

**Diamonds and Pearls, Virtuous Women and Viragos, and Tender and all Too Visible Breasts: The Politics of Female Dress in Washington D.C., 1800-1820**

In the early 1800s, Washington D.C. was a small village dressed up as a capital city. It sought to make an impression as a virtuous, republican capital that was also worthy of being held in great esteem like its European counterparts. However, it was more bucolic than cosmopolitan, and the city's business was the chiefly male endeavor of nation-building, both physically and politically. The city's evening social scene of dinners, balls, and "squeezes" with politicians, ambassadors, and society grand dames allowed for networking and socializing between the sexes. Refinement and virtue, both personal and political, were conveyed through these public "performances", and the costumes— that is, the dress of the female sex —were essential props. Determinations of what was fashionable, appropriate, ostentatious, or risqué changed over the years, but critiquing women's dress was consistent. Observers evaluated the dress of notable women such as Elizabeth Merry, Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, and Dolley Madison, and nameless other women in revealing "nudities", often relaying their judgements in missives to family members. The sartorial was both personal and political in Early Washington, and a woman's dress reflected herself, her husband, and the political virtues, or lack thereof, of the government they represented. Thomas Jefferson may have believed that "the tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsions," but the politics of the new nation were worked out over the garments and adornments resting upon the ladies of Washington and their breasts, as much as they were acted out in its neoclassical buildings.

The politics of female dress in the new capital made clear that even if the idealized American woman, the republican wife and mother, was to be above the political fray, the real women of Washington D.C., were embedded in it and were judged and defined by what they wore. Observers connected these judgments to the political views and nations these women

represented or supported. American politics of fashion from 1800-1820, like the traditional politics, were influenced by the desire to set the virtuous new nation apart from morally compromised European nations. Through their fashion choices, women both notorious and anonymous demonstrated that they enjoyed the more liberating city lifestyle of salons, balls, and visits to the halls of government, rather than simply being content with the idealized role of republican mother/wife, popularized by Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republicans. The early reactions of men, as well as those of women who purported to adhere more to the republican mother/wife ideal, demonstrated that this excess freeness in dress was not to be tolerated. Only the combination of French elegance and republican virtue embodied by Dolley Madison was allowable, even admirable, and even Dolley strayed from this ideal at times. Female dress was not just the superficial concern of women, but rather was a major arena for determining the values of the new political society that developed along the Potomac.

Having only formally been the seat of government since 1800, Washington D.C. proved very sleepy by European standards, and even American standard when compared to the more populous cities of New York and Philadelphia. However, since it was the capital, it was necessary for foreign envoys to reside there at least part of the year. American politicians did little to impress European diplomats. Sir Augustus John Foster, secretary to British Ambassador Anthony Merry, remarked they were “rough and unfashioned persons to whom it is of consequence to be in a place where they are attended to more than they would be likely to be in a large city.”<sup>1</sup> These “unfashioned persons” were the members of the new government, many of whom came from wealth, but following the lead of the head of the Democratic-Republican party,

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<sup>1</sup> Sir John Augustus Foster, “Notes on the United States,” in “Caviar along the Potomac: Sir Augustus John Foster’s ‘Notes on the United States,’ 1804-1812,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, James Madison 1751-1836 Bicentennial Number (Jan. 1951): 72.

President Thomas Jefferson, made sure to publicly identify with the more prosaic beliefs of the citizens who elected them. Foster was not won over by this appeal to American virtue and remarked of Thomas Jefferson's pretended simplicity in manners and dress:

[H]e was playing a game for retaining the highest offices in the state where manners are not a prevailing feature in the great mass of the Society being, except in the large towns, rather despised as a mark of effeminacy by the majority who seem to glory in being only though men of bold strong minds and good sound judgment.<sup>2</sup>

Foster knew that Jefferson was aristocratic by American standards and recognized that he was putting on a pretense of simple, masculine republican virtue.

Republican virtue entailed a selfless love for country, and an aversion to the corruption that had brought down earlier republics and defined the courts of Europe. Much like the new republican government, republican virtue was considered masculine, since women were thought to be the more easily corruptible and deceitful. After all, in the American mind, meddling female aristocrats and royalty had been responsible for the excesses and corruption of the ancient regime in France. However, women were expected to have a form of republican virtue in that they were to be personally virtuous and subscribe to traditional expectations of women such as being focused on the home and subservient to their husbands. These traditional expectations came not just from social influence but also from government. Following increased political activism by women in the 1790s, Americans sought to preclude their further involvement in politics.<sup>3</sup> Male politicians, particularly Thomas Jefferson, would create a role for women that would ostensibly give them a civic role, but one that was firmly based in the home to hopefully distract them from the allures of political intrigue.

