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Republicanism, Wives, and the Presidency
The Political Dilemma of Washington, Adams, and Madison

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The first three presidential spouses were thrust into a position of which there was no precedent, during a time when the role of women in politics was limited to their domestic role as guardians of virtuous children and husbands, an era in which they had no legal identity if married, and into an age which limited their civic rights and duties as citizens. As wives of the President, these women were expected to perform roles that were inherently political, and yet the idea of women in politics was anathema to those who subscribed to the varied ideals of republicanism. Confronted with such a precarious situation, each woman dealt with her time in the capital as best she could with the resources found within her own person and those at hand. The letters written by Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, Abigail Smith Adams, and Dolley Payne Todd Madison during the respective presidential administrations demonstrate the ways in which each woman addressed her ambiguous position as wife to the chief politician of the Early Republic and maneuvered through the principles of republicanism.

The political ideology of the early United States was derived from Enlightenment thought, Protestantism, and classical republicanism, an ideology that had little place for women in the political sphere.¹ Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and the other major Enlightenment thinkers never directly addressed the function and responsibilities of women in the politics that they knew and those they conjured up.² Women were only seen as wives and mothers, incapable of any real political thought or action. The American Revolution, however, changed the situation of women in the former colonies, affording them the opportunity to become involved in an enormous political statement

¹ Bloch, Ruth H., "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13, no. 11 (1987): 40.

² Kerber, Linda K., *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 15.

against a power deemed unfair and tyrannical. The political activity women could legitimately perform was nonetheless relegated to areas regarded as domestic and appropriate for women, such as boycotting British goods and spinning cloth for clothing manufacturers.³ The Revolutionary era accelerated change in the lives of women, giving them the opportunity to become more autonomous and increasing the chance that they might have more control over their lives.⁴

It is important to note that the activities of the Revolutionary women were political in and of themselves. One historian defines political behavior as “including acts, orientation to action, identifications, demands, expectations, and evaluations;” she concludes that, taking into consideration the wide range this definition covers, American women began participating in politics soon after the Puritans arrived in North America.⁵ Americans had no choice but to acknowledge the fact that women were part of the public sphere, and needed to be educated in civil matters.⁶ Women had as much a stake in the birth and formation of the new United State of America as their male counterparts did, and the experience changed attitudes toward women and their role in the public realm. The second first lady, Abigail Adams, lived through those tumultuous days, and she recounts her memories to one of her many correspondents, Mercy Otis Warren:

³ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 35-67; Matthews, Glenna, *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 56.

⁴ Norton, Mary Beth, “The Evolution of White Woman's Experience in Early America,” *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 614.

⁵ Young, Louise M., “A Women's Place in American Politics: The Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of Politics* 38, no. 3 (Aug. 1976): 295-96. Young also defines political participation as “those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy.”

⁶ Norton, 616.

You and I, my dear Madam, have trod together through one gloomy scene of war, havoc, and desolation; and we have seen our country rise superior to oppression and despotism, and take its rank among the nations, presenting at this period the *only spectacle* of a free republic which has not been revolutionized by the...power which...cries give, give while [failed examples of a republic] cry to us with an awful warning voice to behold their fate and secure ourselves by a direct opposite conduct to that which was proved fatal to them.⁷

The republic that Adams spoke of was derived from classical republicanism, Protestant theories and civic humanism; republicanism was the prevailing political theory during and after the Revolution.⁸ The republican political society was defined by its “broad permissiveness, individual liberty, and the absence of a strong central authority.”⁹ The very definition and composition of the term “republicanism” was debated, and the name “republican” was one that was fought over and heatedly disputed during the decade of the 1790s.¹⁰ A widespread tenet of republicanism was that a republican government was impermanent and frail, easily thwarted by factionalism, power struggles, war, internal decay, and the cyclical nature of history.¹¹ As Abigail Adams noted above, the citizens of this new political entity were largely well aware of the precarious position in which their chosen government was placed. The French Revolution and the subsequent

⁷ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, June 17, 1798, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams. With an Introductory Memoir by her grandson, Charles Francis Adams* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Company, 1848): 377.

⁸ Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” 40; Lewis, Jan, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 44:4 (October 1987): 690.

⁹ Howe, John R. Jr., “Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s,” *American Quarterly* vol. 19, iss. 2, pt. 1 (Summer 19 67): 154.

¹⁰ Appleby, Joyce, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 320-339, esp. 323. Appleby proposes that there were two strains of republicanism present during the Early Republic (the first derived from “chase, venerable” classical republicanism and updated by Montesquieu, and the second being liberal republicanism traced to the philosophies of Bacon, Newton, Locke, and Smith), and that these accounted for the political division between the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists.

