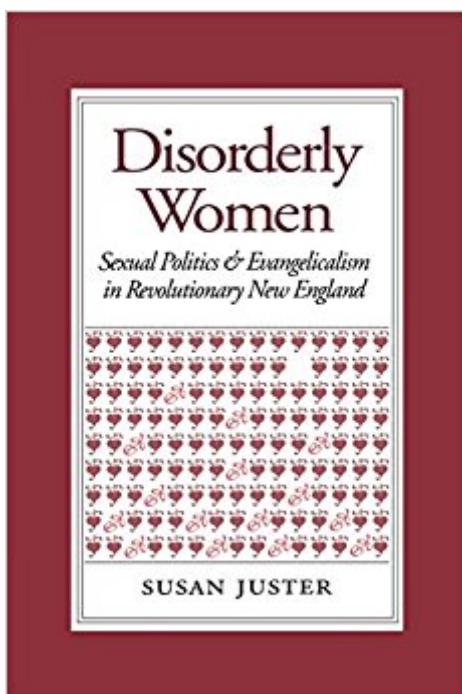


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# Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics And Evangelicalism In Revolutionary New England



## **Synopsis**

Throughout most of the eighteenth century and particularly during the religious revivals of the Great Awakening, evangelical women in colonial New England participated vigorously in major church decisions, from electing pastors to disciplining backsliding members. After the Revolutionary War, however, women were excluded from political life, not only in their churches but in the new republic as well. Reconstructing the history of this change, Susan Juster shows how a common view of masculinity and femininity shaped both radical religion and revolutionary politics in America. Juster compares contemporary accounts of Baptist women and men who voice their conversion experiences, theological opinions, and preoccupation with personal conflicts and pastoral controversies. At times, the ardent revivalist message of spiritual individualism appeared to sanction sexual anarchy. According to one contemporary, the revival attempted "to make all things common, wives as well as goods." The place of women at the center of evangelical life in the mid-eighteenth century, Juster finds, reflected the extent to which evangelical religion itself was perceived as "feminine" - emotional, sensual, and ultimately marginal.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Juster (history, Univ. of Michigan) examines the changing role of Baptist women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England. At first essentially equal to men in church governance and in the right to speak in church, women were gradually excluded from power in Baptist churches after the Revolution. As the Baptist church adopted a more patriarchal model of church organization, women

were not only marginalized and silenced but associated because of gender with several serious sins, including sexual misconduct, lying, and slander. For an earlier, more general discussion of Baptists in New England, see William G. McLoughlin's *New England Dissent 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (1971) and *Soul Liberty: The Baptists' Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Univ. Pr. of New England, 1991). Appropriate for academic libraries and collections in women's studies and history of religion. Patricia A. Beaber, Trenton State Coll. Lib., N.J. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Juster examines the changing role of Baptist women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England. At first essentially equal to men in church governance and in the right to speak in church, women were gradually excluded from power in Baptist churches after the Revolution. As the Baptist church adopted a more patriarchal model of church organization, women were not only marginalized and silenced but associated because of gender with several serious sins, including sexual misconduct, lying, and slander." *Library Journal* "Susan Juster's valuable book traces the emergence and collapse of gender equality among New England Baptists from the mid-eighteenth century Great Awakening into the Age of Revolution. It also recounts evangelical women's brave but ill-fated attempts to preserve hard-won freedoms as the Brethren moved to portray them . . . as untrustworthy, irrational sinners to be feared and controlled by men. . . . A dazzling analysis of the operations of gender within evangelical religious experiences." *Women's Review of Books* "Cogently argued and wonderfully written, *Disorderly Women* is an insightful and inspiring work on gender and religion in Revolutionary New England." *William and Mary Quarterly* "A groundbreaking book that should appeal to both popular and scholarly audiences. Because Juster is such a clear and forceful writer, her book is a pleasure to read." *Christian Century* "One of the most significant books about the early republic to appear in recent years. Juster challenges us to understand the American Revolution not only as a crisis between England and the colonies, King and people, and among men of different political persuasions, but also between men and women. Evangelical women who had once been understood as speaking truth to power were redefined as unstable, irresponsible, and disorderly." *Linda K. Kerber, author of *Women of the Republic**

This award winning women's history integrates religious history with women's history, two subjects that belong together. In her book Juster introduces the reader to the story of women's religious leadership in the 18th century separate Baptist church, an evangelical church produced by the

movement of the great awakening. Like much colonial and early American history, this is the story of how women led much of the early movement, as those who provided wonderful insight and leadership during the spiritual awakening, followed by the almost sudden exclusion of women as the movement moved towards acceptability in the larger culture of American religious life. This is well worth the time to read and digest, illuminating for the reader much of the story of women in the early republic.

Through a series of well-researched arguments, Susan Juster, Professor of History at the University of Michigan, seeks to show in this monograph that the participation of evangelical churches in the revolutionary cause during the late 18th century had a profound impact upon the place that women were offered within those churches. During the pre-revolutionary era, Baptist and other evangelical churches became increasingly prominent parts of the New England religious landscape. The relative parity that women enjoyed with men in these congregations was a function of the liminality inherent in the intense religious experience that members of such congregations shared. The American revolution, along with a desire for increased respectability among Baptists, soon moved Baptist churches towards the mainstream of New England religious life. Juster argues that the rhetoric of the American revolution, with its identification of submission to authority as female, caused evangelical churches to reconsider sin as a gendered concept. Effects of this reconsideration can be found, for instance, in evangelical conversion narratives, which for the first time after the revolution can be identified with the gender of the writer through the language used for deity and sin, indicating that men and women after the revolution had begun to think of their relationship to God and themselves in very different ways. Juster comes to her conclusions through the application of feminist theories borrowed from other scholars to the material that she has gathered on the revolutionary-era evangelical churches of New England. Her conclusions about the shifting use of gender language and the sinking status of women within these churches during and after the revolution are convincing, although her use of theory is occasionally somewhat essentialistic. Juster sometimes lifts theoretical concepts from studies of other historical situations and places them over her own subject without offering an explanation as to how the given theory or idea remains applicable. At no point, however, does Juster's use of theory squeeze her subjects into a mold so tight that her conclusions are entirely the results of her method and not the content of her sources. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Juster's work is the breadth of her research. To gather enough discipline records and conversion narratives to come to a representative conclusion, the author canvassed denominational historical societies, government archives and university

library special collections. As a result, Juster's work is unlikely to be criticized for drawing a conclusion which does not reflect the scope of research claimed in title of her text. This work serves two purposes: It paints an excellent portrait of colonial evangelicalism in New England, and then shows with a good deal of persuasiveness how these churches were eventually altered by the revolutionary climate and the churches' subsequent need for respectability. Any reader with an interest in early American history, women's history, or the history of evangelicalism can read this book with profit.

Susan Juster's *Disorderly Women* is well written, but her arguments concerning the "feminine" nature of early Evangelicalism and its transition to a more masculine form in the late 18th century are extremely poor. She relies mostly on her own heavily biased opinions, when in many cases, the primary source evidence she provides clearly contradicts her. On the whole, this book does a great disservice to anyone who would ever attempt to reasonably argue any of what is covered within this book, as Juster so completely fails in arguing her thesis that one is inclined to believe that just the opposite is probably true.

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