

American Theater and the Quest for a Republican Identity

Judith S. Murray's *The Medium;
or, Virtue Triumphant* (1795)

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Judith Sargent Murray's largely overlooked play *The Medium; or, Virtue Triumphant* (1795) was written during one of the most challenging decades in early American history; challenging in terms of consistent political efforts to (re)define concepts of national identity, to safeguard republican ideals, and (re)formulate the role of the United States in the world. The rising political tension that stemmed from the emergence of party antagonism between the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans betrayed a wider national anxiety over the international instability caused by the terrifying aftermath of the French Revolution and the unsettling relations between France and England, as well as a persistent domestic unease at the haunting prospect of "democratic excess."¹ For both Federalists and Democratic Republicans, the task of building a nation proved immensely arduous, eventually causing a hardly acknowledged bifurcation in the development of American republicanism.² Postwar American society witnessed a political atmosphere of

1 The notion belongs to Elbridge Gerry, a Massachusetts delegate, who refused to sign the United States Constitution at the Continental Congress of 1787. Gerry's reaction was the result of his own first-hand experience of Shays' Rebellion (1786) and the disruptive threat of unruly people. It was this experience that made Gerry particularly wary of the shape and authority of the United States government as well as the liberties and limitations of the people: "The evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy. The people do not want virtue; but are the dupes of pretended patriots" (qtd. in Billias 160).

2 In his seminal study on American ideology, Gordon S. Wood has explained that republicanism meant more for Americans than simply the elimination of a king and the

division between the republican promise of social regeneration and cultural openness, and the reality of restricted access to political identity and public authority.³

By the 1790s, republicanism had turned into a most vulnerable concept embracing alternate and often conflicting ideologies, retaining the vitality of classical republicanism in theory while in practice its very own principles were compromised against a number of unresolved issues, such as slavery and naturalization, as well as against the newly emerging challenges of assertive individualism and aggressive commercialism.⁴ The abstract propositions and universalist assumptions of republicanism heightened its radical implications causing a serious discrepancy between the revolutionary claim to equal rights for all and the Founding Fathers' commitment to social stratification and racial/ethnic hierarchy.⁵

In the case of women, the discrepancy between their unprecedented access to the public world of the Revolution and their systematic exclusion from the political process of nation building exposed an effort to tailor the Lockean

institution of an elective system. It added a moral dimension, a utopian depth to the political separation from England—a depth that involved the very character of their society (47–53). The major ideas of republicanism included those of classical antiquity, civic virtue and self-government, and equality of opportunity. For more information on American republicanism, its influences and development, see Kerber, “The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation.”

- 3 As Joyce Appleby justifiably wonders, “if the Revolution was fought in a frenzy over corruption, out of fear of tyranny, and with hopes for redemption through civic virtue, where and when are scholars to find the sources for the aggressive individualism, the optimistic materialism, and the pragmatic interest-group politics that became so salient so early in the life of the new nation?” (937).
- 4 Drew McCoy uses the term “hybrid republican vision” to describe the ideological effort to “adapt the moral and social imperatives of classical republicanism to modern commercial society” (237–38). J.R. Pole points out that in most states the legal interpretation of the obligations of republican government “conformed more closely to the dictates of social and economic interests than to any explicit requirements of republican spirit” (124). Also, the naturalization laws that were passed in the 1790s greatly challenged the republican discourse of equal opportunities for all; see Jacobson; Smith.
- 5 The Lockean discourse of natural rights was used by both Federalists and Democratic Republicans. The Federalists, with their insistence on a hierarchical social order, sought to contain rather than exploit the radical power of natural rights for fear of any threat that might challenge social and political institutions. On the other hand, the Democratic Republicans invoked the rights of man to expand the franchise to larger portions of the white male population eliminating the property requirements for men.

tradition of natural rights to fit specific gender definitions. In examining the gendered effects of the political shift from the Federalist to the Democratic Republican party, Jeanne Boydston has argued that the rise of Jeffersonian republicanism redefined elite white women's claims to public authority through a domestic discourse (262).⁶

It seems that Murray's literary response to the dynamically changing socio-political climate of her time is as complex, and at places as self-contradicting, as the wider political effort to substitute the "republican" with the "national" in the post-revolutionary era. Literary scholars approaching the entirety of Murray's writing are faced with the challenge of accounting for a number of ideological contradictions. Her work has been described as both conservative and radical; as informed by Federalist ideas about the imperative of class hierarchy and social authority, and her adherence to more progressive Universalist tenets regarding the spiritual equality of women as well as her faith in the republican utopia of civic virtue and women's more active role in the new political society.⁷ It could be argued that Murray's own transition from enthusiastic support of radical egalitarian doctrines to a more conservative social and gender vision in fact reflects the transitional moment in the