¹¹ Howe, 154-162.

Reign of Terror had taken place before Abigail took up residence in Philadelphia as the president's wife, and she was terrified that the same disasters would occur.¹² The most important component of a successful republican government, and essentially the only element that could save such a government from self-destruction, was the existence of a virtuous citizenry, one that was wholeheartedly dedicated to the American cause.¹³

The idea of virtue in the republic was fluid, changing as the political situation of the colonies morphed into that of the new nation. The older and more traditional definition of republican virtue was one that referred to a male public spirit, in which the citizen willingly sacrificed his own ambitions in the interest of serving the common good. During the American Revolution, the term "virtue" was couched in strictly masculine language that emphasized heroism, fame, and glory; language which defined non-virtuous citizens as effeminate, lazy, cowardly, dependent, and idle.¹⁴ The conceptualization of virtue shifted, however, to encompass a definition that was much more feminine, conservative, and traditional in its connotation. In the place of disinterested public spirit came the emphasis on enlightenment, reason, and justice, though the old idea of the virtue did not entirely disappear.¹⁵ The virtuous citizen was to

¹² When John Adams lost the 1800 election to Thomas Jefferson, the nation faced one of its greatest tests; the passing of political power from one party to another, without the nation dissolving into civil war. In a letter to her son Thomas, Abigail admits her anxiety: "If the administration should get into hands which would depart from the system under which we have enjoyed so great a share of peace, prosperity and happiness, we should soon be involved in the wars and calamities which have deluged other nations in blood. We should soon become a divided and a miserable people. I have been so long a witness to the scenes which have been acted for years past, and know too well what must be endured, to have any other sensations, when I look to an elevated seat, than painful solicitude and anxiety. It is a mark at which envy, pride and malevolence will shoot their envenomed arrows." Adams to Thomas Adams, November 8, 1796, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams. With an Introductory Memoir by her grandson, Charles Francis Adams* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Company, 1848): 371.

¹³ Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 41; Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 716; Matthews, 62; Zagari, Rosemarie, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother." *American Quarterly* 44:2 (June 1992): 192-215.

¹⁴ Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 38-44.

¹⁵ Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 53.

be shaped outside of the state, namely in the home. This shift in thought had far-reaching implications for the role of women in politics, and the public and private sphere

As the realm of the private home was seen as the domain of women, the responsibility of shaping the virtuous citizenry of the American nation was placed squarely on their shoulders. Ironically, not long before, women had been negated the right to official political activity and agency. American women had been denied the right to vote even though they were purportedly represented by the elected men in Congress.¹⁶ Women were in fact restricted or barred from all aspects of the public arena: if married, women had no legal identity and barely any legal rights; they could not vote and were unable to run for public office; they were restricted in their access to public spaces; and any type of public address was frowned upon.¹⁷ And yet they were given, by various sources both religious and secular, the opportunity to influence politics through their traditional roles as mothers and wives. One might wonder if these women contained the virtue that was necessary to pass down to the younger generation. Abigail Adams, however, was firmly confident in the women of America and that they possessed the necessary virtue:

Patriotism in the female Sex is the most disinterested of all virtues. Excluded from honours and from offices, we cannot attach ourselves to the State or Government from having held a place of

¹⁶ Senator Samuel Latham Mitchill wrote to his wife frequently during his tenure in Washington; in a letter to his wife dated December 8, 1804, Mitchill states that she is one of his constituents and that he is “in some way responsible to [her] for [his] public conduct. In the theory of the Constitution, women are calculated as *political beings* [emphasis mine]. They are numbered in the census of the inhabitants to make up the amount of the population, and the Representatives are apportioned among the people according to their numbers, reckoning the females as well as the males. Though, therefore, women do not vote, they are nevertheless represented in the national government to their full amount.” One wonders what Mitchill meant by “political beings.” “Dr. Mitchill’s Letters from Washington, 1801-1813,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 58:347 (April 1879): 748.

¹⁷Matthews, 6-7.

