

**The Pen and the Petticoat: Gendered Slander Against Dolley Madison in the
Early American Republic**

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Introduction

On January 15, 1813, the newspaper *The Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette* posted a fake advertisement for an upcoming book concerning “a new system of moral and political law.”¹ The false book had a chapter called ‘L’Amour and la fumee ne peuvent se cacher’ or ‘Love and Smoke Cannot be Hidden.’ In this section the anonymous author writes that this subject “is admirably calculated to exhibit, in their true colors, the speculative as well as the practical parts of polygamy, interluded with appropriate apothegms upon the beauty of virtue and the deformity of conjugal infidelity.”² The author was, in essence, practicing a type of sarcasm that he (for the author was almost certainly male) applied throughout to insinuate that the woman who inspired the commentary was unfaithful, and even polygamous.

The piece ends with comments about an “illustrious patroness” who, the anonymous author sardonically remarks, “hath long been preeminently distinguished throughout the United States for her transcendent virtues . . . inflexible morality, her exemplary sobriety, and her conjugal fidelity.”³ The author was not complimenting her. These were veiled insults where he insinuated that she was the opposite of all these things: immoral, intemperate, and unfaithful. He called her a ‘Corina,’ the famous mistress of Ovid, and overall accused her of infidelity. This was a well-circulated newspaper that publically accused Dolley Madison, a prominent public figure, of sexual misconduct. This invites the question of why; why would the news go after a First Lady and why would these rumors continue to circulate.

The Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette was not the first newspaper to accuse Dolley Madison of promiscuity and adultery. These accusations would follow her throughout her

¹Anonymous, “Dans l’art d’interesser consiste l’art d’ecrire,” *Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*, (Georgetown, DC), Jan. 15th, 1813.

²ibid

³ibid

political life. Allegedly beginning in 1804, a series of papers discussed Dolley Madison and her sister being pimped out to foreign dignitaries.⁴ The actual accusations from the newspapers are not preserved it seems, however, several references to them exist. Postmaster Gideon Granger, for instance, threatened James Madison with ‘revealing’ Dolley’s and her sister’s “sexual diversions” connected to the 1804 accusations.⁵ These rumors only picked up steam.

Congressman John Randolph wrote to James Monroe in 1806 asserting that James Madison’s “unfortunate matrimonial connexion” would hurt Madison’s career.⁶ In the election of 1808, Dolley was slandered again, people commented on how she was “unfeelingly traduced in the Virginia papers.”⁷ She was accused of having affairs with everyone from Thomas Jefferson to Congressmen Samuel Hunt and various government officials. Mrs. Madison was not even safe after the election. A prominent Anglican religious leader, Reverend Peters, gave a public sermon where he accused her of sexual “insatiability” in 1809.⁸

The rumors never really died down after that, but significantly reappeared during the War of 1812. Congressmen referenced such rumors in speeches on the house floor, and in the aforementioned fake ad for a book placed in the papers appeared at this time. Dolley Madison was “unfeelingly traduced” throughout her public life, and there is no indication that any of these accusations had any evidence behind them. These rumors only disappeared after she became the

⁴Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 34.

⁵Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg. *Madison and Jefferson*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 531.

⁶John Randolph to James Madison, Sept. 16, 1806, in *Writings of James Monroe*, ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898), 4:486.

⁷Samuel Mitchell to Catherine Mitchell, 1 April 1808, in *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, Catherine Allgor (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 132.

⁸Irving Brant. *James Madison: Secretary of State*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 243.

heroine of the War of 1812 and saved George Washington's portrait, a narrative that she carefully crafted herself.

To add to the puzzle, not only were the accusations unfounded, they were aimed at a generally beloved public figure. Dolley Madison was a well-liked character, known for her charisma and demure manner. Mrs. Madison gave out patronages, held dinners, and should have been considered apolitical due cultural assumptions about her gender. The First Ladies before her, furthermore, were not attacked in the same manner. This adds to the question of why she was sexually slandered throughout her life.

Not only was this bizarre considering her standing, but it was also unprecedented in the context of how president's wives were treated before this. There were two previous First Ladies who were at least somewhat known in the public sphere: Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. Neither was as entrenched in their role as the nation's hostess as Dolley Madison, but they held the same official position. Furthermore, Martha Washington also had a similar circumstance as Mrs. Madison of not having conceived any children by her presidential husband.⁹ Infertility was one of the main gendered accusations against Mrs. Madison, while Martha Washington experienced none of the same targeted language. It was unheard of, or at least wholly under the radar, for the press and society to have sexual slander brought against the 'Lady Presidentress.' There was no weight to the accusations, no precedent for them, and they were lobbed at a wholly beloved public figure. So why did Dolley Madison become the target of slander?

To a certain extent, Dolley Madison brought the spotlight on herself through some of her actions, personality, and appearance. The most prominent scholar on Dolley Madison is

⁹Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2006), 12.

Catherine Allgor, having written three books on Dolley herself and one on the ladies of Washington, DC in general. Allgor accounts for Dolley's slander due to her 'femaleness' at a time where women couldn't be visible in the same way men could. Gender was a factor, but Allgor does not delve into the political or press culture aspects that vitally contributed to the slander. Allgor does give a clear account of who Madison was as a person. Information on Dolley's inner life is scarce, but we do know a brief timeline. She came from a strict Quaker background and family that eventually entered into financial straits. She was married and had two sons before one of them and her husband were carried away by yellow fever. She married James Madison and formed a lifelong affectionate relationship with him.

As 'Mrs. Madison,' she would serve as the nation's hostess for widower Thomas Jefferson and embrace the role of a socialite. She became first lady in 1808 and increased the visibility and role of her position, peddling influence where her husband could not and promoting his agenda and later reelection. Dolley herself was friendly, intelligent in the way she never forgot a face or relationship, and appears to have had a deep political savvy in a time where women were excluded from the public sphere. She doled out patronage, controlled social networks, and steered conversations in rooms. She appeared in the newspapers frequently, and not just in a negative light, in a time when no respectable woman's name was in the news. Her outfits created talk and expressed the new republic's right to rule through aristocratic symbols. Dolley Madison drew attention to herself, and then gossip, through who she was as a uniquely powerful woman. However, vibrant woman like Dolley have existed before and after her, Abigail Adams was also very political. There is more to the story than just Dolley's personal characteristics. Gender assumptions and the press also created the environment for the unparalleled slew of attacks against the wife of a president.

Another reason behind the accusations is the nature of gender and sexuality predominating in early nineteenth century American culture. Dolley Madison lived in a time period when women did not legally exist as their own individuals, but only as extensions of their husbands. This gender dynamic meant that it made sense for James Madison's enemies to go after him through her. Furthermore, there was a growing anxiety around female sexuality after the War for Independence. Rosemarie Zagarri, an important scholar on women in the Early Republic, describes the post-revolutionary backlash and emergence of the role of the 'Republican Mother.' Other authors also mention how premarital pregnancies and fornication and adultery court cases were increasing, but criminal punishments for these indiscretions were becoming less harsh. Anxiety over perceived expanded female sexual agency led to literature and newspapers condemning female sexuality by all means necessary, Dolley was just in the crossfire.

Additionally, medical knowledge affected the ways in which she was attacked. She was presumed to run too 'hot,' that is, to be a promiscuous woman who burned her husband up and rendered him infertile.¹⁰ The couple's infertility and Dolley's physical features as 'buxom' added fuel to the conversation. Authors like Bruce Chadwick, a scholar of both James and Dolley Madison, attributes Mrs. Madison's slander to her appearance, ie a very tall woman with a small husband.¹¹ Physicality is an important part of the story, but infertility and appearance do not complete the picture. After all, 'pretty' and large women exist but defamation against them does not become widespread without the press.

¹⁰Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2006), 131.

¹¹Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 152.

The press and its interactions with the public and relationship with politics would be a defining feature for the slander against Dolley Madison. David O. Stewart, who writes about political relationships, incorporates the fact that the booming press was hounding public figures in any way they could. Stewart expresses that “With an unbridled press, American Politics was not a profession for those easily wounded.”¹² He points to the press as the largest reason for the attack. Print was expanding at an alarming rate and since libel laws were not enforced, it was ‘unbridled.’

Jeffrey Pasley in his book *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, describes the press’s influence. Pasley expresses how “Journalists were politicians, some of them among the most prominent candidates, officeholders and party operatives in the nation.”¹³ The press and politics were intimately connected. Newspapers functioned “in nineteenth century America . . . (as) the political systems central institution . . . linking parties, voters, and the government together.”¹⁴ Parties were built on newspapers in the sense that newspapers campaigned for them: “communicating a party’s messages . . . (and) attacking their opponents,” as seen by the attacks on Dolley Madison.¹⁵

The press controlled politics to a significant degree, and also presented America with a new way of cultural coherence; that is newspapers boomed in numbers and allowed for a greater expression of shared values. A seminal author on the meaning of the press and newspapers is Benedict Anderson. He writes about nationalism and print capitalism’s ability to forge ‘imagined communities.’ While nationalism was not a pivotal factor in Dolley’s slander, ‘imagined

¹² David O. Stewart *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 281.

¹³ Jeffrey Pasley. *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001) 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

communities' is an all-important notion for understanding the nature of why her attacks gained traction. The Federalist newspapers who targeted her formed a party-based 'mental landscape' in their far-flung political community, and in that landscape they created a false Dolley Madison. This fictitious image was given legitimacy, description, and momentum through the press. It is doubtful that the accusations would have become meaningful without it. It needed a Federalist imagined community through the press to spread the rumors, all informed by gender and a shadow of Dolley's personality.

Synthesis is a very important part of historical research. It gives nuance and subtlety to interpretations that might otherwise be colored in black and white. In my thesis I combine traditional approaches to historical events, focusing on politics, and along with modern feminist scholarship. Traditional scholarship often brushed aside female figures, defining their importance only as in connection to their husbands and the men in their lives. Feminist historians sought to counter this and the reality of women being erased from history, mainly by focusing on the lives of everyday women. However, ignoring political women's relationship to institutions like the press, the government, and the state can be a mistake. I place importance on Dolley Madison in her own right, but also embed the story of the slander campaign against her within a larger narrative of political polarization and cultural change.

