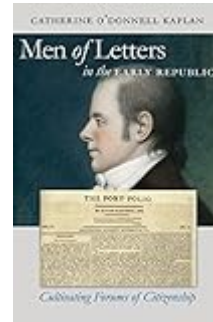


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Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan. *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. viii + 239 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3164-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5853-0.



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Communities of Sensibility, Cultures of Letters

Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan opens the imaginatively conceived and beautifully written *Men of Letters in the Early Republic* with a provocative question: "Does America need men of letters?" Some in postrevolutionary America thought not. From their perspective, political challenges elided other civic responsibilities. Political rhetoric was the lingua franca of the moment. And, most important, an American's identity as citizen trumped all other self-designations. Those who counted themselves among the nation's first generation of intellectuals disagreed. Kaplan focuses on three clusters of men—the Friendly Club in New York City, which gathered around Elihu Hubbard Smith, whose collaborators included William Dunlap and Charles Brockden Brown; the circle revolving around Joseph Dennie, editor of two periodicals; and the Anthologists of the Boston Athenaeum. For these individuals, politics alone was not sufficient to fulfill America's promise. Instead, they promoted a citizenship that was distinguished by commitments to cultural refinement and moral virtue.

As Kaplan shows, the circles and networks these in-

dividuals constituted were anchored in British America's institutions of civil society. In colonial cities and towns from Charleston to Boston, elite men and women, who gathered in literary clubs, salons, tea tables, and taverns, had crafted a polite culture of conversation and manuscript exchange. Increasingly in the decades before the American Revolution, they had begun to publish some of the poetry and prose they had circulated in their gatherings. In practicing the ideal of reciprocal exchange, these belletrists had partaken in a transatlantic culture of sociability, which was grounded in shared affections, genteel manners, and social pleasures. The sociability they had practiced had been designed to mark members of this elite as privileged relative to their counterparts in the lower ranks.

Transformations in material and ideological context led their postrevolutionary successors to revise certain premises and practices. Perhaps most notably, they tempered displays of aristocratic elegance by invoking the need for republican simplicity. But, as they elaborated their definition of citizenship, what they kept was the

more crucial. They anticipated that the elitism and attendant deference to which they subscribed would continue to distinguish social relations. They promoted the critically engaged belletrism that had characterized pre-revolutionary institutions of sociability. They insisted that dissent should be an integral part of a healthy society. And, at the moment when white men of property were being designated as the nation's political actors, these men of letters embedded their identities in cultural aspirations and commitments to the collection and circulation of information on all possible subjects. The newly independent United States that Thomas Jefferson had hailed as "the world's best hope" was supposed to be a place where individuals (such as themselves), communities of sensibility, and cultures of letters flourished.

However, as Kaplan tells us, the fact that these men refused to pursue more conventional careers in politics and commerce threatened their claim to the culturally sanctioned manhood of the postrevolutionary decades. That threat was exacerbated by the important role that women played in their communities of sensibility and cultures of letters. In privileging the need to protect and enhance an image of manliness, these men trafficked in contradictions and stereotypes. Smith relied on women and the heterosocial networks they enlivened for counsel on ideas but denied female friends participation in the Friendly Club. Dennie did the same—taking pleasure in the wit of female friends all the while projecting a male clubbishness in the pages of the *Portfolio* that associated femininity with fickleness and frivolity. The Anthologists proudly published Mary Moody Emerson but banned her from membership in the Boston Athenaeum. In a description of Brown's *Alcuin* that might well be applied to the behavior of these men of letters, Kaplan notes insightfully that "downplaying women's role emerged from a need to assert the manliness of cultural activities rather than from denigration of women's intellectual capacities: women's successful participation was what made their containment necessary" (p. 83).

A gentleman of cosmopolitan learning and taste, Smith embodied the identity that this generation claimed for itself. A participant in the Friendly Club, an author of poetry and prose (fiction and nonfiction), an editor of an anthology of poetry, and a founder of a scientific periodical, Smith was passionately committed to the improvement of the fledgling nation through the acquisition and circulation of information. The approach taken to the abolition of slavery by Smith and his collaborators Dunlap and James Kent in New York's Manumission Society illustrates their commitment to ideals of human per-

fectibility, which they combined with the practical labor of achieving change. However, as Kaplan points out, the emphasis on education as the spur to perfectibility also fostered the idea that ignorance was as pernicious as enslavement itself. And, as she notes, Smith's recommendation that members of the Manumission Society disseminate knowledge about the evils of slavery to the enslaved as well as the free highlights a striking obliviousness—slaves certainly did not need to be reminded about the suffering they endured.

Print and the market connected Smith's Tuesday Club and his heterosocial networks to a transatlantic culture of letters. They were able to read English, French, and German authors whose books were either imported from abroad or reprinted in the United States. Equally important, Smith and his colleagues expanded the reach of their communities of sensibility when they wrote for American periodicals and newspapers and published books. In these projects, they found ready support from their clubs and networks. Brown offers an illuminating example. In charting the publication of Brown's *Alcuin*, Kaplan brings to the fore the crucial role played by Smith, who rallied the author, gathered subscriptions from members of the club and networks, and shepherded the volume into print.