Eminence. Even in the freest countrys our property is subject to the controul and disposal of our partners, to whom the Laws have given a soverign Authority. Deprived of a vote in Legislation, obliged to submit to those Laws which are imposed upon us, is it not sufficient to make us indifferent to the publick Welfare? Yet all History and every age exhibit Instances of patriotick virtue in the female Sex; which considering our situation equals the most Heriock of yours.¹⁸

Women, labeled as society's moral force, were seen as fully capable of reforming the "manners" of society, which alluded to the morality of individuals and personal character. By educating men and children in the correct ways of personal conduct and morality, women could shape "the fabric of society."¹⁹

Women were to accomplish this feat by employing a radically new mixture of traditional domestic roles infused with a political meaning and public consequences. As the arbiters of the morality of the American male population, "Republican mothers" and wives needed to direct, guide, and mold the character of their husbands and children. Both theorists of the Enlightenment and Protestant theologians saw that the woman was naturally suited for the education of children and men, giving motherhood an extensive social utility.²⁰ The virtue seen in women was only of the kind associated with Christianity, not the disinterested public virtue so highly valued in the late eighteenth century. Enlightenment thought enabled men to elevate women socially, but kept them out of the political sphere by claiming that they did not have the mental or emotional

¹⁸ As quoted in Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams: An American Woman* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980): 74.

¹⁹ Zagari, Rosemarie, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother." *American Quarterly* 44:2 (June 1992): 201-202; Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 700.

²⁰ Bloch, Ruth H., "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4:2 (1978): 119-120.

capacity to deal with such issues.²¹ Females did need to be properly educated in order to fulfill their highest duty, companionship for a republican man, and so female education in the home was paramount. Enlightenment thought said that women possessed human reason and with education would be able to fulfill their potential as rational mothers who could pass on valuable knowledge to their children.²² Women held the responsibility as mothers to instill in their children the qualities of civic virtue, and as wives, were meant to cultivate and sustain public virtue in their suitors and husbands. British and American moralists frequently repeated that a woman had the power to reform the character and morals of society through her natural charms.²³ The idea of the Republican Mother also had implications for the split between male and female, public and private spheres by shifting the woman's contributions to be solely located in the enclosed home, sacrificing in the interest of her children and of her country.²⁴ The development of the political atmosphere that gave birth to the philosophy of "republican motherhood" was crucial in legitimizing the existence of women in American politics. Though they were not able to participate overtly in elections, campaigns, or discussions, women could shape the political scene through their husbands and children, as well as through the domestic roles afforded to them.

The family-as-state analogy of "the little commonwealth" that was prevalent in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, brought over to America by the Puritans, had begun to lose its grip on the government of the colonies by the mid-1700s.²⁵ The

²¹ Zagarri, 210.

²² Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 42; Lewis, "The Republican Wife," 702-703; Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition," 118.

²³ Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 46.

²⁴ Norton, 618.

²⁵ Norton, 612; Young, 297.

basis of society became the institution of marriage, which played a huge role in the lives of women during the Early Republic, as well as in the lives of the women who had to serve their nation simply because they had married a man who became the President of the United States. Marriage was seen as “the highest state of human felicity, and resembles that of the beneficent beings above,” leading to an emphasis on choosing the right marriage partner. A Republican marriage was to be egalitarian, or an “exalted state of friendship.” However, the man and the woman were two parts of the whole; man was the rational head and woman was the emotional heart. Marriage was to be symmetrical, which led women and men to be excluded from areas of life not seen as feminine or masculine. The welfare of society was the main interest of the Republican marriage, and the ideal was to have no marital disagreement or individualistic tendencies.²⁶ A wife had the responsibility of maintaining her husband’s virtue, reigning in the tendencies toward power and self-interested action that might potentially destroy the ideal republic. In this way, women became envisioned as political beings.

Despite their new political importance, women were given no legal identity while married; she was instead subsumed into the legal identity of her husband. As the English jurist Blackstone said, “the most important consequence of marriage is that the husband and the wife become, in law, only one person: the legal existence of the wife is consolidated into that of the husband.”²⁷ Coverture, as this state was known, assumed that women could not maintain independent thoughts or minds while married, because she might be influenced by her husband against her will. Ancient Western traditions said that women were politically and legally irresponsible, and so could not legitimately act in

²⁶ Lewis, “The Republican Wife,” 706-711.

²⁷ As quoted in Jan Lewis, “Of Every Age Sex & Condition’: The Representation of Women in the Constitution,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15:3 (1995): 379.

their own interests.²⁸ Though the strict English legal interpretation was relaxed in some instances, by and large married women of the Early Republic had no legal identity, though ironically they did have political power.²⁹

Now that the political stage has been set for Martha, Abigail, and Dolley, how is one to determine what they actually thought of these republican principles and the ways they incorporated them into their lives as the president's wives? Writing about political issues of the day was not seen as "ladylike," but all these women said at least something about the contemporary political atmosphere or mentioned their opinions about politics in general. Martha's letters during the time of her role as first lady are limited, and the subjects typically were only about the domestic affairs or business-like replies to enquiries sent to her. Abigail is well known for her sharp wit and vast political knowledge and opinion, and was certainly not afraid to dabble in politics while in Philadelphia and the newly built White House. Dolley also participated in the political arena, though said next to nothing in writing about political affairs. Her political activity was of a most interesting kind, one that incorporated the social sphere in an ingenious way. The letters of these three women during their time as the president's wife reveal their personal thoughts about their position and their ideas about the politics of the Early Republic.³⁰

²⁸ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 147.