Various authors have attempted to provide an explanation to the slander against Dolley Madison by focusing on a single factor. Allgor has connected it mainly to gender, Chadwick has claimed it was due to Madison's appearance; and Stewart has attributed it only to an unbridled press. However, none of these interpretations have been in dialogue with each other. History has a level of complexity that demonstrates that even seemingly peripheral events are multi-

dimensional. Scholars previously have failed to synthesize coherent arguments that give breadth to how Dolley Madison was viewed and attacked during her time as a public figure, especially in accordance with the role of the politicized press. No event occurs in a vacuum and I will argue that the mechanisms behind the event are highly connected to one another. The print controlled 1800s politics. Politics defined how Dolley Madison presented herself, and Dolley Madison in many subtle ways directed politics. Finally, the performance of gender and sexuality was molded and reinforced by the press. These topics are intimately connected and this is important to understand how history operates.

History is not a one-dimensional topic and while we often like to point to one ‘pivot point’ as to why an event occurred, there is usually multiple factors involved. By creating a dialogue between historians and describing an interplay between several topics I will add nuance and depth to this particular historical event. I will emphasize, however that while they are all pivotal pieces, the slander against Dolley Madison was primarily fueled by the press and print culture, and the press itself informed by Dolley herself and gender and sexuality. Considered together, these elements explain the slander campaign against a remarkable woman.

Ch. 1 Dolley Madison: A Woman of Many Hats

Who Was Dolley

When most people think about Dolley Madison, they usually recall a First Lady who saved Washington's portrait from being burned with the rest of the White House, or maybe the dessert named after her. Very few, however, know her for her wider reputation as an invaluable hostess, political unifier, and player in the larger Washington scene during the early Republic. Indeed, looking back at her social functions, strategic geniality, and wide social networking, we would categorize her today as a skillful politician. Dolley was affable, good in the spotlight, and a socialite: the first 'First Lady' and a wearer of many hats (both literally and figuratively).

It is, nonetheless, very hard to *know* Dolley Madison in any detailed fashion. Documents relating to her life are limited. She lived at a time when women did not leave behind the same amount of speeches and pamphlets or meticulously preserved correspondence as their male counterparts, a symptom of the 'vanishing woman' effect throughout history. As such, "no family letters survive from the first twenty-five years of her life."¹⁶ There are letters from her later life, but by that point Mrs. Madison became aware that history had an eye on her, and she carefully self-edited her correspondence by striking content or discarding them altogether.

Dolley herself was rather self-contained, a politician in many senses, she was likable but described as unknowable. One female acquaintance writes "It is impossible however to be with her and not be pleased . . . yet I do not think it possible to know what her real opinions are. She is all things to all men."¹⁷ As a controlled woman, she did not express outright anger to any of her

¹⁶David B. Mattern and Holly C. Shulman, ed., *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁷David O. Stewart. *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 278.

relatives about her slander, and she left the briefest of records that it upset her at all. Nonetheless, through newspapers, letters, and even congressional speeches, we can see how the world saw her and then puzzle together why the likable Mrs. Madison might have been attacked. Dolley created her own image: her large personality, symbolic appearance, and affable personality together gave her a great deal of influence. All this may explain why gendered slander was leveled against her; she was important, she was imposing, and she became a target.

Early Life

Dolley Payne was born on May 20, 1768, to a plantation owning father and Quaker mother in what is now Greensboro, North Carolina. Several early historians, including her niece Mary Cutts, recorded her name as ‘Dorothea’ or ‘Dorothy’ Payne, perhaps to give some ‘respectability’ to a name some deemed silly. In fact, one piece of the puzzle may even begin to come together here. Her name was associated with ‘dolly,’ a “slang term for a lower-class, sexually suspect woman or a courtesan” at the time.¹⁸ Even within her name there was an opening for rivals to attack her as promiscuous and lascivious. Nonetheless, she was named Dolley in 1768, the first of eight children, including three sisters who would influence her, and be dear to her, for the rest of her life.

Dolley was originally born in a Quaker settlement in North Carolina, but in 1769, a year after her birth, the family moved to Virginia to settle on a plantation of her mother’s family. Dolley’s father converted to Quakerism before she was born and raised the children in a strict fashion. After the American Revolution, he freed their five slaves on religious principles and in 1783 moved his family to Philadelphia, the center of American Quakerism.¹⁹ Her father, John

¹⁸Mary Cutts. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*, edited by Catherine Allgor. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 21.

¹⁹Paul Zall. *Dolley Madison* (Huntington, NY: Nova History Publications, 2001), 2.

Payne, became a Quaker preacher in Philadelphia, but also a failed businessman. Quakers or ‘The Society of Friends’ espoused doctrines of nonviolence, humility, and self-reliance, among other things, and they rejected luxuries and engaged in plain-dress.²⁰ Dolley herself would find the strictness of the sect stifling. Later in life she wrote to her beloved sister Anna Cutts that being trapped in Philadelphia “made me recollect the times when *our Society* [of friends] used to control me entirely & debar me from so many advantages & pleasures.”²¹ She was obviously displeased by a childhood under the restricted society and a father whom his neighbors sometimes called ‘fanatical.’ Furthermore, after moving to Philadelphia the family fell on hard times; her father failed in the starch business and entered a deep depression.²² This poverty and strict religious background may give us insights into her later spending and habits. She had by all accounts a taste for extravagance, luxuries that she perhaps was denied before, although, we shall also see that she used ornaments as political tools as well.

Dolley Payne married John Todd, a rising lawyer, in 1791 according to the wishes of her recently deceased father. John Todd was a successful provider and devout Quaker. He was twenty-seven and she was twenty-two when they married. Dolley had known him previously and refused his first marriage proposal, but she agreed to satisfy her father’s last wish. Despite the initial rejection, they appeared to settle into a happy relationship by 1791. They had two sons and appeared to be a well-adjusted family until misfortune struck Philadelphia. The city was ravaged by a plague of yellow fever in 1793, killing an estimated 20% of the city’s inhabitants, including

²⁰Alfons J. Beitzinger. *A history of American political thought* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 84-5.

²¹DPTM to Anna Payne Cutts, 19 Aug. 1805. Dolley Madison Digital Archives. Coll. 2007.07. Rotunda, The University of Virginia Press.

²²Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 21.

John Todd and their younger son.²³ This shook Dolley deeply and she entered into a period of grief before being forced to find her way as a single woman in the world. After a brief legal battle over her late husband's estate (he willed it to her but women couldn't own property so she had to fight in court), she became a well-off widow. During this time she made the acquaintance of Aaron Burr. He introduced her to James Madison, who had heard of her and wanted to meet the handsome widow.²⁴

Marriage and Personal Life

James and Dolley Madison were very different people. Dolley was lively and personable and James was more reserved and dour in public, but they became enamored with one another. The affection between James and Dolley would last a lifetime. They reportedly played games, such as foot races, and exchanged affectionate letters during the brief periods they were apart. After meeting her James became persistent in courting her right away. James Madison, interestingly enough, could be described as a 'romantic,' uninterested in marrying for convenience, but for love.²⁵ He had been engaged twice before, but each time it ended in heartache. He was dogged, he took her out many times, going to dinners, concerts, plays, and public events. Dolley was hesitant; she wanted to have a good father for her son, but after many romantic letters and character references from friends and even Martha Washington, she agreed. They married in 1794. A small scandal surrounded the event as it was only a few months after her first husband's death, a fact that would be used against her in the papers later on. Dolley was also quickly ejected from the Quaker church for marrying outside of the sect, but she

²³Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 33.

²⁴*Ibid*, 36.

²⁵*Ibid*, 38.

certainly didn't seem to mind. She was now financially stable, pleased, and unknowably set up to become a very influential lady.

After marrying, the couple spent three more years in Philadelphia as James Madison served in the House of Representatives. In 1797, however, James 'retired' from politics to settle his family in Virginia at the Montpelier estate. There, they renovated the house and received various guests, Dolley raised her son John Payne Todd (called 'Payne'). James Madison adopted Payne, calling him 'our son,' and Payne calling him Papa.²⁶ James was a dedicated if somewhat distracted figure in his life, while Dolley was described as rather 'indulgent.'²⁷ Perhaps because of family loss in her first marriage, Dolley lavished attention on the young man, somewhat becoming an enabler to his harmful habits. Later in life he would accumulate mass amounts of debt through drinking and gambling at great cost to the family.²⁸

Dolley's and James's physical appearances shaped public opinions in interesting ways. He was seventeen years her senior and never previously married. Shy and reserved in public, James did not seem like a likely candidate for Dolley's hand. She was boisterous and social, he was not; she was colorful and vibrant, where he was quiet and more introverted. However, one of the keys to their relationship, and some argue Madison's administration, was balance. She filled in the political social gaps and he asserted a great intellect. Their marriage was solid, but their coupling drew intrigue. His small stature next to hers was a point of interest and, in many ways, a subversion of gender norms. She was the bigger one physically and personality-wise, he was the smaller one and had a rather 'delicate' manner. In any circumstance where couples switch

²⁶Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 112.

²⁷David O. Stewart. *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 275.

²⁸Ibid, 300.

gender roles people are bound to talk and newspapers exploited this evident physical and personality difference. Ugly accusations were directed at a loving, if somewhat unusual, couple.

Politics and Duties

In 1801, Thomas Jefferson was elected President and he quickly named James Madison his Secretary of State. After a few months, the Madisons moved to the new capital of Washington, DC and took up residence on F Street. Jefferson himself was a widower and asked Dolley Madison to fill in at social functions. As a result “Dolley filled the social vacuum” of a female hostess for the President.²⁹ She and her sister were called on for formal events, “making her the leading female figure in the capital.”³⁰ Dolley would embrace the role of hostess and enhance the position and its social power throughout her life. This time period, however, would also see the first significant circulation of the rumors that she was having affairs. Normally, Dolley filling in for a friend’s deceased wife would not be controversial, but due to the polarized political scene she ended up as ‘collateral damage’ in the political game. Attacking her was just another way of accusing the Democratic-Republican administration of corruption, of all sorts in this case.

