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## Judith Sargent Murray: The "So-Called" Feminist

### Abstract

This article discusses the writings of Judith Murray, and critiques the notion that she was an early feminist and supporter of women's right to move outside of the domestic sphere.

## Judith Sargent Murray: The "So-Called" Feminist

Sara Scobell

She heard the roaring guns and rebel cries of the American Revolution, read the blazing words of John Locke and his fellow Enlightenment philosophes, and felt the surging tides of change beating against and eroding the shores of convention. Indeed, Judith Sargent Murray lived in an era and in a country that confronted all of her senses with radically new ways of life and thought. Like so many other literate, upper-class women who lived in the late eighteenth-century United States, Murray recorded her reactions to the atmosphere of radical sentiment in various essays, poems, letters, and plays. For notably influential historians like Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton, these works by Murray, particularly her boldly titled essay "On the Equality of the Sexes," represent the first strains of feminist thought in America.<sup>1</sup> Though Murray did produce some of her nation's earliest writings on the topics of female education, abilities, and rights, her prose (especially when compared to treatises written by her male contemporaries upon the same subject) reflects a more traditional view of women's role. Where modern scholars of women's history paint a portrait of Judith Sargent Murray, the feminist, popular literature by late eighteenth-century male authors, and indeed many of Murray's own words, support a much different depiction of Murray—that of a woman who dedicated herself to the advocacy of a traditional female domestic sphere.

For the past two decades, scholars in the field of women's history have devoted significant attention to the study of the American Revolution and its effects upon women in the United States. Judith Sargent Murray, as a widely read author and playwright of this time, reflected in her compositions many of the ideological trends recognized by historians researching this period. These same historians frequently refer to Murray's writings in their works, but only one book (Sheila Skemp's *Judith Sargent Murray, A Brief Biography*) focuses wholly on Murray and her contributions to post-Revolutionary America's changing conceptions of women.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the books and articles recently published about women, ideology, and the American Revolution provide a necessary contextual analysis of the time in which Murray lived and the trends that she absorbed and reflected.

The two most prominent historians of women in the Revolutionary era, Kerber and Norton, inaugurated the trend of studying women in late eighteenth-century America with the simultaneous publication of their seminal works, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* and *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (respectively) in 1980. In their books, both Kerber and Norton rely

extensively upon Judith Sargent Murray's published essays, short stories, and plays. More important than these authors' brief forays into Murray's writings, though, are their historical interpretations of the wider changes in women's lives and thought during the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods.

Beginning with the observation that Enlightenment ideas traveled to and deeply affected America before the Revolution broke out, Kerber relates the life-altering political, social, and technological changes wrought by the Great War and the Enlightenment thought preceding it. In the midst of America's violent transition from a "restrained, deferential democracy" to an "aggressive, egalitarian, modern participatory democracy," Kerber argues that women became strongly politicized. Politicization, while a radical effect for many women, did not automatically offer them an outlet in a public realm where traditional paternalistic views held sway. Looking, then, for a way in which they could influence the republic and demonstrate their new political natures, women eventually found a socially acceptable way of exercising their newfound "civic virtue" as "republican mothers." Kerber, who coined this now familiar phrase, contended that women turned to their roles as educators of America's future virtuous citizens in order to exert their power over the public world from the safety of the domestic sphere. Judith Sargent Murray's arguments for educating women so that they could later teach their children republican virtue definitely fits into the mold of Kerber's "republican mother."<sup>3</sup>

Mary Beth Norton, in the same vein as Kerber, touches upon Murray's contributions to the rhetoric of female education. Norton emphasizes the radical nature of Murray's words along with the "revolutionary experience" of most women during this period. According to Norton, the experience of Revolution (which included American women's first real public activism through economic boycotts and formalized patriotic groups) awoke women's political awareness. In all of her descriptions of women's exploits during and after the Revolutionary War, Norton tends to accentuate the female population's newfound independence, activism, and radicalization. Where Kerber takes a more reserved view of women's activities in the democratizing wake of the Revolutionary War, Norton makes grand generalizations about the conflict's alteration of women's ideology and lives. Norton, though differing from Kerber upon many topics, finds herself ultimately agreeing with Kerber's position that post-Revolutionary American women found their niche in America's new political culture by imbuing their maternal and matrimonial roles with the power to influence the American republic.<sup>4</sup>

Jane Rendall, author of *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860*, obviously draws heavily from Kerber and the theory of Republican motherhood. However, in her discussion of early American feminism, she distinguishes herself by placing

the changes in Judith Sargent Murray's ideology and that of many other American women within the larger context of a changing world. Rendall makes the important distinction that not only America, but also France, England, and other European countries saw "radical changes" in the relationship between the sexes; a phenomenon attributable to the far-reaching (and Enlightenment originated) theory of natural rights.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, Kerber, Norton, and many other scholars of women's history offer a glimpse into the world of women before the Revolution—arguably the time when the notion of the "domestic sphere" developed into a monolithic figure in women's lives. In the study of Judith Sargent Murray and Republican Motherhood (in fact in the study of any topic within women's history), it is imperative to understand what theorists of the time spoke of when they referred to "the sphere of domesticity." Kerber describes this sphere as "a feminine, domestic circle . . . . We may think of women as forming a tradition-bound, underdeveloped nation within a larger, more politically sophisticated one."<sup>6</sup> Kerber depicts women and their realm as an entity that moved to the rhythms of child bearing, child rearing, and tending to hearth and home. Norton also portrays the life of women within their own "small circle of domestic concerns," where they directed their "household's day-to-day activities" in a domestic and private role.<sup>7</sup> A set of virtues and values, believed inherent to women and their domesticity, accompanied the physical roles and duties of the domestic sphere. A male writer from the eighteenth century, Thomas Gisborne, specifies several of these virtues in his 1798 work *An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*. He writes that to find the most noble affections "of modesty, of delicacy, of . . . sensibility, of prompt and active benevolence, of warmth and tenderness of attachment," one must merely turn to woman in her rightful place, the home.<sup>8</sup> These notions of women, their place, and their appropriate influence impacted women before, during, and even after the stunning impact of the American Revolution.