²⁹ See Gundersen, Joan R. and Gwen Victor Gampel, "Married Women's Legal Status in Eighteenth-Century New York and Virginia," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, vol 39, issue 1, (Jan., 1982): 114-134.

³⁰ Young states that the first three women to fill the role as the president's wife represented the cultural strands existing in America at the time: Martha Washington with her aristocratic deference, Abigail Adams with her republican tastes, and Dolley Madison's ability to influence social and political relationships through her demeanor and extraordinary hostessing skills. Certainly all three of these women approached their prescribed roles very differently.; 305.

Martha Dandridge Custis Washington is typically seen as the matronly figure that accompanied George Washington on his journey to political fame and power, though she should be awarded much applause for her work in forming the position of the president's wife and setting the precedent for her successors. Unfortunately for scholars studying her, not many of her letters still exist and only four between Martha and George. Some of her letters were drafted by her husband and then copied by her before being sent, an unsurprising tactic given her known dislike of letter writing and her inconsistent writing habits.³¹ What can be discerned from her letters is her strength of character and willingness to sacrifice her happiness in the interest of her husband and her country. In a letter to Mercy Otis Warren dated December 26, 1789, Martha expresses her dismay at becoming the first lady of the land:

I little thought when the war was finished, that any circumstances could possible have happened which would call the General into public life again. I had anticipated, that from this moment we should have been left to grow old in solitude and tranquility together: that was, my Dear madam, the first and dearest wish of my heart; - but in *that* I have been disappointed...With respect to myself, I sometimes think the arrangement is not quite as it ought to have been [her position as the president's wife], that I, who had much rather be at home should occupy a place with which a great many younger and gayer women would be prodigiously pleased.³²

³¹ Fields, Joseph E., "*Worthy Partner*;" *The Papers of Martha Washington* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994): xxxi.

³² Martha Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, December 26, 1789, Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 223. Martha did not have a choice as to whether or not she should join her husband in the capital and aid him in his work as the President. Presidential wives became public servants by virtue of the private contract of marriage – they had no choice, even if serving the nation was not their desire. In *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), Carole Pateman shows that the social contract is based on the previous contract of marriage, in which men are free agents but women have other attachments and obligations. Hence, the woman is engulfed into the patriarchal political power without her consent or participation.

In letters to Fanny Bassett Washington, her sister's daughter, she also expresses her general dislike of "politick," which she does not concern herself with.³³ Martha articulates one of her more famous quotes to Fanny in a later letter, lamenting that she leads a "very dull life," and feels "like a state prisoner," who has "certain bounds" set for her that she cannot depart from – such a position made her opt to be "obstinate and stay at home."³⁴ Martha Washington was fifty-seven years old when her husband was elected president; she did not relish her career as the nation's hostess because it was one that was more suited to a younger woman. Martha confided to Mercy Otis Warren that if she had been younger, she should probably have "enjoyed the inoscent gayeties of life as much as most my age." However, she "had long since placed all the prospects of [her] future worldly happiness in the still enjoyments of the fireside at Mount Vernon."³⁵ The President's wife was expected to hold many parties, levees, drawing rooms, and other social events, as well as return all visits made to her residence. This would have been a very taxing task for a woman well-advanced in years and whose personality preferred a quiet setting to the bustling cities of New York and Philadelphia.

However, Martha was "determined to be cheerful and to be happy in whatever situation" she happened to be in, for she had "learnt from experianence that the greater part of our happiness or misary depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances."³⁶ She attests that "everybody and everything" collaborated to make her as contented as possible and able to fulfill the demands placed upon her. When Martha's time as the President's wife came to a close in 1797, she expressed relief in a letter to

³³ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, February 25, 1788, Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 205.

³⁴ Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, October 23, 1789, Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 220.

³⁵ Martha Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, December 26, 1789, Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 223.

³⁶ Martha Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, December 26, 1789, Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 224.