As Dolley rose in prominence, people began to talk and sexual slander arose. Specifically, Dolley acting as Jefferson’s official hostess led to “Newspaper stories alleging Jefferson had pimped Dolley and Anna [her sister] to foreign visitors” and similar nasty rumors.³¹ This slander was aided and abetted by previous newspaper innuendo about Thomas Jefferson affair with his slave, Sally Hemings. It began with newspaper editor James Callender in 1802. After being denied a government position, he wrote in his paper *Richmond Recorder* “It is

²⁹ Ibid, 277.

³⁰ Ibid, 277.

³¹ Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 34.

well known that the man, whom it delighteth the public to honor, keeps . . . as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is SALLY.”³² This was all part of a larger newspaper culture comprised of what they called “scandal mongers” and will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. Dolley’s association with Jefferson and Jefferson’s own misconduct would be one factor in the gendered defamations against her. There is, of course, no evidence that Dolley Madison was guilty of any of these charges.

In 1808, Thomas Jefferson selected James Madison to be his successor and Madison ran for President on a platform of continuing the policies of the Jefferson administration. There was stiff competition during this election, and further allegations against Dolley arose. Madison ran against Charles Pinkney, George Clinton, and James Monroe. There was a hated Emurgo Act in place at the time that posed a real threat to Madison’s chances, New England especially opposed the Act and Madison.³³ It was an impassioned race, but Madison came out cleanly on top. Dolley played no small part in the informal sphere of the election since gentlemen were supposed to show a deep disinterest in politics and she could act where he could not. Dolley acted for all intents and purposes as his campaign manager and promoter; as a woman she had could be an inconspicuous political agent and organizer.³⁴ She courted votes by hosting dinners and holding social events. During this time a smear campaign against her also reached new heights. She was accused of having affairs with Jefferson, Congressman Samuel Hunt, the Secretary of Treasury, and other political figures. To dispel the rumors they invited Samuel Hunt over for dinner to

³²James Callender, *Richmond Recorder*, (Richmond, VA), Sept. 1, 1802.

³³Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 142.

³⁴Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (New York: Westview Press, 2013), 66.

show that there was nothing to hide.³⁵ This didn't stop the onslaught and the Madison's had no choice but to ignore the papers and 'whisper campaigns.'

After becoming First Lady, Dolley would increase her socializing and extravagance, projecting the administration's right to rule through her dress and parties. First, Dolley helped design the White House itself along with James Hoban. She had a specific vision in mind and went to great lengths to project new 'Americanism' through Greek effects and aristocratic statements of wealth. Importantly, she pushed for a round drawing room with space for large gatherings and an open floor plan.

After the White House opened, Dolley became famous for her 'drawing room' events, the open floor format being a major factor. This physical layout contrasted with the previous restricted administration entertainments. For "Thomas Jefferson kept his guests on a tight leash, literally monitoring all the conversations at the table." These events took place in one room with a round table; he only invited men and only from his political circle.³⁶ This limited the informal sphere of politicking and may have been one of the reasons for the rise in partisanship. Dolley, however, had a 'freewheeling' set-up where guests could roam and have private conversations. She of course floated from guest to guest and made many feel welcome as she put them at ease. Notably, it was a setup where "anybody might introduce [themselves to the] President" and men even arrived in work boots and with less aristocratic manners.³⁷ In many ways, it was an experiment in democracy; anyone could greet the president, people could cross social and party lines to talk. It was also a testament to Dolley's vision and her centrality to the Washington social

³⁵Ibid, 68.

³⁶Ibid, 85.

³⁷Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 193.

scene. Her parties were the place ‘to see and be seen,’ Dolley controlled these events and made herself flamboyantly visible and important, something she would pay for in the papers.

Throughout the rest of her career in the world of politics, political enemies insinuated that Dolley Madison was a temptress, a European-style courtesan, and generally unfaithful. Her visibility in the drawing room and in the political arena cannot be ignored, and the slander only disappeared after her heroism in the War of 1812. However, before she saved George Washington’s portrait, she was frequently accused of lasciviousness. Gender standards, newspaper culture, and political climate played a big role in this, and so did the character of Dolley herself.

Personality & Political Strategy

There was a lot to say about Dolley’s personality and the effect she had on people. An exchange between Henry Clay and Dolley exemplified her persona. Henry Clay gushed, “Everybody loves Mrs. Madison,” and she [Mrs. Madison] coyly replied that was because “Mrs. Madison loves everybody.”³⁸ Mrs. Madison probably did not quite love everyone, but there is something to be said about a woman whom people perceived as universally loved or lovable. She used her charming personality, strategic mind, and appearance to political advantage - something that would earn her admirers, and the attention of enemies.

Affable and accommodating Mrs. Madison was said to be a warm and generous hostess, even to her enemies. The First Lady reportedly “met political assailants with mildness.”³⁹ Early historians would try to paint Dolley as the pinnacle of ‘American womanhood.’ They depicted her as a tender heart who socialized because she liked people and wore extravagant things since

³⁸Mary Cutts. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts’s Life of Dolley Madison*, edited by Catherine Allgor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), x.

³⁹Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (New York: Westview Press, 2013), 67.

women are naturally drawn to ornaments. While she may have been warm and extravagant, her character was most likely more complex than that. Dolley, the famous entertainer, occasionally “held drawing rooms even when she was almost too ill to attend” and sometimes bitterly complained about her husband’s rivals.⁴⁰ She wasn’t socializing ‘for fun’ at all times; even when she was sick or grumpy or not in the mood, she still performed. The evidence is clear that Dolley was strategic and her outward persona was just that: a persona.

As well as being charming, Mrs. Madison was also reported to have had a sharp mind and to put great value on intelligence. Her son claimed that she told him education was “the most interesting of all earthly concerns” and she went to great lengths for Payne’s education.⁴¹ More importantly, Dolley “was famed for never forgetting a name, a face or family pedigree;” she was said even to be able to remember details about people she met twenty years earlier.⁴² These were feats of an active mind, something she used to great advantage in her navigation of political life. Dolley would become a great engine of social networks and patronage through her ability to keep track of people, names, and faces, and then facilitating favors.⁴³ Her personality drew people to her and her connections kept them aiming for her good graces.

Dolley would become a significant figure in the nation’s capital before she became ‘Lady Presidentess’ and wielded a type of bipartisan power that would render her a recognizably influential person. During Jefferson’s administration Federalists and Democratic-Republicans were highly polarized; they dined, lived, and were entertained separately and there was no space for bipartisan interaction. Dolley created a new space from her house on F Street when James

⁴⁰Ibid, 82, 105.

⁴¹David O. Stewart. *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 214.

⁴²Ibid, 101.

⁴³Mary Cutts. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*, edited by Catherine Allgor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 37.

was Secretary of State, where she invited gentlemen from both parties to wine and dine. This would be one of the few spaces of personal connection between opposing congressmen where they could exchange ideas.⁴⁴ As the facilitator of these exchanges, Dolley “ordinarily sat at the end of the table and directed conversation as the occasion required.”⁴⁵ She was a pivotal player on the Washington scene. These spaces were paramount for politicking in the new capital and gave Dolley a considerable amount of access to important people. While early recorders such as Mary Cutts and Mary Bayard Smith tried to portray Dolley’s many gatherings as a result of her love of socializing, the narrative is more complex. Modern historians argue “that through her parties she invented a public space, invited everyone of importance - both men and women - to participate, provided the environment for networking and the building of interest groups, and then, using her feminine charms, manipulated and guided a fractious congress.”⁴⁶ She guided, she charmed, she manipulated in these spaces she created, and this made Dolley herself a reason to attract attention.

Her influence was noted; people knew that Dolley had a certain power. Senator Samuel Mitchell told friends: “One reason for Madison’s election, was the ability of his glamorous wife, Dolley, to make her husband look “presidential” at her many soirees.”⁴⁷ He won elections with her help, according to Mitchell. Poignantly, Dolley was also an active player in the system of political ‘patronage,’ or rather, jobs for favors. She secured positions such as envoy to Spain for the family friend Anthony Morris; he later thanked her directly as the reason for his

⁴⁴Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (New York: Westview Press, 2013), 85.

⁴⁵David O. Stewart. *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 278.

⁴⁶David B. Mattern and Holly C. Shulman, ed., *The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 3.

⁴⁷Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 144.

opportunity.⁴⁸ She helped facilitate David Bailie Warden's appointment as the American consul in Paris and frequently used one of America's first multi-millionaires, the merchant John Jacob Astor, for business favors in exchange for political ones.⁴⁹ It was not necessarily 'honest,' but it was politics.

Mary Cutts reported that many people were "indebted to Mrs. Madison for [their] independence and position in society" and that Dolley had the attention and ears of many influential people.⁵⁰ Through the power of her intellect and 'charm' of her personality, she was a force to be reckoned with. This would make her a prime target. The main source of her influence was her character, so it would be logical for enemies to aim for that aspect of her. The best way to take down her reputation, her influence, would be to besmirch a woman's central value: her virtue. Virtue was considered the most valuable trait of a woman at the time, so Dolley's power would justify newspapers and Federalists attacking her in an unvirtuous manner.

Appearance and Presentation

Another reason why her virtue would be questioned was due to Dolley's physical attributes and apparel. She was a tall woman, standing at 5'8" and described by many people as 'buxom' and 'shapely,' she did not go unnoticed in a crowd.⁵¹ On top of that she often wore heels and a tall feather on her turban, making her appear almost seven feet tall by some reports. Furthermore, this height contrasted with that of James Madison, who was 5'4" and our shortest Founding Father. He only weighed around a hundred pounds, mainly wore drab white powdered

⁴⁸Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 228.

⁴⁹*Ibid*, 229-30.

⁵⁰Mary Cutts. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*, edited by Catherine Allgor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 37.

