me as if he imagined me a blue-stocking. Just because my sister wears spectacles, folks take it for granted that I also am literary.”

Prentiss’s frustration lay in the negative connotations of the derogatory word, “bluestocking,” which referred to dangerously literary females, but her phrasing was revealing. She used the fact that her sister wore spectacles as synonymous with being a literary woman, both in her eyes and the eyes of those around her. Prentiss’s sister took a deliberate risk in wearing spectacles; by doing so she publicly marked herself—and her family—as transgressing traditional gender boundaries. In America’s Early Republic, a time of uncertain and transitional gender roles between the end of the American Revolution and 1850, when the submissive Enlightenment woman was becoming the Republican Mother, women like Elizabeth Payson Prentiss’s sister actively altered gender roles and created personas for themselves through the choices that they made about visual aids.

Spectacles as material culture provide a window into changing gender norms during the Early Republic. However, most studies on spectacles tend to be traditional.

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material histories. Often presented as guides for collectors or catalogues of museum collections, these volumes are generally written by opticians and go into great detail about the construction and changing styles of eyeglasses, sometimes pointing out unusual and particularly interesting pairs. One of the most complete of these is *Spectacles and Other Vision Aids: A History and Guide to Collecting*, a gigantic volume by J. William Rosenthal, M.D., that delves into a variety of topics, such as how to examine historical artifacts, the history of glass and development of optical lenses, Chinese and Japanese spectacles, different types of European visual aids, spectacles in art, and a myriad of other subjects. His chapters are short, but informative. Other books on visual aids, like *Spectacles: From Utility Article to Cult Object* by B. Michael Andressen, provide only a short, if useful, introduction to older forms of eyeglasses before launching into an evaluation of modern glasses. Wolf Winkler’s *A Spectacle of Spectacles: Exhibition Catalogue* describes a British museum exhibition of 1988-9. Most resources, like these, focus primarily or solely on European and Asian visual aids, and several are translations of German or French works. An excellent pictorial resource for American eyeglasses is the eyeglasses collector’s book *Eyeglass Retrospective: Where Fashion Meets Science* by Nancy Schiffer, which has a large section on the McAllister opticians of Philadelphia. Its presentation is similar to a museum display, with a wealth of visual information and short, informative captions.

The best resource for information on American spectacles, however, is *antiquespectacles.com*, run by David A. Fleishman, M.D. This website features a virtual museum, scholarly articles on spectacles, references for study, and other resources for collectors, historians, opticians, and others who are interested in the study of vision aids.
Surprisingly, although American visual aids themselves have attracted a fairly large amount of scholarly attention, only one recent work has provided a true social history. Dr. Katherine Stebbins-McCaffrey’s dissertation, *Reading Glasses: American Spectacles in the Age of Franklin*, provides a view of visual aids hitherto unexplored. One of her most cogent arguments is that in the eighteenth century, spectacles and eyeglasses were simultaneously barriers between viewer and viewed (primarily man and woman,) and lenses to overt, illicit sexuality that reinforced masculine dominance.

Recent work in women’s and gender history has uncovered intricate complexity in post-Revolution gender role shifts. In *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (2006), Catherine Kerrison shows that a dearth of public documents written by women does not denote inactivity on their part; rather, in the most rigidly hierarchical gendered society in early America, southern women actively shaped their own roles in society. Mary Beth Norton’s book *Liberty’s Daughters* (1980) describes women’s Revolutionary involvement within changing but rigid social expectations. Rosemarie Zagarri traces changing ideas about women’s inherent inferiority to men and political potential from the seventeenth century, through post-Revolutionary acceptance in the realm of party politics, to a severe backlash in views about women’s abilities in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when once again, women came to be viewed as the weaker vessel.² Kate Haulman uses the term “culture wars” in her article, “Fashion and the Culture Wars of Revolutionary Philadelphia,” to

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describe the back and forth of heated debate over fashion and gender.\(^3\) A complex shift was occurring; while America entered the Revolution, conceptions of masculine and feminine ideals moved away from the foppery and luxury of the early eighteenth century, which came to be viewed as feminine and dangerous. Historian Linda Kerber puts it concisely: “Effeminacy was associated with timidity, dependence, and foppishness—even homosexuality. It was associated with luxury and self-indulgence...”\(^4\) Women were expected to both remain within the domestic sphere and to make themselves useful to their country, a conflicted philosophy that generated the concept of the Republican Mother, a model of sensible femininity who was also politically savvy—in order to educate her sons to be virtuous citizens of the new republic. Women actively shaped this role, however, by accepting or resisting it, and those who needed visual aids had the additional power to manipulate stereotypes and use their spectacles or quizzing glasses to mark themselves as effeminate, matronly, or academic.

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Chapter 1. Eyewear and Gender

I. The History of Spectacles

The study of optics has a long and ancient history, but ironically it was only relatively recently that lenses were put to use in correcting visual defects. Spectacles were most commonly used to correct presbyopia, or age-related eyesight deterioration. “Around age forty [the eyes] begin their decline, and by about age sixty they lose almost all of their strength.”

They were also used to correct farsightedness in younger people, and, less commonly, myopia, or nearsightedness.