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, "Notes on the United States," 71.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see Rosemary Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), and Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

Through his time in France and Philadelphia, Jefferson met politically active women and was not enthused by these interactions. Deciding that “the tender breasts of ladies were not formed for political convulsion; and the French ladies miscalculate much their own happiness when they wander from the true field of their influence [the home] into that of politicks,” Jefferson would advocate the concept of the republican wife/mother, a woman who recognized that doing her patriotic duty meant tending her the domestic sphere of her home to make it an apolitical refuge for her husband.<sup>4</sup> Her only political role of sorts was educating her children to become virtuous citizens of the republic. Historians such as Nancy Cott, Jan Lewis, and Rosemary Zagari have discussed how concepts of separate spheres and republican motherhood were ideologically important but did not always reflect women’s lives, explaining that women did involve themselves in public life and political issues<sup>5</sup> Women living in Washington, D.C. were such a group.

In part, the city environment explains why. Two of the most important features of early Washington, D.C., were its uneven gender balance that skewed male, and the relative lack of individual homes. Unable to find single family housing, many congressmen and other government officials opted to take rooms at a boarding house, and not wanting to subject their wives to such an arrangement, did not bring them wives to the city. Those who did bring their wives would often live with them in the boarding house as well. Thus, female domesticity was not as central in Washington D.C. as there were not many homes to tend. Additionally, children usually did not move to Washington and when younger relatives were brought, they tended to be

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Angelica Schuyler Church, September 21, 1788.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977); Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Oct. 1987): 689-721; Rosemary Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

“marriageable daughters, nieces, sisters, and cousins” who could be married to an ambitious government man.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances freed women to attend numerous social gatherings, such as dinner parties, balls and even watching sessions of the House of Representatives and Senate from the galleries. In all these places, they were exposed to and discussed politics, the chief business of the city. Catherine Allgor’s classic work, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (2000) as well as articles by Fredericka Teute and Cynthia Earman, have specifically focused on the experiences and culture of these women, discussing how these women operated as observers, patrons, and conduits in a nascent political culture.<sup>7</sup> While these women welcomed the new experiences and the break from domesticity, many congressmen were displeased with their time in the city, and “their negative sentiments about the national government were expressions of a deep yearning for the domestic home,” and the wives who tended them. Pdraig Riley’s more recent article “The Lonely Congressman: Gender and Politics in Washington, D.C.” (2014) looks at the role of Washington women through the lenses of congressmen who missed their more domestically inclined wives while they served in Congress.<sup>8</sup> The desire for the ideal republican female would in turn influence how men reacted to Washington women and their dress.

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<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Earman, “Remember the Ladies: Women, Etiquette, and Diversions in Washington City, 1800-1814,” *Washington History*, Vol. 12, No. 1, “Coming into the City: Essays on Early Washington D.C. Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Federal Government’s Arrival in 1800,” (Spring/Summer 2000): 102-117/105.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 2000).; Cynthia Earman, “Remember the Ladies: Women, Etiquette, and Diversions in Washington City, 1800-1814,” *Washington History*, Vol. 12, No. 1, “Coming into the City: Essays on Early Washington D.C. Commemorating the Bicentennial of the Federal Government’s Arrival in 1800,” (Spring/Summer 2000): 102-117; “Roman Matron on the Banks of Tiber Creek: Margaret Bayard Smith and the Politicization of Spheres in the Nation’s Capital.” In *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early American Republic*, edited by Donald R. Kennon, pgs. 89-121, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Press of Virginia, 1999) Jan Lewis, “Politics and the Ambivalence of the Private Sphere: Women in Early Washington D.C.” in *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early American Republic*, edited by Donald R. Kennon, pgs. 122-151 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Press of Virginia, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Pdraig Riley, “The Lonely Congressman: Gender and Politics in Early Washington D.C.,” *Journal of the Early American Republic*, Volume 34, No. 2 (Summer 2014): 243-273. Riley, “The Lonely Congressman, 244.