As an author, Judith Sargent Murray drafted works that soundly endorsed these customary female duties of tending to children, husband, and hearth, but she also diverged greatly from the traditional model of womanhood. Admittedly, Murray did not fit the mold of an average mother, wife, and housekeeper. Needless to say the majority of women in the late-eighteenth century United States (at least those in the middle and upper classes) never worked outside of the home, and therefore rarely conveyed their opinions to an audience larger than that of their husbands and children.<sup>9</sup> Murray, through her published essays, stories, and plays, broadcast her beliefs to the entire American reading public, and in so doing she broke many bonds of female convention. Well aware that her profession distinguished her from other women, Judith often felt the need to apologize for what she called rising to "heights I ought not to ascend . . . ." <sup>10</sup> She admits to her readers, "the public Eye is very incompatible

with the native Modesty in which our sex are inshrined," and the fact that critics could chide her for so rejecting that "native Modesty" troubled her.<sup>11</sup> Even so, Murray continued to record her thoughts about politically charged topics like the Revolutionary War, the French Revolution (which she thoroughly opposed), and the proper distribution of power within the branches of the federal government.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, Murray found justification for her public voice on typically "male topics" by "linking her public concerns with her private role."<sup>13</sup> She couched her comments about the American and French Revolutions, for instance, in terms of her concern for maintaining familial stability; and she claimed that women best exhibited their patriotism in allowing their husbands and sons to go off to war.<sup>14</sup> These examples, while showing Murray's tendency to rely upon tradition in her writing, do not detract from the fact that Murray represented a new type of woman active in the public arena of ideas.

From where, one might ask, did Murray receive the incentive to step outside of her fated bounds and perform on the public stage? The answer lies in the atmosphere created by the American Revolution. Murray and other women writers of her generation took advantage of Revolutionary conditions that promoted the questioning of certain long-standing traditions. The Revolution, besides challenging the patriarchal authoritarianism of the British monarchy, also led the citizens of the rebellion to challenge aspects of authoritarian custom in areas of life other than government. As stated eloquently by Sheila Skemp, "[f]or those who lived through this period of change and instability. . .the familiar verities around which they had once arranged their lives no longer had the power to claim their automatic allegiance."<sup>15</sup> One of those "familiar verities" that people of the eighteenth century expected was women's non-involvement in the realm of public discourse. But, like so many other articles of orthodoxy, this practice met with the quizzical minds of eager American citizens. Whereas before the mid-1760s, "most men and women accepted without question the standard dictum that political discussion, like direct political participation, fell outside the feminine sphere," "the years after the Revolution saw the publishing of more and more items by women that concerned the new government, the new society, and women's roles within them."<sup>16</sup>

While the unique national environment created by the American Revolution played a vital part in the birth of Judith Sargent Murray's career as a writer, the circumstances surrounding her upbringing in Gloucester, Massachusetts, more centrally shaped her opinions and outlook upon life. Born in 1751 to a wealthy New England mercantile family, Murray lived a privileged life in comparison to the majority of Americans. Her upper-class background gave her every necessary material comfort and also provided her with a class-based, hierarchical view of life. As a Sargent, Judith believed in her own superiority—a fact that

later prevented her from attacking the despotism of wealth so important to Mary Wollstonecraft, a British writer and feminist contemporary of Murray.<sup>17</sup> Certainly a woman enmeshed in the etiquette of the upper class, Murray greatly stressed certain aspects of tradition—which eventually led her to defend the traditional woman's sphere.<sup>18</sup>

Besides her situation on the social ladder, Murray's physical location at the crossroads of American commerce in Massachusetts lent much weight to the formation of her particular belief system. Living in a port city like Gloucester exposed a young Judith to the wonders of newly established American printing presses that turned out volume upon volume of national literature.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, from her position Judith encountered the lively streams of Enlightenment thought flowing from Europe. The popularity of the works of Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke, during the era of the Revolution cannot be emphasized enough. Elite Americans evinced a deep interest in the philosophes and their analysis of "[t]he great questions of political liberty and civic freedom, [and] of the relationship between law and liberty."<sup>20</sup> These analyses introduced to America the vital tenets of a new democratic theory based upon the rights of man that would become the rallying cry of patriots everywhere during the American Revolution. Linda Kerber notes, though, that while the philosophes provided Americans with a basis to understand their relations to government, they confined this basis to the male realm.<sup>21</sup> Women remained marginalized, even largely ignored, by the same writers that so passionately called for the overthrow of despotic government and its replacement with a virtuous society of free citizens. Even so, Judith Sargent Murray's early and extensive encounters with the writings of philosophers like Locke, René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire undoubtedly struck a chord with her, as evidenced in her citations of their ideas in her many essays.<sup>22</sup>

