

# Presbyterians, Evangelicals and the Educational Culture of the Middle Colonies

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The academic career of Richard Dunn has been associated with two mid-Atlantic educational institutions of eighteenth-century origin: the University of Pennsylvania, of course, the former College of Philadelphia, and, before that, what was once the College of New Jersey at Princeton. Both were more than simply local institutions; rather, they brought a wide range of students and influences to the mid-Atlantic, in the process expanding greatly the influence of the region. They, like Richard himself and Poor Richard his predecessor, stand as representatives of the expansive quality of Middle Colony culture.

I should like to address here a particular aspect of the story of those two mid-Atlantic educational institutions: the fact that they were either formally Presbyterian, in the case of the College of New Jersey, or at least had important Presbyterian connections. That counted for quite a bit within that culture. During the eighteenth century, Presbyterianism increasingly came to represent something of a middle or mainstream within provincial America. In fact, the term "Presbyterian" was often used to refer to more than just the members of the Presbyterian Church, but rather to all of those who favored the government of the church not by bishops or Episcopates but rather ministers or Presbyters without higher authorities; in short, to churches that insisted upon the right of governing themselves. The term could thus incorporate most of the principal dissenting denominations — dissenting, that is, from the Anglican church — who constituted the predominant element within the provincial religious scene. Within that religious grouping, the Presbyterian Church played a central and increasingly prominent role in the forging of a mainstream and distinctly *provincial* religious and educational culture within the mid-Atlantic region.<sup>1</sup>

## I

The pattern of Presbyterian development in America was indicative of the role that it would play. Presbyterianism was the most rapidly-growing provincial denomination during the first half of the eighteenth century, and one whose position in the colonies was becoming increasingly central. Geographically, the position of the Presbyterians was literally central, anchored in the heartland of Pennsylvania and the commercial corridor linking New York to Philadelphia. Presbyterians extended their reach throughout the Middle Colonies and on into those portions of the northern and southern backcountries that comprised Greater New York and Greater Pennsylvania. Its principal

governing body was the Synod, located in Philadelphia, but divided in 1741 into an Old Side Synod in that city and a New Side Synod in New York. Its educational center was the College of New Jersey, founded at Elizabethtown in 1746 and moving to Princeton a decade later. Presbyterian centrality was augmented by their ability to establish important working relationships with several other religious groups, including the Dutch Reformed and the Congregationalists. They would even establish cooperative relationships with colonial Anglicans in the colleges.<sup>2</sup>

In form, Presbyterianism was well suited to the provincial phase of American development, the period in which the citizens of still-dependent colonial communities came to claim for themselves the rights and privileges of imperial citizens. During the seventeenth century, the Presbyterian presence had been minimal within English colonies that were dominated either by overseas extensions of English or Dutch state churches or by sectarian faiths with strong separatist leanings. Presbyterianism fit somewhere in between. Rejecting, with other dissenters, the hierarchical structure, the erastianism, and the metropolitan orientation of the Anglican Church, Presbyterians were equally resistant to the extreme localism of the sects. Instead, the Presbyterian Church was governed by bodies composed of ministers and lay elders meeting together. It was, therefore, neither wholly centralized and metropolitan nor wholly congregational and local. If authority was dispersed into Presbyteries, those were linked together, in turn, in larger groupings called Synods. Presbyterianism thus resembled a federation of local or regional religious organizations and a middle position within the American religious system.

The role of the American Presbyterian Church was amplified by its unique imperial position as an alternative religious establishment: the Presbyterian Church was the established Church of Scotland, its position secured by the 1707 Treaty of Union. While the American Church maintained no formal allegiance to its Scottish counterpart, ties between them were close. At times the American Church claimed the protection of its overseas ally; for example, the Presbyterian Church of New York rested its charter in the General Assembly of the Scottish Church in order to circumvent opposition from New York's powerful Anglican Church to an incorporation of dissenters.<sup>3</sup>

From a strong position among the Reformed denominations, Presbyterians promoted the goal of Protestant union. Almost from the moment the Synod divided in 1741 over issues of authority during the Great Awakening, Presbyterian leaders began to look for ways to reunite. That was facilitated by the fact that on matters of essential doctrine, the division in that church was never so wide as it was in several other denominations. Both Old Side and New Side maintained a firm adherence to the basic Calvinistic creed; there was little clear evidence of a drift towards Arminianism within the Church.<sup>4</sup> Nor did Presbyterians suffer from the divisions over the qualifications for church

membership that proved so divisive in New England and that cost Jonathan Edwards his pulpit. Even Gilbert Tennent's fractious *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* advocated removing oneself only from the influence of unregenerate *clergymen*; he never threatened separation from unregenerate lay men and women.<sup>5</sup> And Tennent would soon repent even those remarks.