John Trumbull, “A few weeks now, will place me in the shades of mount vernon, under our own vines and fig trees...”³⁷ Though it is difficult to directly connect the writings of Martha Washington during her time as the president’s spouse to the ideals of republicanism, it can be easily acknowledged that she admirably fulfilled the duties ascribed to the eighteenth-century wife. As one historian in particular has shown, the position of the virtuous wife in the Early Republic was essential for the survival and maintenance of the ideology of republicanism and its requisite citizenry.³⁸ It is especially difficult to gauge Mrs. Washington’s relationship with her husband, since the vast majority of the letters between them have either been lost or destroyed. Despite this appalling lack of vital documentation, one can presume that Martha Washington fulfilled her prescribed political role (though not acknowledged as such) as a supportive, republican wife in the social and public arena with great skill and tact – enough so that her successors followed closely in her steps and none to this day have drastically changed the “fundamental and enduring characteristics” of the first lady.³⁹

The above quotes and paraphrases are the extent of the known letters by Martha Washington that speak of her position as the President’s wife, and her written thoughts on her elevated position.⁴⁰ The remainder of the extant letters both to and from her cover domestic details (such as the health of friends and relatives) or are short, formulaic

³⁷ Martha Washington to John Trumbull, January 12, 1797, Fields, “*Worthy Partner*,” 296.

³⁸ See Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., 44:4 (October 1987): 689-721.

³⁹ Watson, Robert P., “The ‘White Glove Pulpit’: A History of Policy Influence by First Ladies,” *Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 10. See also Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Caroli, “America’s First Ladies,” *American History Illustrated* 24, no. 3 (1989): 26-31, 48, 50; Robert P. Watson, “The First Ladies’ Character: Applying Barber’s Character Study to the Presidential Spouses,” *White House Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 51-63.

⁴⁰ There is one letter from Martha to Lucy Flucker Knox, expressing her delight at returning to her peaceful home after serving as the President’s wife. However, it is of dubious authenticity. Fields, “*Worthy Partner*,” 303.

responses, quite often drafted by either George Washington or his secretary, to enquires and requests.⁴¹ Though Martha's interest in politics and government was apparently nonexistent, she performed an extremely important role in assisting the president in his capacity as head of state. The entertainment and hosting of guests, particularly foreign dignitaries, was an essential part of statesmanship and vital to the international relations of the new country. Though the president's spouse was not viewed as a political entity during the Early Republic, this is in fact what she was. As a woman who embodied the ideals of a wife in the young republic and as a hostess for the nation, Martha Washington indisputably enabled the president to fulfill his duties while acting as a political figure and facilitator in her own right.

Martha's successor, Abigail Smith Adams, appears in the historical narrative as the mirror image of the reserved, gentle first president's wife. Abigail was the intelligent and outspoken writer of many letters during the span of her life, addressing many issues ranging from politics to domestic concerns. Despite her acute political insight and eagerness to be involved in the political arena, Abigail was fearful for her husband and his rise to the presidency; she admitted to her son that she felt "perhaps too keenly the abuse of party." After learning that her husband had been elected president, she was so anxious about her new role that she had a vivid dream in which she was shot at with bullets.⁴² The rivalry between the two political parties in the 1790s was explosive, leading to extremely harsh rhetoric against any person of an opposing party. Even George

⁴¹ It is interesting to examine all the personal requests that were written to Martha during the presidential years, specifically looking at how she was addressed. Her titles range from "Your Excellency" to "Consort of our most worthy President," and "The Honorable Lady Washington of General George Washington" to "the patroness of distress'd merit." Fields, "*Worthy Partner*," 242, 245, 283, 235. She was highly regarded by the American citizens, and seen as a compassionate benefactor to whom pleas for help might be sent and favorably answered.

⁴² Gelles, Edith B. *First Thoughts: Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 124.

Washington's popularity, integrity, character, wealth, and experience did not protect him from the Republicans' criticism; Abigail says that "he was reviled and abused, his administration perplexed, and his measures impeded."⁴³ She declared that Washington's successor "must be armed as Washington was with integrity, with firmness, with intrepidity. These must be his shield and his wall of brass; and religion too, or he never will be able to stand sure and steadfast."⁴⁴ Though Abigail saw her husband as possessing all of these admirable qualities, he did not escape the ferocious attacks from the opposition. Abigail played a prominent role in defending her husband's actions by writing to relatives and the press to justify decisions and refute inaccurate claims. Benjamin Franklin Bache's Philadelphia-based paper, the *Aurora*, was a frequent enemy. In a letter to her sister Mary Cranch, Abigail rails against Bache's distress that Adams was honored while traveling:

Every person who is acquainted with the Republican manners and habits of the President can witness for him, that every kind of show and parade are contrary to his tastes and inclination, and that they can be agreeable on no other ground, than as the Will of the People, Manifesting their determined resolution to support the Government, and the Administrators of it, so long as the administration is conformable to the Constitution.⁴⁵

⁴³ Abigail Adams to Thomas B. Adams, November 8, 1796, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 372.