The Enlightenment philosophers were not Murray's only source of knowledge concerning the rights of man; her adherence to the doctrines of Universalism also provided her with the foundations of her personal belief system. Though Murray did not become a Universalist until the age of twenty-five, she rooted herself deeply in a faith that claimed all people who believed in Jesus Christ achieved heavenly salvation. This major tenet of Universalism reflects the faith's general tendency to question the validity of "received orthodoxy."<sup>23</sup> Universalism, in promoting "human liberty and empowerment," therefore provided ideological legitimacy for the American patriots' denunciations of the British. For tampering with Protestant New England's cherished doctrine of predestination, however, many people quickly condemned the religion as heretical.<sup>24</sup> Judith herself endured hurtful criticism for her religious beliefs, but from such experiences she learned how to deal with intense public disapproval. Indeed, Murray's encounters with criticism of her religion only

strengthened her determination to speak out on other topics—including the issue of women and their role in society. Murray combined these two areas of interest in her 1782 *Universalist Catechism*, a small booklet outlining the “rudiments of the Universalist faith.”<sup>25</sup> Judith’s inspiration for drafting her *Catechism* emanated from her love of children and her desire to teach them how to properly follow the principles of her faith. In writing this piece, her earliest and likely least known work, Murray notes that she threatens to step “without the Line in which Custom hath circumscribed her;” and though she apologizes for doing so, she nonetheless continues on to record her reflections upon the *Universalist faith*.<sup>26</sup> In a move indicating her complete immersion in the faith, six years after the publication of her *Catechism* and one year after the death of her first husband, John Stevens, Judith Sargent married John Murray—the man who brought Universalism from England to the American colonies in 1770.<sup>27</sup>

This multifarious mixture of influences, including but not limited to the rebellious atmosphere of the American Revolution, her tradition-soaked, hierarchical upbringing in Massachusetts, and her conversion to the *Universalist faith*, naturally formed Judith Sargent Murray into a most complex author. This complexity manifested itself in the immense medley of topics and literary forms Murray employed. Her work ranged from essays about politics and religion to comic plays concerning the interactions of class in Revolutionary America.<sup>28</sup> More significantly, the diversity of influences that made up Murray’s background led her to hold contradictory views on the topic of women and their rights and roles in society. As mentioned earlier, Murray lived in an era dominated by the ideological impact of the American Revolution, a war that encouraged egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, and the “fresh” renegotiation of “relations between state and the citizens, and between men and women.”<sup>29</sup> Although no one can deny that the ideology of the Revolution influenced Murray and her literary compatriots, one must also note the continued influence of traditional views in the lives of Americans. Tradition maintained a most vigorous hold over the popular views of women in the Republic, even while citizens searched for “fresh” conceptualizations of the relationship between men and women. In many ways, people still relied upon old customs in creating “new” types of associations between the sexes—an understandable reaction when one considers the human inclination of relying upon traditional paradigms when confronting with new circumstances.

The most stalwart custom reigning over the realm of femininity, that of women’s inherent and automatic subordination to men, played a huge role in the “reconfiguration” of male and female relationships. Historian Rosemary Zaggarri suggests that the influence of both Revolutionary rhetoric and this long-standing belief in women’s inborn subjugation caused writers such as Murray to face a most troubling predicament, “wanting to reconcile a new



notion-women's rights-with a very old idea, women's subordination to men."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, this dilemma would prove to be the crux that prevented Judith Sargent Murray from taking a feminist (for the late eighteenth century) outlook on women's roles in America: she so devoted herself the maintenance of women's deference to men that she ultimately undermined much of the power in her pro-women's rights arguments. Murray's sabotage of her own work can best be illustrated in comparing her writings upon the status of women to the products of contemporary male theorists in the same field. Male theorists, like John Bennett, Thomas Gisborne, and William Kerrick, were writers, not unlike Murray, who contributed articles to popular magazines of the day (such as the *Massachusetts Magazine*, the *Columbian Magazine*, and the *Lady and Gentleman's Pocket Magazine of Literature and Polite Amusement*) concerning the status of women.<sup>31</sup> As men, they unquestionably believed in the subordination of women (not even the most enlightened males of the time would believe otherwise), but as members of the Revolutionary generation, they often agreed to allow women certain advancements in education and status that they had previously denied them.<sup>32</sup>

Judith Sargent Murray's strikingly titled essay "On the Equality of the Sexes" stands as her most well known and likely her most "feminist" composition; this because in it Murray passionately defends the inherent rationality of women. Written in 1779 and later included in Murray's three-volume collection of works called *The Gleaner* (1790), this piece receives considerable attention from Norton, Skemp, and many other historians who analyze Murray in their studies of American Revolution-era women. Norton calls "On the Equality of the Sexes," an educational blueprint for women to accomplish a "break with the past."<sup>33</sup> Skemp sees the essay as an attestation of Murray's "abiding concern with expanding economic, social, and even political opportunities for women."<sup>34</sup> In many ways, this particular writing deserves much of the praise bestowed upon it by historians and feminists alike. Murray opens the piece with a poem bemoaning the "imbecility" imposed upon the women by "the lordly sex," who "rob us [women] of the power t'improve, [a]nd then declare we only trifles of love. . . ."<sup>35</sup> Dripping with a resentment of men that deny women education by means of illogical arguments (such as the male contention that since women possess a weaker physical composition, they must also lack mental strength), Murray utilizes the powers of nature, reason, and experience to prove that women, once granted "an equality of acquirement," could equal men in the powers of rationality.<sup>36</sup> For Murray, the distinctions between male and female intellects are mere constructions of custom. By allowing women to study geography, natural philosophy, and the "flowery paths of science," though, one eliminates these unnatural distinctions—and in turn one destroys the customary inequality of the female mind to the male.<sup>37</sup> Invoking the language of war, she claims that

once women's souls, with the aid of a thorough education, come to equal those of men, women will rise and fight "the despot man," and "answer the exalted expectations which are formed."<sup>38</sup>