The first theory that ground optical lenses could correct eyesight was posited by the Arab astronomer Alhazen (965 A.D.-c. 1040 A.D.) Roger Bacon (1214-1294) followed with theoretical proof, but it was medieval Christian monks, working from Alhazen’s theories, who first came up with reading stones, “grinding the first planoconvex segments from a rock-crystal or quartz sphere. Depending on the thickness of such segments, writing could be enlarged to a degree that made it easier for farsighted monks to read.” The first pair of rimmed spectacles, however, were “two convex ground lenses…rimmed in thick oak or horn” and riveted together, made in Murano, Italy near the end of the thirteenth century. The Venetians were the only group of people known to have made completely transparent glass at the time. Eventually, riveted spectacles went out of fashion and by the eighteenth century they were replaced by spectacles that used tension on the temples to stay on, hence the name “temple spectacles.” The discomfort of wearing temple spectacles prompted a myriad of other designs, not least the over-the-ear

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1 Katherine Stebbins-McCaffrey, “Reading Glasses: American Spectacles in the Age of Franklin” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2007), 4
3 Andressen, Spectacles, 13.
version worn today, developed around 1850. Single reading glasses or glasses for other purposes, such as quizzing glasses, became popular as well. By the nineteenth century, Americans obtained optical glasses not only from merchants who imported them from Europe, but also from domestic opticians. Lenses were not always made of glass; a sturdier, more scratch-resistant alternative, “Pebble, a naturally occurring stone in Brazil, was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to make optical lenses in Europe and the United States. Although the mineral is as clear as flint glass, not all specimens were suitable for lenses….The brown color in some, however, could be removed by gradual heating, as in the sun.” An important American contribution to the development of spectacles was Benjamin Franklin’s highly debated invention of the bifocal lens. After bifocals became popular, several alternative versions were made, such as glasses with a second set of lenses that flipped forward to change the primary set, or a separate, second set of lenses that hung on the spectacles similar to twentieth-century clip-on reading lenses.

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II. The Need to See

As Linda Kerber argues, the impetus for female education in the northern United States that began in the 1790s helped to close the literacy gap for women. With improving literacy rates, clear vision for reading became increasingly important. However, advice book after book from the early nineteenth century warned its readers, male and female, of the fragility of the eyes. Author Georg Beer mourned the circumstances that weaken the eyes early in life:

Then come the masters, if the poor martyrs [young boys and girls] are cooped up at home, and there is no end to writing, drawing, sewing, embroidery, music, &c., until the little ones, driven beyond their powers, can no longer support it without complaining of their eyes. Too often, indeed, their complaints are useless; and although an experienced physician should be called in, who may speak from the dictates of his conscience to the headstrong parents, pointing out the excess of

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hurtful labour, yet the ordinary reply is, ‘that they cannot too soon accustom them
to employment, if they wish to make any thing of them.’

Beer and other authors warned of reading and writing at night or in dim lighting as a
major strain on the eyes. Many contemporary letter-writers complained of strain caused
by reading and writing, particularly at night, and several took up wearing spectacles
specifically at nighttime. Even girls involved in trade experienced hazards to their eyes:

Several Young Ladies, of only about 25 years of Age, have complained to me that
they could not work without Spectacles of 30 Inches focus—who I found, on
inquiry, very justly attributed this premature failure of their Sight to having been
obliged frequently to sit up at Needle-work half the Night during the time they
were with Dress-makers.

Occupational pursuits were not the only dangers to the sight, however. Beer warned
against the female fashion of wearing veils:

Amongst the great number of the inventions of luxury, I mean those particularly
prejudicial to the sight, there are few, if any, which have more hurtful effects than
the veils now used by the fair sex….The continual vacillation of these gauzes or
nets, thus intercepting objects in a confused and partial manner, weakens the sight
so much that I frequently have under my care young persons, not more than
seventeen or eighteen years of age, whose eyes were naturally very good, but who
already complain of visual weakness, and are no longer able to execute any of
those fine works with which they have been accustomed to amuse themselves

Opticians’ concern about the subject was undiminished thirty-three years later. In 1848,
John Harrison Curtis admonished his female readers:

Many naturally good eyes have been permanently weakened by the apparently
innocent custom of wearing a veil, the constant shifting of which affects the eyes
so prejudicially, in its ceaseless endeavour to adjust itself to the veil’s vibrations,
that I have known not a few young ladies who have brought on great visual
debility by this means alone

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10 Beer, *The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age*, 34-5.
Both authors expressed concern about tight clothing, colors, and fashion in general. “Will these martyrs to fashion never be truly sensible of the injury they are thus doing to themselves?” lamented Beer. Women’s fashions and activities injured their eyes before the natural decline of vision in their old age often necessitating the use of vision aids.

Visual aids had been available for hundreds of years, and widely available since the eighteenth century. Spectacles, particularly a model called temple spectacles, which used tension against the temples to remain on the head (rather than looping over the ear, as glasses do today,) were a very popular choice. Although often bought as imports, they were also made domestically; John McAllister of Philadelphia was one of the most famous of the early nineteenth-century American opticians.