⁵¹Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 37.

wigs and plain, entirely black outfits.⁵² An observer described him as “one of the puny knights of Lilliputia” next to his wife, an “Amazonian.”⁵³ This stark contrast would get people talking: ‘she was too attractive for him and would cheat,’ or else her beauty indicated less virtue than a pious woman would have. A “focus on the body of the ruler [has] long roots in Western court culture” and in the early nineteenth century it was seen as an “extension or part of the public policy.”⁵⁴ The body of the leader reflected his or her leadership. To be beautiful was seen by some as a sign of being blessed, but in a conservative society it was also a symbol of decadence and sin. Dolley Madison’s innate features as a ruler, a shapely body, fed the rumor mill.

On top of her appearance, Dolley Madison used her own sense of style strategically. Just as the body was an extension of policy in Western thought, so was dress an indication of ruling legitimacy. America was in a very delicate transitional position: the new nation rejected the monarchy and the legacy of the aristocracy, and yet the ‘right to rule’ was still associated in the people’s minds with aristocratic symbols. The emotional and psychological attachments were to finery, jewels, and extravagance as part of a leader’s emblems of authority. The fledgling government depended on displays of elite women to fill the ‘legitimacy gap.’ They did this by projecting a balance of republicanism and traditional dramatics: bonnets and pearls, sensible shoes and feathers.⁵⁵ Dolley in particular took up the mantle; while she still retained some of her Quaker effects, such as the dark bonnet, she developed a striking public appearance. She donned pearls instead of jewels to depict ‘Americanness’ and was well known for her flamboyant

⁵²Ibid, 97.

⁵³Ibid, 157.

⁵⁴Allgor, Catherine. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (Westview Press, 2013), 93.

⁵⁵Ibid, 95.

feathers on her turban and colorful attire.⁵⁶ A friend of hers even described that Dolley's head-garment looking like a shimmering "crown."⁵⁷ Dolley Madison was a symbol, an image of the new American political class. She embodied their right to rule through combining old monarchical symbols with new American ones. This symbolic power and position as a decadent icon would be a contributing factor to her gendered slander.

To be visible is to be a target, but to have those colors and accessories be representative of larger power - of the administration's validity - would add another reason for enemies to darken her name. A way to do this was in associating her with the ugly aspect of European court life: the extravagance attached to sexual debauchery. In an address to Congress in 1813 the Federalist Congressman Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts took advantage of one such association, saying 'he will not employ any slander on his remarks' and avoid "the unenvied task of giving the portrait of a drawing-room, and describing Eastern democracy on this floor."⁵⁸ Mr. Quincy corrected a part of his printed speech; he originally remarked that Eastern Democrats were "toads, or reptiles, which spread their slime on the drawing room."⁵⁹ While these words seem oblique to modern readers, their meaning would have been clear to listeners at the time and the reason Mr. Quincy would redact some of his written speech. 'Drawing rooms' were firmly Dolley's spaces in the White House, to 'leave slime' in the drawing room was an allusion to Dolley's relationship to members of Congress as being unchaste.

Quincy in his speech was utilizing a biblical metaphor to slander her. Snakes in the bible are a symbol of sin: the tempter that brought about man's original downfall, and to locate one in

⁵⁶David O. Stewart. *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships that Built America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 284.

⁵⁷Ibid, 284.

⁵⁸Annals of Congress, 12th Cong, 2nd session, 600.

⁵⁹Ibid, 600.

the drawing room would depict a place of power being debauched. According to Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, “Snakes oozing slime called up the history of European palace intrigues where sexual liaisons were common. ‘Queen’ Dolley was the Eve-like seductress, turning the President’s House into a Harem.”⁶⁰ Dolley’s presentation as a ‘queen’ through her flamboyant dress would provoke direct attacks on her. She was associated with royalty, which led to connections with negative court aspects. She was disparaged in a gendered way for her mannerisms.

Dolley may have been attacked for her visibility, influence, appearance, and general force of character, but the way she was attacked was uniquely gendered. In many ways the sexual slander was not a reflection of Dolley herself, but a reflection of ideas about women at the time. Ideals were highly informed by sexuality as women were often defined by and controlled through their sexuality in a patriarchal system. In order to understand in what ways Dolley was attacked, one has to understand the status of women and how they were viewed in the early 1800s.

⁶⁰Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg. *Madison and Jefferson*. (New York: Random house, 2010), 520.

Ch. 2

Hot and Cold: Women's Status and Feminine Politics in the New Republic

The odd and unfortunate nature of talking about women in politics, even in the modern day, is that sexuality is a front and center topic. This may be due to a very easy link between politics being power, sexuality being power, and women wielding either being deemed immoral. Sexuality itself is often relegated to a realm outside of the flow of normal history: it is in a private space. Nonetheless, we will find that, just like any aspect of human life, sexuality is intimately connected to and reflects historical events. It is almost unavoidable to address in the line of work of women's history, since women were so often reduced to their sexuality. Sexuality is both an untouchable subject and also one that is inevitable to explore: it is a large part of the human narrative, and often unfortunately central to the history of women.

The time and place of baseless sexual slander allegations toward a traditionally feminine woman is significant. Dolley Madison was slandered for her status as a woman in the post-revolutionary period, part of a larger cultural backlash against expanding female roles, involving a complex honor system that prized masculinity above all else. Masculinity was related intimately with femininity and control of the feminine. This all played into a larger narrative of women in politics, their roles, and how Dolley Madison herself conformed to and defied gender roles leading to her successes, and status as a target.

Women's Status After the American Revolution

Throughout history, war has almost always disrupted patterns of normal life, sexuality, and gender roles; the mobility of the population and breakup of families and communities forces new patterns and norms to emerge. The War for Independence was no exception; furthermore, the added uncertainty of an untested new nation enhanced social anxiety and gender dilemmas.

During the American Revolution, women found a new role in society and, to a degree, even greater rights and freedoms. Revolutionary-era women were busy supporting and bolstering the war effort through crafts, information distribution and pamphlets, and home-made goods in lieu of boycotted British ones. With the men away at war, women were also in many cases “conducting business as heads of households.”⁶¹ Greater activity and initiative often creates spaces for oppressed peoples to operate in novel ways and assert themselves, and women in this period enjoyed an expanded space of action. Feeling that they played an important role in the war effort, many women felt they earned the right to be part of the new American experiment, and rudimentary ideas about ‘women’s rights’ started to circulate.

Disseminating ideas about inalienable rights in general would mobilize a discourse of women’s status all around. Figures like First Lady Abigail Adams were tentatively expressing ideas about expanded rights for women. She wrote to John Adams: “all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”⁶² Abigail Adams was asserting that men are naturally predisposed to tyranny and that women would not suffer it anymore; new demands for women's rights were being made. In subsequent years, this discussion was further developed by other female writers, such as in 1792 by English author Mary Wollstonecraft. She published ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’ which explored the topic of women’s education and was a type of proto-feminism. This work “raised the stakes and transformed the debate. Her work introduced the term “women’s

⁶¹Pauline Schloesser. *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 57.

⁶²Abigail Adams to John Adams. March 31, 1776. In Founders Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241>.

rights” into widespread usage.”⁶³ Women’s status was of growing interest to the public, both as a new event and, in men’s view, perhaps a threat to the patriarchal orders. The backlash that ensued formed the context for how Dolley Madison experienced slanderous newspapers and the political machine of pointed ‘whispers.’⁶⁴

The new idea of ‘Women’s Rights’ was limited by contemporary views of female roles. One important feature of shifting female status during and after the Revolution was the idea of the ‘Republican Mother.’ The idea strengthened arguments for women receiving enhanced education, but also confined women more rigidly to the private domestic sphere. The key responsibility of “Republican Mothers” was “to instruct all males in republican virtue,” using their inherent morality to shape and create what *was* the American citizen.⁶⁵ As educators, women in theory deserved to be educated themselves and have a new type of moral authority rooted in their maternal role. This push resulted in an increase in female literacy and a circulation of literature and newspapers aimed at women. This development had far-reaching implications for Dolley Madison, as will be explored in the third chapter of this thesis.

The ‘Republican Mother’ concept also created room for political maneuverability for women; they were considered virtuous creatures above politics and could thus operate more freely in that arena. Dolley would both take advantage of this, and be left more vulnerable since it limited the ways she could respond to attacks against her. Post-revolutionary America developed an increasingly vitriolic political atmosphere, with partisanship rising to the point

⁶³Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 4.

⁶⁴Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xxi.

⁶⁵Mary Kelley. *Learning to Speak and Stand: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 25.

where some historians suggest the country was on ‘the edge of civil war.’⁶⁶ Some contemporaries argued that in this contentious atmosphere women “could best serve the nation not by engaging in politics but by withdrawing to the domestic realm. As wives and mothers, they could mitigate party passions by acting as mediators between warring male partisans.”⁶⁷ This played on traditional values of women being the ‘tempering sex’ who helped to civilize men and encouraged them to behave properly in society. The brief period when, during the Revolution, women could undertake political action, seemed to be over.

In the Early Republic, any effort on their part to take sides between Federalists or Democratic Republicans was deeply frowned upon. Women’s active political voice in the streets became silenced. However, their supposed freedom from political views “invited men to let down their guard” and share private asides with women at social events, potentially turning them into spies and other agents.⁶⁸ Republican mothers could form alliances outside of partisan politics, which Dolley did with a deft hand and to great effect. However, as an apolitical actor, she could not speak out against her enemies for fear of appearing to recognize political opponents and herself as a player and not just a victim. Furthermore, it could compromise her ‘virtue’ - the source of power for a Republican mother. Her enemies were free to attack her because there was no template for her to push back against them, and the pattern perpetuated itself.

⁶⁶Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 6.

⁶⁷Ibid, 6.

⁶⁸Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 57.