6 The political vision of the Democratic Republicans made it clear that the main impediment to women's voting was their sex; see Zagarri, "Gender and the First Party System." With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), women's exclusion from politics could no longer be taken as an unquestioned given invoking nature to justify their subordinate status, but had to be rationalized within a socio-political context. The result was a gendered division of rights and, concurrently, the elaboration of a separate spheres ideology (Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman" [229-30]). As Jeanne Boydston pointedly argues, "the term 'republican motherhood' is perhaps most appropriately capitalized, as 'Republican motherhood,' to locate it both chronologically in the late 1790s and discursively within the rhetoric of Jefferson's particular brand of republican thought" (262).

7 Pauline Schloesser argues that "Murray was the founder of liberal feminist thought in the United States" (157), while she hastens to add that her social outlook and political thought are laden with "inconsistencies" (158). Myra Jehlen calls Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes" a "feminist manifesto" (874), whereas Nina Baym is very careful when applying the label "feminist" to Murray (iii). Sheila Skemp stresses Murray's class consciousness and her support of "a traditional, organic society based on order, deference, and hierarchy" (9). For Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton, the concept of "Republican Motherhood," despite its ambiguities and limitations, provides a safe ideological context for Murray's use of republican virtue in favor of women's better education and autonomy (Kerber, "Women and the Shaping" 227-58; Norton 242-55).

broader political culture of the new nation when the radicalism of the revolutionary discourse was gradually supplanted by opposing, yet equally limiting, civil discourses that sought to establish their own views of social hierarchy and democratic governance.⁸

As a woman writer in the post-revolutionary United States, Murray experienced more intensely the ideological fluidity and confusion of a society wavering between the still vibrant echoes of revolutionary radicalism and the reality of political conservatism in the formation of the American body politic. However, living in a society where the power of the printing press grew as forcefully as the desire of the new nation to disseminate republican ideas and patriotic sentiments, Murray quickly turned to the written word to acquire a public voice.⁹ Employing the standard practice of most women writers of the time who wrote under pseudonyms, Murray commented on a host of political and social issues drawing upon a range of intellectual traditions and using multiple genres toward self-expression.¹⁰ While a number of scholars have studied Murray's diverse literary production and have all agreed on the significance of her writings for a better understanding of American women's relations to the social order and political culture of the new nation,¹¹ her dra-

8 In the 1790s, the process of party formation gave rise to divergent political orientations regarding the formation of social structure and the future of the nation, which, in both cases, sought to circumscribe the radical promises of the Revolution. On the one hand, the Federalists proposed a strong, centralized government favoring a clearly stratified society and the leadership of a wealthy and educated elite. On the other hand, the Democratic Republicans envisioned a social order in which race and gender, instead of class, were the principal factors in determining one's access to the public sphere and one's eligibility for self-government, prioritizing free white males over women, African Americans and Native Americans. For more information about the political and social vision of the two competing parties, see Ben-Atar and Oberg; Elkins and McKittrick; Horn; Lewis and Onuf; Sharp.

9 For more information on the development and significance of the emerging print culture in the early national period, see Brown.

10 For American women's access to the written word and their use of pseudonyms, see Hicks. Skemp has made an interesting comment pointing out that "because she [Murray] always wrote under a pseudonym, sometimes as a woman and other times as a man, her disguises personified the fluidity of gender identities" (xiii).

11 During the post-revolutionary years, Murray was one of the most prolific writers in the United States. According to Joanne Dobson and Sandra A. Zagarell, the three most influential women in print in the 1790s were Mercy Otis Warren, Sarah Wentworth Morton, and Judith Sargent Murray, whose participation in the literary culture of the newly emerging Republic was grounded in the Enlightenment belief in woman's intellectual

matic works have received little attention.¹² However, Murray's venture into the world of the theater in the 1790s may be interpreted as a conscious political act given the theater's new social role as an explicit site for enacting national narratives and negotiating republican values.¹³ As "one of the earliest to patronize the theatre" (Field 32),¹⁴ Murray's playwriting seems to have grown out of her firm belief that "a virtuous theatre is highly influential in regulating the opinions, manners, and morals of the populace" (Murray, "Panegyric" 227). Murray saw in the theater a most effective public *medium* central to the cultural development of the nation and the establishment of a republic.¹⁵

and moral equality to man (364). See Baym; Harris; Rider; Schloesser; Skemp; Vietto, among others.