⁴⁴ Abigail Adams to Thomas B. Adams, November 8, 1796, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 372.

⁴⁵ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, December 12, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801* ed. Stewart Mitchell, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 118.

Abigail Adams has been called the “quintessential republican woman” in her ideas, behavior, accomplishments, and in her limitations.⁴⁶ She was keenly aware of the tenets of republicanism and often spoke of the ideology and its importance to the survival of the state. In a letter to Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail states that “it depends upon the people to say that they will remain a free and happy republic.” She quotes John, who said that “*all depends* upon these [republican] virtues. If these fail us we are lost. Our constitution and administration all depend upon them. Our government without these aids has no power at home or abroad. We have no other principles of union or capacity of defence.”⁴⁷ Abigail approached her role as a public servant with solemnity; in another letter to Mercy Otis Warren, she thanked Warren for her congratulations on the “late important event,” considering her elevated status

as the voluntary and unsolicited gift of a free and enlightened people, it is a precious and valuable deposit and calls for every exertion of the head and every virtue of the heart to do justice to so sacred a trust. Yet however pure the intentions or upright the conduct, offences will come, ‘high stations tumult but not bliss create.’⁴⁸

After learning the results of the election, Abigail wrote to her husband congratulating him on his newly elected position as president, saying the her “thoughts and meditations” were with him, and expressing that her feelings were not ones of “pride or ostentation,”

⁴⁶ Matthews, 65.

⁴⁷ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, June 17, 1798, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 378.

⁴⁸ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, March 4, 1797, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 376.

but were “solemnized by a sense of the obligations, the important trusts, and numerous duties” connected with the Presidency.⁴⁹

Abigail was intensely aware of the responsibilities that went with the nation’s highest office and viewed John’s term as a joint effort. Though it is difficult to determine her actual influence on policy and political decisions during her time as first lady, she did function as a close confidante to John Adams, who often asked her advice and consulted with her about political affairs. Her political knowledge during the presidential years indicate that she was very close to those who made the important decisions, namely her husband.⁵⁰ Their marriage was typical in that it followed eighteenth-century conventions, which dictated that Abigail’s life would be determined by John’s preferences. When he was elected president, she also became a public servant because of her previous contract of marriage.⁵¹ She was extremely proud of the supportive role that she played and the patriotic sacrifices that she made, both during and before the Adams administration. In a reply to a question asking if she would have allowed John to go abroad on his diplomatic missions had she known it would span a decade, she responded that she “would have not only submitted to the absence...I would not have opposed it even though three more years should be added to the number. I feel a pleasure in being able to sacrifice my selfish passions to the general good, and in imitating the example which was taught me to consider myself and family but as the small dust of the balance, when compared with the

⁴⁹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, February 8, 1797, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 374.

⁵⁰ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 139, 152-153; Caroli, *First Ladies*, 9. Gelles says that the difference Abigail made in the Adams’ administration was her aid in helping to formulate policies through dialogue, acting to smooth over political appointments, interfering with the journalistic campaign to undermine John’s credibility, and serving as a transmitter of vital domestic information to John Quincy Adams; 154-155. Louise Young states that Abigail Adams provided a perfect model of the husband-wife political partnership; 304.

⁵¹ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 135-138.

great community.”⁵² Abigail was the ideal republican woman: courageous, giving, virtuous, cooperative, intelligent, and patriotic.

The second first lady was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the duties required of her and of the challenge of succeeding Martha Washington. Abigail did consult Martha on how she should function as the president’s wife, to which Martha replied that the best guide would be found internally. Abigail did just that, driven by a determination to aid her husband as best she could and fulfill her “religiously mandated” patriotic duty.⁵³ Abigail chose to follow closely in Martha’s steps, directing the president’s social schedule, holding levées, drawing rooms, and dinner parties.⁵⁴ In a letter to her sister Mary Cranch, Abigail recounts a typical day as the president’s wife:

I keep up my old Habit of rising at an early hour. If I did not I should have little command of my Time. At 5 I rise. From that time till 8 I have a few leisure hours. At 8 I breakfast, after which untill Eleven I attend to my Family arrangements. At that hour I dress for the day. From 12 until two I receive company, sometimes until 3. We dine at that hour unless on company days which are tuesdays & thursdays . After dinner I usually ride out untill seven. I begin to feel a little more at Home, and less anxiety about the ceremonious part of my duty, tho by not having a drawing Room for the summer I am obliged every day, to devote two Hours for the purpose of seeing company.⁵⁵

Abigail also confided to her sister her desire to “discharge my part with honour, and give satisfaction,” and though her position was “enviable no doubt in the Eyes of some,” it

⁵² As quoted in Laura C. Holloway, *The Ladies of the White House, or In the Home of the Presidents* (Philadelphia: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1881), 113.

