
Reviewed by Keri Holt, Utah State University

*New England Women Writers, Secularity, and the Federalist Politics of Church and State* provides an eye-opening study of the interconnected relationships involving religion, politics, and women’s writing in the early US. Spanning the years from the 1790s through the 1870s, Gretchen Murphy’s book examines five writers who are usually studied in relation to the politics and aesthetics of sentiment: Judith Sargent Murray, Sally Sayward Wood, Lydia Sigourney, Catherine Sedgwick, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though sentimentalism certainly plays a significant role in their writing, Murphy presses readers to consider their work outside of “scholarly concern[s] with women’s domestic power” and recognize the public and partisan dimensions of their religious content (187). By examining these writers’ engagement with the politics of the Federalist Party in conjunction with debates over religious disestablishment, Murphy’s book offers exciting opportunities to situate women as creative and influential agents of partisan politics, while also illuminating literature’s role in negotiating the relationship between church and state throughout the nineteenth century.

Murphy’s emphasis on examining the “imbrication of the theological and the political in women’s writing” is a hallmark of the postsecular turn in studies of American religion (7). Rejecting the longstanding thesis that US culture is defined by a gradual progression from religious to secular social values, this postsecular approach takes a more synchronous view, examining how religion adapts alongside, rather than in opposition to, secular discourse. Murphy clearly positions her study within this postsecular framework, arguing that these women wrote to facilitate “a process of social and cultural change that did not eradicate religion or cordon it off into private inner experience but rather redistributed it” (9). She explores this redistribution specifically in relation to religious disestablishment, examining how these writers used literature to negotiate the separation between church and state throughout the nineteenth century. For Murphy, these writers saw their writing as an effective means of positioning religion as a “basis of republican nationalism” outside of the institutional power of the state—a position that was deeply rooted in the political ideology of the Federalist Party.

Murphy’s attention to the politics and influence of the Federalist Party is one of the most significant contributions of this monograph, particularly regarding the role that women

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played in promoting and adapting Federalist principles. To be sure, analyzing these writers in relation to Federalist politics might seem odd given the historical scope of the study. Although the careers of Murray and Wood coincide with years when the Federalist Party was an active presence in politics, most of the book covers women’s writing published after 1820, by which time the Federalist Party ceased to exist. Yet federalism continued to influence US politics and culture throughout the nineteenth century, as historians and political scientists such as David Waldstreicher, Marshall Foletta, and Jonathan J. Den Hartog have shown. Literary scholarship, however, has been much slower to engage with Federalist politics and its lasting cultural impact. By highlighting the important role that literature played in promoting Federalist ideologies and identifying women as leading voices of Federalist thought, Murray means to remedy this “lack of conversation between political historians and literary scholars” (30). In doing so, her work opens the door for productive cross-disciplinary conversations that can lead political scientists and historians to prioritize the political roles of women and literary texts even as it prompts literary scholars to consider the partisan dimensions of literary and religious discourse in the early US.

While Murphy’s critical engagement with Federalist politics is extensive, there are some surprising gaps in her engagement with Federalist scholarship, particularly Hartog’s *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (2015). Hartog, too, explores how Federalist political philosophy influenced public understandings of the relationship between religion and the nation, and Murphy might have addressed the alignments and divergences in their respective studies. Hartog’s inattention to both literature and the role of women in his study of religion and Federalist politics, for instance, illuminates a crucial gap in Federalist studies that Murphy seeks to fill, and it would be helpful to see her engage Hartog’s research in detail, as well as with the scholarship featured in his coedited collection, *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States* (2019). This later volume specifically addresses the relationship between the Federalist Party and the disestablishment debates from the perspective of male ministers, politicians, and writers.

