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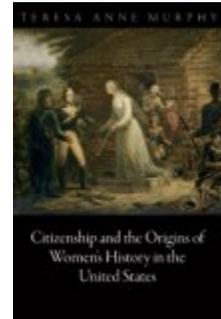
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Teresa Anne Murphy. *Citizenship and the Origins of Women's History in the United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4489-2.

Reviewed by Elizabeth R. Varon (Corcoran Department of History, University of Virginia)

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This splendid book charts the quest by female authors such as Lydia Maria Child and Caroline Dall to elaborate a usable past for those seeking to expand the purview of female citizenship. The book begins with a trenchant analysis of eighteenth-century discourse on women's role as emblems of civilization, a discourse most fully realized in the writings of Scottish Enlightenment writers in the Common Sense school, such as John Millar and Lord Kames. These men offered up a stage theory of women's history, in which the differentiation of gender roles was a marker of social progress: advanced societies recognized that women's delicacy ill suited them for manual labor or political intrigue and suited them ideally for domesticity. Stage theory posited that women were less patriotic than men because their relationship to the state was mediated, and their primary allegiances were personal and not abstract.

This discourse was the context for what Murphy calls the first wave of women's history, in the late eighteenth century, by authors such as William Alexander. These works retained the focus on progress and domesticity, but offered a new specificity in contrasting negative examples of female politicization, degeneracy, and corruption (ancient Greece and modern France) with positive examples of domestic citizenship (the ancient Roman republic). The upshot was that women's civic role was to be chaste, virtuous companions and peacemakers.

American writers, in the midst of the ferment of the Revolutionary era, challenged the assumptions of stage theory and domestic citizenship, and began to elaborate an alternate theory of political citizenship. Abigail Adams argued that women's patriotism, precisely be-

cause it was not motivated by pride or emoluments, was more selfless than men's, while Judith Sargent Murray retooled stage theory to assert that the most advanced societies were characterized not merely by a complementarity in gender roles but by an acknowledgment of women's equality to men in the key traits of fortitude, love of country, eloquence, and literary accomplishment. Murray looked to history—not only to the classical past and to female monarchs such as Elizabeth of England and Isabella of Spain, but to recent, proximate examples of female achievement, such as her fellow New England intellectual Mercy Otis Warren—to furnish proof of women's capacity for civic virtue and sound judgment.

Such work elicited a backlash, and renewed efforts to promote a differentiated citizenship that celebrated women's domesticity, with a new emphasis, evident in works such as Hannah Mather Crocker's 1818 *Observations on the Real Rights of Women*, on the appropriateness of benevolent work as an outlet for female virtue. But in the 1830s, a vanguard of female authors offered up a systematic repudiation of stage theory and of domestic citizenship. Lydia Maria Child in her 1835 *History of the Condition of Women* rejected the spirit of self-congratulation in stage theory, and offered a far more ambivalent assessment of women's progress. She took note of the economic productivity, autonomy, and authority of women in the premodern world and she linked this reconsideration of the past to a critique of American slavery, with its degradation of labor. Pushing beyond the work of Murray, Child highlighted examples from history of female political acumen and leadership, and of contributions to public life by female intellectuals. In her view, it was not women's domestic virtues but

their labor—outside of as well as within the home—that generated national progress. Sarah Grimke and Margaret Fuller in turn built upon Childs’ work, emphasizing that because men and women shared fundamental characteristics they shared the same moral and political duties.

In the 1840s, “the political activities of women in the past became an explicit justification for the right of women to vote” (p. 111). Activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Henry Blackwell invoked the successful leadership of female heads of state such as Maria Theresa and Catherine the Great as proof that women were well suited to govern and that women’s exclusion from politics in the United States was both unnatural and symptomatic of their decline in status during the modern era of domesticity. Reformers also argued that domesticity had pushed women out of useful trades and professions, such as obstetrics, at which they had once excelled. The keynote of these appeals to history was environmentalism: whatever deficiencies women had shown were not innate but the products of an oppressive environment that had deprived them of opportunities for self-improvement and achievement.

Murphy’s story, though, is not linear. The linkage of women’s history to women’s rights provoked another backlash, as mavens of true womanhood such as Sarah Josepha Hale moved to reinvigorate domestic citizenship and keep political citizenship at bay. This they did by grafting stage theory onto nineteenth-century romantic nationalism and antebellum evangelical perfectionism. Woman’s superior moral virtue, nurtured by domesticity and safeguarded by her male protectors, so the argument ran, was making possible the remarkable and singular progress of the Anglo-Saxon race. The work of history which best embodied this argument was Elizabeth Ellet’s three-volume history of women in the Revolution. It celebrated women’s sacrifices and struggles on behalf

of their families, neighbors, and localities, but denied that such familial nationalism was in any meaningful way political.

Murphy’s story ends with the two figures—Caroline Dall and Paulina Wright Davis—who aimed most explicitly at discounting the arguments of Hale and the nouveau stage theorists. Dall sought to expose the insidious operation of misogyny on public opinion, noting for example that male professors of the classics had misused ancient history to suggest that it proved female inferiority. But Dall did not merely invoke classical heroines and female exemplars from European history: she urged American women to draw inspiration from modern heroines, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller. These women had stood firm in the face of discouraging trends—namely the decline, since the colonial era, in the scope of women’s political and economic opportunities.

The greatest strength of this book is that Murphy does not merely trace and juxtapose these competing arguments: she truly connects them, and establishes that these debates were literally and overtly an ongoing dialogue between the various thinkers. Child had read Alexander and reviewed Fuller. Child’s own work on women’s history was in circulation in libraries from England to the Deep South, and is echoed in the notebooks of female academy students and in the rhetoric of labor reformers in New England. Child and Fuller appeared in Hale’s history as cautionary tales—as women who had strayed from their domestic responsibilities. Murphy suggests in her conclusion that all of these women set the stage for Mary Beard, Betty Freidan, and Eleanor Flexner. “Without reading the past clearly, it is impossible to go to the root of present evils,” Caroline Dall had proclaimed in a February 1855 edition of *The Una*. Try as they might, the forces of tradition could not mute this clarion call.

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