Medical and Sexual Knowledge

A great deal of the sexual slander launched against Dolley was based on medical information and gender assumptions of the day (supposedly rooted in neutral scientific rationale). Dolley was painted in all these circumstances as ‘sexually insatiable,’ which could only lead to her cheating or emasculating James Madison. An Anglican minister, Reverend Richard Peters of Philadelphia, created a very vivid picture of her after James’s inauguration in 1809. He described “the [sexual] insatiability of democratic women” and referred to Dolley as “the leader of the ceremonious flock . . . [who] carries with her if not the thing itself at least the appetites of the second of the four insatiable things mentioned in the thirtieth chapter of the Proverbs, verse 16.”⁶⁹ Peters referred to ‘Sayings of Agur,’ a portion of the bible that declares: “There are three things that are never satisfied, // four that never say, ‘Enough!’: // the grave, the barren womb, // land, which is never satisfied with water, // and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’”⁷⁰ The four things are death, infertility, parched land, and fire. Three of these things are notably associated with ‘heat’ and using something up, such as land or a body. Proverb thirty is also generally about selfishness and greed, and the “the way of an adulterous woman: // She eats and wipes her mouth // and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’”⁷¹ Dolley was being slandered using biblical references, inferring she was insatiable, like thirsty earth or a hunger, which had caused her marital infertility. Dolley was the adulteress here, leading the ‘flock’ toward immorality. The verses Reverend Peters chose also are associated with heat and using something up, which connected to medical knowledge of the day that assumed that infertility was caused by women being too ‘hot’ and draining their husbands.

⁶⁹Irving, Brant. *James Madison: Secretary of State*, (Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 243.

⁷⁰Sayings of Agur, Proverbs 30:16

⁷¹Sayings of Agur, Proverbs 30:20

Although the scientific method of observation and correlation had emerged in the 17th century, it was nowhere near as objective as it claimed to be. Scientific knowledge regarding sexuality was very much based in conjecture and assumption more than anything. That is not to say that people of the time were unaware or unconcerned with sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis, which was a real problem at the time and the focus of inquiry.⁷² However, science reflects its scientists, and sex differences were seen as biological destiny that, in turn, defined political policy and social reality.⁷³ At the time, “assumption of female inferiority led to the belief that women lacked self-control and good judgment....women possessed voracious sexual appetite that, once awakened, could not be governed.”⁷⁴ Dolley’s sexual insatiability, as described by the Reverend Peters, was based on the idea that women lack rationality and thus the ability to control their ‘primal’ urges if not monitored carefully. Perhaps Dolley’s large personality, and James’s more reserved one, suggested that she was not a closely monitored woman and was thus a loose one.

The idea of women’s inferiority and irrationality had a physiological justification, according to many people of the eighteenth-century. The basis for this was the notion that “Men’s bodies contained more heat than women’s bodies, and this heat made men more intelligent, more capable of reason, and physically stronger.”⁷⁵ Coming into popularity was a new interpretation by Samuel Thompson of the four Galenic humors (phlegm, blood, black bile, yellow bile). Thompson believed that all animal bodies were composed of four main elements:

⁷²Karen A. Weyler. *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*. Edited by Merrill D. Smith. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 294.

⁷³Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 169.

⁷⁴Else L. Hambleton. *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*. Edited by Merrill D. Smith. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 104.

⁷⁵*Ibid*, 103

earth, air, fire, and water; fire and heat were the source of all life and power.⁷⁶ If men had more heat, then they had more vigor and energy to reason and be physically strong. A cooler temperature meant women were innately inferior. However, if women ran ‘too hot,’ like men, they would sap a man’s strength and be sexually insatiable and immoral since they could not handle ‘the heat.’ With regard to Dolley Madison, “whisperers surmised that Dolley’s excessive “heat,” in the form of sexual appetite, made her husband sterile.”⁷⁷ Sexual appetite was thought to generate heat and “contrary to the law of nature for a women to emit heat” and thus an “insatiable” woman caused imbalance, and infertility in her husband.⁷⁸

Ironically, accusing Dolley of being too ‘hot’ also likened her to a man, someone with the type of heat that made her rational and strong. While Dolley was in many ways a demure ‘people-pleaser’ who took on feminine aspects of passivity and deference, she was also recognized as a being outside conventional gender lines. Reputation and personal connections were the heart of political power at this time of great national transition; personality was at the heart of political capital.⁷⁹ Dolley’s ability to be generally well-liked and charm anyone in the room was her source of political maneuverability and influence. Furthermore, not only was she an unusually tall woman, but also her impressive presence itself “demanded emotional control” and attention from others. Reports consistently pointed to Dolley’s presence always being felt in a room.⁸⁰ In a culture that valued women taking up as little space and attention as possible,

⁷⁶Paul Starr. *The social transformation of American medicine: The rise of a sovereign profession and the making of a vast industry*. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 31.

⁷⁷Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 251.

⁷⁸*Ibid*, 132.

⁷⁹Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xix.

⁸⁰Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (New York: Westview Press, 2013), 103.

Dolley was the exception.⁸¹ The public press rendered Dolley as a figure of promiscuity, not only for the fact she was simply a woman, but also that she was a woman who had political influence and took up space in a masculine way.

Masculinity & Honor Culture

Masculinity was also at the core of the slander against Dolley Madison. While Dolley had influence in her own right, James Madison was the one who signed the legislation and treaties. The steady stream of attacks against her, however, suggested that she threatened components of masculinity. James Madison himself was not a picture of masculinity, and his wife was not the picture of modest femininity, and in an honor culture built around these notions slander against her made sense.

Masculinity in an honor culture in many ways defined itself by control and wielding that control. Women lacked status and identity outside of men, "Society conceptualized them as dependents whose menfolk would speak and act for them in economic, political, and legal affairs."⁸² It would make sense to attack James through Dolley, since she was legally and socially an extension of him. Gender distinction also "describes not only the supposedly separate characteristics between the sexes" but also social relationships, in that context gender is the "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."⁸³ In honor culture a man is responsible for his wife in order to maintain his own masculine virtues and power relationship not only in the relationship but in society.

⁸¹Karin A. Martin, "Becoming a gendered body: Practices of preschools." *American sociological review* 63, No. 4 (1998): 494.

⁸²Mary Beth Norton. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1996), 4.

⁸³*Ibid*, 6.

James Madison did not fit classical ideas of masculinity and this deficiency was potent in an ‘honor culture’ of gentlemen. James Madison was a small man with a modest presence in a room, and sired no children of his own. As stated previously, James was 5’4, around a hundred pounds, and described as “mute, colde and repressive.”⁸⁴ He was also described as sickly and suffered from epilepsy early in life that left him cautious and a bit of a hypochondriac. In Federalist newspapers, he was called “an anchovy, a tortoise, and a “dead head” with his cold-blooded, sterile “lack of amorous passion.”⁸⁵ He was more reserved and intellectual than he was loud and ‘threatening,’ almost a feminine disposition some might say. Without siring any children, James Madison was also in a bind: “The ability to impregnate a woman was a key indicator of manhood” in his society.⁸⁶ One of the ways Federalists could exploit this weakness in ‘manhood’ was insinuating he could not control or satisfy his wife.

The honor culture helps to explain why James was attacked through Dolley. Honor was based in standards of masculinity, and specifically gentlemanly masculinity. It encompassed a “core of a man’s identity . . . entirely other-directed, [it was] determined before the eyes of the world; it did not exist unless bestowed by others. Indeed, a man of honor was defined by the respect that he received in public.”⁸⁷ In an era when politics were highly personal attacking a man in terms of his masculinity and honor could destroy his career. A key way to do this was to attack his deficiencies as a provider and husband. Women and children were usually off limits in

⁸⁴Bruce Chadwick. *James and Dolley Madison: America's First Power Couple*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), 37.

⁸⁵Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 132.

⁸⁶Mary Beth Norton. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1996), 195.

⁸⁷Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xvi.

an honor culture but Dolley was an exception.⁸⁸ Honor culture was everything, especially in the American South in this period; an enemy knew that taking down a man's political career was taking down his honor.⁸⁹ The importance of his status bestowed by the public meant that 'whisper' campaigns and slander were the ultimate tool, and James Madison a target. Dolley was an extension of him and thus in the firing range.

Female Sexuality & the Cultural Backlash

Femininity during this time period was defined by virtue, reservation, and deference, but the sexuality of women was also a changing terrain post-revolution. Sexual infractions were punished less frequently as the 1700s progressed, although this development met with backlash. The biggest indicator of change was in the legal system; "during the decades immediately before and after the Revolution: although accounts suggest that adultery and fornication increased, criminal punishments for those offenses underwent a sharp decline."⁹⁰ Sentences given out for sexual transgressions became less harsh even as the number of premarital births went up. Young men and women after 1776 enjoyed a higher degree of self-determination in comparison to their parents, and many saw it as female sexual freedom, which in some ways it was.⁹¹ Historian Karen Weyler argues there were "increasing tolerant legal attitudes toward female sexuality" due to laws becoming codified and communities breaking up.⁹² Communities and individuals were on the move in America; more and more people were traveling west or simply moving. This broke up traditional bonds used to prosecute members of their community for sexual liaisons. Furthermore, after the American Revolution there was a real effort to make laws the rule of the

⁸⁸Ibid, 132.

⁸⁹Ibid, 5.

⁹⁰Karen A. Weyler. *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*. Edited by Merrill D. Smith. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 292.

⁹¹Ibid, 292.

⁹²Ibid, 304.

land, not individuals or tradition. Laws were being codified and upheld. Legal records show, according to Weyler's data, that criminal punishment for adultery and fornication took a sharp decline in the 1780s and onward for both men and women.

Anxiety surrounding the new sexual freedom also increased. News articles, periodicals, and especially literature depicted the consequences of fornication, adultery, and other sexual transgressions for women in particular. Sentimental fiction, akin to romance novels, again and again linked female sexual expression with madness, death, and punishment. Fictional narratives were gaining in numbers and cultural authority, and depicted an obvious backlash against the post-revolution breakdown of social mores.⁹³

Dolley became First Lady in an environment that was more hostile toward women than usual, and in particular, was obsessed with the development of increasing female sexuality. Dolley herself did have a few traits to contribute to the rumor mill. Dolley was affectionate and sensual: "like many southern women, she hugged people, and, when asked for a kiss, presented her lips. Dolley famously wore low-cut gowns."⁹⁴ She kissed gentlemen on the mouth when they asked, and greeted people with hugs and physical touch. It was also fashionable at the time for women to protect their modesty by stuffing a handkerchief down their blouse to hide their cleavage, but Dolley did not do this.⁹⁵ In an era when newspapers tended to attack female sexuality, Dolley was not hiding her cleavage. In little actions such as this, the news and gossipers were inspired to slander her and make up stories about her promiscuity.

