



A Mirror of the Connecticut Wits: A New Take on Noah Webster

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ABSTRACT: This study places Noah Webster in the literary tradition of the Connecticut Wits, drawing on primary and secondary sources, including histories, biographies, and literary studies. While not classified among the Connecticut Wits, Webster reflected much of their opinions, closely mirroring Timothy Dwight and others in fearing democratic reforms and defending the role of religion in the public square. With the bicentennial of Webster's dictionary approaching, scholars should examine his connections with one of the first literary movements in the new nation's history.

KEY WORDS: Noah Webster, Connecticut Wits, Hartford Wits, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow.

INTRODUCTION

On October 19, 1807, sitting at his desk in New Haven, Connecticut, Noah Webster wrote a letter to his old college classmate Joel Barlow. While divided by politics and religion, Webster thanked Barlow for his "favorable opinion of my Dictionary and of my further designs" and, in turned, praised his friend for his own literary accomplishments. Webster also looked back a quarter century when Barlow was one of "the only friends who in 1783 ventured to encourage me to publish my *Spelling Book*." While Webster could not resist bragging that his speller continued to prove successful, noting that "more than 200,000 copies now sell annually," he looked forward to reading Barlow's *Columbiad*, an epic poem on Christopher Columbus and the fledgling United States. "I shall be happy to receive your opinion on any subject favorable to American literature and to be of any service of you in the pursuit," Webster wrote in conclusion (Warfel, 1953, 292-294).

A year later, Webster wrote Barlow again, explaining why he would not review the *Columbiad*. Besides noting he was in poor health and had a busy summer, Webster got to the heart of the matter, insisting that he had "a doubt whether I can execute this purpose in a manner to satisfy you and my own conscience at the same time." While Webster had no problems with the literary aspects of the poem, he disagreed with his old friend on religious matters. "I cannot in a review omit a severe censure on the atheistical principles it contains." Webster added that politics and religious matters "separated" Barlow "from many of your old friends." However, despite their disagreements, Webster left no room for doubt about the important role Barlow had played in his life. "No man on earth not allied to me by nature of marriage had so large a share in my affections as Joel Barlow until you renounced the religions which once preached and which I believe," Webster wrote. "But with my views of the principles you have introduced into the *Columbiad* I apprehend my silence will be the most agreed to you, and most expedient for Your old friend" (Warfel, 1953, 308-309).

Despite those disagreements, Webster continued to think highly of Barlow's literary abilities. Whatever their differences on religion and other matters, Webster and Barlow were both affiliated with talented literary circle based in Connecticut. With the bicentennial of Webster's dictionary in 2028 on the horizon, renewed interest in America's premier lexicographer is warranted, including determining his place his country's culture and literature. Biographies of Webster such as Unger's (1998) and Kendall's (2012) rightfully focus on his nationalism and his role on the public stage. But, while he did not join them in writing poetry, Webster's thinking on politics and religion mirrored the Connecticut Wits, the premier group of American writers in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Webster reflected much of that group's developments and he should be classified as the last—and certainly the most impactful—of the Connecticut Wits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While they are not studied much these days, the Connecticut Wits—also called the Harford Wits—once drew a great deal of attention from scholars and readers. However, even a century ago, Parrington (1926) noted they were garnering less attention, even at colleges

and universities. In his collection of the Connecticut Wits' poetry, Parrington (1926) included Richard Alsop, Joel Barlow, Timothy Dwight, Lemuel Hopkins, David Humphreys, and John Trumbull, all poets active in Connecticut during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In his study of the Wits, Howard (1943) focused heavily on Barlow, Dwight, Humphreys, and Trumbull, briefly touching on Hopkins, while only mentioning Alsop once.