Although both Beer and Curtis gave examples of young women who ruined their eyes early as a result of fashion or feminine work, Curtis estimated that “most persons begin to feel the necessity for some assistance to their eyes in reading and working after

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12 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 35.
the age of thirty or thirty-five.\textsuperscript{13} This is a measure of the natural decline of the eye into farsightedness with age and use (presbyopia), rather than the more congenital myopia, or nearsightedness. In either case, consumers of all classes could find spectacles. Not all spectacles were alike, however. Although the quality of lens-making had steadily progressed over the course of the eighteenth century, warning after warning in self-help books reminded readers that cheap merchandise was often defective.

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Advertisement, April 1860, courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{13} Curtis, \textit{Curtis on the Preservation of Sight}, 32.
Georg Beer spoke of spectacles “‘manufactured by wholesale,’ from all sorts of defective materials, even sometimes made from the common window glass…[that] infallibly destroy the sight they were expected to assist and to preserve.”

Beer added a few more points of error in “mass-produced” lenses (ground “two to six at a time” by the same worker):

The points of complaint respecting the common spectacles, in general, are, That their assortment of the lenses is irregular, one of the glasses having generally a different focus from the other; That they are badly polished, which affects their transparency; That the two glasses, or lenses, are never of an equal thickness; That the glass is often full of specks and imperfections, which being partly ground down are not easily observable; And, finally, that the convexity is not regular, the sides not only differing, but different degrees of convexity being absolutely on the same side of the lens.

Beer pointed out that it was very difficult for one worker to produce one quality lens at a time, and that different focal lengths in the same lens and between it and its mate were a major source of eye strain and even scarring on the cornea. He compared wearing cheap spectacles to “falling into Charybdis whilst avoiding Scylla.” A few decades later, Curtis gave a similar warning: “persons cannot be too cautious of whom they purchase spectacles; for it is a fact that they are to be bought wholesale at little more than one shilling per dozen; and the use of such inferior articles cannot be too much reprobated.”

Even with quality spectacles, there were pitfalls into which the consumer could fall. A common practice in the early part of the nineteenth century was to measure and label different strengths of spectacles by the age at which the consumer was expected to use them. However, William Kitchiner, M.D., told his readers in his self-help book on

14 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 237.
15 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 240.
16 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 239.
17 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 240-3.
18 Curtis, Curtis on the Preservation of Sight, 43, footnote.
optical medicine that “nothing can be more erroneous than the common notion, that there is an invariable Rule that a certain form of Glass is calculated for a certain Age. No Rule has more exceptions:--but this Vulgar Error has been productive of great and irremediable Injury to the Eyes of Thousands!”

Opticians also debated about whether colored lenses were better for the eyesight than clear ones, although dark green lenses seem to be almost universally discouraged in no uncertain terms. Single-lens glasses were also available in a variety of hand-held forms, even without prescription lenses for the fashion conscious.

III. Gendered Glasses

Historian Kate Haulman argues that “at the heart of revolutionary contests over fashion lay the power to define gender identity and control relations between the sexes.”

This gender war continued in the post-revolutionary period, and extended to eyewear. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century associated specific and often contradictory gendered stereotypes with two of the most popular forms of visual correction, quizzing glasses and spectacles. The quizzing glass, or quizzer “consisted of a small lens encased in a frame with a short handle….While very few of the lenses were myopic, and therefore truly useful in distance vision, most were ground convex for close viewing or were plano for cosmetic effect only.”

Quizzing glasses were shaped to fit fashions: “Originally the quizzing glasses were round. As they became more fashionable, oval and rectangular shapes were

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19 Kitchiner, The Economy of the Eyes, 6.
21 Rosenthal, Spectacles and Other Vision Aids, 220.
also used. They were usually worn on a silk cord or ribbon around the neck.”

Quizzing glasses had long been an attribute of European and American fops.


This style of masculinity had been widely popular in the pre-Revolutionary period, but faced opposition during and after the Revolution as an overly European convention. An American traveler in Europe in 1824 described a dandy that he viewed as

“an Exquisite, perfuming the air as he passes, with rings on his fingers, diamonds in his broach, and a gemmed quizzing glass at his side.” The backlash attacked such attention to jewelry and appearance as effeminate, and pressed the republican virtues of neoclassical simplicity of dress and manner. Interestingly, as more women began to wear quizzing glasses and the stereotype became increasingly feminine, men who used quizzers circa 1820 changed the way that they wore them, fitting them into the eye as an early form of monocle rather than holding them in the hand. The shift in masculinity and its battle with the older popular style was heavily expressed in the negative depiction of fops in the satire of the first decades of the nineteenth century. British trendsetter and dandy Beau Brummell was mocked in a Cruikshank caricature, “A Fashionable of 1817,” (Fig. 6) as an emasculated fop whose bony figure, snide expression, mismatched shoes, and weak, slouched posture hardly complemented the values of rugged strength and confident sociability that Americans like Thomas Jefferson advocated in the Early Republic.