Dolley's self-presentation and gender are inseparable, her persona was modeled after gender expectations, 'American womanhood.' However, gender standards and expressive

⁹³Ibid, 285.

⁹⁴Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 250.

⁹⁵Ibid, 250.

women like Dolley have existed in other time periods, so there was a final factor behind her opponents' campaign of slander. Maybe Dolley was vibrant and a woman, but none of this would have been perpetrated without the newspapers. Newspapers preyed on assumptions about her and used sexuality as a tool to slander her and grab readers' attention. The potency was in the fact that these accusations could be broadly advertised in the press, exposing more and more of the public to the idea and augmenting its power.

Ch.3. The Pen is Mightier than the Pulpit:

The Influence of the Press on 18th Century Politics

Print has a unique place in society as a reflection and crafter of the social landscape, as it creates public space that allows for shared values beyond an individual's personal community. In his seminal work on print capitalism, Benedict Anderson describes this phenomenon of print's ability to facilitate an 'imagined community.' He argues that people within one nation will never meet the majority of the citizens their own country, or even city, and print acts as a conductor among them.⁹⁶ In the 'lives of their minds,' people have an image of their national community; the nation is their 'in-group' and they feel linked by a semblance of shared attitudes.⁹⁷ While Anderson's main argument is about nationalism, his analysis of print and its impressive powers is essential to understanding the primacy of it in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century America. Print spreads and codifies widespread norms through linking communities that otherwise might not have a means to bond. It is indispensable for people imagining their nation, their community, and what is acceptable to think, do, or act in public space as the press opens the way. It provides the language for people to describe and make sense of the world around them. The press in this instance created diverging imagined communities split between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, and for the Federalists, Dolley was a fictitious adulteress.

Women typically did not occupy public space in the same way men did in the early American republic, but were still the objects of intense consideration and 'creation.' Politics and news were joined at a time before concepts of 'journalistic integrity' or 'loyal opposition'

⁹⁶Benedict Anderson. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. (London: Verso Books, 2006), 7.

⁹⁷Ibid, 7.

existed. It was a sensationalist time meant to keep papers circulating and patrons supporting them above all else.

Several Federalist newspapers went after Dolley Madison, spreading the idea that she and her sister were being pimped out by Thomas Jefferson in 1804 and publishing false ads for books about her in 1813. Certain journalists believed her sexuality and personal life were open to scrutiny and the slurs against her inspired alarm from friends and even a duel. A letter to Catherine Mitchell, Dolley's close friend, from her husband Samuel Mitchell said "Your Friend Mrs. Madison is shockingly and unfeeling traduced in the Virginia papers."⁹⁸ The papers were noticeably going after Dolley and muddying her name in a meaningful way. The question is why; why this happened and why it mattered. Mrs. Madison was fairly well-beloved and should have been considered generally apolitical and off-limits due to her gender. And yet, in 1804, in 1808, and again in 1813, the papers launched gendered attacks against her.

The context of the period is the engine behind these events. The papers were powerful, partisan, loosely controlled, and lacked the culture of journalistic integrity modern readers might expect. Papers were highly political at the time. As James Madison's Democratic-Republican Party rose, the Federalist Party died, and in its death throes it attacked anyone it could. These attacks helped to solidify a struggling Federalist party, this 'imagined community' that targeted Dolley Madison as a way to attack her husband and his party. They gave disconnected readers an alleged look into Dolley's very private life and thus gave them permission to make the personal public. Print extended readers' gaze into not only the public but also the private lives of politicians and made them fair game for commentary, it gave them the language they needed to

⁹⁸Samuel Mitchell to Catherine Mitchell, 1 April 1808, in *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*, Catherine Allgor (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 132.

do so. That make leaders not only politically public, but also personally public, their private lives on display for the masses to consider.

The Power of Print

In early 18th-century America, political parties were loosely organized, campaign machines were nonexistent, and formal communication links between the public and politicians were undeveloped. To fill the gap in political organization came the press, which worked tirelessly on behalf of the two emerging parties and for individual politicians to broadcast messages and promote candidates. Newspapers were forces of political power that would be unrecognizable by modern standards. Paper editors held political office, party leaders directly patronized popular papers, and papers were unashamedly partisan. Several of them even went as far as to denounce impartiality as ‘immoral’ altogether.⁹⁹ The power of the press during this time on a partisan level cannot be overstated: the press was a force for moving, shaking, and creating public opinion. This unhindered power meant it was an effective tool for going after opponents- and in this case, opponents’ wives.

The first question is why the press was so powerful. During the 18th century literacy was on the rise for both men and women, and significantly high in New England. However, although circulation of individual papers may have been low and many people couldn’t afford them, newspapers were read aloud at taverns, inns, and in other group settings.¹⁰⁰ This extended their influence far beyond what subscription rates might suggest. It was a communal pastime that united the public’s knowledge. Furthermore, political debate was still a vivid American activity after the Revolution and motivated people to seek out newspapers and discuss their contents.

⁹⁹Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 50.

¹⁰⁰Jeffrey Pasley. “*The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 7.

Print was relevant and growing: “the number of newspapers jumped from nearly 50 at the end of the Revolution, to over 100 in 1790, and to over 575 by 1820, an increase that far outstripped the rate of population growth.”¹⁰¹ Demand for newspapers and the growth of the press boomed. Literacy also increased, for men and women, and the paper became the primary vehicle of political literacy and interaction with the ‘imagined community’ of the new United States.

The press was the main technological means for mass communication at the time. Word of mouth was also a means of communication, but gossip only reached so far and people only gave it so much credit. Thus newspapers became a kind of technological unifier for the new nation by spreading news- and rumors- much more widely. More importantly, the press provided a new type of social connection. An ‘imagined community’ often becomes more necessary when physical communities are on the move or unstable. America was expanding rapidly with its populace migrating into new lands after the American Revolution, both internally and westward. An early-nineteenth century observer of American culture, Alexis de Tocqueville, described a “decline or absence of traditional social bonds.”¹⁰² With looser communities, a reliance on the press for greater access to ‘belonging’ and knowledge of public affairs might explain expanded demand. Local news could be shared in person, but the press became culturally central to geographically scattered Americans in a time when national news was the focus.¹⁰³ National news gave people the sense of belonging to something larger. The consumption of the press and emphasis on national news over local would make it a prime tool against a national figure such as Dolley Madison.

¹⁰¹Rosemarie Zagari. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 53.

¹⁰²Jeffrey Pasley. “*The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*.” (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 4.

¹⁰³Ibid, 2.

The early national press derived its political power from an intimate relationship with the emerging political parties. Opportunity and mutual benefit was the foundation of their symbiosis. Despite the vastly growing print industry, funds for individual newspapers were low. Circulation of journals and newspapers was increasing, but presses “constantly disappeared” as some failed and new ones took their place.¹⁰⁴ The printing press business was a hard one and printers were always looking for new ways to fund themselves. This came in the form of politicians who needed effective mouthpieces to reach the people. Politicians formed alliances with specific newspapers, and as a result “editors were the gatekeepers of what passed into the public domain.”¹⁰⁵ Politicians needed editors to bring their platforms to the people and would fund them in order to do so.

Newspapers started being funded by political leaders almost right away. The *National Gazette* was the first paper in Washington, DC. It was sponsored by Thomas Jefferson as a counterweight to the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* of Philadelphia supported by Hamilton. The papers were sponsored personally by these leaders and often even had Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton writing columns for them anonymously. These papers were also partisan and cut-throat. *The National Gazette*, for instance, called George Washington a ‘monarch’ with royal vices and accused him personally of thinking “it was beneath his dignity to mix occasionally with the people.”¹⁰⁶ These papers called their political opponents’ slugs, dogs, demagogues, debauched, and every other type of denunciation. These papers would serve as

¹⁰⁴Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 54.

¹⁰⁵Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 23.

¹⁰⁶Eric Burns. *Infamous scribblers: The founding fathers and the rowdy beginnings of American journalism*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 288.

mouthpieces for the parties after 1790 and reflected the growing press-politics relationship that created increasing tensions.

Not only did papers serve as intermediaries, but they also operated in ‘ungentlemanly’ ways that gentleman politicians could not. In an honor culture, “Print warfare was a bloodless duel that could affect reputations as profoundly as an ‘interview’ [duel] on the field of honor.”¹⁰⁷ It was battle against another opponent, and low-level printers were allowed to fight dirty. Since “journalism was a profession held in low repute in the 18th century,” they were already considered lowly and had less to lose if they lashed out.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, a good portion of articles were signed as ‘anonymous’ or else were untraceable reprints from other papers. In this era, “there were no copyright fees, required permissions, or even well-established canons of giving credit, for use of previously published material in newspapers.”¹⁰⁹ They could reprint material freely and then not be blamed for any backlash by claiming the material did not originate with them. Newspapers used this combination of poor reputation, anonymity, and the ability to reprint in order to hit ‘below the belt’ in rhetorical terms, and Dolley Madison became one of their favorite targets.

The accusations against Dolley Madison directly mirrored this union of press and politics. While friends and Democratic-Republicans came to Dolley’s defense when she was defamed, the spark of disgrace was still there. Two years after Dolley was accused of being pimped out by Thomas Jefferson in 1804, Congressman John Randolph referred to the slander when writing to James Monroe as he urged him to run for the Presidency. He derides James

¹⁰⁷Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 132.

¹⁰⁸Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 24.

¹⁰⁹Jeffrey Pasley. “*The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 8.

Madison for his “unfortunate matrimonial connexion.”¹¹⁰ In January 1813, *The Federal Republican* insinuated that Dolley Madison practiced “practical parts of polygamy,” and alluded to her being unfaithful and immoral.¹¹¹ That same month, a Federalist congressman asserted that First Lady Dolley Madison kept a sexually debauched European-style court in Washington. He said Democratic-Republicans “spread their slime” in her drawing room.¹¹² Politics and the papers mirrored each other; congressmen used the same rhetoric of her sexual immorality as the press did. They went hand in hand to perpetuate the slurs against her, but the papers in this case led the way, as they could say more, reach more people, and were for all intents and purposes, just another tool of the politicians.