- 12 For a brief discussion of Murray's plays *The Medium* (1795) and *The Traveller Returned* (1796), especially within the context of disputed dominant definitions of American womanhood, see Kritzer. Jeffrey H. Richards has also analyzed Murray's *The Traveller Returned* through its obvious similarities to Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771) while arguing, in her favor, that she has "put a stamp of originality on her creation" (91) by adapting it to her contemporary social reality and promoting patriotic sentiments and republican virtue. See Detsi-Diamanti for an analysis of *The Traveller Returned* as an expression of Murray's skepticism toward the social achievements and legal transformations brought about by the American Revolution.
- 13 A number of studies have focused on the role of the theater in the construction of the American national identity; see Mason and Gainor; Richards; Wilmer. Heather S. Nathans has provided a most enlightening account of how the political tension of the 1790s "quickly found its way into the playhouse, as every aspect of playgoing, from seating arrangements, to musical interludes, to script choice, to performance became a potentially problematic declaration of allegiance to a particular political, economic, or social agenda" (77).
- 14 In her essay "A Panegyric on the Drama," Murray defends theater and attempts to refute the dominant misconceptions about theatrical amusement. She makes a strong claim against the legal prohibition of theater: "in the present enlightened era and administration of liberty, the citizen would hardly consent to an abridgement of those amusements, the evil tendency of which could not be unequivocally demonstrated to his understanding" (225).
- 15 Murray took great pains to conceal her identity as a playwright fearing the impact of her association with the theater on her second husband, the Universalist minister John Murray (Drexler 409). Her persistence, however, to see her play produced was spurred by both her own artistic ambition and financial need.

Republican Politics in *The Medium*

The political undertones of Murray's first play, *The Medium; or Virtue Triumphant*, capture the ideological complexities, or rather contradictions, of the 1790s. Despite the play's obvious weaknesses, its repetitiveness, intense moralizing, and crude characterizations for the sake of didacticism, *The Medium* can be read as an early day social comedy, a most worthy forerunner to Anna Cora Mowatt's much more spirited and refined mid-19th-century play *Fashion* (1845).¹⁶ Although the play's main plotline traces the melodramatic complications arising from Mr. Maitland's objection to his son's romantic attachment to Eliza Clairville, Murray moves beyond that and takes an incisive look into the social structure and cultural profile of post-revolutionary American society.¹⁷ Like Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) and Robert Munford's less known and much less successful *The Patriots* (c1777), Murray's play brings to focus a number of social types and cultural attitudes while exploring their appropriateness and validity for the new political system. When it comes to issues of social inclusion and acceptance, Murray cannot escape her own class conditioning and Federalist skepticism regarding all people's fitness for self-government in the American Republic.

Within this context, the play's title merits some attention as it serves as an ideological backdrop against which political ideas and cultural values are measured. What is *The Medium*? What does it stand for? How is it interpreted? Mr. Maitland, a member of the older generation of the American elite, is actually the one who introduces the concept of the *medium* in the opening scene

16 The Boston newspaper *Federal Orrery* announced that a new comedy, written by a "Citizen of the United States" would be performed at the Federal Street Theatre on March 2, 1795 (Skemp 254). Though it enjoyed only one performance, the play has entered the annals of early American theater as the first American-authored play to have been performed on Boston stage, with Murray as the first woman in Boston to have had a play professionally performed (Harris xxxvii; Schloesser 156).

17 Although *The Medium* essentially flopped upon its initial production at the Federal Street Theatre in Boston, Murray made repeated—yet unsuccessful—efforts to give her play another chance and have it produced at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, even resorting to changing its title to the more melodramatic *Virtue Triumphant* (Skemp 255). The play was eventually published along with her other works in *The Gleaner*. Murray's second play *The Traveller Returned* did not fare very well either. For criticism of the play, see Skemp 259. See also Murray's first biographer, Vena Bernadette Field (33-40).

of the play—underlining its major significance in determining all aspects of human life and development:

MAITL: [...] a Medium is ever self-balanced—it is the centre of perfection—the philosopher's stone—the genuine panacea for every evil. It is that divine alchymy, the operation of which will finally transmute this iron age of ours, restoring the golden reign of philosophy and of reason. (16)

Maitland's perception of the *medium*, however, transcends his philosophical rambling and becomes a rigid framework of ideas that determines his personal relationships and political allegiances. When it comes to politics, Maitland's *medium* is the middle ground between monarchical tyranny and democratic excess: "It is my attachment to the immaculate consistency of a *Medium*, which makes me such a confirmed enemy to the Aristocrats, Democrats, Jacobins, le Peuple Soverain, &c. &c. Kings are one extreme, subjects are another" (16). For Maitland, the desired antidote to these easily identifiable extremes is the ambiguously defined concept of the *Commonwealth of Equality*, a kind of "blest fraternity" in defense of the "general good" (16). What this means exactly, however, remains rather hazy throughout the play, and it is left unclear who really qualifies to be included in this "blest fraternity." In his conversation with Colonel Mellfont, an Englishman traveling in the United States and soon to be revealed as the wealthy guardian of Eliza Clairville, there is a confusing blending of the concepts of the *medium* and *equality* with social class, personal worth, and the "select few:"

MAITL: This world is given to see things through a false medium.