Not satisfied with her attack upon the male hegemony over women's education in "On the Equality of the Sexes," Murray appends a letter to the end of the essay that contains her startling re-interpretation of the biblical Adam and Eve story. In a very unusual statement for her time (but not for her controversial Universalist faith and brethren), the author announces her belief that Biblical stories are "merely metaphorical."<sup>39</sup> With this one fell stroke, Murray invalidates the "literal" Biblical evidence used by men to protest the education of women (a purpose for which scriptural stories were often, and even now are often, used). She then goes on, in a very interesting argument, to exonerate Eve for the fall of man and place the ultimate blame for the original sin upon Adam. According to Murray, an angel promising knowledge, not a snake, tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve accepted the angel's offer out of a desire for her own betterment through an all-encompassing wisdom, not out of carnal lust. Adam, on the other hand, tempted by his "bare pusillanimous attachment to a woman," consciously chose to defy the Lord and "sacrifice myriads of beings yet unborn."<sup>40</sup> In the end, the biblical story manipulated most often by egotistical men to prove the inferiority of women receives an overhaul by Murray, so that she can remove the onus of original sin traditionally placed upon women's shoulders.

A re-interpretation of the Adam and Eve tale, a claim that all Biblical stories are metaphorical, and the placement of the blame for original sin upon the conscience of man—all of these elements in "On the Equality of the Sexes" indisputably indicate its unconventionality. Certainly Murray's contemporaries, most especially her male counterparts in the literature business, viewed the Bible in a more traditional light. For instance, the author of *The Whole Duty of Woman*, William Kerrick, constantly reminds his female readers that as "the Daughters of Eve" they need to remember "the fatal consequence" of their mother's disobedience.<sup>41</sup> Kerrick reflects in this statement the popular, and traditional, belief that Eve caused the fall of man and the stain of her sin tainted all women. Upon reading "On the Equality of the Sexes" and its radical rendition of the happenings in Eden, Kerrick and others would have likely denounced it as a product of Murray's heretical Universalist religion. Even with this consideration of Murray's unique religious beliefs, further investigation of this "most radical essay" reveals Murray's support of traditional female roles.

Murray maintains the status quo of the female sphere in "On the Equality of the Sexes" most evidently through her binding of women's educational advancement to the notion of "Republican Motherhood." As stated earlier, historian Linda Kerber first articulated this tendency for theorists in the post-Revolutionary period to tie women's education to their duties as mothers of

the next generation of virtuous American citizens. Kerber, Norton, and many of their fellow historians, in noting the novelty of granting eighteenth-century women any sort of role in the republic at large, forget to acknowledge how "Republican Motherhood" succeeds in promoting the traditional domestic sphere of womanhood. The theory of schooling women for the purpose of teaching their own children, while endowing women with the previously unheard-of opportunity of a formal education, still confined them to the realm of domesticity. Women, though they supposedly influenced society and politics by raising virtuous leaders for the republic, remained within the home and disassociated from direct public-political involvement. Republican Motherhood even offered men the opportunity to deny women further participation within the public sphere. It did so by giving them the ability to claim that women needed no further political involvement, since they already possessed the power to mold their husbands' and sons' virtuous citizenship. Rosemarie Zagari describes how such a theory, in the end:

privileged women's domestic role and precluded the possibility of women's direct participation in politics. It enabled Americans to adopt the language of rights for women at the same time it prevented . . . the expansion of women's rights into the public sphere.<sup>42</sup>

This illustrates how male-female relationships were never truly reconfigured—they were merely spoken of in different terms.

In the light of the limitations Republican Motherhood placed upon women and their roles in society, Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes" seems much less revolutionary than portrayed by Norton, Skemp, and others. Murray argues in the essay that one of the key effects of thoroughly educating women, and a major justification for its implementation, is that it renders women "fit companions."<sup>43</sup> Such reasoning narrows the efficacy of women's education to the service of their male companions within the home, and ultimately not to the expansion of their rights or roles. "On the Equality of the Sexes," though often showcasing Murray's belief in the natural equality of female and male souls ("Yes, ye lordly, haughty sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours . . ."), finds the author constructing the artificial barriers of sexist custom that often so irritate her.<sup>44</sup> In the same essay in which she cried for an "equality of acquirement," Murray maintains that the education of women must pay heed to the sex's "particular departments."<sup>45</sup> This statement suggests Murray subscribed to the traditional, domestic role of the woman; for she qualifies her call for equal education by claiming a female's schooling must be limited to that which is pertinent to a woman's domestic duties (her "particular departments").

Murray again places limitations upon educational and actual "equality" for women when she appeals to her male readers:

O ye arbiters of our fate! we confess that the superiority is indubitably yours; you are by nature formed for our protectors; we pretend not to vie with you in bodily strength. . . . Shield us then . . . from external evils, and in return we will transact your domestick affairs.<sup>46</sup>

Even more than conceding that men are physically transcendent to women (something that she, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other women writers of the time easily granted in their works), Judith Sargent Murray also places the ultimate fate of womanhood in the hands of man.<sup>47</sup> This statement accurately reflects the situation of women in a firmly patriarchal society, but by granting men control over women's actions—even those within the domestic realm ("your domestick affairs")—Murray exceeds the conservatism of the traditional "domestic sphere" theory.<sup>48</sup> Not only do men rule the public realm, but according to Murray, they preside over the domestic sphere as well.