Importantly, the central feature of the caricature of Brummell is the small quizzing glass he holds to his eye, marking him unquestionably as a fop. A New Year’s poem addressed to “the patrons of the American Athenaeum, for 1826” desired fops to realize their ridiculousness: “To Fops, and Dandies, all such quizzing elves./We wish they’d turn the glass upon—themselves!” In 1819 a satiric story attributed to an anonymous London newspaper was published widely in the American news. Entitled “The Highlander and Dandy,” the short tale opens with a confrontation between a kilted Scotsman and a dandy, who peers rudely at the Scotsman through his quizzing glass, “and seemed greatly astonished at his robust and manly form, particularly his brawny and

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shapely limbs, which appeared bare and free.” The Highlander, offended by the dandy’s behavior, immediately breaks the quizzing glass with his stick, and further provoked by profanities from the dandy, grabs him by the chest, and is astounded when the dandy’s frill, false vests, and pair of corsets are easily dragged off, revealing his bare skin. The dandy is described effeminately as “the trembling exquisite” and is terrified when the astonished Highlander misconstrues the situation and generously gives him a half crown to “to help to buy you a sark,” or shirt.26 A crowd gathers to laugh at the dandy, and “The hardy Highlander, in walking off, observed to his friend, ‘How thankful we Caledonians ought to be, when Nature has so kindly endowed us with bodily forms that do not require the assistance of milliners and corsetmakers to give us an artificial shape.’”27

The dichotomy presented is between two forms of masculinity vying for superiority. Importantly, the first thing that the dandy does is to pull out and use on the Highlander the universal mark of his form of masculinity, the quizzing glass, and the first thing that the Highlander does to assert his masculine dominance in the situation is to break it. The breaking of the quizzing glass and the ensuing interaction paint the dandy as helpless, unable to fight back, frightened, and thus effeminate. It is no surprise that “The Highlander and Dandy” was so popular in the post-Revolutionary United States. It describes concisely the escalating war over masculinity between dandies and rugged self-confidence.

As the rugged Republican ideal began to replace foppery, the dandy was viewed as increasingly effeminate, and, not surprisingly, his attributes became acceptable for women’s use, including the all-important quizzing glass. With quizzing glasses, young women were able to correct their visual deficiencies in public, a sphere in which spectacles were not socially acceptable for ladies who desired a feminine persona. A fashion plate in *Le Beau Monde* of May 1807 (Fig. 7) depicts a demure, turbaned young lady holding a quizzing glass which she wears on a chain around her neck. This is telling; another reason for quizzing glasses to be feminine was that they were considered jewelry.

*Figure 6:* Woman using a quizzing glass at a fancy dinner. D. C. Davidson, *Spectacles, Lorgnettes and Monocles* (Shire Publications, Ltd., 1989), 13.
Although occasionally sold with utilitarian optical instruments such as spyglasses, or with miscellany, quizzing glasses were generally listed in advertisements for jewelry and ornamental items, particularly in the context of women’s jewelry. This is unsurprising, as “The main purpose of this optical device was to decorate oneself and impress others. Invariably, the quizzer was hung on a cord or tape that encircled the neck. This arrangement was convenient, as it was available for use at a moment’s notice and was quite visible to others as well.”

Quizzing glasses, like the women who chose to wear them and preferred the feminine persona popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were decorative objects. By contrast, spectacles were generally listed with optical instruments, utilitarian items or hardware.

The social acceptance of quizzing glasses for women was limited by the gender war and by age group. An article in The Tickler of Philadelphia in 1812 criticizes the modern belle...her quizzing glass raised to her eye, to recognize with unblushing cheeks their various features, [of the people in the room she just entered] and, with assured ease, placing herself in the center of it, attracting, by the raised tones of her conversation, or the scarcely clothed colours of her fashionable form, the observation not ADMIRATION of our sex, and surely the pity of the better judging of the other.

29 Rosenthal, Spectacles and Other Vision Aids, 220.
This opinion was clearly in line with that of William Cobbett’s complaint of the new styles worn by the “bold, daredevil, turban-headed females” that he observed on the streets of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Figure 7}: Morning and evening fashion plate, May 1807, showing a fashionable and feminine young lady wearing a quizzing glass. Susan Watkins, \textit{Jane Austen In Style} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

During the transition from eighteenth-century to nineteenth-century gender ideals, quizzing glasses came to be in vogue for both genders to the point that they were used solely to give the impression of fashionable intelligence. J. William Rosenthal points out that instead of being ground convex or concave, many quizzing glass lenses were left

“plano for cosmetic effect only.” The irony of the situation was, however, that the use of false glasses precipitated the use of real ones:

*A Single Glass*, set in a smart Ring, is often used by Trinket-fanciers merely for Fashion’s sake, by folks who have not the least defect in their Sight,--and are not aware of the mischievous consequences of such irritation:-- this pernicious plaything will most assuredly, in a very few Years, bring on an imperfect vision in One or Both Eyes.

Quizzing glasses were not only a vision aid, but a fashion statement, and as an item of jewelry were open to women for use in public. Spectacles, on the other hand, had more complex connotations. Often ridiculed as unsightly and undesirable, they had gained popularity with the French *philosophes*, and later in America with influential individuals such as Benjamin Franklin:

whereas eyeglasses had long been the mark of a learned man, many people in the eighteenth century shied away from them for personal and other reasons. The fact that Franklin wore eyeglasses and had them on when he entered Paris set an example for others to follow and helped increase their popularity.