⁵³ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 132. Only a few letters exist between these two women, probably because Martha was not much of a letter writer and was of a very different personality than her successor.

⁵⁴ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 158-159.

⁵⁵ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 24, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 91.

was never envied or coveted by her.⁵⁶ Abigail's endless entertainment schedule was exhausting for her; another woman called her situation a "splendid misery," and Abigail admitted that "she was not far from Truth."⁵⁷ The first lady wrote often to her sister Mary describing the drawing rooms and dinners that she hosted, often noting that they were crowded to capacity and "frequently exhibit[ed] a specimen of Grecian, Turkish, French and English fashion at the same time, with ease, Beauty and Elegance equal to any court."⁵⁸ Abigail did not relish these ceremonial duties, though did her best to entertain the people on behalf of her husband. She described the task of the president as "very arduous, very perplexing and very hazardous. I do not wonder Washington wished to retire from it, or rejoiced at seeing an old oak tree in his place."⁵⁹ When it came time for John and Abigail to retire from the Presidency after the election of 1800, she was thankful to leave the hectic life as the president's wife. However, her letters indicate that she still desired to be involved in public life; in writing to her sister Mary, she expressed that "if my future peace & tranquility were all that I considered, a release from public life would be the most desirable event..."⁶⁰ Abigail told her son Thomas that she had "few regrets" for herself and her family, and that "neither my habits, nor my education or inclinations have led me to an expensive style of living, so that on that score I have little to mourn over."⁶¹ Abigail was devastated when John Adams was not re-elected as president and though happy to leave the public sector at the capital, still retained her interest in public

⁵⁶ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, April 30, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 87.

⁵⁷ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 16, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 90.

⁵⁸ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, March 14, 1798, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 145.

⁵⁹ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, June 23, 1797, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 99.

⁶⁰ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 21, 1800, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, 259.

⁶¹ Abigail Adams to Thomas B. Adams, November 13, 1800, Adams, ed., *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, 380.

affairs and politics. She was a unique woman, who was the perfect republican wife and yet was one of the most politically active women during the first years of the new nation.

There was no official president's partner during the years of Thomas Jefferson's administration, for his wife had died previous to his election. A number of women filled the position as the nation's hostess, though since none were married to the president their impact on the nation's capital was not as noticeable. As the wife of the secretary of state during the Jefferson era, Dolley Madison did have a hand in directing the social events of Washington City. When she became first lady in 1809, her incredible social talent was showcased marvelously in the fantastic drawing rooms and parties that she devised and hosted. It has been said that Dolley can be credited with transferring the spirit of Jeffersonian democracy into society by creating one that allowed for intensely intimate political interaction.⁶² Though she did not write about political issues as her predecessor did, she nonetheless contributed to the political atmosphere of the day by creating a social space conducive to political and intellectual interaction. As one historian has said, "the unofficial sphere can introduce issues, minimize risk, and bring life and emotion to the formation of public policy."⁶³ Dolley's distinctive style of entertainment enabled the tenets of republicanism to be interpreted in an applicable manner – she provided a social solution to the problem of republican politics, which was the attempt to keep a government together without undermining the core values of disinterestedness, aversion to political power, and the unselfish devotion to the common good. Dolley invited guests from both parties to mingle at her popular drawing rooms, allowing both a level of vital access to the president that probably would not have been possible outside of a relaxed

⁶² Young, 306.

⁶³ Allgor, Catherine, *Parlor Politics* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 246.

social atmosphere. She was aware of how difficult her husband's job was and, through her extensive network of politically connected female friends, she aided her husband in convincing them to support President Madison politically. It was acknowledged even then that Dolley's social skills were the determining factor in her husband's re-election, as he did not possess the charisma and social connections that she did.⁶⁴ Dolley walked a delicate path in acting as a political wife in a world that saw women solely as domestics, yet who were responsible for the political philosophy of their husbands.⁶⁵

Dolley was uniquely suited for the position that she filled and further developed it from Martha and Abigail's example. Mrs. Eliza Lee wrote to Dolley expressing her pleasure with her friend's elevation in status: "On this day eight years ago, I wrote...to congratulate you on the joyful event that placed you in the highest station our country can bestow. I then enjoyed the proudest feelings – that my friend, the friend of my youth, who never had forsaken me, should be thus distinguished and so peculiarly fitted for it."⁶⁶ Dolley's personality was effusive and charismatic, (exactly opposite of James, who has been described as having "an unmoved and abstracted air"⁶⁷) and she went out of her way to know the name of every person she met. She offset her husband's bland personality and inconspicuous public presence, particularly in the spectacular outfits that she wore