When comparing these conservative components of Murray's essay to those of male essayists, they clearly coincide with one another. In direct correspondence with Murray, Thomas Gisborne discusses the "smaller mould" and "looser texture" of the female form in comparison to the "muscular vigor" of the typical male.<sup>49</sup> The author Reverend John Bennett also remarks upon the "physical inferiority of woman;" surely, the obviousness of the smaller female build escaped few writers.<sup>50</sup> A feature more important than these authors' agreements with Murray over the physical deficiencies of women, though, is the fact that the essays by Gisborne, Kerrick, and Bennett contain arguments that echo many of those within Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes." Kerrick, the man who so differs from Murray in regards to his interpretation of Biblical stories, finds common ground with Murray when he proposes that women should acquire "knowledge fitting for thee [women]."<sup>51</sup> Admittedly, Kerrick believes that women should not "trace the dark spurges of science" where Murray openly resents the fact that only men can tread the "flowery paths of science."<sup>52</sup> Yet, upon the same page as she decries the denial of sciences to women, Murray makes the suggestion that women's education should conform to their "particular departments;" virtually the same traditional advice Kerrick administers.<sup>53</sup>

An author whose words more noticeably echo those of Murray is John Bennett. His 1793 piece *Strictures on Female Education* begins with the gripping statement, "When we consider the natural equality of woman with the other sex, their influence upon society, . . . it may justly appear a matter of amazement, that their education has been so much and so generally neglected."<sup>54</sup> Like Murray, Bennett initiates his foray into the realm of female education and rights with a claim of women's equality to men. But, also like Murray, Bennett

does not use the term "equality" in reference to women as individuals of the late twentieth century do.

When people today speak of a woman's equality to man, they generally mean that a woman possesses rights identical to those of a man in the realms of politics, education, and employment. Murray, Bennett, and others in the late eighteenth century, however, refer to a quite different type of "equality." Rosemarie Zagarri addresses this perplexing issue and attempts to clarify the situation. She contends that even though theorists in the post-revolutionary period began to conceive of women as "bearers of rights," the rights that they granted to women differed greatly from those they gave to men—ultimately, "rights became a gendered variable."<sup>55</sup> Women, according to Zagarri, received a set of rights, "nonpolitical in nature," that stressed "duty and obligation . . . confined to the traditional feminine role of wife and mother;" this is in great contrast to the male rights that emphasized political participation, liberty, and choice."<sup>56</sup> When Murray, Bennett, and others spoke of equality, then, they only meant that men and women had an equal opportunity to fulfill their gender-specific rights and roles. In this light, both Murray's and Bennett's declarations of women's "equality" seem much less radical than initially perceived. Consequently, the outwardly modernistic title of Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes" loses much of its "feminist" character.

Venturing further into Bennett's work, one can easily observe how he desires only a "gendered" equality for women. And when one compares Murray's arguments in "On the Equality of the Sexes" and her other pieces to such sentiments, one can discern how Murray herself wanted such differentiated rights. Bennett, without qualification, makes several bold statements arguing for the preservation of the female domestic role and women's exercise of rights only within such a sphere. According to him, women's rights and destiny lie wholly in the "bearing and nurturing of children" and in "the necessity of superintending domestic concerns."<sup>57</sup> Women who have dared to step away from the hearth, like those queens who ascended to the throne in old Europe, did not only fail to realize meaningful change through their actions; they also helped prove that women's participation outside the home is merely a "burlesque" upon male-run government and society.<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly, Bennett presents a quite conservative, traditionalist view of women in the social order. But, alongside these old notions of womanhood, Bennett advocates a very extensive education for women to include "[e]pistolary writing, [h]istory of the lives of particular persons, geography, natural history, astronomy, poetry . . .," and other topics not ordinarily associated with women's schooling.<sup>59</sup>

How can a man so dedicated to the maintenance of traditional gender roles recommend such a revolutionary education for women? The answer lies in the fact that Bennett conceives of this education as serving only to enhance the performance of women within their divinely apportioned positions of mother

and wife. He believes, in line with the "republican motherhood" theory of Linda Kerber and the gender differentiated rights theory of Rosemarie Zagari, that a woman's schooling should elevate her status as "the wife, the mother, and the economist of a family" and allow her to exercise her rights therein. A true woman's education should not guide her into a life of "studious virginity" or participation in activities outside the home.<sup>60</sup>

Murray follows the same line of reasoning as Bennett in her various tomes upon the subjects of women, their education, and their role in society. She echoes Bennett's resentment of those who refuse to acknowledge women's gifts of "reason and understanding" when she insists upon "the *capability* of the female mind" in her essay "Observations on Female Abilities."<sup>61</sup> After making the arguably advanced request for the education of women for "independence" (so that they could provide for themselves in the event of their spouses' death), Murray finds herself arguing for the application of education to the domestic sphere. So much like Bennett, Murray argues that the zenith of a woman's accomplishments (academic or otherwise) is reached "by the cradle of their children, and in viewing the smiles of their daughters, or the sports of their sons . . ."<sup>62</sup> She qualifies her earlier statements concerning the "independence" of women by claiming that she desires only to show women their capability of enduring extreme circumstances, while by no means wanting to "*unsex*" them.<sup>63</sup> In the last few pages of her otherwise progressive essay, Murray reveals that she truly wants to maintain the ascendancy of traditional domesticity for women. And, in accordance with Zagari's theory, Murray considers this sphere the only one in which women can practice their "rights" (or, as Zagari calls them, "benefits that imposed duties" like motherhood).<sup>64</sup>