The drive for union was linked to an equally strong predilection for institution-building and expansion, which was also a product of Presbyterians' national church background. The founding of the College of New Jersey in 1746 at Elizabethtown was only a small part of the effort. Presbyterians were even more active in the creation of academies, beginning with the evangelical "Log College" in Pennsylvania and Francis Alison's Old Side academy at Newark in Delaware. After 1740, as the church extended its reach, Presbyterian ministers began to establish academies wherever they settled, throughout the backcountries of Maryland, and Pennsylvania — eventually as far west as Carlisle in Pennsylvania — and into North Carolina. By 1760, Presbyterians had established more than twenty academies in the mainland colonies; by the end of the century there would be more than three times that number.<sup>6</sup>

The original purpose of the colleges and academies was to educate a ministry to preach to the expanding Presbyterian population; during its first twenty years, the College of New Jersey graduated more than a hundred and fifty clergymen.<sup>7</sup> But that was not its only purpose; it instructed an even larger number of lawyers, physicians, and merchants, and gentlemen as well, providing, among other things, a significant portion of the political leadership of colonies from New York south to the Carolinas. Presbyterian educational institutions were designed to inculcate piety and virtue together within a generation of provincial community leaders. Educational outreach and the dissemination of the spirit of piety and virtue among a provincial youth became a significant part of the evangelical mission.

## II

Presbyterian support for union was indicative of something else: a middle position in American theology, seeking to combine the emotional fervor of evangelicalism with the ethos of Enlightenment, tempering the passion of the former with the reasoned moderation of the latter. That was apparent at least from the time of the Awakening. While, at the beginning of the revival, such Presbyterians as Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Finley would establish themselves as among the most aggressive of evangelists, they — like other moderate evangelicals in the British world — rather quickly began to pull back from any identification with either enthusiasm or schism. The titles of some of Gilbert Tennent's published pulpit sermons illustrate the change that took place in his thinking. His aggressive and even abusive *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (1740) was followed four years later by a more humble sermon on

*The Danger of Spiritual Pride*. One of his early calls for revival, *The Necessity of Religious Violence* (1735), was succeeded by *The Necessity of Holding Fast the Truth* (1743) and *The Necessity of Studying to Be Quiet, and Doing Our Own Business* (1744), and, later, *The Blessedness of Peace-Makers Represented* (1759). Tennent may well have been thinking of his own earlier rashness when, in a 1744 sermon, he denounced “ignorant Novices in Religion” who “pronounce sentence against the spiritual states of others rashly and without sufficient foundation.”<sup>8</sup>

What emerged among Presbyterians in the aftermath of the Awakening was a broader kind of evangelicalism that was concerned less with grand and demonstrative religious revivals than with the revival of religion in common life and the cultivation of religious character, a position upon which most Old Side and New Side ministers could agree. Among their models was the work of such English dissenters as Isaac Watts, such as his *Humble Attempt Towards the Revival of Practical Religion Among Christians* (1731), and that of Philip Doddridge’s “Free Thoughts on the Most Probable Means of Reviving the Dissenting Interest” and *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Those works influenced a wide range of religious leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. Their approach to revivalism was summed up in a sermon by Scottish Presbyterian preacher James Stoddart, a close ally of American evangelicals, entitled simply *The Revival of Religion*. There Stoddart emphasized the necessity of combining piety with “natural parts,” “useful learning,” and “consummate prudence” to spur the revival, a long way indeed from earlier views of religious revivals.<sup>9</sup>

A good example of the newer approach to revivals was the awakening that broke out at the College of New Jersey in 1757, led by the Reverend Aaron Burr. It was described in several accounts, including the journal of his wife, Esther Burr. While participants and observers eagerly reported upon the progress of religion at Princeton, they were just as careful to emphasize the efforts undertaken to moderate the passions. When the awakening first began, the president sent for assistance among nearby Presbyterian clergymen, including the Reverend William Tennent, Jr., brother of Gilbert, whom Esther described as “not attal like Gilbert but as prudent a Man in Conducting affairs of reigion as ever I saw in my life. He hates noise . . . .” Eventually Gilbert did turn up at Princeton eager to preach, and Aaron Burr had to “manage” the evangelist so as to prevent “irregularities.”<sup>10</sup>

All of the depictions of the revival emphasized its rationality and regularity. Esther Burr commented on “the propriety and [decorum] that subsists amongst the scholars. . . . There is nothing in the Whole affair but what is desireable.” Aaron Burr described it as a work “carried on by the still voice of the Spirit; no boisterous methods; no special pathetic addresses to the passions.” Especially important was that the revival had not disrupted the principal work of the college, which was learning, and that no religious exercises had at any time been carried on in the hours appointed for study.”<sup>11</sup>