COL. M: I am perfectly of your opinion, Sir; the world is, indeed, given to error; it is only a select few who see things as they are; while the blinded multitude, borne in the vortex of folly, will continue their idle whirl on the very brink of destruction. [...]

MAITL: You have spoken rationally. I have always been a cool, deliberate man, Sir, a lover of reason, and a friend of equality: some of my countrymen hate Frenchmen—some hate Englishmen—these are both extremes, Sir; but, for my part, I love a man of worth, let him be the growth of what clime he will. I am a true brother of the Royal Arch—my motto is equality, and I embrace the brotherhood with my whole heart, Sir. (51-52, original emphasis)

Maitland himself, however, with his upper-class status and essentially conservative ideas regarding class hierarchy and social background, seems to negate

the very definition of the *medium* and *equality* he so fervently espouses. When it comes to his personal life and his relationship with his son, Maitland's unwavering opposition to Charles's love for Eliza Clairville, whom he has never met, betrays a personality bordering on extremes. His stiffness and narrow-mindedness invite another kind of *medium*, one that is defined through the *mediating* actions and more impartial judgment of his friend, Mr. Weston, who suggests that he, at least, "consent to see Miss Clairville" (7). To this, Maitland vehemently responds:

MAITL: I know her, Sir, I know her; she is a needy adventurer, who came over here in the train of a French lady; and, imagining America was the land of Utopia, she preferred a continuance here to a return to blood and murder, and hath now set up the very honourable trade of fortune-hunting. There, Sir—there is her character in toto, and her hopes are the natural result of her situation. (17, original emphasis)

Maitland's opinion of Eliza takes on political dimensions, echoing contemporary anxieties about the turbulent situation in Europe and its impact on the vulnerable nature of American democracy. Despite Maitland's limitations as a character, his adherence to the value of the middle condition in all aspects of human life allows Murray to express her own concerns regarding the conflicting ideological forces that characterized American society in the 1790s. Almost a year before the production of her play, Murray, in her "Sketch of the Present Situation of America" (1794), had openly vouched for national neutrality in the face of the tremendous challenge posed by the aftermath of the French Revolution and the ensuing war between France and Britain, as well as for composure and moderation in order to effectively cope with the domestic discord caused by the rise of factionalism in the United States. Without hesitating to voice her own political allegiance in the "Sketch," Murray cautions about the danger threatening the blessings of a federalist government upon "which we were successfully building the superstructure of every thing useful, every thing virtuous, every thing ornamental" (50). She laments the fact that faction, as "a fearful and destructive hydra" (50), has "introduced its cloven foot among us; with astonishing effrontery it hath dared to lift its baleful head" (53). Murray warns against both despotism and anarchy, as equally disastrous extremes, opting for "the general observance and establishment of order," and wishing that "every citizen would learn, *habitually*, to venerate *offices* and *characters*, devoted to, and engaged in, the administration of justice,

and to which every *good and worthy member of the community is alike eligible*" (56, original emphasis).

With *The Medium*, Murray seeks to give dramatic form to the major issues she addresses in her "Sketch of the Present Situation of America." When Charles—heartbroken by his father's unyielding stance and Eliza's refusal to marry him but on "equal terms" (32)—announces his decision to leave for Europe, Robert, his faithful servant, exclaims in panic:

ROBERT: But these are perilous times, Sir; very perilous times; it looks as if there would not be a mother's son left in the Old World; and, when I consider how often I have carried you in these arms, it afflicts me sorely, master Charles, that you should run after wars and murders, and bloodshed.

CHARLES: I am not going to the field of battle, Robert.