Though "Observations on Female Abilities," "On the Equality of the Sexes," and similar pieces represent a good portion of Murray's portfolio, the author also expresses her opinions in literary forms outside of the essay genre. In fact, Murray's use of the serial fiction format gave her an effective and publicly popular means to voice her beliefs about women and their roles. The serialized story was a well-liked form of literature in Murray's era, especially amongst women. Presented chapter by chapter in American magazines on a monthly basis, these tales fed the growing hunger of American women for prescriptive, romantic fiction that told tales of virtue, passion, and redemption.<sup>65</sup> Though Murray vehemently denied that she provided fodder for the often-criticized fictional romance division of literature, her tale of the young orphan Margaretta nonetheless represents Murray's foray into the world of the romance writer.<sup>66</sup> In a total of twelve chapters, Murray chronicles the life of the heroine from her childhood adoption by the Vigilius's to her disastrous near-marriage to the evil Sinisterus Courtland (Murray apparently felt no need to subtly name her characters), and finally to her loving partnership with the honorable Edward Hamilton. Murray intended the tale of Margaretta to provide "object lessons"

for women in the areas of marriage, child rearing, and education.<sup>67</sup> She crafted the character of Margaretta into what she believed was the ideal woman: energetic in thought, but passive and dependent in action.<sup>68</sup> When faced with the imminent economic ruin of her husband, for example, Margaretta faints and dissolves into sobs. She remains in such a state until her long-lost, "blessed" father appears and saves "his well near sinking Margaretta!"<sup>69</sup> In this and other situations, Margaretta consistently gives the impression of a pathetic figure, one who always swoons in the most mildly stressing situations and needs to be rescued by the men in her life.<sup>70</sup>

Besides being unable to cope with even mildly taxing circumstances, Murray's "ideal woman" dreads voicing her opinions before men (including her own husband), for fear that she might step beyond her subscribed bounds of womanhood. Margaretta's adoptive mother encourages her daughter's deference by praising her for engaging in "conversation with manifest reluctance," and, when amongst the company of strangers, for feeling "alarmed at the sound of her own voice. . . ."<sup>71</sup> Along with her advocacy of her Margaretta's subservience, Mrs. Vigillius promotes an education for her daughter to include "feminine" branches of improvement to help her become a "pleasing and instructive companion."<sup>72</sup> As the narrative voice of the *Margaretta* story, Murray reassures her reading audience that the education given to the novel's heroine by no means "unfit[s] [her] for her proper sphere . . . ."<sup>73</sup> Murray, like John Bennett in his *Strictures on Female Education*, does not want to raise a woman's "understanding on the ruin of her graces."<sup>74</sup>

In her descriptions of Margaretta's character and education, Judith Sargent Murray paints a portrait of a cultivated, but extremely dependent and weak, woman. It may be argued that because the tale of *Margaretta* is merely a fictional work, one cannot use it to discern Murray's attitudes towards women and their roles. Considering the fact, though, that Murray intends this fictitious tale to provide her readers with "moral lessons," it becomes clear she uses the character of Margaretta to portray what she believes is the feminine ideal.<sup>75</sup> Demure, silent amongst men, relegated to the home, and educated only to the point of wifely usefulness, Murray's Margaretta consciously adheres to customary feminine roles and never steps out of her set bounds. Creating a heroine in such a conservative mold, Murray demonstrates her belief in a wholly domestic role for women with schooling as a tool to better them within that role.

In their studies of women in the Revolutionary era, historians like Kerber and Norton usually utilize *Margaretta* and several other of Judith Sargent Murray's more widely published essays and stories.<sup>76</sup> Too often, such scholars ignore the wealth of information present within Murray's unpublished writings and personal correspondence. The letters she exchanged with members of her family and fellow Universalists, along with the small volumes of essays she

never released to the public, reveal aspects of Murray's character barely discernible in her popularly read works. A most important feature of Murray's personality exposed by her personal correspondence is her fervent desire for literary fame. In her 1801 letter to the Reverend Redding, Murray asks the cleric to purchase surplus copies of her *Gleaner* anthology. Murray tells the Reverend that by selling her work, she hopes to "come into possession of that portion of celebrity" her writing might bestow upon her.<sup>77</sup> During the drafting of her Universalist Catechism, Murray wrote a short poem divulging her goal of becoming a famous author—an aim which she describes as an "enchanted dream of future praise, [w]ith an immortal life from mortal days."<sup>78</sup> In her biography of Murray, Sheila Skemp does not ignore her subject's profound longing for immortality; in fact, she dedicates an entire chapter of the book to what she calls Judith's "mania for literary fame."<sup>79</sup> Murray's youthful fondness for scribbling developed into an adult "quest for fame," and according to Skemp, also a quest for fortune.<sup>80</sup> Though Skemp claims that Murray intended to profit only from her status as a playwright (her theatrical efforts included a comedy entitled *The Medium* and the drama *The African*), Murray's pleas to the Reverend Redding suggest that she expected to derive income from her essay writing as well.

Skemp and other historians dealing with Murray fail to explore the impact of her quest for public praise and profit upon the author's work and dedication to the more "feminist" sentiments found in her essays. In the aforementioned letter to Reverend Redding, the way in which Murray denigrates her own abilities and those of her sex in general demonstrates her lack of commitment to radical notions of women's equality and, correspondingly, her devotion to a more traditional role of domestic womanhood. Understandably, Murray adopts a deferential tone when writing to an authoritative figure, one from whom she hopes to receive a favor. Judith calls Redding her "respected panagyrists" and "most respected Correspondent[s]," a man who she believes can confer distinction upon her with the mere acknowledgement of her work.<sup>81</sup> All trappings of custom and etiquette aside, Murray's letter still exhibits the level of Judith's disingenuousness when it comes to her dedication to women's equality in the face of gaining fame and fortune.