Contemporaries felt, however, that spectacles made women look prematurely old and worse, educated or bookish. A story in the *Godey’s Lady’s Book* of April 1836 illustrates the embarrassment a young woman felt at being discovered wearing spectacles by her suitor—an embarrassment amplified by her sudden realization that he was extremely unattractive, having seen him clearly for the first time. The author claimed that myopia was widespread among young women: “The fact was, that Lucy, like all young ladies of the present day, was very short-sighted, and, to conquer the difficulties of Mozart and Rossini, she always practiced in spectacles.”

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34 Kitchiner, *The Economy of the Eyes*, 16.
Spectacles, however, obviously did not match the way Lucy wanted to portray herself to the world: “Now, a heroine (and that was my cousin’s natural vocation) could not be supposed to wear spectacles – and these spectacles were kept as great a mystery as a murder, or a ghost. Lucy went about the world seeing half and imagining the rest.”

Women who desired to maintain a feminine persona utilized quizzing glasses in public, or wore no vision aids at all.

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IV. Spectacles and Aging

The obituary of British Naval Captain James Cook’s widow in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* of September 1835 celebrated the 94-year-old woman’s feminine achievements, including her autonomy and independence, even from such things as reading glasses. “Her mind was perfectly clear and active to the very last, so that she not only read the psalms and the newspaper every day, and read them without spectacles, still extremely near-sighted as she had always been, but managed all her own affairs till within a few days of her death…” Mrs. Cook was an ideal case of femininity, a woman that, like Lucy from “The Spectacles” was nearsighted at a young age, but managed as best she could without disfiguring herself by wearing spectacles. Spectacles were clearly associated with old age. The popular Currier and Ives picture “The Life & Age of Woman: Stages of Woman’s Life from the Cradle to the Grave” (Fig. 9) depicts a woman first wearing spectacles at age fifty, and again, bending over a cane sporting a different design of spectacles with larger lenses at age eighty. Opticians of the nineteenth century well understood presbyopia, the farsighted, age-related deterioration of the eyes, and created a proliferation of spectacles to combat it. In fact, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a primary way of determining prescription strength was by the age of the consumer, particularly if the person who would wear the spectacles was absent, having sent a friend or relative to procure lenses in their stead.

“One set of rules called for a convex glass of 2.0 degrees for a person between thirty and forty years of age; 2.5 degrees, if between forty and fifty; and on up to more than 5.0 degrees for an individual over eighty.”

The system had its dangers. Dr. William Kitchiner told his readers that “nothing can be more erroneous than the common notion, that there is an invariable Rule that *a certain form of Glass is calculated for a certain Age*. No Rule has more exceptions:—but this *Vulgar Error* has been productive of great and irremediable Injury to the Eyes of Thousands!”

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38 Finger, *Doctor Franklin’s Medicine*, 259.
Figure 10: Portrait of an unknown Quaker woman, circa early nineteenth century. Unusually for a portrait, she wears her spectacles on top of her head, and holds her spectacle case. Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia.

The system persisted, however, and was utilized by women, who often procured spectacles through family members or close friends. “The Spectacles you Sent are to young none Under Sixty fits my Eyes,” complained 45-year-old Abigail Bilhah Levy Franks in 1741. Although age was often simply used as a measure of lens strength, it is

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likely that the system made women like Abigail Franks feel prematurely old. Like women of today, those of the nineteenth century were reluctant to show their age, according to Dr. William Kitchiner:

…[People with prematurely bad eyesight] suppose that Spectacles are such unequivocal evidence of Age and Infirmity—that they desire to dispense with exhibiting them as long as possible—therefore, they purchase “A READING GLASS,” and habitually put it up to One and the same Eye, leaving the other involuntarily to wander;—after a few years, the sight of the Idle Eye becomes of a different focus to that which has been employed with the Glass—and is often irreparably impaired.41

The embarrassment was exponentially more acute for the younger members of society. In the 1854 story “Mrs. Daffodil at the Theatre,” a girl of thirteen or fourteen who is nearsighted and wears spectacles to the opera is rudely asked by an old woman to share them. She is confused, but is saved from embarrassment by her gentleman companion, who purposely reinterprets the request and gives the astonished old woman his opera-glass or lorgnette instead.42

In an attempt to save themselves from aging, women could accidentally achieve the same physical debility of growing old by making ill-informed decisions about vision aids. Dr. Kitchiner’s self-help optics book reiterated the embarrassment felt by middle-aged people in seeming prematurely elderly:

When would-be-thought-young Persons, first felt the necessity of giving their Eyes Optical assistance, they are, nevertheless, shy of mounting Spectacles, which they seem to consider an inconvenient manner of advertising their Age upon their Nose—not reflecting that they are worn by many persons who have not seen half their years, but who being Short Sighted, are obliged to walk about in Spectacles, or forego the sight of ‘the Human Face Divine.’43

41 Kitchiner, The Economy of the Eyes, 12-3.
43 Kitchiner, The Economy of the Eyes, 12.
In the same way that the quizzing glass was an attribute of fops and dandies, spectacles were almost universally associated with elderly people. Nineteenth-century Americans commented, “She is seventy-two, and wearing spectacles,”⁴⁴ “grandfathers and grandmothers put on their spectacles,”⁴⁵ “[a lock of hair] will serve to make you remember me when locks are crisp and gray, and the quiet cap, and the spectacles…are all that is left of you.”⁴⁶ In a dialogue in the Godey’s Lady’s Book of December 1831, the young Hon. Catherine Somerton’s very conservative great-grandmother, portrayed as a relic of the eighteenth century, is described in the stage directions as wearing silver-