One aspect of the newer evangelicalism, indicated by the title of Isaac Watts' sermon, was increased public attention to the realm of what was referred to as practical religion — personal devotion, moral behavior, and family worship. Thus the journal of Esther Burr described her husband Aaron's preaching in Newark in February, 1755:

At meeting all day. Mr. Burr is still insisting on a reformation in famalies, and tells the people they must expect that this will be the burthen of his sermons until he sees reformation beginning. He has been remarkably stired up to be fervent in his preaching of late.<sup>12</sup>

The reference to her husband's "stirred up" and "fervent" preaching about family reformation suggests that Aaron Burr was engaged in something other than a simple reversion to the sort of cold moralist preaching that earlier generations of Presbyterians and Puritans had so roundly condemned. This was no Arminian call to a life of good works. Rather, it was part of an effort to promote piety by inducing a change in disposition, to instill what another Presbyterian leader, Samuel Davies, would refer to as "evangelical virtue or true Christian morality," to link piety tightly to virtue — in short, to effect a reformation of religious character.<sup>13</sup>

A good exposition of that style of evangelical preaching can be found in the work of the New Side Presbyterian John Blair, graduate of the Log College, brother of the leading New Side revivalist Samuel Blair, and Professor of Divinity at the College of New Jersey. Blair preached and wrote extensively about the processes of regeneration and the new birth, but he defined them in ways far removed from the emotional and sensory descriptions of the most radical New Lights. Conversion, to Blair, was evidenced through moral behavior, but not simply in the fact of a moral life. Rather, the purpose of examining one's behavior was to guide one's inward temper or disposition. Blair described regeneration as an inward principle, a "settled determination of the mind to right activity towards spiritual objects." Its attainment became evident only through "a course of experience" characterized by "strictness, spirituality, and holiness." Words such as "habitual" and "constant" in reference to the avoidance of sin were among the most frequent that Blair and his associates used in their descriptions of the regenerate.<sup>14</sup>

If one of the principal goals of evangelical preaching was to persuade hearers to avoid sin, in Blair's view, his motive was not to induce morality for its own sake, but rather as a first step towards repentance. That sort of moral preaching relied upon the assumptions of the faculty psychology and upon particular eighteenth-century understandings of the passions. In the view of such preachers, sin was not simply wrong in itself; it was also detrimental to

conversion. In the process of sinning, one gratified powerful passions, which had to be overcome to make way for repentance and an altered disposition. Just as moral sense philosophers insisted upon controlling the passions as a prerequisite to the refinement of the weaker moral sense, so evangelical moralists insisted upon controlling sinful passions before one could begin to repent. Thus would John Blair advise his hearers not to harden their hearts against conversion "by giving loose reigns to your lusts and sinful practices."<sup>15</sup>

As committed Calvinists, evangelical Presbyterians were careful to maintain that mere striving for morality would not suffice; "evangelical repentance" went far beyond common moralism. It was the sinner's obligation to strive nonetheless; as John Blair's brother Samuel put it, a sinner "never practices any thing like repentance till he comes to this: to forsake entirely his sinful courses, withstand all snares and temptations to them, and wrestle against the inward corruptions of his heart."<sup>16</sup> That may seem a long distance from the criticism of moral preaching by Blair's fellow Log College graduate Gilbert Tennent, in his *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* during the height of the Awakening, where he characterized it as "Driving, Driving, to Duty, Duty." Yet it was a road that Tennent himself would travel. By 1744 that preacher also, in a sermon on *The Necessity of Keeping the Soul*, would loudly advocate "the earnest and constant use of all appointed means" in order "to keep the soul from sins."<sup>17</sup>

### III

The emphasis upon the cultivation of character led to a greatly heightened emphasis upon secular learning within Presbyterian education, incorporating such subjects as the new moral and natural philosophies, history, and even belles-lettres.<sup>18</sup> A good illustration of the diverse nature of that curriculum comes from the 1760 commencement activities at the College of New Jersey, the only commencement over which Samuel Davies presided. The proceedings mixed celebrations of religion, science, literature, and social progress. They included a lecture in praise of oratory, delivered by the future doctor Benjamin Rush, a member of the graduating class; another by Samuel Blair, son of the revivalist minister, on the Enlightenment hypothesis that the elegance of oratory consisted in making the words consonant to their sense; a Latin dispute on the connection between ethics and revelation; the singing of an Ode on Science composed by the president; and an address by another student on the flourishing state of public affairs in America.<sup>19</sup>