Drawing on the scholarship of historians and political scientists to situate these writers in relation to Federalist ideologies and debates over religious disestablishment, Murphy’s book is firmly grounded in the methods of literary analysis. Each chapter focuses on a single author, examining their respective engagements with the Federalist Party and individual religious background before moving into detailed close readings of their literary texts. Her chapters on Murray and Stowe stand out for their detailed assessments
of literary form as Murphy investigates the dialogic multigenre structure of Murray’s *The Gleaner* (1789) and Stowe’s strategic juxtapositions of narrative perspective in *Old Town Folks* (1869) and *Poganuc People* (1878). Murphy ultimately makes two very different arguments about the political implications of these works, arguing that Murray’s miscellaneous style modeled a “private, naturalized form of liberal Protestantism” that encouraged “openness and inquiry,” while Stowe uses her novels to imagine a “religious privatization that joins evangelicalism and libertarianism in public discourse” (58; 150). Nevertheless, in both cases, her careful close readings persuasively illustrate how literature provided a space to provide religious guidance that could influence the state without being an instrument of the state.

Especially impressive is Murphy’s engagement with biography. Literary scholars are often reluctant to examine texts in relation to the lives of their authors, a legacy of New Criticism and deconstructionist critiques of authorial intent. Murphy, however, makes a compelling case for why biography is an indispensable tool for examining how these women incorporated and adapted Federalist principles. According to Murphy, these writers’ interests and investments in Federalism were “intensely personal, bound up in childhood loyalties and prejudices,” and she turns to biography as a means of illuminating how they used their writing “as a vehicle for Federalist ideals” (116, 92). In the Lydia Sigourney chapter, for example, Murphy dives deeply into the author’s childhood experiences growing up “between servitude and kinship” within the wealthy Lathrop family. In doing so, she examines how Sigourney’s early engagements with class differences and social mobility led her to support and champion Federalist principles of inclusion and toleration, as well as the need for hierarchical social structures, within her poetry (88). Likewise, Murphy explores Catherine Sedgwick’s personal struggles as she contemplated joining the Unitarian church in the 1820s, arguing that her novel, *Redwood* (1824), represents her attempt to mediate the conflicts between liberal and orthodox religious beliefs at stake in the Unitarian controversy. By interweaving her analysis of Sedgwick’s biography with close readings of the novel, Murphy convincingly illustrates how Sedgwick positioned literature as a means of combining and mediating religious zeal and religious order in the service of republican principles, which, in turn, was a core component of Federalist political thought.

Another notable contribution of Murphy’s work concerns her attention to texts that have been little studied within the field. While the importance of Murray’s *The Gleaner* is often noted, for instance, its complicated multivoiced structure makes it challenging to study, and Murphy’s detailed analysis is a welcome addition to scholarship surrounding
Murray’s work. Likewise, Murphy’s focus on Stowe’s rarely studied novels *Oldtown Folks* and *Poganuc People* provides new avenues for evaluating the regional, religious, and political dimensions of Stowe’s expansive corpus of writing.

Murphy’s chapter on Sally Sayward Wood, however, marks her most substantial addition to studies of American women’s writing. Wood’s work attracted some attention as part of feminist recovery efforts in the 1990s, but her writing has long deserved more thorough critical interest. Focusing primarily on Wood’s first novel *Julia and the Illuminated Baron* (1800), Murphy highlights Wood’s efforts to combine Federalist principles about civic virtue with literary narrative to imagine a “private but public Christianity” (80). In doing so, Murphy situates Wood’s writing in relation to the partisan dynamics of the Bavarian Illuminati crisis and the Sandemanian religious movement in the late 1790s, providing new political and religious contexts for evaluating the political dynamics, not just of Wood’s writing, but other gothic fiction of the 1790s.

In closing, I return to my opening point about how this book reframes the critical discourse of sentimentalism, which has dominated literary studies of the politics of women’s writing in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. By incorporating a study of religious disestablishment and Federalist politics into literary studies, Murphy provides a new way of understanding the political stakes of women’s writing that is connected to, but not solely dependent upon, sentimentalism. For Murphy, “The frames of sentimentalism and Federalism overlap.” Her purpose is not “to displace sentimentality as an explanatory category or formal quality of these works”; instead, she wishes “to understand its imbrication with and inflection by this historically specific strand of New England women’s political and religious thought” (26). *New England Women Writers, Secularity, and the Federalist Politics of Church and State* successfully illustrates the productive outcomes of examining sentimentalism in these “imbricated” terms. By positioning these women writers as influential proponents of Federalist ideology and innovative agents of religious disestablishment, Gretchen Murphy provides a generative starting point for tracing the intersectional relationships among religion, gender, politics, religion, and literature in future scholarship.