For many decades, scholars erroneously did not consider fashion as an important component of the revolutionary experience in both America and France, or as reflective of woman's active choices. As recently as 2016, an exhibit at the Daughters of the American Revolution was titled "An Agreeable Tyrant: Fashion After the Revolution" and commented that "most women seem indeed to have found the fashion demands of the tyrant agreeable, and yielded gladly,"<sup>9</sup> despite previous scholarly work by historians such as Lynn Hunt and David Waldstrieher explaining the political significance of fashion as a medium for expressing political beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Writing on the 1780s and 1790s in France, Hunt asserts that "dress was the social itself, the arena in which all social distinction came into being, and under fire," and women's dress had particular social power after male dress began to be more uniform in the 1790s."<sup>11</sup> Placing the change in women's dress in a broader cultural and chronological context, Valerie Steele commenting that the development of the chemise dress, a 1780s forerunner of the neoclassical style "was related to a more widespread classical trend that moved away from the three dimensional rococo and toward the "pure" straight lines of classicism."<sup>12</sup> She also points to the influence of Enlightenment thinking in this design change. Monarchical excess was on its way out, while classical, if not exactly republican, simplicity was coming into fashion. The French Revolution, Steele argues, would push the simplicity in dress to its more daring levels.

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<sup>9</sup> Daughters of the American Revolution, "An Agreeable Tyrant": Fashion After the Revolution Exhibition Catalogue (Lanham, MD: Corporate Press, 2016), 42

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hunt, "Freedom of Dress in Revolutionary France," in *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Sara E. Melzer & Kathryn Norberg (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1998); Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2017); David Waldstrieher, "Why Thomas Jefferson and African Americans Wore Their Politics on Their Sleeves: Dress and Mobilization between American Revolutions," in *New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Lynn Hunt, "Freedom of Dress in Revolutionary France," in *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Sara E. Melzer & Kathryn Norberg (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1998), 249, 239.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017), 40.

Writing about American sartorial culture in the same era, Waldstrieher posited: “Like political language, clothing was both put on and regarded. It existed on the person of the wearer and in the eyes of the beholder, on the streets and in a profusion of printed and graphic images. Thus, dress opened up reciprocal possibilities for expression, for judgement and for identification.”<sup>13</sup>.

Women in federal Philadelphia recognized this and used dress to convey differing views of the politics of the French Revolution the previous capital, Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup>In her salutary address at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia had 1793, Priscilla Mason had suggested a “senate of ladies” modeled after an ancient Roman council to make rules on fashion, stating the following:

And truly methinks the dress of our country, at this day, would admit of some regulation, for it is subject to no rules at all—It would be worthy the wisdom of Congress, to consider whether a similar institution, established at the seat of our Federal Government, would not be a public benefit. We cannot be independent, while we receive our fashions from other countries, nor act properly, while we imitate the manners of governments not congenial to our own.<sup>15</sup>

She recognized that European beliefs and, worst of all, morals could be conveyed through imported clothes, corrupting America’s young women. Her suggestion was ignored, and European styles, particularly French styles, continued to influence urbane American women, who then exposed others to those designs.

In the late 1790s and 1800s, the rise of neoclassical dress—characterized by linear silhouettes, light fabrics, low necklines, and a tendency to show more of a woman’s body and its natural shape than eighteenth century styles—harkened back to the simple, draped style of the

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<sup>13</sup> David Waldstrieher, “Why Thomas Jefferson and African Americans Wore Their Politics on Their Sleeves: Dress and Mobilization between American Revolutions,” in *New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 90.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Three, “Patriotism and Partisanship,” in Zagarrri, *Revolutionary Backlash*.

<sup>15</sup> “The Salutatory Oration, Delivered by Miss Priscilla Mason, May 15, 1793,” in *The Rise and Progress of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: Stewart & Cochran, 1794).

women of Roman republic. It was a sharp contrast to the sumptuous and elaborate styles that had dominated fashion for most of the eighteenth century. However, while the Roman republic was worthy of emulation by American politicians, a French version of its fashions was met with less enthusiasm. However, the women of Washington would utilize these styles while determining their role in the new national capital. Thus, as Allgor asserts in *Parlor Politics*, fashion and accessories “must be seen as a language, a formal grammar of power, not merely as a decorative expression of personal taste or sexual attractiveness.”<sup>16</sup> The revealing fashion certainly had the power to disconcert observers.