Another striking illustration of Presbyterian approaches toward secular learning can be found in the journal kept by Samuel Davies. During his tenure in Virginia, Davies had published poetry himself, all of it on religious subjects. When the quality of his verses was derided by his Anglican opponents, the preacher made no attempt to defend their literary merit. Rather, the purpose

of his poetry was simply to attach the affections to the sacred cause; the quality of the poetry was "subservient to the interests of religion and virtue," a project he deemed far more important than literary merit. Indeed, according to Davies, an excessive elegance of style might even put off the general reader from obtaining the benefits of his verse, however much it might impress those with a taste for elegance.<sup>20</sup>

In 1753, Davies, along with Gilbert Tennent, undertook a fund-raising trip to Great Britain on behalf of the College of New Jersey. While on shipboard, Davies busied himself with catching up on his reading, including several novels. His taste was as moralistic as Esther Burr's. On the whole he was not impressed; for example, he described Defoe's *Roxana* as "the Hystory of an abandoned Prostitute, pretendedly penitent." He also read the "Memoirs of a fortunate Maid," possibly a French piece translated by Eliza Haywood, which, he remarked, had "a better [Tendency] than most that are so much in Vogue."<sup>21</sup>

There were two reasons Davies was able to undertake that reading during the voyage. He had time on his hands; he could peruse those novels, about which he evidently had much curiosity, without detracting from his responsibilities to his congregation. He could also read in private, away from the view of a public that might disapprove of a minister reading novels. In the north of England, Davies, out of curiosity, would even attend a play, at a time that the Presbyterian community was deeply divided over the morality of play-going. For Davies, the spirit in which he went to the play was more significant than the mere fact of his attendance. He saw it in a community, where he would not be known, "and consequently could give no Offense."<sup>22</sup>

Despite continuing controversy over the theater, students at the College of New Jersey enacted plays during Aaron Burr's tenure; Esther Burr referred to one that even involved cross-dressing. She was hardly known for levity, but the episode left her "extreamly merry." The main point for her was that the play was put on "quite privately, and with no other design than to Lern the young sparks a good dilivery," and so she had no objection.<sup>23</sup>

In his recent study of Anglo-American discussions of the theater, Jean-Christophe Agnew has described eighteenth-century critiques of the theater as simple restatements of older Puritan arguments against theatricality, which concentrated on a tendency toward immorality on the stage and its encouragement of falseness and dissimulation. He cited in particular the tract written by another future president of the College of New Jersey, John Witherspoon, as part of a controversy that was covered extensively in William Smith's *American Magazine*.<sup>24</sup>

Yet Agnew's contention overlooks an important change in emphasis: it was not the very existence of plays, but the tendencies most plays promoted, to which eighteenth-century Presbyterians objected. Under proper circumstances, the performance of plays could inspire piety, virtue, and learning,

as the plays put on at the College of New Jersey were intended to do. It was rather the institution of the theater, and its organization along commercial principles, that posed the problem. For such theaters to survive and attract a wide audience, they had to appeal to the lowest common denominator of popular sentiment. In short, they gratified the passions rather than promoting the principles of piety and virtue, the very opposite of the virtuous disposition they ought to instill. Commercial theater thus worked exactly opposite to the evangelical moral preaching undertaken by Aaron Burr and Samuel Davies, which insisted upon the avoidance of temptation as the first step towards repentance and true virtue.<sup>25</sup>

That Protestant moral aesthetic contributed to the growing popularity of novels among a Protestant readership. That was especially true of Richardson's novels, in which the heroines upheld the principles of virtue, always motivated by piety of a decidedly nondenominational sort that was deeply inscribed within their characters. In his later novels, *Clarissa* and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, the heroines and heroes coupled their evangelical virtues with a strict but inner-felt adherence to Christian rules of honor, politeness, and taste.<sup>26</sup>

A good illustration of the reading interests of mid-Atlantic Presbyterians comes from the borrower's list of an early circulating library, founded in Hatboro, Pennsylvania, to the north and east of Philadelphia, in 1755. It was organized by some of Hatboro's leading citizens, including Charles Beatty, the Presbyterian minister. The Library contained its share of traditional books. Early lists included such classic "steady sellers" as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*. There were numerous other religious works as well, including such newer devotional works as Philip Doddridge, *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Elizabeth Rowe's *Friendship in Death*; in *Twenty Letters from the Dead to the Living*, and many works by Isaac Watts.<sup>27</sup> The library also owned books in several other categories as well, including literary journals, such as the *Spectator* and *Tatler*, and, especially, novels.