ROBERT: There is no knowing what might take place, Sir; and then this Colonel Mellfont belongs to the English—everybody says they will have bloody times in England Master Charles; and, for my part, Sir, I think them are best off who have least to do either with French or English. (45)

In Murray's dramatic world, neutrality seems to be the best option for the new nation.¹⁸ The *medium* offers an alternative of rationality, self-control, and stability to minimize the impact of the disorder and chaos ravaging Europe and to counteract any form of domestic discord that might jeopardize the new political system. However, the attainment of the *medium* proves to be a process fraught with ideological inconsistencies. Murray's play depicts a society seeking its way through conflicting political views over international and domestic affairs, changing social patterns, and cultural standards reproducing—consciously or not—the major contradictions between republican ideology and social reality. Although throughout the play, the tendency to connect the abstract concept of equality with the notion of personal merit provides a discursive framework for social ascendancy in a democratic society, the persistent references to social class and economic status betray a reality undermining such a possibility. In the case of Eliza Clairville, for example, her exceptional personality, her unparalleled virtue and dignity, praised by almost all the characters in the play, cannot overcome the "insurmountable obstacles" (31) posed by class barriers in her union with Charles:

18 In view of the "dreadfully tempest" political situation in Europe, Murray advises the American people that "nothing but an overwhelming self-partiality could lead us to expect escaping at least the outskirts of the hurricane" ("Sketch" 51).

ELIZA: Had I been addressed by a man, whom my heart and my judgment had approved, and who had been born the equal of my humble family and lowly fortune, to a single moment's suspense he should not have been condemned; my extended hand, accompanying my yielded heart, our mutual attachment should have received the sanction of the holy priest. (30, original emphasis)

Eliza's autonomy and sound judgment, evident in her determination to "never, but on equal terms" (32) plight her faith with Charles, are actually undermined by her social status as an orphan, dependent on the Bloomville family, "a kind of upper servant" (72). In her meeting with Maitland, Eliza is so class-conscious that she becomes disarmingly outspoken: "Subordination, rank and degree, are of divine original; the lines are justly drawn; and he who breaks the rank assigned him by his Creator, is surely an aggressor" (62). Though Eliza's "charming frankness" (62) eventually wins Maitland over, this is not enough for the kind of equality that would ensure Eliza's domestic bliss with Charles. The "miracle" that would render her "the equal" of Charles (62) comes from a melodramatic twist of fate by which she is rewarded with social status and wealth for her impeccable character. Despite the happy denouement in the love affair between Eliza and Charles, the question still remains: is it money, social standing, or personal merit, or all combined that determine one's social acceptance in the democratic society of the new nation?

The "society of men of genuine worth" (83), that Major Bloomville so happily announces, is an exclusive one with rigid boundaries intended to keep out "unworthy" men like Captain Flashet, a former soldier of the American Revolution. Captain Flashet's pretensions to sophistication and his unwarranted claim to social ascendance are meant to instigate a rather scathing criticism against all those whose rise to social visibility was more the result of the general socio-political mayhem of the revolutionary period than their own personal merit and achievements.¹⁹ Captain Flashet's efforts to slither his way into the more "respectable" circles of American society are met with annoyance and scorn. This becomes evident when Captain Flashet pays Charles Maitland a visit:

19 Robert Munford's play *The Patriots* (c1777) is an early example of the concern that the Revolution and the ensuing transition to a republican political system would disrupt traditional social relations and forms of deference and open the way for "men who aim at power without merit" (268).

[Enter Captain Flashet]

CAPT. F: Faith, I am glad to see thee, Charles. How is't, my boy?

CHARLES: Intolerable familiarity. [Aside.] When did you come to town, Sir?

CAPT. F: Two days since, Charles.

CHARLES: Do you bring any news, Sir?

CAPT. F: News, old boy, what of news? Thou lookest plaguy glum. I should hardly have run through fire and water to see thee, if I had prophesied such a reception; and I have, bona fide, labored more to make myself visible in this apartment, than ever Alexander the great did, in cleansing the Herculean stables.

CHARLES: Idiot. [Aside.] (21, original emphasis)

Captain Flashet receives Murray's poignant satire as he embodies the threat that a distorted version of republicanism might pose in terms of the people's unchecked access to political power and social authority. Although his character is most likely designed for comic effect, Captain Flashet is both product and reflection of a highly sentimental patriotic discourse reminiscent of the "glorious" American Revolution and allied with a self-assuring sense—however illusory—of bravery and honor. Captain Flashet boasts of having served "under the great WASHINGTON" [...]; of being "admitted into all WASHINGTON'S councils—finger next to the thumb—nobody but Captain Flashet, Captain Flashet, at every turn" (22). For people like Captain Flashet, whose claims to personal merit are totally unfounded, the new political system with its egalitarian promises can only magnify their limitations and weaknesses, eventually turning American society into Alexander Hamilton's greatest fear, an "imprudent democracy" (qtd. in Zinn 95).²⁰ Captain Flashet personifies the terrifying prospect of the abuse of power in a democratic society. When he speaks to Robert, Charles Maitland's servant, Flashet is unnecessarily offensive, betraying his own insecurity in his effort to forge for himself an identity of social superiority:

CAPT. F: Here you, Mr. Grey Hairs, where is my friend Charles?