Writing on new European fashions in late 1801, Philadelphia’s *The Port-Folio*, reminisced about fashion trends gone by, remarking:

“There was a decency, a decorum, in wearing that uncouth, that unnatural thing called a hoop. It kept the enemy at a distance, and even the abuse of it, by the wanton hand of audacious demireps, in reminding men of the goodness of ladies’ hosiery, was, perhaps, better tolerated, than that the outline of the female figure should be constantly obtruded on sight.”<sup>17</sup>

Besides revealing outlines, another recurrent American criticism of French fashions were their low necklines. Fashion plates from publications such as *Corriere Della Dame* and *Costume Parisienne*, showed women in evening and sometimes day dress with at least the top halves of their breasts visible, too much for conservative tastes.<sup>18</sup> Breasts and a visible outline of the female body were reminders of female fertility and sexuality, and unnerved those who strove for republican virtue. In a country desirous of presenting itself as a virtuous alternative to the corruption and impurity of Europe, women’s dress was important in conveying their own virtue

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 2000), 92.

<sup>17</sup>, “Festoon of Fashion,” *The Port-Folio*, Vol 1, Issue 52 (Dec 26, 1801), 411.

<sup>18</sup> *Corriere Della Dame*, No. 242, (1808); *Costume Parisienne*, No.5 (1806); *Costume Parisienne* No. 40 (1806) in the *Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection*, New York Public Library.

as republican women, and that of their country. As fashion historian Michele Majer noted, low cut necklines and diaphanous gowns common to French fashion were a danger to both modesty and the republic itself, because “[t]he potential loss of feminine purity as a result of the ‘reigning unchaste fashion’ was seen to threaten the very foundations of society, upsetting the relations between the sexes and even going as far as to undermine the political virtue and independence of the nation itself.”<sup>19</sup> Virtuous women were modest and behavior in dress, thus women who dressed “inappropriately” by American standards, were viewed as lacking virtue. If they lacked traditional virtue, their republican virtue was also in question. Revealing dress could also pose a temptation and threat to virtuous republican men. Americans equated female sexuality with female intrigue and schemes for power in European courts, and thus its expression through revealing clothing was anathema to a virtuous republican government. However, for the early years of Jefferson’s administration, most women recognized that Paris and Washington, D.C. were two very different cities and “proper clothing” in Washington, D.C. “did not, however, mean dressing totally a la mode,” and modified French styles to a “more modest, covered up appearance.” Belgian born Rosalie Stier Calvert, who lived in Bladensburg, MD wrote to her family members that, compared to what was visible of the female body in Europe, “in this more virtuous land only the contours are perceived through filmy batiste—a subtler fashion.”<sup>20</sup> For a while, the republic was safe from the tender, yet dangerous when visible breasts of its women.<sup>21</sup> While others worried, women in Washington—no longer encumbered by the extensive hoops and large gowns of earlier decades—took advantage of increased mobility. They could easily travel to

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<sup>19</sup> Michele Majer, “American Women and French Fashion,” in *Age of Napoleon: Costume from Revolution to Empire, 1789-1815*, edited by Katell le Bourhis (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 231.

<sup>20</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Charles J. Stier July 3, 1802, in *Mistress of Riverdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert, 1795-1821*, edited by Margaret Law Callcott (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Earman, “Remembering the Ladies,” 107; Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Early and Federal America* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2003), 104.

the Capitol, each other's drawing rooms, and shops to secure imported materials for creating the most fashionable dresses that adhered to what was appropriate for American women.

Like their foremothers prior to the American Revolution, American women of means desired European fabrics. Much like storeowners had done in the colonial papers, Washington, D.C. storeowners advertised in local newspapers such as the *National Intelligencer*, listing products such as "extra superfine London cloths," "Irish and German linens, "damask, raw silk, and camel hair shawls," and "coarse India muslins." One woman placed an ad on how her millinery now employed a "lady from Europe well acquainted with Mantua-making."<sup>22</sup> Many even advertised English and French goods during the period of the Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts of 1807, much to the chagrin of President Jefferson. He imagined republican mothers creating homespun clothes, much like women did during the American Revolution to show their support of the American cause and repudiation of English goods. Elite Washington women, however, did not seem to desire to do so, and instead used the time this would have taken to pursue the unique opportunities Washington offered. Additionally, women bought foreign fabrics because "it was more economically efficient to do so, but also because they wanted to be in style," at least a moderate version of European style.<sup>23</sup> Elite women may have thought America had the best style of government, but still viewed Europe as the best for fashion.