The most unique aspect of the records of the Hatboro Circulating Library are the loan records, which contains the borrowing lists of that library's early subscribers. Examining them demonstrates the importance of novels such as *Pamela*, which was among the most popular borrowings. Of the twenty subscribers entered on the list between 1755 and 1762, the first eight years of the library, nine borrowed *Pamela*, six of them during the first two years. For two of the subscribers it was their first book borrowed. Other novels were also popular, including *Tom Jones* (nine borrowers), John Hill's *History of Charlotte Seymour* (six), and Eliza Haywood's *History of Miss Best-Thoughtless* (eight). Eliza Haywood was the most popular author of all; her works, many addressed particularly to women, were borrowed by sixteen of the twenty members.<sup>28</sup>



## IV

The Hatboro lists suggest that literary culture of the Enlightenment affected the tastes not only of Presbyterian men but of women also, as the incorporation of secular knowledge became an important part of female evangelical experience. There is no better illustration of this than in the “journal” of Esther Burr, which began — at least the extant part of it — as follows:

This Morn the Woman that helpt me Commencement time  
left me (who is a very valuable person and a person of  
reading, and very good company, as well as good sense  
and piety and has some very just thoughts about friendship). . . .<sup>29</sup>

Such a description sits a bit oddly on the first page of a journal kept by the daughter of Jonathan Edwards and the wife of Aaron Burr. Not all of it, to be sure; her reference to “good sense and piety” — especially the latter — is about what one would expect from a woman so closely connected to those leading evangelical ministers. Nor are other attributes Esther Burr recorded — reading, good company, and friendship — surprising in and of themselves. It is rather the way in which they are mentioned that is worthy of notice: all together, without any obvious order, as though they were rough equivalents — reading, company, piety and friendship. Piety appears nearer to the end of the list than to the beginning, buried among a group of other, seemingly more worldly virtues. That contrasts sharply with her father’s philosophical treatise on *The Nature of True Virtue*, a principal purpose of which was to establish a radical distinction between a “true virtue” almost synonymous with piety, characterized by a love of being itself and attainable only through divine grace, and its imperfect, partial, and worldly counterfeits — especially the “moral sense” proclaimed by the Presbyterian philosopher Frances Hutcheson and the rest of the “British Moralists.” In her devotion to books and learning and her efforts to cultivate conscience through sociability and study, it would seem that Esther Edwards Burr was applying the very methods for refining the moral sense and developing a practical evangelical ethics — education, reflection, and conversation — that the elder Edwards worked so determinedly to dismiss.

What we have called the “journal” of Esther Burr was not really a journal at all, but a journal-like correspondence carried out between Esther Burr and her intimate friend Sarah Prince. Like Burr, Prince had a Congregationalist background, but came from a family whose positions were intended to transcend narrow denominational barriers. The work these two women produced was a self-conscious and deliberate construction. If many of the goals of the journal tied it to a traditional genre of female writing, the pious memoir, its form derived from a very different one: the epistolary novel. In the course of writing their journals the two friends corresponded about Samuel

Richardson's then extraordinarily popular novel *Pamela*, which Esther Burr was reading at her friend's suggestion. But the particular model for their journals was not so much *Pamela* as Richardson's later novel, *Clarissa*, which the two friends had read earlier, and which both pronounced a superior work. That book, unlike its predecessor, involved the exchange of journals between female correspondents who were intimate friends rather than relations, as in *Pamela*, and who corresponded not only for companionship but with an eye toward personal improvement. Esther Burr employed the pen name "Burissa" in the portion of the journal that discussed Richardson's works, a name that Sarah Prince had applied to her earlier.<sup>30</sup>

The use of *Clarissa* as a model for the Burr-Prince correspondence suggests some of the importance that books played in the composition of the journal. That is evident as well in the first extant entry, quoted above, where, immediately after lamenting the loss of the woman "of reading" from her household, Esther Burr mentioned that she herself was reading Isaac Watts' "Miscellaneous Thoughts"<sup>31</sup> to amuse herself during her husband's absence. Books would be a regular subject of the correspondence thereafter. Early on in the correspondence, Esther requested that her friend quote everything worthwhile that she found in her reading, "for you know I hant much time for reading now I have a young child" (p. 50).

Evidently Esther Burr found more time for reading than her frequent complaints would suggest. Thus in March, 1755, shortly after she had told Sarah Prince that motherhood left her little time for reading, she informed her friend that she had borrowed *Pamela* at Sarah's suggestion and had begun reading it. By the next day she was well into it and had read enough to comprehend the gist of the story. Amid her other activities she kept reading, and quickly finished Part One, which is to say, the whole of the work that modern readers know as *Pamela*. But she continued with the longer Part Two. She was sufficiently busy as to abandon her journal for nearly a week while the Presbytery met in her vicinity, but she continued to read. In a month she had completed the whole of *Pamela*, six volumes as it was originally published, four long and rather tedious volumes in a modern edition.<sup>32</sup>

The works mentioned in the journal were a varied group. Some represented the kind of reading in which one would expect a pious woman to be engaged. Several were sermons, some by ministers with whom the women were closely connected, such as Aaron Burr and Thomas Prince, Sarah's father. The writings of Watts, Rowe, Hervey, and Housman represented popular devotional works. Others were less traditional. The poet Mary Jones was hardly noted for her religiosity. *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were novels, a genre about which orthodox Calvinists continued to speak with suspicion. Yet Burr devoted more space in her journals to discussing the works of Jones and Richardson than any other writers.