Federalists vs Democratic Republicans

The political climate itself aided the growing print scene and explained some of its many actions. The early 1800s partisanship had many aspects of a brewing civil war. During the brief before the Constitution was ratified many important politicians were unified, the founders pushing for its adoption by the whole nation. Conflicts arose over its interpretation along with questions about what direction to take the new nation. Key players in the Revolution took up the mantle to try to determine this immense question: Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson along with James Madison. The feud began over whether or not the federal government should assume state wartime debts, as Hamilton proposed, and by extension what role government should play in a republican society.¹¹³ Hamilton advocated for a loose interpretation of the

¹¹⁰John Randolph to James Madison, Sept. 16, 1806, in *Writings of James Monroe*, ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898), 4:486.

¹¹¹Anonymous, “Dans l’art d’interesser consiste l’art d’écrire,” *Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*, (Georgetown, DC), Jan. 15th, 1813.

¹¹²Annals of Congress, 12th Cong, 2nd session, 600.

¹¹³Paul E. Johnson. *The Early American Republic: 1789-1829*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

Constitution. He imagined an expanded role for the government, ultimately envisioning an industrialized United States with protectionist trade policies and favoring more centralized control.¹¹⁴ Jefferson and Madison, however, favored a strict interpretation of the Constitution and a very limited role for government. Jefferson conceived of an agrarian nation with free trade policies, and a society distant from anything like monarchy.¹¹⁵ These conflicting ideas and the arguments over debt and the meaning of federalism became the basis of two parties: the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans. Their polarization would be a major motivating factor for the press going after Dolley.

Jefferson and Hamilton did not like each other and their views contrasted with one another in almost every way, but how did the political scene become so entirely hostile? During the 1790s, Federalists controlled the political scene with “a few dominating leaders” such as Washington and Adams, and encouraged rapid creation of several institutions like a national bank and military force.¹¹⁶ The Democratic-Republicans arose in opposition to these measures, which they firmly believed endangered the republic. After passage of unpopular acts like the Alien and Sedition Acts and a Quasi-war with France during his administration John Adams was voted out of office in the ‘Bloodless Revolution.’ This event led to him being replaced with the newly elected Thomas Jefferson. When Jefferson took office, the nation’s capital fully moved to the partially constructed Washington, DC. With Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans in charge, the Federalists experienced political exclusion. Their sense of alienation was hardly helped by the death of Alexander Hamilton, a leader for whom there emerged no effective replacement.

¹¹⁴Ibid, 15.

¹¹⁵Ibid, 31.

¹¹⁶Shaw Livermore Jr. *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party*. (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), 5.

Political exclusion is one of the four types of grievances that afflict countries before a civil war, according to the influential work of Collier and Hoeffler.¹¹⁷ It alienates the opposition and builds up resentment to the point of perceived oppression and justified push back. In the 1790s, the Federalists had controlled both houses of Congress and the presidency. They effectively strong-armed their way into building up a navy and extending the role of central government, leaving their opposition feeling excluded from power. Thomas Jefferson built up his Democratic-Republicans to push back against Federalists whom he saw as betraying the founding ideals of their nation.¹¹⁸ With Jefferson's election in 1800, however, the Federalists now felt the pain of political exile. These feelings of political exclusion exaggerated political polarization and increased politicians' desire to fund press operations to defame their opponents.

Circumstances around these parties were also influential: the all-or-nothing political attitude, anxiety about the war in Europe, and the layout of DC itself contributed to a robust volatility. The American experiment was setting out on a new test: how to approach political division. While debate was almost universally praised as a good thing for a republic, there was no such concept yet of the 'loyal opposition.'¹¹⁹ You were either with the President and his administration or you were against it, and by extension an enemy of the state. Debate was good, wrongheaded opinions were 'bad.' Despite their emergence, parties were not seen as legitimate in this "Age of Passion," but rather were regarded as self-interested factions that would destroy the nation. Parties had to "justify their rule by casting the opposition in the blackest of hues."¹²⁰

¹¹⁷Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. "Greed and grievance in civil war." *Oxford economic papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563-595.

¹¹⁸Shaw Jr. Livermore. *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party*. (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), 5.

¹¹⁹Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 38.

¹²⁰Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 14.

The rules of political engagement had yet to be fully formed, and were far from being tempered, making ‘us-versus-them’ the dominant rhetoric.

Another important factor was the war in Europe. Britain and France had gone to war in the aftermath of the French Revolution and engaged in a bloody conflict that spilled over globally. Although the United States remained neutral, the Federalists supported Britain, while the Democratic Republicans favored Revolutionary France. The parties’ divergent stances on the European war were especially important as “this was an era of almost no domestic policy- the business of government was foreign relations.”¹²¹ The American politicians’ who took sides over the war in Europe thus created schisms at home. While they were still in control of the government, the Federalists saw “the poor, the ignorant, the passionate, and the vicious,” turned into a ‘frenzy’ by the press during the French Revolution.¹²² The Federalists embarked on a quasi-war with France over trade infractions, and would later seek to muzzle the press as part of the package of legislation known as the Alien and Sedition Acts with far-reaching consequences.

The war, the newness of American untested politics, and the personal feud of Hamilton and Jefferson kicked off party tensions, but the move to Washington DC exacerbated it. Dolley Madison was attacked in the press only after the capital at Washington DC was completed in 1801. The physical geography of the city contributed to the extreme partisanship, some of which Dolley tried to mend through social events. The new nation had never before had a city exclusively devoted to the purposes of government.¹²³ The swampy marsh land upon which it was built slowly developed and the city layout was shaped to serve its primary occupants: white

¹²¹Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity* (Virginia: Westview Press, 2013), 82.

¹²²Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 39.

¹²³James Sterling Young. *The Washington Community: 1800-1828*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966), xii.

male congressman. Since these men did not live there year round, few brought their families and instead stayed in boarding houses with other men. Men in these dining houses ate together, took leisure together, and eventually voted together, with the housing arrangement helping to determine party affiliation.¹²⁴ Without extensive contact with political opponents, congressmen tended to become more deeply partisan. It was easy to demonize the other side when you didn't see them outside of work. Dolley's drawing rooms were actually one of the few places where congressmen met outside of party lines and socialized freely.¹²⁵ Yet her efforts in seeking bipartisanship did not dissuade papers from defaming her even in an era that supposedly prized propriety.

Libel Laws

Loose libel laws also explain why Dolley Madison was so easily maligned in the newspapers. America was unique in some of its free press practices, as the United States "unlike most European nations . . . did not lay taxes on printed matter, nor did it establish a system for monitoring the content of what was printed or sent through the mail."¹²⁶ The material was uncensored, and essentially subsidized with low rates of paper and postage exemptions, leading to 70% of all mail being newspapers by 1794.¹²⁷ The United States encouraged free exchange of information in print. The nation was also distancing itself from its mother country. British policy had been "prosecution, restrictive licensing, bribery, public subsidies and other forms of "influence" to control the flow of information" and the government set out to "assure the authorities a public voice that would constantly support, explain, and apologize for their

¹²⁴Ibid, 87-88.

¹²⁵Catherine Allgor. *Dolley Madison: The Problem of National Unity*. (Virginia: Westview Press, 2013), 84.

¹²⁶Jeffrey Pasley. "The Tyranny of Printers:" *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 48.

¹²⁷Ibid, 48-9.

actions.”¹²⁸ Britain controlled its public through controlling the flow and nature of information. The Americans were very wary of British practices at the time, which may help to explain why the press was free to launch the kind of attacks it did against Dolley. In addition, one reason the Federalist John Adams also became so unpopular was his support of the Sedition Acts against free speech. Democratic-Republicans could hardly condone such policies once in power.

The Sedition Act passed in 1798 during Adams’s administration, had polarized politics, and caused the Democratic-Republicans to think twice about passing their own censorship laws. Enacted along with a set of measures seeking to curb the immigration of “aliens,” the Sedition Act called for jailing or fining “men who engaged in seditious libel against the government.”¹²⁹ The Federalist administrations had already been facing a heavy amount of criticism, and even George Washington tried to denounce press activities in his Farewell Address.¹³⁰ The Sedition Act was set up to take these ‘acts against the government’ and suppress them. The practice worked in the short run as editors were fined or jailed, and their papers intimidated out of business. In the long run, it had the opposite effect. Not only did Democratic-Republican papers increase substantially when the Sedition Act expired in 1801, but they spawned even more vicious rhetoric.

The Act against free speech was an important contributing factor for Adams only serving one term as president. Several popular editors were jailed and the measure appeared to be bullying the populace, as the British libel laws had done. For “the Federalists had overreached”

¹²⁸Ibid, 41.

¹²⁹Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xvii.

¹³⁰Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 32.

Alexander Hamilton penned much of the address and Washington pushed to have a section condemning the lies and slander spread by some of the press, the section was cut by Hamilton.

and “turned the tide of popular opinion against them permanently.”¹³¹ The Democratic-Republicans learned from this and did not muzzle the press later, even when it went after them, including such seemingly peripheral figures as Dolley Madison. Furthermore, the Sedition Acts failed in that it “seemingly called new men into the field, in greater numbers and with greater intensity than previously.”¹³² Federalist papers had originally outnumbered Democratic-Republican papers substantially, but this shifted quickly. The Sedition Acts caused a move toward opening up new papers, which urged ‘Guardians of Liberty’ and ‘Friends of the People’ to speak out against all Federalists. These papers were even less shy about their party opinions, and even more ready to decry any effort to ‘oppress’ them. Federalist papers responded by becoming more extreme as Democratic-Republican papers became more radical. The trend accelerated after Alexander Hamilton’s death in 1804 and the Federalist Party lost its guidance. It responded to the vacuum in leadership, leverage, and power by engaging in slander against their opponents. They felt backed into a corner and ready to use any tools at their disposal.

