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CATHERINE O'DONNELL KAPLAN. *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

In an era of increased concern over the conditions of possibility for interdisciplinary scholarship, particularly in the field of early American history, special attention should be drawn to those works that practice contextualization as a kind of close, literary reading of historical texts. Such is the accomplishment of Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan in her new and first book, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship*. A student of literature turned scholar of history, she manages to be an excellent practitioner of both. Kaplan places intellectual life in early America squarely in the contexts of eighteenth-century concerns for a culture of lettered politeness, and the traumatic partisanship of the mid to late 1790's, illustrating the profound tensions that came about at the borderline between these cultural forces. Her band of literary critics and anthologists, all of Federalist leanings, are more than effective windows into the life of the mind and its relationship to politics in the period,

Kaplan's figures hoped that their publication of circulating literary magazines would carve out a space of polite intellectual and cultural exchange at least somewhat freed from the ideological demands of a heavily politicized populace. A small group of Federalist intellectuals went to battle with the naïve Jeffersonian hope that "republican liberty would reveal a natural consensus among the people" (p. 25). Most of the book is devoted to Elihu Hubbard Smith and Joseph Dennie, while the last part of the book focuses on Boston anthologists who published the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*. Smith hoped to practice a liberal and community-creating open-mindedness while mounting an increasingly Burkean critique of blind faith in the inevitability of progress. In so far as this faith was identified with the Francophile character of Jeffersonian republicanism, Joseph Dennie picked up on this mounting Federalist criticism and put it directly to the uses of ideological warfare. His *Port-Folio* was the launching pad for many an elitist rant against the apotheosis of the "people," as well as many a just, if not polite, rail against the slave owning Jefferson and his supposed cloak of liberty. Kaplan observes rather interestingly that while the partisan codes of the *Port-Folio* helped to create shared communities of Federalist sentiment, in its single-minded pursuit of republican hypocrisy the magazine lost its ability to create real opportunities for moderate reform and successful political action. In the aftermath of Federalist defeat, and in the company of the Boston Anthologists who hoped to create spaces in which enlightened gentlemen could transcend politics, Dennie's *Port-Folio* itself had to adjust to a more consensual and bi-partisan intellectual and political culture. This was a world in which both major political parties, and the reading public that supported them, had absorbed the lesson that neither of them could claim to speak with the true and unadulterated voice of the nation.

Pointing at a broader significance, Kaplan's problem is the role of purely intellectual activity in a democratic republic, and it is not too much to say that she, like the subjects she writes about, wants to give attentive readers the awareness of spaces of thought and conversation that are not constantly being forced into the rubrics of partisanship or "Americanism." Throughout the book, she refers to the Jeffersonian belief in the fundamental unity of a republican polity and the singular voice of the people in politics, both as a perception her subjects held and a fairly accurate historical description of the Jeffersonian project. Sure enough, Jefferson came to power convinced that his party represented the "spirit of 1776", but this strikes me as a different kind of assumption than that attributed to him by Kaplan, especially for someone who built the first political party. We have an alternative picture left by Jefferson himself, writing to Destutt de Tracy in 1811 about the failures of the French Revolution: "the

republican government of France was lost without a struggle, because the party of “*un et indivisible*” had prevailed; no provincial organizations existed to which the people might rally under authority of the laws.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than a simple nationalist faith in the uniformity of the people, Jeffersonian republicanism can be seen as an effort to create political space where the constituent action of the people in the revolution could be institutionalized and remembered in the new nation, an effort aimed at preventing “the people” from becoming an abstract category of discourse. Federalist intellectuals really did fight this effort, and doing so through belles-lettres rather than pure politics in retrospect seems only slightly less political. In this way, Kaplan’s book, which deserves great admiration and respect, opens the way for historians to grapple not only with the history of intellectual and scholarly life in a different perspective, but the history of what we might call a politics of scholarship as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Desutt de Tracy, January 26, 1811, in *Jefferson: Writings*, Merrill D. Peterson, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1246