The two women's reading habits certainly represented a broader range than would have been usual among pious women a half-century earlier, when they mostly read devotional work that David Hall has referred to as "steady sellers."<sup>33</sup> That extension of taste did not always come easily for Esther Burr. When she began reading Mary Jones' *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, she admired her "fine strokes on friendship" but described her as having "no turn for religion" (p. 62). In fact, she believed the author to be a Deist. Soon thereafter, she encountered a negative allusion to George Whitefield and the Methodists in the volume, which made her want to give up the volume entirely. Yet to do so would have been to abandon the goal of their journals to cultivate learning useful to the improvement of religion and morals; as Esther Burr put it, her friend would call that "prejudice" (p. 64). In the end, Esther Burr would come to regard Mary Jones' work, despite its lack of religion, as containing sentiments highly beneficial to a life of piety and virtue.

Most of the books that appeared in the journal were quite recent. The oldest — by Rowe, Watts, and Young — although classics of devotional writing, were still no more than a few decades old. The works by Hervey, Housman, Prentice, Prince, Imrie, Byles, and Mary Jones that they mentioned were brand new.<sup>34</sup> While both women had certainly read other books, including the traditional pious literature, most of what engaged Esther Burr and Sarah Prince as they wrote their journals were recent productions. Evidently, the two women believed that such works were most likely to profit them, a point that Esther Burr noted in her journal (p. 63). Sarah Prince was requested to keep her busy friend informed in part to help her keep up-to-date. In essence, the women were assimilating pious literature into an Enlightenment model of progressive knowledge.

As important as what books the women read was how they read them. Historians of the novel have theorized that one of its most important influences on the lives of readers was to turn readers into critics and commentators. This is abundantly evident in the journal. Sarah Prince had already told her friend that *Pamela* did not equal *Clarissa*, and Esther Burr quickly agreed. Her first entry about the book, just one day after beginning it, criticized as a "great defect in the performance" that the author would allow his heroine to forgive conduct as "devilish" as that which Mr. B. displayed. Certainly, she wrote, "this does not well agree with so much virtue and piety" (p. 98). The following day she accused the author (whom she mistook for Fielding) of having "degraded our sex most horridly. . . . I could never pardon him if he had not made it up in *Clarissia*" (p. 99). She began to pardon him as she reached the end of Part One, writing that she found there "some excelent observations on the duties of the Married state" and concluded, "I shant repent my pains I guss" (p. 102).

As important as Esther Burr's adoption of the role of critic was the intensely Protestant critical standard that she employed: she read books for their literal and moral meanings. She approved those portions of *Pamela* that provided lessons in piety and virtue; she objected where the lesson offered was less beneficial, as when she thought that Richardson was "setting up Riches and honnour as the great essentials of happyness in a married state" (p. 98). There was no sense of multiple interpretation in her reading; Esther asked Sarah to give her all of her thoughts about *Pamela*, for, as she wrote, "I know you have made very usefull remark that could be made" (p. 107). Throughout, Esther Burr was pleased with *Pamela's* display of virtue, and especially pleased with its abundant moral lessons. In the end, despite her evident distaste for much that happened in the work, she concluded that it really was "a very good thing for all my ill nature about it" (p. 108).

Because the benefits of novel reading were moral ones, Esther Burr made little distinction between the manner of reading a novel or any other kind of pious work. Thus the language that she used to describe the character of Pamela closely resembled that which she used for the English author Elizabeth Rowe. Rowe was "hardly mortal," according to Burr, and lived among "Angels and departed spirits" (p. 80). Pamela was "more than Woman — An *Angel imbodied*" (p.105). Nor did she make much distinction between the novels themselves and the characters within them; thus she expected that she would not like *Pamela* as much as *Clarissa* because Sarah Prince had told her that the former work "did not equal *her*" (p. 98, emphasis mine).