ROBERT: My master, Sir, is very busy, and can't be interrupted at present.

CAPT. F: Can't be interrupted, rascal?

20 Alexander Hamilton shared with other Federalists the belief that the Constitution be designed in such a fashion to assure that the few would be the predominant force in the nation's government. For more information on Hamilton's vision of the social and political future of the United States, see Ferling 172–200.

ROBERT: Rascal, Sir! This is a name which I never yet received from either of my masters!

CAPT. F: Don't prate, old fellow, don't prate, I say; or, as I am a soldier, I will lend thee a blow that shall lay thee as stiff as was Julius Cesar [sic], when he was beheaded by Oliver Cromwell. [...] If we men of the sword do not exert ourselves, and be seen in our place, we shall be treated with as little respect as a dead Carthaginian. (56, original emphasis)

Unlike Flashet, however, members of the upper class approach equality with a confidence pertaining to their social status, and a new sense of entitlement as they undertake to safeguard republican values and uphold social justice and morality. Charles exhibits genuine concern for the problems of the less privileged and serves as a heroic figure, a source of inspiration for the lower classes:

CHARLES: Hast thou visited our friends in Stricken Alley, as I requested?

ROBERT: Oh! Sir! Could you have heard their lamentations, I am sure it would have melted you!

CHARLES: Lamentations, Robert?

ROBERT: Yes, Sir, for at the same time that I gave them your liberal benefaction, I informed them of your intended departure; and such a general shout of sorrow, old as I am, I never before heard.

CHARLES: Poor unfortunates!

ROBERT: And then such blessings as they poured on you—his reward will be great, said one—It cannot exceed his deservings, said another—May the good God protect him, said all.

CHARLES: I feel enriched by their united benedictions.

ROBERT: But what, dear Sir, will become of them?

CHARLES: They shall still be my care. (45-46)

Although in the social structure of Murray's play the American elite seems to ensure stability and coherence through their political control and hegemonic influence, there is a fleeting glimpse of a rift in the democratic process of the new nation. For one thing, the reference to the Whiskey Rebellion brings to mind a major incident of domestic friction not only over issues of taxation but also over the legal framework of a democratic society. By having Captain Flashet—a character bordering on caricature—proudly proclaim Washington's "quelling [of] the whiskey insurrection" (22), Murray avoids attaching to it more political gravity than a social comedy would allow. Nevertheless,

the implications of the need for social order and compliance to the laws of the government become clear.²¹

Furthermore, there is a passing mention of the mechanics as an emerging urban class with expanding economic horizons. In Maitland's words, "[h]ad Charles taken it into his head to have fallen in love with the cherry-cheek'd daughter of any reputable mechanic, with whom I could have clubb'd the difference and met on the true point of brotherhood, I might, perhaps, have been satisfied" (17). Maitland's reference to the mechanics hints at the Federalists' courting of the mechanic community for continued political support. While in the first years of the Republic, mechanics of all ranks sided with the Federalists' plan for the creation of a strong nation with an international appeal, by the 1790s they were gradually drawn closer to the Democratic Republicans' more liberal ideology that promised a decentralized power-structure and a transition from a privileged economy to a more egalitarian one (Rock 71-72).²²

Gender Politics in *The Medium*

With the political atmosphere of the 1790s pervading Murray's sentimental comedy, the political call for a national consciousness that would balance assertive individuality with public morality blends with the emergent cultural discourse of domesticity. Ostensibly moving within the confines of the domestic sphere, the women in the play embody both the dynamic optimism of republican rhetoric and the shortcomings inherent in the implementation of its democratic tenets.²³ *The Medium* focuses on a specific group of Ameri-

21 The Whiskey Rebellion (1791) refers to the tax on all distilled products that the Federalist government under George Washington imposed. American farmers resisted the tax, very often by resorting to violence against federal officials. However, the political connotations of this measure were far deeper than a tax injuring the economic interests of a certain part of the population. The Federalist government made open accusations against Democratic Republican societies for fueling the revolt; see Kornblith and Murrin 54.