Press as the Engine of Slander

In 1804, after a Virginian paper published its stories about Dolley Madison’s immoral ‘relations’ with foreign dignitaries, Postmaster Gideon Granger decided to defend her honor. Instead of ignoring the rumor mill and papers as the Madison’s had done, he offered to challenge Congressman Samuel Hunt to a duel. Granger associated Hunt with these allegations because Hunt was an outspoken Federalist with connections to the Federalist press.¹³³ He was talked out of the duel, but his public outcry and efforts most likely just spread the rumors all the more. The

¹³¹Ibid, 47.

¹³²Ibid, 47.

¹³³Catherine Allgor. *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 132.

important factor is that the impetus for this duel was the press, and had a snowball effect that led to duels, rumors, and then more slander.

In 1804, 1808, and 1813 newspapers let loose allegations against Dolley. They insinuated that she was an adulteress, immoral, and sexually insatiable. These newspapers were Federalist and their editors were generally radicals like Alexander Contee Hanson. Hanson wrote for the *Federalist Republican*. He called Democratic-Republicans “demagogues” in the business of ruining American Democracy and committing “vile and infamous acts.”¹³⁴ He wrote the fake ad in 1813 that accused Dolley Madison of polygamy, adultery, and depravity.¹³⁵ He also attacked James Madison in a similar crude way, accusing him of having a “lack of amorous passion” and being cold blooded, which, as discussed in chapter 2, besmirched his power and sexuality.¹³⁶

Hanson’s strong language and uncensored writing style made his the foremost radical Federalist paper and also made Hanson himself a target. While the Democratic-Republicans did not pass formal laws against slander, Hanson was still walking a dangerous line that he eventually crossed. In 1814, after Hanson called James Madison a ‘Bonaparte’ and decried the war with Britain, a patriotic mob gathered around his press and ended up destroying it.¹³⁷ While the state did not have the political capital to censor its citizens, citizens themselves apparently would do the work for them. The rumors about any indiscretions by Dolley would cease only after the War of 1812 when stories about her iconic flight from the White House carrying George Washington’s portrait spread. She would be remembered as the heroine of the war, and not as the Federalist image of a corrupt woman.

¹³⁴*Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*, (Georgetown, DC), Oct 19th, 1808.

¹³⁵Anonymous, “Dans l’art d’interesser consiste l’art d’ecrire,” *Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*, (Georgetown, DC), Jan. 15th, 1813.

¹³⁶*Federalist Republican*, (Georgetown, DC), April 19th, 1814.

¹³⁷Si Sheppard. *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 67.

That isn't to say that the words spread against her are not important or worth looking into. The fact they happened at all in a consistent pattern says much about the times and political culture. This story, however, could not be told without the newspapers; it most likely could not have been spread or perpetuated without the newspapers. Before the press, authority figures like kings and queens existed mostly as distant icons with little relevance to everyday people. They may have been discussed, but most likely not on widespread intimate terms. Authorities in many ways controlled their own image. The elites had a monopoly on literacy, written news, and information for many decades. Mass literacy and newspapers changed this. These developments connected communities to a larger entity, and to that entity's leaders, like never before. In this case, the Federalists used the press to create an imagined community among distant Federalists and formed a false Dolley Madison to predominate over that mental landscape.

The Federalist papers could sell newspapers by writing about 'intrigue' and things that entertained. On their own, it might not have occurred to people to think deeply or intrusively about their leaders, and if they did, it most likely occurred privately in confined circles. But the press entertained the public as it presented information that they might not have thought of themselves. To have the newspapers write about Dolley Madison in a private way gave citizens the credence and words to talk about her in that way as well. As primary documents report, congressmen, government employees, and clergy accused her of sexual indiscretions, and all after the first 1804 allegations of her being 'pimped out.' These newspaper articles themselves seem to be lost, but references to them exist. Postmaster Gideon Granger threatened to release information about the "sexual diversions of both the first lady and her sister" that were written about in the newspapers during the election of 1804.¹³⁸ Newspapers gave Federalists and people

¹³⁸Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg. *Madison and Jefferson*. (New York: Random house, 2010), 531.

like Granger the words and imagined landscape to make these accusations, and make them confidently. The false sexual slander was transmitted and legitimized through the press. The Federalists created an imagined community of like-minded individuals, and then imagined First Lady Dolley Madison as they wished. Mrs. Madison herself and gender informed the slanderous discussion, but the press started it.

Conclusion: To Know a Lady, Public Creation, Private Insight

Dolley Madison displayed symptoms of the ‘vanishing lady’ effect. She did not leave public speeches or official writings, the first twenty-five years of her life produced no letters, she censored her own documents later in life. Luckily, unlike many women who are obscured from history, Dolley was a public figure. She was watched, she was noticed, she was recorded. It would not be a stretch to say her story would not have been written down and noted without her connection to powerful men. One of the side effects of a gendered culture is that the importance of women is often predicated on their relationships to men. They were worth writing about on the basis of their husbands, sons, and fathers, with some exceptions. Furthermore, history is often written as a political story, one in which men were important for dominating events. Dolley Madison existed at an intersection of gender and politics; there is no single angle from which to assess her historical significance.

The trend of valuing ‘women only in connection to men’ would reverse itself as feminist history arose, addressing the problem of women not being considered on the basis of their own merits, as individuals. Feminist historians often focused on women who ‘bucked’ the system or lives of the average women such as midwives, domestic laborers, consumers, and so on. Early feminist historians sought to counter the ‘vanishing ladies’ effect by describing woman’s private thoughts from primary sources. They were expressing that not only do women have merit in their own right, but their thoughts, actions, internal landscape, ie private lives, were important. They did not have to ‘earn’ their right to be documented. However, as prominent women's political historian Rosemarie Zagarri writes, “minimizing the importance of women’s relationship to the

state has a cost.”¹³⁹ By not addressing women in centers of power and women in connection to governments and other institutions we miss a broader story of how these elements interact. Women did not just exist in the domestic sphere, even if that’s where they were pushed, and to only write about their everyday lives in the domestic sphere is to limit the narrative. Both feminist and traditional historical approaches can be improved through being combined.

One of my struggles in researching Dolley Madison was a lack of significant historiography. Historians such as Catherine Allgor have filled the gaps, but most books on Dolley focus on James Madison and her or are just short summaries of her life and almost always the War of 1812. For many feminist historians, she represented conformity and a type of remote privilege; representing the niche population of white elite women. For political historians she was an informal, trivial, political player, and not a separate agent from James Madison. Historians writing from either of these perspectives lack an abundance of primary documents recording her thoughts and a clear angle from which to approach her story.

In order to derive a fuller portrait of an early nineteenth-century political woman, a synthesis of approaches has to be utilized. I aim to recover her story on its own merits, but recognize that in the world in which she operated, she was an extension of her husband. She was affected by the state in the way that the Democratic-Republican administration led to her being targeted, and she in turn affected the state through patronage and informal campaigning. The political opposition created a false, sexualized, image of her, and by interpreting her public image we can better understand the time period, history, and the lady herself.

The approach of my thesis incorporates the relationships of state, gender, print, and the individual. It answers the question of what being a public woman meant at a time when women

¹³⁹Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 3.

were confined to the private domestic sphere and is useful in expanding women's and political history. It presents a synthesis of traditional historical analysis of an individual's importance to state history, predominantly male, and new feminist theory of female actors being important in their own right.

A synthetic approach to historical data is also important for discerning causal factors. Historical events don't occur in a vacuum where only one 'point' controls all other events. One facet maybe more important than the others, but it isn't a sole factor. Individuals, culture, and institutions all shape and pivot the past. A full narrative involves different and connecting elements that create a nuanced understanding of the past and our world. Dolley Madison herself influenced the slander against her via her personality, gender informed the way her personality was formed and presented, and print culture spread ideas about Dolley that reflected gender and was a shadow of version of the women herself. One portion of this story cannot be told without the others.

It would be heartening to say that the story of Dolley Madison and the sexual rumors against her was a narrative of the past, when one of the most effective ways to defame a woman was through her sexuality. Unfortunately, the story of Dolley Madison in the press and political game is still relevant today. Women still struggle in politics to be taken seriously and gender expectations still pose a large obstacle for them to overcome. During Hillary Clinton's bid for the Presidency in 2016, her opponents produced sexist buttons that referenced her physical appearance, and her faithfulness to her husband came into question.¹⁴⁰ Carly Fiorina, a Republican hopeful in the 2016 race, was judged on her smile and called a 'bimbo' in her career

¹⁴⁰Nikki Schwab. "Anti-Hillary Buttons Sold at Donald Trump Rally." *Daily Mail Online*. Associated Newspapers, 03 May 2016. Web. 23 Mar. 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3571662/Anti-Hillary-buttons-Donald-Trump-rally-fat-thighs-small-breasts-call-b.html>

and other terms for promiscuous women.¹⁴¹ None of these allegations, just as in Mrs. Madison's case, have any truth behind them. It is unfortunately the same kind of vocabulary that has been utilized against female political figures for centuries now. However, perhaps Dolley Madison can provide some hope and guidance. She remained steadfast and ignored the rumors. She became remembered for her heroism, and not the fictions others created about her.

After the war of 1812, Dolley carefully penned a letter to her sister recounting the events of the flight from the White House. It is this document that is most referenced about the event. Dolley then sent this letter to biographers, but only after penning a second version. She even corrected a newspaper for claiming someone else saved Washington's portrait and engineered the story around it.¹⁴² The classic image of her saving the portrait is not entirely accurate, she did not carry it and she did not cut it out of the frame herself. However, collective memory doesn't care, it just remembers her as an icon and a heroine. Knowing Dolley's inner life may be a challenge, but she achieved what many men and women spend lifetimes on: forming a prestigious reputation that lasted beyond her. She spread her own image as an icon of the War of 1812 and perhaps set an example of a woman who shaped her own overarching narrative past what was imposed on her by the press or the public. Dolley Madison may have been slandered, but she had the last word in what was remembered about her, and that's the part that mattered.

¹⁴¹Philip Elliot. "Carly Fiorina Sexism: Silicon Valley, Campaign Trail." *Time*. Time, 01 Aug. 2015. Web. 23 Mar. 2017, <http://time.com/3981315/carly-fiorina-sexism-campaign-silicon-valley/>

¹⁴²Mary Cutts. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*, edited by Catherine Allgor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 13.

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