If novel-reading helped turn Esther Burr into a critic, it did not make her a solitary one. To her, reading was not a private affair, but an activity leading to contemplation and discussion with her intimate companions — her husband and her friend, who almost always read the same books. The purpose was to refine and improve the lessons they learned. For that reason, Esther asked Sarah to help her past her confusion about *Pamela* by offering her thoughts about its meaning, as well as thoughts on anything else she was reading. And yet, despite Esther's concession of her own "poor judgment" about the merits of the novel, and her polite deferral to her friend — Esther announced that she was willing to pronounce *Pamela* inferior to *Clarissa*, even before she read it, merely because Sarah had said so — Esther was determined to "have a judgment of my own" nonetheless (p. 98). Through such an exchange of thoughts, the women harmonized and refined the ideas they derived from their reading.

The process by which Burr and Prince adjusted their ideas was not unlike that described by Adam Smith in his 1759 work on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, among the most influential of the works of the British moralists, which discussed how sympathy led to the establishment of moral standards. In one section, Smith compared the refinement of sympathy to the process of

tuning an orchestra, in which the players sought to refine the pitch by attending to the pitches of those around them, and adjusting their tones according.<sup>35</sup>

The term Esther Burr employed for such discussions was “conversation.” As she used the term, conversation was not just any act of speaking among several persons; it was restricted to edifying discussion. Thus early in 1755, she lamented her situation in New Jersey, where she was surrounded by so many she referred to as “triflers and flirting misses” (p. 93). She had no one to converse with but her husband, “for Conversasion with any body elce I have about me, I dont call Conversasion. I dont know what to call it, but I believe *Chit-Chat* will do as well as any name, for indeed tis no easy matter to give a name to *Nothing*.” (p. 79) *True* conversation, by contrast, was discussion in the active pursuit of religion and improvement, such as Sarah Prince found in Boston, where she was surrounded by “charming friends . . . that one might unbosom their whole soul too.” Esther praised Sarah for doing good whatever she attended to, “whether in Conversation of writing” And religious conversation, Burr remarked, in a phrase that she probably had borrowed from the recent and very popular work by the English dissenter Philip Doddridge, was “one of the best helps to keep up releston in the soul” (p. 112).<sup>36</sup>

Through conversation and sociability, Esther Burr and her circle participated in the broader dissemination of Presbyterian education; indeed, the absence of female academies makes that participation all the more striking. Like the schools, some women also worked to integrate an evangelical sensibility with the ethos of Enlightenment in the pursuit of piety and virtue. Presbyterian academies expanded into what Howard Miller has called an “evangelical education empire” extending into the American backcountry.<sup>37</sup> Presbyterian men and women generally did as much as any group of early Americans to blend the seemingly divergent perspectives of evangelicalism, enlightenment, and civility into an expansive and unifying outlook standing near the center of the American religious spectrum, one befitting a thriving and maturing provincial culture.

## Notes

1. This essay constitutes something of a retrospective survey for me, as I first began working on the topic of mid-Atlantic Presbyterians in Richard Dunn's seminar more than twenty years ago. Portions of this essay will appear also in Ned Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680-1760* (New York, 1997), and in "Esther Edwards Burr and the Nature of True Virtue: Books and Conversation, Piety and Virtue in the Presbyterian Enlightenment," in preparation.
2. Edward Scott Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York, 1976). Leonard J. Trinterud, *Forming an American Tradition: A Reexamination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, 1749), remains standard on the history of that church; also see Howard Miller, *The Revolutionary College: American Presbyterian Higher Education 1707-1837* (New York, 1976).
3. William Smith, Jr., *The History of the Province of New-York From the First Discovery to the Year 1732*, ed. Michael Kammen, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1972; first published 1757), I: 205-7.
4. Elizabeth I. Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences in Colonial Presbyterianism," *Journal of American History*, 68 (1981-2), 813-32, does find Old Side Presbyterian tendencies towards the liberal and tolerant perspectives of Francis Hutcheson and the Irish "New Lights," few of whom directly disavowed their doctrinal heritage.
5. Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry, Considered in a Sermon* (Philadelphia, 1740).
6. Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York, 1971); Howard Miller, "Evangelical Religion and Colonial Princeton," in *Schooling and Society*, ed. Lawrence Stone (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 115-45.
7. Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Princeton, 1989), p. 18.
8. Tennent, *The Necessity of Studying to Be Quiet, and Doing Our Own Business* (Philadelphia, n.d. [1744]), p. 10.
9. Stoddart, *The Revival of Religion* (Glasgow, 1764), p. 10; see also Isaac Watts, *An Humble Attempt Towards the Revival of Religion Among Christians, and Particularly the Protestant Dissenters, in Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D.*, 6 vols. (London, 1810), vol. 3, pp. 3-103; Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (London, 1745).
10. *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr 1754-1757*, ed. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven, 1984), pp. 246, 248.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 249, and see the letters from Jonathan Edwards and Aaron Burr, published in *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel*, comp. John Gillies, 2 vols. (Kelso, 1845), 2: 522-5; and William Tennent's Letter, 27 February, 1757, in Archibald Alexander, *Biographical Sketches of the Founder, and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (Princeton, 1845), pp. 367-9. For other British groups and their redefinitions of revival, see Watts, *An Humble Attempt Towards the Revival of Practical Religion*; and Stoddart, *Revival of Religion*; and see Mark Valeri, "The New Divinity and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 46 (1989): 741-69, (hereafter WMQ). See also my "Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740-1775," in *Sociability and Society: The Social World of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. John Dwyer and Richard Sher, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 15 (1991): 194-209.
12. Journal of Esther Burr, p. 92.
13. Samuel Davies, "The Rule of Equity," in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, ed. Albert Barnes, 3 vols. (New York, 1842), vol. 2, pp. 62-75.
14. Blair, *The New Creature Delineated. In a Sermon, Delivered in Philadelphia, February 26, 1767* (Philadelphia, 1767), pp. 22-3, 29-30; Blair, *Essays on the Nature, Uses and Subjects of the Sacrament of the New Testament. II. On Regeneration, wherein the Principle of spiritual Life thereby implanted; is particularly considered.* . . (New York, 1771).
15. Blair, *New Creature Delineated*, pp. 29-30. On parallels between Reformed theology and the tenets of the moral sense philosophers, see Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral*

*Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, 1981).

16. Samuel Blair, *A Persuasive to Repentance* (Philadelphia, 1743), pp. 14-15.

17. Tennent, *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*; and *The Necessity of Keeping the Soul. A Sermon Preach'd at Philadelphia, December the 23d, 1744* (Philadelphia, 1745), p. 14.

18. Francis L. Broderick, "Pulpit, Physics and Politics," *WMQ*, 3d ser., 6 (1949), 42-68; Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth Century Harvard: A Discipline in Transition* (Chapel Hill, 1981).

19. John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey 1746-1854*, 2 vols. (New York, 1969; first published, 1877), I: 216-7.

20. Davies, *Miscellaneous Poems Chiefly on Divine Subjects* (Williamsburg, 1752), Preface.

21. *The Reverend Samuel Davies Abroad: The Diary of Journey to England and Scotland, 1753-55*, ed. George William Pilcher (Chicago, 1967), pp. 38-9.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 106. On the theater controversy within British Presbyterianism during the 1750s, see especially Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 74-92.

23. *Journal of Esther Burr*, p. 83.

24. Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (New York, 1986), pp. 191-2; Witherspoon, *A Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage. Being an Attempt to Show, that Contributing to the Support of a Public Theatre, is Inconsistent with the Character of a Christian* (Glasgow, 1757); and see *The American Magazine, or Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1757-8), *passim*.

25. Witherspoon, *Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage*.

26. Richardson mixed an emphasis upon character with a generalized version of the educational ideas of Locke, which Pamela discussed at great length in the second part of the novel. It may well have been through the reading of the second part of *Pamela* that many Presbyterian readers first encountered those ideas directly stated.

27. Chester T. Hallenback, "A Colonial Reading List: The Loan-Book of Hatboro

Library, 1762-1774," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 56 (1932): 289-340.

28. Hallenback, "Loan-Book of Hatboro Library."

29. *Journal of Esther Burr*, p. 45. All page numbers given in the text are to the published edition of the journal unless otherwise noted. I have discussed the form and content of the journal at much greater length in a related paper entitled "Esther Edwards Burr and the Nature of True Virtue: Books and Conversation, Piety and Virtue in the Presbyterian Enlightenment," unpublished paper delivered at the Columbia Seminar for Early American History, December, 1994.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 103. See also Aaron Burr to Sarah Prince, 8 February, 1753.

31. Undoubtedly Watts' *Reliquiae Juveniles: Miscellaneous Thoughts in Prose and Verse on Natural, Moral and Divine Subjects; Written Chiefly in Younger Years* (London, 1734), although Karlsen and Crumacker guess at *Sermons on Various Subjects, Divine and Moral* (London, 1721-3). The subtitle of the former work, prominently displayed on the title page, make the identification evident.

32. *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, 4 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1970). Esther's references to the story of the Countess make evident that it was the longer version she was reading. Her time for reading, as well as for writing, did diminish after the birth of her second child, Aaron, Jr..

33. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 48ff., discusses the "steady sellers" that dominated seventeenth century pious reading. For a similar broadening in religious publication in Presbyterian Scotland, see my "Presbyterians and Provincial Society."

34. *The Power and Pleasure of the Divine Life; Exemplify'd in the Late Mrs. Housman*, printed in London in 1744, had just been reprinted in Boston.

35. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), p. 22.

36. Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* . . .

37. Howard Miller, "Evangelical Religion and Colonial Princeton."