From the outset of her message to Redding, Murray envisages the positive influence of the Reverend's praise upon her literary reputation and prosperity. Murray claims that Redding's belief in her originality encourages her "literary wishes," Judith's dreams of "add[ing] a single item to the catalogue of delicacies, which already amply enriches the refined, and [mental?] Connaisseur."<sup>82</sup> She goes on to note how Redding's purchase of her remaining *Gleaner* copies would remedy her financial situation, as well as assail the annoying tendency of Americans to ignore native authors and instead buy "every European publication that appears in our mother tongue—" a fact Murray attributes the



lagging sales of her *Gleaner* volumes to.<sup>83</sup> After establishing the effects she expects the Reverend's praise to have on her life, Murray goes about discrediting the radical sentiments that may be read into her essays in order to preserve her benefactor's good will. She refuses to disavow her belief that men and women equally possess the capacity to think rationally, but she feels obliged to explain that this belief does not in any way damage traditional notions of womanhood. She writes:

I do not recollect ever to have penned a sentence, which could justify the shadow of suspicion that I was seeking to throw down barriers, most judiciously erected, to destroy the distinction of character, or to create that confusion which would no doubt be now so advantageously, and so properly assigned to the male and female world . . . .<sup>84</sup>

Without reservation, Murray forgoes any claim that her work (from "On the Equality of the Sexes" to the fictional Margarettta tales) serves the purpose of depositing women into a realm outside the domestic one known to them. In this brief passage, Murray testifies to her faith in the traditionally circumscribed lives of women and those "judiciously erected" barriers of convention preventing them from participating in the larger world. For the sake of gaining the Reverend's favor, Murray denounces the more radical interpretations of her compositions and places them within the category of traditional female prescriptive literature written by John Bennett, Thomas Gisborne, and William Kerrick.

While writing to Reverend Redding, Murray makes a most interesting comment reflecting yet another aspect of her multifaceted personality—her passion for order. Following her denunciation of radical interpretations of her writings, Murray makes the claim that as a "lover of system," she wholeheartedly believes that "regularity, and that order, and subordination, are the stamina of civilized life. . . ."<sup>85</sup> For her priestly audience, Murray voices her utter hatred of faction and her hope to maintain the bonds of tradition for the sake of a "civilized" society. She believes in the legitimacy of a class-hierarchical system, whose intrinsic "subordination" is so vital to the workings of the American polity. Indeed, Murray's views betray her fervent support of the Federalist Party. Skemp notes that even though Murray's financial situation was not always as secure in her married life as in her affluent childhood, she always associated herself with the upper crust of New England's merchant society and their Federalist politics.<sup>86</sup> Like the staunch Federalist Alexander Hamilton, Murray revolted at the thought of "domestic faction and insurrection" throwing the United States into "a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of

tyranny and anarchy;" and many of Judith's writings contain examples of her own vehement Federalism.<sup>87</sup>

In a brief and generally overlooked piece entitled "Reflecting, During a Fine Morning, upon Existing Circumstances," Murray voices her distaste for schism and lawless revolution and places it within the context of the chaotic Revolutionary war.<sup>88</sup> Murray despises the "internal tumult" caused by a conflict that pits father against son, and she confesses that such "anarchy" makes her tremble for herself and her friends of both parties [patriot and loyalist].<sup>89</sup> Obviously, Murray fears revolution and its inherent threat to the stability of her world's status quo. Another very telling essay, Murray's "Sketch of the Present Situation of America, 1794," includes the author's criticism of the irrational and immoral French Revolution. In it she also warns Americans that "faction hath introduced its cloven foot among us."<sup>90</sup> The prominent historian Jan Lewis, in her studies of the development of Republican rhetoric in the post-Revolutionary period, finds Murray's detestation of disorder to be common to the era's "republican theorists." According to Lewis, these individuals "prized harmony above all else" and followed a political system (federalism) that fundamentally "aimed to avoid conflict."<sup>91</sup> As one of Lewis's typical "republican theorists," and as a devout Hamiltonian Federalist, Murray's desire for order and a hierarchical class structure influenced her theories concerning women and their roles in society.

An instance of Murray's conservative Federalism coming to bear on her female ideology occurs in a chapter of the *Margaretta* series. In the installment focusing on Margaretta's marital crisis, the heroine's mother writes to her daughter a letter advising her how to act in this trying situation. Mrs. Vigillius instructs her child to win her way back into her husbands heart (though he was the partner suspected of being unfaithful) through gentleness and submission. Most notably, after providing Margaretta with this guidance, her mother writes that she dislikes women who act unduly acquiescent towards men:

but custom hath established a certain order in society, and custom is a despot, whose chains, I am fearful, it will be in vain that an individual will assay to burst.<sup>92</sup>

Though she speaks of custom in largely negative terms in this excerpt, Murray (through the words of Mrs. Vigillius) indicates how essential the traditional limitations placed upon women by society are to maintaining "order." To Judith, the necessity of preserving an orderly society, even if that preservation calls for the binding of women to a wholly subordinate position, transcends any one person's desire to alter the conventional gender roles of the early republic.

Despite the fact that Judith Sargent Murray (like many male Revolutionary-era authors of female prescriptive literature) advocated a traditional life within the domestic sphere for women, she stands as an example of female talent and achievement in the earliest days of the American nation. She ventured into the murky waters of national discourse through her publications, and doing so at a time when many considered it an "unwomanly" act testifies to Murray's bravery in the face of public criticism. Certainly, her exposure to the very transforming tides of the American Revolution, Enlightenment thought, and her own conversion to the Universalist faith impelled her to break certain boundaries constructed by tradition. Other aspects of Murray's intricate personality, including her adherence to the conventional notions of domestic womanhood, her desire for fame, and her Federalist outlook on society, led her to write literature promoting a sphere from which she herself had broken free. A surprisingly small number of historians have ventured to examine this fascinating woman's life and works. Hopefully the day will come when we realize that Judith Sargent Murray epitomizes the complex relationship between transformation and tradition in the Revolutionary-era.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3-14; Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Sheila L. Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Linda K. Kerber, "Daughters of Colombia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787-1805," in *Women's America: Focusing the Past*, eds. Linda K. Kerber and Jane DeHart Matthews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 247.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States, 1780-1860* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Gisborne, *An Inquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1798), 16.