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rimmed spectacles. Another story asks if the reader has ever considered that her grandmother, who “is shriveled into wrinkles, who has lost all her teeth, and wears a plain cap, and heavy gold spectacles,” was once young and “had not lost her teeth, and did not wear spectacles and a cap. She was fully as fair as you.” Here, spectacles are not only a mark of age, but a sign of the loss of beauty that was seen to accompany it. (Fig. 12)

Spectacles were the only widely acceptable form of eyewear for older women; there were not only gendered but age-related constraints on quizzing glasses. Several articles in contemporary newspapers describe elderly women with quizzing glasses as grotesque, leering, and licentious, not to mention painting negative images of their failed attempts to appear fashionably younger than they actually were: “Here is a great display of fashion; but it is disgusting to me to see old women of seventy with a thousand curls dangling about their faces, and a quizzing glass constantly at one eye, viewing those that pass them.” Older women were strictly limited in their fashionable self-expression; attempting to appear too young by the use of quizzing glasses was socially unacceptable.

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Spectacles were so strongly associated with growing old that there was even a natural expectation of wearing them as an accessory of aging, even for women who possessed good vision. Kitchiner pointed out that misunderstandings about the nature and function of spectacles caused more nice than wise folks, who without any need of Spectacles, yet hearing their acquaintance talk of how charmingly they can see in Glasses, they long... ‘to be better than well’—and will not believe, that although they have not the least occasion for Optical assistance, yet, without trying all sorts of Glasses, cannot be convinced, that however this branch of Optics may alleviate the infirmity of the Eyes...they can receive no more assistance from Glasses, for the ordinary purposes of the Sight—than a person who is not Deaf can from a Hearing Trumpet—50

50 Kitchiner, The Economy of the Eyes, 18.
Dr. Kitchiner continued with the humorous case of a 79-year-old woman whose vision no optician was able to correct, and whose complaint was that she could not read in spectacles. The optician she was visiting attempted to comfort her, to which she retorted with sufficient vehemence, and, to his extreme astonishment, exclaimed,—‘Sir, You are strangely mistaken, Sir!—I did not tell you that I could not see to Read, Sir!—I can see to Read, Sir, as well as ever I could,—I only complained that I could not see to read in Spectacles!! I can see to read very well without!!! but my Acquaintance say how charmingly they can see with Glasses, and surely, it is very hard that I cannot enjoy the same Advantage.’

Although this story of a foolish woman has misogynistic overtones, it clearly describes a drawback of the strong cultural relationship between age and spectacles, and perhaps also the poor level of education that eighteenth-century women had received in the sciences.

Women could, however, take advantage of the positive stereotypes of bespectacled age. The public use of spectacles by *philosophes* and figures such as Benjamin Franklin, as well as by the elderly, bestowed a sense of venerable wisdom upon wearers of both sexes. *Godey’s Lady’s Book* spoke of a man who wore spectacles and “appeared…like a wandering son of spleen or science.”

In portraits, young women almost never appeared wearing or holding spectacles, but a fair number of elderly women did so. Their spectacles add gravity to their portraits, and demand age-related respect. As will be explored in the next section, women with specific reasons for appearing wise, such as authors or the founders of academies, often appeared with spectacles, drawing on the stereotypes associated with spectacle-wearing men.

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51 Kitchiner, *The Economy of the Eyes*, 20-1
V. The Educated Woman

“And why should girls be learnt or wise,/Books only serve to spoil their eyes./The studious eye but faintly twinkles/And reading paves the way to wrinkles” warned American artist John Trumbull. (Fig. 13) Although the Republican Mother was expected to be well-versed enough in practical and religious literature to teach her sons properly, the line was drawn at a genre enjoyed by many women of the time, the novel. “If any abuse of our sight is blameable,” chided Beer, “what shall we say to those silly women, and giddy girls, who every night sacrifice a part of their repose for the purpose of reading absurd romances and insipid novels? Who can grant to them the least portion of pity?”

Historian Linda Kerber described the gendered divide in reading practices: “Men were said to read newspapers and history; women were thought to exercise their weaker intellects on the less demanding fare of fiction and devotional literature. A vigorous proscriptive literature warned of the dangers women risked if they persisted in what was said to be their taste for frivolous and romantic fiction.” Despite the warnings, women persisted in enjoying novels, even ameliorating a culturally unacceptable practice by changing the nature of novels themselves, “writing romantic fiction that counseled against the loss of self-control….”

54 Beer, The Art of Preserving the Sight Unimpaired to an Extreme Old Age, 150.
Ironically, as in the *Godey’s Lady’s Book* story of Lucy’s reluctance to wear glasses in fear of not being as much like a heroine, novels could reinforce cultural negativity toward young women wearing spectacles. Part of her embarrassment may have been in looking old in front of her suitor, but part may also have been a reluctance to appear bookish.
Interestingly, as much as men disparaged women’s reading them, novels were stereotypically relegated to women. In 1836, Rebecca Gratz found amusement in her brother’s fulfilling a female role: “he is reading Rienzi with as much perseverance as a school girl- you will think it a singular cause of pleasure in a grave character like me- that with spectacles on my brother should be reading a novel.”