In the winter of 1803-4, two women who wholeheartedly embraced European styles would be censured by both men and women who felt they were too extreme for the republic's capital: Elizabeth Merry, the wife of ambassador Anthony Merry of Great Britain, and Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, the young Baltimore-born wife of Jerome Bonaparte, the younger brother

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<sup>22</sup> *The National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser* (Washington, D.C.), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 105.

of Napoleon Bonaparte, Consul of France. Aaron Burr mentions both women in a January 1804 letter to his daughter Theodosia, remarking that Elizabeth Bonaparte was a “charming little woman” and that she “dresses with taste and simplicity (by some thought too free)” and that Elizabeth Merry “is tall, fair, fat- pas trop [not too much] however. No more than a desirable embonpoint.” He also found both their personalities agreeable and thought that Elizabeth Merry’s time spent in England and France gave her “all that could be wished of the manners of both countries.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately for the two women, Burr was one of the few who spoke so warmly of them. Both women’s style— Merry’s being ostentatious and Patterson Bonaparte’s being revealing – reflected the countries they aligned themselves with, Britain and France, and the divergent social beliefs that those countries held compared to the United States. To the broader Washington D.C. society, this was a misstep. As Jeanne Abrams remarks in *First Ladies of the Republic* (2018), perceptions of Europe and its place as “code word for everything that needed to be eradicated” played an “overarching role” in defining roles for the female relatives of government figures.<sup>25</sup> Through the full embrace and sartorial display of European values, Elizabeth Merry and Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte were in opposition to the republican wife ideal that Democratic-Republicans in power actively promoted.

By English standards, Elizabeth (Death) Merry had been born “common” sometime in between 1755 to 1770, but had raised her station through two advantageous marriages, and expected that she was to be treated with the respect and deference usually given to an ambassador’s wife.<sup>26</sup> She was intelligent, a conversationalist, cosmopolitan, and her strong

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<sup>24</sup> Aaron Burr to Theodosia Burr Alston, January 17, 1804, in *Memoirs of Aaron Burr, With Miscellaneous Sections from His Correspondence, Volume II*, edited by Matthew L. Davis (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1855), 269.

<sup>25</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation of an Iconic American Role* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Merry’s exact birth year was hard to uncover, but a passage in *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America, speculates* that Anthony Merry wanted a wife past childbearing years, which suggests she was probably in her forties or fifties.

personality contrasted Anthony Merry's quiet one, and she outshone him, rather than supported him. This was not what Americans, particularly the president, desired in women. Anthony Merry's biographer, Malcom Lester, made the following assessment based largely on American sources: "The image of an imperious, garrulous, supercilious woman emerges— a woman who had many accomplishments but not those that would have been helpful for the wife of a British minister to the United States in 1803."<sup>27</sup> Merry and her husband were not impressed with Washington following their November 1803 arrival, but Elizabeth quickly inserted herself into its public life. In a January 1804 letter to poet Thomas Moore, Elizabeth Merry discusses her plans to "exhibit at the Capitol," a place that many elite women frequented.<sup>28</sup> However, it would be in Washington's homes that Merry would really make her mark.

Elizabeth Merry's manners were deemed haughty, and her style was deemed ostentatious, especially after the events of the Merry Affair. This was a social scandal resulting from Thomas Jefferson's refusal to escort her to the table at a dinner held for her husband, instead escorting Dolley Madison, the wife of the Secretary of State. It was not the only time Mrs. Merry had been snubbed in America as a similar incident took place at an event held by James Madison. The Merrys believed that they had been singled out for this treatment especially after an incident in which Jefferson took the hand of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte at a private dinner with her extended family Senator Samuel Smith and Secretary of the Navy, Robert Smith.<sup>29</sup> Jefferson indeed took a dislike to Merry and her aristocratic and forthright manners, and in a letter to

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William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America Beyond Romantic Friendships*. By William Benemann (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>27</sup> Malcom Lester, *Anthony Merry Redivivus: A Reappraisal of the British Minister to the United States, 1803-6* (Charlottesville, VA: 1978), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Merry to Thomas Moore, Jan 1804, *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Co., 1856) 52.

<sup>29</sup> Louis-Andre Pichon to Talleyrand, February 5, 1804, in *Henry Adams, A History of the United States of America During the Administration of Thomas Jefferson, Vol II.*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1921), 373-4.