The group's literary and political conservatism came through in all their works. "They were the literary old guard of eighteenth century Toryism, the expiring gasp of a rationalistic age, given to criticism, suspicious of all emotion, contemptuous of idealistic programs," noted Parrington (1926, xi). In his study of the Connecticut Wits, Dowling (1990) noted that through their writings Dwight and Humphreys offered a "sober vision of the new American republic as a state in which the virtue of the polity remains to be won, and can be won, moreover, only through a perpetual struggle against the source of corruption I human moral nature itself" (Dowling, 1990, 61). Dowling specifically noted that Webster's Fourth of July address in 1798 reflected the same warnings Dwight and Humphreys offered about the utopianism promised by supporters of the French Revolution, including Thomas Jefferson and his backers. "The great danger of Jeffersonian republicans as it would emerge in the United States in the last years of the eighteenth century lay for Dwight and Humphreys in the degree to which it has absorbed the abstract doctrines of Liberty and Equality promulgated by the French revolutionists, its obvious intention of importing into the young American republic precisely those utopian visions that in France, so short a time ago, had been drowned in blood and Terror," Dowling (1990, 9) noted.

While they have not garnered much attention in recent years, Humphreys is covered by Cifelli (1982) while Fitzmeir (1998) examined Dwight. Concerning the principles that Dwight and later Webster championed, Berk (1974) examined Dwight's religious thinking. Wells (2002) offered an excellent overview of Dwight's *The Triumph of Infidelity*, a poem published in 1788 that offered warnings about many of the chief principles of the Enlightenment. Buel's (2011) biography of Barlow, who broke with the rest of the Connecticut Wits on political, cultural, and religious issues, sheds considerable light on his various enterprises, from diplomacy to poetry. Hill's (2012) look at Barlow is far better on his public life, no surprise considering the author was a specialist on diplomatic history.

Scholarship on Webster shows that he followed the same path taken by Dwight and Humphreys—fellow sons of Connecticut who attended Yale just before Webster studied there—early champions of the Revolution who turned against further egalitarian and democratic reforms. In his reinterpretation of Webster's life, Rollins (1980) portrayed the lexicographer as moving away from championing reforms to submitting to religious authority and the federal government. Rollins (1989) showcased that take on his subject in his collection of Webster's autobiographical writings, an essential primary source to understand the famed writer. While far more concerned with his nationalism and efforts to develop an American culture, Unger's (1998) and Kendall's (2012) biographies of Webster reveal his increased opposition to the reforms and changes taking place in Jeffersonian and later Jacksonian America.

With the exception of Barlow, the Connecticut Wits were staunch Federalists. Both Fischer (1965) and Kerber (1970) offered memorable takes on how the Federalists viewed and opposed the social and political changes impacting America at the start of the nineteenth century. Siegel (1998) presented a striking account of how Federalists in Connecticut saw themselves as under siege during the Jeffersonian era.

The Fear of the Mob

Like so many other New England Federalists, Webster feared mob rule, which they associated with the French Revolution and Jefferson and his supporters. Soon after Jefferson's presidential election in 1800, Dwight showcased the dangers mob rule posed in "Morpheus," a poem warning Americans about the dangers of an egalitarian society. Reviewing this poem and other Federalist warnings about mobs, Kerber (1970) offered insights on Federalist thinking. "The mob is the people in their worst mood—boisterous, giddy, impassioned, unreasonable, destructive," Kerber (1970, 181) noted.

Rollins (1980) portrayed Webster as a supporter of the Enlightenment during his youth, including his time as a student at Yale and as a backer of the American Revolution. But, like other Connecticut Wits, he came to reject the Enlightenment, especially after the French Revolution.

Webster opposed efforts to expand equality, including at the ballot box, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. During the heated 1800 presidential campaign, when he backed John Adams over Thomas Jefferson, Webster engaged in a debate with English radical Joseph Priestley over the merits of democracy. "You define *democrat* with a view to explain away the odious sense annexed to the word *Democrat*," Webster sneered. "The word Democrat has been used as synonymous with the word Jacobin in France." Democrats, Webster insisted, backed "an undue opposition to or influence over government by means of private clubs, secret intrigues, or by public popular meetings which are extraneous to the constitution." In the United States, Webster insisted, "power is not in the hands of the people but of their representatives." Instead of a democracy, the United States was a "*representative Republic*," backed by responsible and informed citizens (Warfel, 1953, 207-208).