22 See also Young.

23 Although the Revolution had provided the political framework for American women to envision a distinct social role for themselves, the reality was deeply disappointing. As Joan Hoff has argued, "there is no conclusive evidence that the War of Independence made married women bona-fide citizens of the new republic or that the legal status of married or single women improved significantly in other less tangible areas of civil life in the first three or four decades following the end of the War of Independence" (49).

can women—upper-class, educated women—underlining their common concerns and aspirations. While Murray returns to the issue of women's education in the play, she does so as part of her larger socio-political vision of an ordered republic with civic-minded citizens.²⁴ For Murray, lack of education for both American men and women signals an alarming possibility of cultural disorientation in the midst of the new nation's quest for an identity. As Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen have pointed out, "Murray has no patience for those illiterate 'unlettered' blank slates who are dangerous in a democracy" (180). In *The Medium*, although Captain Flashet's ignorance and self-important airs mark him as a ridiculous figure, his lack of education fuels serious anxieties about the future of the American Republic. Captain Flashet's distorted use of language inspires intense worry about the ability of American citizens to comprehend the new national standards and to live up to republican expectations.²⁵ When it comes to the women characters, Miss Dorinda Scornwell is Captain Flashet's female counterpart in her pretentiousness and ignorance:

CAPT. F: [...] you are the quintessence of all loveliness, and your beauty exceeds even that of Medusa!—that head becomes you infinitely—and, if I believed in fairies, I should conceive you to be the divine Erebus, whom the fiddler Jason, with his golden bow, redeemed from the lower regions, whither she had sailed with King Agamemnon, after his conquest of Bohemia.

MISS SC: I am no reader, Sir; and, of course, these are names, which are not familiar to me—Were they English, French, or Spanish, Sir? (68, original emphasis)

However, in Miss Scornwell's case, her superficiality and snobbish adherence to etiquette hide a problematic personality untouched by the regenerative impact of republican discourse. Her poor judgment and arrogance prevent her from acknowledging Eliza's exceptional character, contemptuously discarding her as "a low bred girl," "a kind of upper servant" (72). Blinded by her jealousy

24 This is a position held by both Federalists and Democratic Republicans who believed that an educated citizenry was essential for the survival of the American Republic; see Wagoner 31-43.

25 The fear of the vulnerability of all republics was also expressed by Mercy Otis Warren in her romantic tragedies *The Sack of Rome* (1790) and *The Ladies of Castile* (1790). In both cases, the republics collapse through the degeneration of language and morals. For more information on the close connection between political issues and the use of language in the early Republic, see Gustafson; Kramer.

for Eliza, she speaks ill of her to Colonel Mellfont, exhibiting a vindictive attitude:

COL. M: I was informed she was a young person of superior worth and accomplishments.

MISS SC: It is a gross misrepresentation, Sir; [...]

COL. M: Your sentiments, Madam, are a perfect contrast to those of Charles Maitland; and you forgive me, if, in a point so nice, I suspend my judgment. [...] [Exit Colonel Mellfont profoundly bowing.]

MISS SC: Audacious, ill-mannered fellow! But this same dirt-sprung Eliza of their's [sic] shall pay for all. Yes; I will be revenged, if it is in the power of a woman's tongue to speak those daggers, the wounds of which are mortal! [Runs off precipitately.] (73)

The antipode of Miss Scornwell is the aptly named Matronia Aimwell, a female paragon of virtue, modesty, and reason. Matronia is a middle-aged single woman who embodies the possibility for an alternative social role for American women, one that is not frowned upon by society but highly esteemed. When Matronia first appears in the play, she has come to talk business with Mr. Maitland:

MATR: I have invested the whole of my property in a bank stock—I have immediate occasion for one thousand pounds, for which I will give you my note; there are some formalities attendant on drawing money out of our public repositories, which I am willing to spare myself; and, if you can conveniently furnish me with this sum on my engagement that it shall be returned to you in one month, the purpose, the whole purpose [bowing.] of my visit here this morning, will be pleasingly answered. (24-25, original emphasis)

Matronia's determination and acumen are sharply juxtaposed with Maitland's ridiculous assumption that she has come with the intention of making a marriage proposal to him:

MATR: Well, this is singular, upon my word; ha, ha, ha, truly ridiculous. It is beyond a doubt, that this good old gentleman supposed me a candidate for the vacant place in his elegant mansion! Surely it should teach me a lesson; for, if pursuits, far from being reprehensible, and a purpose that indisputably wears the garb of virtue, cannot shield from injurious suspicion, how are the votaries of folly exposed to the multiplied shafts of censure! Unhappy sex!