Dennie took a slightly different path, using his considerable talents as editor of Walpole, New Hampshire's *Farmer's Weekly Museum* to create a periodical through which readers and contributors were able to engage in civic life outside formal politics. Ironically, the editorial stance he took contributed to the partisanship he supposedly disdained. Subscribers to the *Museum* were entertained with lively essays, satires, poems, and letters from contributors. Despite denials of partisanship, they were also rallied to Federalism. Nothing was sacred. In page after page of the *Museum*, Dennie lampooned Americans' obsession with commercial success and political power. There was the one exception that marked the editor as a staunch Federalist. "Trust me," he told readers, "he who jeers received truths, or who tells you that there is no distinction among men, and that all are equally qualified to govern, is an imposter more pernicious than Mahomet, and his Favor is deceitful" (p. 121). In one of her many contributions to our understanding of the professionalization of letters in the early republic, Kaplan argues not only that Dennie was one of the nation's first writers to reach the threshold of self-support, but also that the key to his success was the willingness of others to remain amateurs, asking for nothing except the opportunity to appear in print. (When Smith wrote asking

Dennie to pay Brown for a contribution to the *Museum*, he did not bother to send a reply.)

Editing the *Museum* served as an apprenticeship. Dennie left Walpole for Philadelphia and the *Portfolio*, the highly successful periodical he founded in 1800 and edited for the next seven years. With subscribers stretching from New England to the South, Dennie created a deeply oppositional community that lamented the loss of a society grounded in affective ties and social hierarchy. And, as Smith had done in New York City, he brought together an informal circle of young professionals and their wives. Calling themselves the Tuesday Club, they gathered for conversations at dinner tables and contributed to the *Portfolio*. Under Dennie's leadership, the positions taken by this cluster of individuals were the most radical. The deep loathing for Jefferson and his politics are captured in Josiah Quincy's comment that the president's prose bore a close resemblance to Quincy's maid, Betty. That was not surprising, he declared, "for Betty is a long-sided, raw-boned. Red-haired slut, and like Mr. Jefferson, always *hankering to have a mob of dirty fellows around her*" (p. 160). Between 1806 and his death six years later, Dennie recalibrated his editorial persona and his readership. In years of Jeffersonian dominance and less fierce partisanship, he presented himself as a man of letters who left political engagement to others and invited readers from both political parties to partake in genteel literary fare.

In claiming a civic role for themselves, Bostonians Arthur Maynard Walter, William Smith Shaw, and Joseph Stevens Buckminster dedicated their energies to the creation of cultural institutions. They constituted themselves as the Anthology Society, which rescued the orphaned *Monthly Anthology* and established the storied Athenaeum, a private reading room filled with periodicals and books donated by supporters. Most of the men who participated were Harvard-educated professionals, and many were connected to influential Massachusetts families. John Quincy Adams was representative (except for an exceptional generosity): shortly after the founding of the Athenaeum, he donated a collection of nearly six thousand books. Like Smith and Dennie, the Anthologists celebrated the pleasures of friendship. Like Smith, they linked ideals to action in their commitment to organized benevolence. In contrast to the counterparts, they did not develop informal networks beyond the environs of Boston and Cambridge. Instead, they looked to the city's commercial elite for support for their projects. The bargain they struck served both parties—in offering membership in the Athenaeum to the city's Federalist mer-

chants, the anthologists got the financial support they could not muster themselves; in offering the monies, the patrons could wear the cultural badge of approval. Not surprisingly, the criticism of commerce was muted in the pages of the *Monthly Anthology*, which was focused instead on refinement and enlightenment.

In her conclusion, Kaplan notes that Smith, Dennie, the Anthologists, and their projects eventually faded into obscurity. But, she tells us, the question she asked at the outset is still pertinent. "What place and what use," she asks in the final sentence, "is there in America for the life of the mind, and for those who would live it" (p. 234)? Instead of an abstract question that speaks as much to the present as the past, Kaplan might have probed further the specific historical context and asked how the posture and positions taken by this generation of intellectuals might have resonated in America's postrevolutionary decades. Was their limited success related to the unabashed elitism they did little to conceal? Was it the conviction, as expressed in Smith's "Institutions of the Republic of Utopia," that debate, compromise, and competing interests ought to be replaced by open inquiry, mutual discovery of truth, and harmonious oneness of purpose? Skeptics might have asked the idealistic Smith if there could be a single truth and a single unity of purpose in a nation as diverse as the United States. And they might have questioned if there could be a resolution of the nation's multiple inequalities simply through amassing and disseminating knowledge.

Kaplan's *Men of Letters* contributes to an increasingly rich scholarship on civil society inaugurated by Michael Warner's *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, which appeared eighteen years ago. David Shields's dazzling *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (1997) enlarged the terrain of sociability, introducing us to the salons and tea tables at which women presided. Other scholars' work keeping company with Kaplan include Catharine Allgor's *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (2000), Susan Branson's *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (2001), and, most recently, Bryan Waterman's *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (2007). Kaplan's contribution is important in its own right. Perhaps most notably, she illuminates the connections between scribal and print cultures, emerging professionalism and a persistent amateurism, and women's claims to intellectual equality and still powerful discrimination, which they faced.

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