Women’s education greatly improved in the early nineteenth century, and afforded girls a wider reading base. The most important thing to consider, however, was that participation in the world of the educated was a choice made on an individual basis.

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Women who decided to partake were marked as unattractive, and their reputations had consequences for those close to them. The choice to wear spectacles in public for women who were not elderly was a strong statement that a woman participated in the illicit culture of the “blue-stocking,” defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Blue Stocking lady…sneeringly [referred] to any woman showing a taste for learning, a literary lady. (Much used by reviewers of the first quarter of the 19th [century]….”)\(^{58}\)

Bluestockings were seen by many as masculine, unattractive, and dangerous. In the 1844 *Godey’s Lady’s Book* story “Baby-Visiting,” the author stands positive stereotypes about women on their heads as a group of children are led by their nurse to the homes of their mother’s neighbors, all of whom are rude, terrible parents, or awful with children. One woman, Mrs. Colgar, embodies the negative view of the bluestocking, as well as of the Republican Mother. She is first described as “the large lady with blue spectacles, who always has books in her hand when she calls.” This ambiguous statement is given a decidedly negative tone later in the story: “The dictatorial address and self-appropriating manners of this lady, a large, masculine person, with hollow, gray eyes and very thin lips, at once announced her intellectual pretensions.”\(^{59}\)

Needless to say, Mrs. Colgar is very decidedly unattractive. A classic Thurber Woman, she is overbearing and ostentatious in her description of an article she has written, in which she urges women to become Republican Mothers, but takes it one step further. Instead of mothers’ educating just boys, she advocates education for girls as equals to men. In her very aggressive view, mothers should

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lay the foundation of an intellectual superstructure which will endure for ages. The nation’s destiny is in your hands; you may make it one in which each individual will be a statesman, an orator, a philosopher, a poet – a nation such as the world has never seen, such as was never conceived of by the most enlightened imagination of the past. Why should you shrink from the effort? Regard it as a solemn duty to exert the power with which nature has endowed you, and your influence will become a tremendous engine which shall control the world!

Mrs. Colgar embodied all that was frightening about educated women. Not only do the things that she advocates threaten male dominance with the force of an unnatural, mechanical engine, but her movement into the masculine sphere menaces traditional female gender roles as well. The author of the story was a married woman, Mrs. A. M. F. Annan, who in writing for a magazine could possibly have been considered a borderline bluestocking. Perhaps in Mrs. Colgar, Mrs. Annan drew the line between a “good,” socially acceptable bluestocking and a “bad,” overly aggressive and power-hungry bluestocking. Her message to her female audience may have been one not of eighteenth-century conservatism, but of moderation: it was all right for women to be educated, but not overly so. This was not only for their sakes, but for the sakes of their children. In the story, Mrs. Colgar has no qualms about humiliating her children in front of her intellectual circle, and disparages a man who tried to protect his child from the widespread social humiliation of her stepmother’s having told the circle that the little girl had stolen a gold necklace from the stepmother’s wardrobe. Mrs. Colgar’s three daughters are far better educated than boys their age; her eldest is confined at the time of the visit to her quarters for doing badly in trigonometry, but the six-year-old declines Latin nouns, and the five-year-old can recite the Greek alphabet. As a result, the girls are physically distorted with information not meant for their age or sex: “pallid, meagre little creatures, with dull, sunken eyes, prominent foreheads, and their scanty hair cropped
close to their disproportionately large heads.” Although very young, they already begin to look hollow-eyed and masculine like their mother. Their gaze is vacant, and their voices are parrotlike. When Mrs. Colgar leaves the room, they reveal themselves as selfish, secretive children, whose vacant expressions are a defense against their mother’s abuse, who are rude to their guests and to each other, and who regularly steal from the pantry the sweets their mother denies them.  

Too much education for women, argues Mrs. Annan, is both physically and socially destructive.

Women who wore spectacles in portraits tended to be authors or the founders of female academies. Classic examples of “blue-stockings” who wanted to be seen and understood as such. These women deliberately sacrificed stereotypical beauty in order to be taken seriously as intellectuals in a nation that, in the post-Revolutionary years, temporarily recognized the importance of women in the political sphere of a republic. In doing so they brought about consequences that ran beyond their own personal lives, however, and affected those close to them. 22-year-old Elizabeth Payson Prentiss wrote in annoyance in 1840, “Mr. ---- talked to me as if he imagined me a blue-stocking. Just because my sister wears spectacles, folks take it for granted that I also am literary.”

Elizabeth Prentiss chose to present herself as a model of femininity, a goal that was frustrated by her sister’s defiance of traditional cultural norms.

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60 Annan, “Baby-Visiting.”
Prentiss’s sister and those like her were certainly criticized by men, but may not have had trouble finding matrimonial prospects. One record revealed that there were at least a few males who agreed with Jane Austen in that “Men of sense…do not want silly wives.”