Whose ways are environed with peril; surely we should not fail hourly to invoke the guardian care of attending angels. (25)

Although Matronia laughs at this misunderstanding, she nevertheless realizes the precarious social position of women who remain vulnerable in a society still entrenched in gender bias. However, Maitland's rather dismissive comments that "*women are women*" and "there is no calculating *the caprices of the sex*" (23, original emphasis) are undercut both by Matronia's own prudence and discretion and his own rashness to draw unfounded conclusions when it comes to judging women, just like he did with Eliza. In the line of female characters, Matronia stands out as an early example of an independent woman who moves with ease and confidence within the domestic and public spheres. She successfully combines her autonomous existence with her dedicated commitment to the well-being of her niece's family. At no point does she forsake women's domestic role and marital obligations. She supports the more "republican" view of marriage as a woman's choice based not only on love but also on respect and admiration. When she finds out that her niece, Mrs. Bloomville, married a "worthy" man without really loving him, but because her "vanity was flattered" (76), her advice becomes catalytic:

MATR: [...] you betrayed the tender confidence and fond attachment of a worthy man!—implanted mid his fairest hopes the bitter seeds of anguish, and did him a most heinous injury

MRS. B: Tell me, revered woman, thou who formed my youth to virtue, is there no way by which I may recover the path of honour?

MATR: [...] let your husband's wishes become your future study, and rectitude shall once more crown your hours. [...] Respect your husband's virtues—dwell on each splendid trait that marks his character; if he has faults, extend the ready mantle; let them not harbor in your bosom; but, far as you may, erase them from remembrance. (77-78)

The ending of the play offers a proper melodramatic denouement with Mrs. Bloomville totally reformed after following Matronia's advice about proper wifely conduct. Moreover, Eliza is finally united with Charles with the blessings of Maitland, Miss Scornwell apologizes for her unjust behavior, Captain Flashet remains conveniently absent, and "virtue" reigns "triumphant" in American society. Hence, the ending of the play smoothes over political dissonance and ideological discrepancy and leaves an aura of optimism with

most of the characters having reached a point of reformation and awareness as they converge toward the abstract ideal of personal and public virtue.

Conclusion

Despite the tenuous position of theater in the post-revolutionary United States, dramatic writing was invested with special significance as a direct response to the cultural call for a distinctly American drama and the political need to mold public understandings of a republican American identity. Plays like Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) and William Dunlap's *The Father; or, American Shandyism* (1789) and *André* (1798) were a most welcome addition to the largely British repertoire of plays performed on the American stage in the late eighteenth century. Although early American playwrights relied heavily on the stylistic devices of European drama, the content of their plays promoted an incipient, yet vibrant, nationalistic rhetoric of American exceptionalism through patriotic effusions and evocations of revolutionary ideals. In a similar vein, the handful of American women who ventured into playwriting in the post-revolutionary years found in the theater a public forum for articulating their own vision of the changing American society and culture. The plays by Mercy Otis Warren, Susanna Rowson, and Judith Sargent Murray not only exhibit an acute awareness of the historical events of the time and their political significance, but also bring the question of women's social role into an ideological framework of republican regeneration, individual liberty, and empowerment.

In *The Medium*, the republican discourse of the American Revolution merges with Murray's gender concerns, political beliefs, and class consciousness framing the image of a society in the process of social and cultural redefinition. It is within this context that Murray finds in the theater the space to align the concept of republican womanhood with the revolutionary ideas of personal freedom and equality. Despite the still precarious position of women in American society, Murray offers an image of femininity that exhibits emotional strength, self-fulfillment, and sound judgment. Without denouncing modesty as the most valued defining principle of femininity and the domestic sphere as the most cherished realm of women, Murray's female characters are given a space for maneuvering in their options and decisions without compromising the norms of respectability and propriety. Matronia and Eliza, both in their own distinct ways, seem to have internal-

ized the spirit of personal autonomy so pervasive in the public discourse of the time. Even Mrs. Bloomville, who initially shows a rather irresponsible stance toward her marriage, embarks on a process of self-awareness and reformation, instigated by Matronia's sensible instructions, and achieved through her own capacity for critical thinking. Miss Scornwell, whose lack of substantial education has reduced her to a ridiculous—yet bitter—figure, is effectively contained at the end of the play where it is made pretty clear that the dawning American society is one that rewards people with integrity and dignity rather than people with misguided values and blind adherence to social pretensions.

What makes *The Medium* a particularly intriguing sample of early American dramatic writing—apart from the fact that it was written by a woman—is its political complexity in the sense that it uncovers a web of social relationships, cultural attitudes, and ideological positions. By writing a play—and expecting to see it produced—Murray steps into the public world of theater and politics more daringly and assertively. In a way, she abandons the safety of her previous writings, engages with a genre that has a more direct appeal to people, and successfully explores the emotional intensity and didactic force of dramatic dialogue. *The Medium* moves beyond its obvious affiliation with the concept of republican womanhood and exhibits Murray's keen understanding of the subtle issues at stake in a society still in a transitional phase of political redefinition and cultural restructuring.

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