⁶⁴ Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 82. In a letter to his wife dated November 23, 1807, Senator Samuel Mitchill speaks of the upcoming election and compares the two candidates. It is extremely interesting to note that he gives Madison the upper hand precisely because he "gives dinners and makes generous displays," and "has a wife to aid his pretensions;" Mitchill says that Clinton "has nothing of female succor on his side." James Madison's chances for the Presidency were enormously enhanced by his wife's social abilities, and the same can be said for his re-election. "Dr. Mitchill's Letters from Washington, 1801-1813," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 58:347 (April 1879): 752.

⁶⁵ Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 54-56.

⁶⁶ Eliza Lee to Dolley Madison, March 4, 1817, Clark, Allen C., *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison* (Washington, D.C: W. F. Roberts, 1914), 203-204.

⁶⁷ Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, 139-142. This is from the journal of William Campbell Preston, who visited the Madisons in 1812.

for her huge parties and drawing rooms.⁶⁸ Mrs. Seaton observed that “Her majesty’s appearance was truly regal,...’Tis here the woman who adorns the dress, and not the dress that beautifies the woman. I cannot conceive a female better calculated to dignify the station which she occupies in society than Mrs. Madison,- amiable in private life and affable in public, she is admired and esteemed by the rich and beloved by the poor.”⁶⁹ Dolley was universally admired and liked; Reverend Mason Weems wrote to her, saying that she is one of the “Favord Few” and that “the elevation of your [Dolley’s] Rank, together with the charm of your benevolent spirit & polish’d manners differs so widely as they are by the Members of the National Legislature & the brilliant crowds that attend your Levees give you an influence which no other Lady can pretend to especially among the Fair Sex of our Country.”⁷⁰ Dolley was intensely successful because she provided a social solution, in which both men and women could participate, to the turbulent political atmosphere and the maintenance of republican virtues.⁷¹

In addition to her social abilities, Dolley was extremely knowledgeable about the political atmosphere of the day, due directly to the fact that she was the wife of the president. She does not speak about political issues nor theorize on them as Abigail Adams did, but instead speaks about them in her letters as part of her daily life. She admits to her husband James that she is “not much of a politician,” but in the next breath says that she is “extremely anxious to hear (as far as you think proper) what is going forward in the Cabinet.” Dolley defers to his judgment, using typical language that an early nineteenth-century wife would use in reference to her political knowledge,

⁶⁸ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 14.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, 157-158.

⁷⁰ Rev. Mason L. Weems to Dolley Madison, July 22, 1813, Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, 155-156.

⁷¹ Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 100.

declaring that “she is conscious of her want of talents, and the diffidence in expressing those opinions, always imperfectly understood by her sex.”⁷² Though Dolley did not admit nor acknowledge her political role and familiarity with such issues in public, she was obviously intelligent and ingenious enough to invent a way for republicans to socially interact. When it came time for her to step down as the nation’s hostess and president’s wife, she received a letter from William Johnson, Jr., Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court:

You are now about to enter upon the enjoyment of the most enviable state which can fall to the lot of mankind – to carry with you to your retirement the blessing of all who ever knew you... And be assured that all who have ever enjoyed the honor of your acquaintance, will long remember that polite condescension which never failed to encourage the diffident, that suavity of manner which tempted the morose or thoughtful to be cheerful, or that benevolence of aspect which suffered no one to turn from you without an emotion of gratitude.⁷³

Dolley Madison further brought attention to the national political stage and the woman who presided over it through her social connections and the brilliant social sphere that she concocted.

The letters of Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison allow the modern reader to see that they were in fact actors on the political stage of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, through their given roles as republican mothers and wives. Each woman was different in her approach to her responsibility as the

⁷² Dolley Madison to James Madison, November 1, 1805, Cutts, Lucia Beverly, *Memoirs and Letters of Dolly Madison, wife of James Madison, President of the United States* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1886), 60-61.

⁷³ William Johnson Jr. to Dolley Madison, 1817, Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolly Madison*, 205.

president's wife and ceremonial partner, but each was able to utilize the values of republicanism to the advantage of her husband's administration. Martha served as the nation's mother and domestic partner to its father, Abigail was the political confidante and defender of her husband's politics as well as an avid proponent of republicanism in her own right, and Dolley enabled the ideals of republicanism to be preserved for a time through her inspired social events and charming personality. Though they were not seen as political beings, these ground-breaking first ladies impacted the political history of the United States through their domestic roles as mothers and wives.

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