Webster continued to espouse these beliefs throughout his long life, even as he grew less active in politics. In 1840, at the age of 81, Webster's contempt for democratic politics came through clearly in a letter he sent to his favorite daughter. Weighing in on the "log cabin" campaign of Whig candidate William Henry Harrison as he looked to topple President Martin Van Buren, Webster could not hide his disgust with national affairs. Insisting he had offered his "best efforts to serve my country & advance its moral &

literary character, Webster clearly thought he had failed based on the presidential election. “The *Log Cabin*—oh how our country is degraded, when even men of respectability resort to such means to secure an election!” Webster offered his daughter a quick sketch of his political activities. “I struggled, in the days of Washington, to sustain good principles—but since Jefferson’s principles have prostrated the popular respect for sound principles, further efforts would be useless. And I quit the contest forever. (Rollins, 1989, 115).”

The Connecticut Wits had similar concerns. This was apparent even back in the 1780s when David Humphreys took the lead in working with Joel Barlow, Lemuel Hopkins, and John Trumbull in *The Anarchiad*, a mock epic going hammering supporters of more democracy in the fledgling United States. Reviewing the poem, Parrington (1926, 428-429) noted the writers “were evidently concerned at the menace of Populism” and had fought against in various forms. Even after the ratification of the Constitution, those concerns grew, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the rise of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency. In the sonnet he wrote after George Washington’s death at the end of 1799, David Humphreys warned that other leaders—namely Jefferson as he challenged John Adams—would be more willing to play to the mob. “Who shall entice/Columbia’s sons to tread the paths of vice?” Humphreys demanded (Parrington, 1926, 412). While he did not help write *The Anarchiad*, Dwight’s contempt for democracy, which often sprang from his religious background (Berk, 1974). Fittingly, Dwight’s *The Triumph of Infidelity*, where he ruminated on the dangers of democratic reforms, came out shortly after *The Anarchiad* (Wells 2002).

While Barlow turned away from Federalist concerns about democracy to back the French Revolution and join the ranks of Jefferson’s supporters (Buel, 2011), the other Connecticut Wits remained firmly attached to the anti-reformist views they championed after the American Revolution. So did Webster who lived far longer than Dwight, Barlow, and the other Wits. At the age of 76 in 1835, with Andrew Jackson wrapping up his second term, Webster published a letter noting that his opinions had changed since his support of the Revolution as he pummeled the political culture of the 1830s. Webster insisted it was “unquestionable” that the “subject of government and some opinions that are now maintained by *both* and *by all* political parties are fallacious and deceptive.” Webster added a characteristically pessimistic note. “To err is the lot of humanity (Rollins, 1989, 113).” Dwight and the other Connecticut Wits save Barlow would have surely agreed.

Religion in the Public Square

Even before the dramatic conversion experience in 1808 that made him an evangelical. Webster served as a strong advocate of Christianity playing a large role in the new republic. Even in the introduction to his “Blue-Back Speller” published in 1783, Webster waded into religious matters, explaining why he removed the name of God in the biblical quotes included for young readers. “The reason of this omission is important and obvious,” Webster wrote. “Nothing has a greater tendency to lessen the reverence which mankind ought to have for the Supreme Being, than a careless repetition of his name upon every trifling occasion (Rollins, 1989 76).”

Rooted in Congregationalist Connecticut, one of the most conservative colonies and states during the early republic, as he grew older, Webster continued to see church and state as closely tethered. He expressed that clearly in the preface to his celebrated dictionary. “The United States commenced their existence under circumstances wholly novel and unexplained in the history of nations,” Webster maintained. “They commenced with civilisation, with learning, with science, with constitutions of free government, and with that best gift of God to man, the christian religion.” Webster dedicated the dictionary to “that great and benevolent Being,” thanking God for protecting his health and life during the many years he crafted it (Rollins, 1989, 107-108).

Webster also thought that faith could unite the new country, one of the reasons he offered an edition of the Bible in 1833. “In this country there is no legislative power which claims to have the right to prescribe what version of the scriptures shall be used in the churches, or by the people,” Webster noted. “It is very important that all denominations of christians should use the same version, that in all public discourse, treaties, and controversies, the passages cited as authorities should be uniform (Rollins, 1989, 111). Webster’s commitment to religion in the public square remained unabated throughout the last five decades of his life.