<sup>9</sup> In *Liberty's Daughters* (137), Norton cites the fact that "even in urban areas," the proportion of women working outside of the home remained "below 10 percent" of the entire female population.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, "Upon Printing My Little Catechism," in *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*, ed. Sheila Skemp (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 131.

12 Judith Sargent Murray, "Sketch of the Present Situation of America, 1794," in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49, 53, 67.

13 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 113.

14 Judith Sargent Murray, "Observations on Female Abilities," in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23-24.

15 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 3.

16 Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 170.

17 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 11; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Janet M. Todd (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1977).

18 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 22.

19 Ibid., 22.

20 Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 15.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris. Judith Sargent Murray mentions Descartes' work in her essay "On the Equality of the Sexes." This same work includes implicit attacks upon Rousseau's sexist views of women.

23 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 23.

24 Harris, *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, xxii.

25 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 129.

26 Judith Sargent Stevens, "Some Deductions from the System," 127.

27 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 22-23.

28 See the essays "Necessity of Religion, Especially in Adversity" and "Sketch of the Present Situation of America, 1794" along with the play *The Traveller Returned* in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*.

29 Linda Kerber, "Forum: Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (July 1989): 566.

30 Rosemarie Zagari, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (April 1998): 216.

31 Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 246.

32 Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 35. In this chapter on female patriotism, Kerber asserts that not only men, but also "many women," distrusted the rational and political capabilities of women.

33 Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 252.

34 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 5.

35 Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes," in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

36 Ibid., 10.

37 Ibid., 10.

38 Ibid., 10.

39 Ibid., 11.

40 Ibid., 12-13.

41 William Kerrick, *The Whole Duty of Woman* (Walpole, New Hampshire: David

Carlisle, 1797), 10.

42 Zagarri, "Rights of Man and Woman," 222.

43 *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, 7.

44 *Ibid.*, 8.

45 *Ibid.*, 10, 6.

46 *Ibid.*, 11. Italics Murray's.

47 See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (8). At the outset of this work, Wollstonecraft grants that men are physically stronger than women, so men therefore benefit from a "natural preeminence." See also "On the Equality of the Sexes" in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray* (6-8).

48 Author's italics.

49 Gisborne, *An Inquiry*, 14.

50 John Bennett, *Strictures on Female Education* (Philadelphia: Spotswood and Rice, 1793), 57.

51 Kerrick, *The Whole Duty of Woman*, 20.

52 *Ibid.*, 19; *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, 6.

53 *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, 6.

54 Bennett, *Strictures*, 6.

55 Zagarri, "Rights of Man and Woman," 203.

56 *Ibid.*, 203.

57 Bennett, *Strictures*, 67.

58 *Ibid.*, 66.

59 *Ibid.*, 2.

60 *Ibid.*, 68.

61 *Ibid.*, 55; Judith Sargent Murray, "Observations on Female Abilities," 36.

Italics Murray's.

62 Murray, "Observations," 42.

63 *Ibid.*, 42.

64 Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman," 203.

65 Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 235.

66 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 100.

67 *Ibid.*, 100.

68 Judith Sargent Murray, *Story of Margaretta*, in *Selected Writings of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 253.

69 *Ibid.*, 258.

70 *Ibid.*, 232. Margaretta faints upon seeing her husband, about whom she received information indicating he might have been unfaithful.

71 *Ibid.*, 169.

72 *Ibid.*, 164.

73 *Ibid.*, 166.

74 Bennett, *Strictures*, 9.

75 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 100.

76 In *Liberty's Daughters* (252-254), Norton relies upon "On the Equality of the Sexes" and other essays published in Murray's *Gleaner* volumes. Kerber's *Women of the Republic* (204-207) similarly utilizes *Gleaner* essays.

77 Judith Sargent Murray, "Letter to Reverend Redding," in *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*, ed. Sheila Skemp (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 173-176.

78 Murray, "Upon Printing My Little Catechism," 131-132. Italics Murray's.

79 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 95.

80 Ibid., 100.

81 Murray, "Letter to Reverend Redding," 173, 175.

82 Ibid., 174.

83 Ibid., 174.

84 Ibid., 175.

85 Ibid., 175.

86 Skemp, *Judith Sargent Murray*, 55. Though Murray came from an upper-class merchant background in Massachusetts, her economic fortune began to falter once she married her first husband, John Stevens, in 1769. His exploits in the trading business floundered, and Judith lived in uncertain circumstances throughout their marriage. Judith's second marriage to John Murray in 1788 did not augment her riches in the least—as an Universalist preacher, Murray rarely received a luxuriant income.

87 Hamilton, Alexander, "Federalist No. 09: The Utility of the Union as a Safe-guard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1966), 71.

88 Judith Sargent Murray, "Reflecting, during a Fine Morning, upon Existing Circumstances," in *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*, ed. Sheila Skemp (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 133-135.

89 Ibid., 134.

90 Murray, "Sketch of the Present Situation," 52-53.

91 Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (October 1987): 711.

92 Murray, *Story of Margareta*, 230.