Rebecca Gilman Miller counseled her brother’s love life in a letter to him, and both her opinion and her quote of his description of the young woman he is in love with are telling: “now that you kneel at the shrine of one whom you describe as sensible, fond

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of books &c, &c, and ‘pretty, quite pretty’, I consider you as in perilous situation and if I mistake not you will now be obliged to surrender and ‘own the force of female charms’ or rather female excellence.”  

Chandler Robbins Gilman may have used the girl’s beauty to excuse her literary tendencies, but it seems more likely that he was seeking a companionate marriage with an educated, intelligent young woman who was more an example of “female excellence” than simply “female charms.”

Letter-writing was another education-related activity that often both required spectacles and precipitated their usage. In the first half of the nineteenth century, letter-writing was a primary means of keeping in touch, particularly for women. Correspondence as a medium was simultaneously public and private. It networked women with family, close friends, acquaintances, and even business contacts, while at the same time giving the writer full control over her privacy. A woman could retire to her own desk and put on her spectacles without her correspondent ever knowing of their existence. Like Lucy, her spectacles could be “kept as great a mystery as a murder, or a ghost.”  

On the other hand, she could choose readers in which to confide her secret, or she could be entirely open about the fact that she wore spectacles. Letters from women, particularly to family members, are full of short discussions about eyesight and spectacles. A particular topic of discussion is that of obtaining glasses; some women bought spectacles in person, like Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker, who “went to McAlesters [in Philadelphia] for Spectals – ordered new glasses put into bows I had,” but

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oftentimes women would write to close friends or relatives, especially males, requesting that they buy spectacles by proxy.

![Figure 16: Engraved spectacles, “Presented by Mrs. Francis Van Rensalaer.” Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.](image)

In some cases this was probably a measure of convenience, as quality spectacles tended to either be imported to major cities or sold at stores like McAlister’s, in major cities. In other cases, it may have had to do with the embarrassment of “premature aging” due to damage to the eyes from reading or writing. In 1843, 35-year-old Narcissa Whitman wrote from Walla Walla, Washington to her brother in Angelica, New York, “Your spectacles are of great use to me. I should not know how to do without them. My eyes have failed me almost entirely.”

The year before, Narcissa Whitman had been a missionary to the Nez Perce and wrote to her sister,

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64 Loraine, “The Spectacles.”
66 Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, “Letter from Narcissa Whitman to Jonas Galusha Prentiss”, April 14, 1843, Mrs. Whitman’s Letters 1843-1847 (Salem, OR: Oregon Pioneer Association, 1894) 167, in North
My eyes are much weaker than when I left home and no wonder, I have so much use for them. I am at times obliged to use the spectacles Brother J. G. [probably Jonas Galusha Prentiss] so kindly furnished me. I do not know what I could do without them; so much writing as we have to do, both in our own language and the Nez Perces; and, besides, we have no way to feast our minds with knowledge necessary for health and spirituality without reading, and here the strength of the eyes are taxed again.  

Books spoiled the eyes, as John Trumbull had warned, but they allowed women to pursue rich and varied lives, aided when necessary by spectacles. Because of their literacy, upper and middle-class white women were able to take part in the rich opportunities of correspondence across America, post-Revolutionary politics and Republican Motherhood.

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Conclusion

American Women in the early decades of the nineteenth century lived in a tumultuous world of revolution, backlash, and complex social norms. Opinions on the traits that constituted masculinity and femininity split after the Revolutionary War into several different camps. For men, foppery, with its attribute, the quizzing glass, continued to be popular, but was also heavily disparaged as effeminate. As this shift occurred, the fops’ quizzing glasses became increasingly feminine objects, so much so that they were acceptably carried by young women who wished to appear fashionable and feminine. Spectacles, on the other hand, both retained their connotations of advanced age and facial disfigurement while also bestowing an air of wisdom attractive to men and women of the Early American Republic. Male and female authors, journalists, satirists, and correspondents hotly debated women’s roles in the post-Revolutionary era, and many women actively broke from the traditional submissive, eighteenth-century stereotype. They did so to a variety of degrees, and were deeply critical of the extremism or lack thereof that other women displayed. Women of all ages could and did risk ridicule as masculine, bluestocking, or prematurely aged in wearing spectacles publicly. They were savvy enough, however, to use the ancient, masculine, and age-related stereotype of spectacles revealing the wisdom of the wearer to their advantage. Educated, “bluestocking” women, particularly younger ladies, marked themselves as intellectual by wearing spectacles in public, utilizing conflicted stereotypes to present their personae in an instantly recognizable way. Older women could wear spectacles without a literary stigma, but those with careers in literature or education sometimes carried or wore this attribute of wisdom in portraits. Bluestockings, Republican Mothers, or Enlightenment
ladies alike, these women’s use of visual aids provides a lens that helps to clarify a tumultuous past. It might be conceivable that they could be shuffled off into a subordinate cultural category by the mandates of a patriarchal society, but in fact women took active, differing roles in defining themselves and their place in American society. Far from being pushed into a single stereotype, they maintained a range of options for personas that they pursued at will. The choices they made about visual aids made firm statements about their self-imaging and chosen roles within the fluctuating social construct of the Early American Republic.
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