With the exception of Barlow, the Connecticut Wits also included Christianity as a core element of the republic. Parrington (1926) even compared Dwight to Puritan worthies like Increase Mather. “They regarded the minister as the responsible leader of society who must not suffer his flock to be led astray,” Parrington wrote. “The church was the guardian of morality and the state was its secular arm. The truth faith must not be put in jeopardy by unfaith.” Dwight, Parrington insisted, believed letting “the commonwealth to fall into the power of the godless meant an end to all religion and morality (Parrington, 1926, xli).” Dwight would return those themes over and over in again in poems like *The Triumph of Infidelity*, *The Conquest of Canan*, and *Greenfield Hill*.

Other Connecticut Wits also played up to the importance of religion in the new nation. In “A Poem on the Industry of the United States of America,” first published in 1794, David Humphreys praised God for standing against equality. “For God, a God of order, ne’er designed./ Equal conditions for the human kind.” Humphreys insisted. The poet cheered the government “which protect what honest labor gains,” and warned that unchecked freedom would undermine prosperity. Thankfully, Humphreys continued, God blessed the new nation with its government to prevent that from happening. “Heav’n/ The general government *in trust* has giv’n,” Humphreys wrote. “Then, when ere long your fathers sleep in dust,/ Preserve, like vestal fire, that *sacred* TRUST (Parrington, 1926, 405)!” More than four decades later, Webster would have agreed with his fellow Connecticut Yankee on all of those matters.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the Book VIII of the *Columbiad*, Joel Barlow included several Connecticut Wits as his epic poem turned to the development of the arts in America. Despite his differences with most of them on religious and political grounds, Barlow praised John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, and David Humphreys for their contributions to American literature (Sherman, 2020, 269). While not included in the stanzas, Barlow paid tribute to Noah Webster in the prose accompanying the poem, very fitting considering the famed lexicographer wrote prose and not poetry, unlike his fellow Yale graduates who made up most of the Connecticut Wits. In the Postscript, Barlow acknowledged his old college friend Webster for his work on an Americanized form of English. “Noah Webster, to whose philological labors our language will be much indebted for its purity and its regularity, has pointed out the advantages of a steady course of improvement, and how it ought to be conducted,” Barlow wrote. “The Preface to his new Dictionary is an able performance. He might advantageously give it more development, with some connection, and publish it as a Prospectus to the great work he now has in hand.” (Sherman, 2020, 300).

For his part, Webster treated the Connecticut Wits kindly in *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. In making his case for why American English needed a dictionary of its own, Webster listed a host of “Americans distinguished by their writings and by their science” who could hold their own with their British counterparts. Webster included Timothy Dwight and John Trumbull on that list which included George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, James Madison, Washington Irving, John Marshall, and others. Not surprisingly, a good Federalist to the last, Webster conspicuously left Thomas Jefferson off the list. While he might have given the Sage of Monticello his due, Webster tipped his cap to one of Jefferson’s main subordinates. In 1828, more than a decade after Barlow’s death, Webster praised his old friend in the preface of the first edition of his magnum opus. “Our country has produced some of the best models of composition,” Webster claimed, signaling out the Federalist Papers, the works of the arch-Federalist congressman and orator Fisher Ames, and “(the prose) of Mr. Barlow” (Rollins, 1989, 106-107). Unlike the Connecticut Wits, Webster did not write poetry. But, educated like there were at Yale and growing up in colonial and revolutionary Connecticut, the “land of steady habits,” Webster and most of the Connecticut Wits championed the same values and principles, including suspicion of democratic reform and support for religion playing a prominent role in the public square. Nurtured and living in the conservative atmosphere of Congregationalist and Federalist Connecticut, Webster and the Connecticut Wits largely mirrored each other. For his part, Webster continued to champion the values the Connecticut Wits championed decades after most of them had passed away. With the bicentennial of Webster’s dictionary coming in 2028, scholars examining America’s most celebrated lexicographer should keep in mind where he grew up and the influences that shaped him, including his fellow Federalists the Connecticut Wits.

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