William Short, noted that “pele-mele is our law” and implied that “Mrs. Merry’s jealousy” stood in contrast to how the rule was received “without exciting any jealousy” in the republican wives of government officials.<sup>30</sup> Merry, in Jefferson’s mind, was not as good a woman as the wives in his inner circle. In addition to her complaints over not being escorted to dinner by Jefferson, Merry did not demure to her husband in social settings, and, in fact, was the more socially bold and talkative of the pair. Jefferson also criticized her, stating that she was “a virago,”— a loud, overbearing, woman, who usually acts in a more assertive, “manly” way than is expected of a woman—in a letter to his protégé James Monroe. Jefferson wrote of his hope to bring Anthony Merry back “into society as if she [Elizabeth Merry] did not exist. It is unfortunate that the good understanding of nations should hang on the caprice of an individual, who ostensibly has nothing to do with them.”<sup>31</sup> Jefferson felt that Mr. Merry would be more agreeable if he was separate from his wife. To use a sartorial if dated metaphor, Jefferson wanted Mr. Merry to come out from hiding behind Mrs. Merry’s skirts. Both Merrys would attend social events again, but Elizabeth Merry and her style of dress would still be censured by Jefferson loyalists.

Margaret Bayard Smith, wife of the owner of the *National Intelligencer*, in recalling Merry’s dress at a society event in winter 1804 in a letter to family, commenting:

It was brilliant and fantastic, white satin with a long train, dark blue crape of the same length over it, and white crepe drapery down to her knees and open at one side, so thickly cover’d with silver spangles that it appear’d to be a brilliant silver tissue; a breadth of blue crape, about four yards long, in other words a long shawl, put over her head, instead of over her shoulders and hanging down to the floor, her hair bound tight to her head with a band like her drapery, with a diamond crescent before and a diamond comb behind, diamond ear-rings and necklace, displayed on a bare bosom.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William Short, January 23, 1804.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, January 8, 1804.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, edited by Galliard Hunt (New York, NY: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1906), 46.

The letter then comments how she is “tall, without being graceful” and how she is quite outgoing compared to her husband. This was not a compliment. Though Margaret Bayard Smith herself was more than the simple republican wife she claimed to be, her letter shows the disparaging view of Merry held by those who supported President Jefferson. Her mention of the diamonds is important as Americans viewed costly diamonds as symbols of European royalty excess and viewed pearls as a more appropriate and subdued choice. To Americans, the bounty of diamonds and silver spangles were reminders of the extravagant and archaic government that Merry and her husband represented. On one occasion, Merry’s dress was physically altered by others. In 1806, Sir Augustus John Foster wrote to his mother of the ill treatment Merry received at a Georgetown event at an unspecified point during her husband’s tenure, noting how upsetting it was for her to “have her gown torn because as a civility she had put on a train that was better than any others in [illegible to author] the room, to be told at the door that her diamonds must be let off.”<sup>33</sup> If America struggled with gaining the upper hand in the power balance between themselves and the erstwhile mother country, they could gain little victories by demonstrating their power over the dress and accessories of its female representative.

In addition to her clothing style, people also critiqued Mrs. Merry’s body shape. Rosalie Stier Calvert mocked Merry’s size in a letter to her mother writing: “Mrs. Merry, the new English Ambassadors, is very fat and covers only with fine lace two objects which could fill a fourth of a bushel!”<sup>34</sup> Thus, not only her clothing, but also her body shape were symbols of excess. How fat was “very fat” is up to interpretation as Merry’s 1805 portrait by Gilbert Sturt, shows a curvy, but hardly obese woman, with a low cut, black velvet dress with a sheer

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<sup>33</sup> Sir Augustus John Foster to Lady Elizabeth Foster, July 20, 1806, Sir Augustus John Foster Papers, Library of Congress (Washington DC).

<sup>34</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Mme H.J. Stier, March 2, 1804.

chemisette, holding what is likely a British breed of spaniel in her arms.<sup>35</sup> Merry was not an American, she was an Englishwoman, and she chose to depict herself as such in art, just as she did in dress. Americans did not admire this adherence to elaborate British and European fashions. To them, Elizabeth Merry was emblematic of the problems of excess in British and European society: she had an excess of pretension, size, expression, and lavishness in dress. She was the antithesis of the republican wife/mother, and they were not sorry to see her go in 1806 when Anthony Merry was recalled as ambassador.

Merry was not the only woman found to be lacking republican virtue. Rosalie Stier Calvert wrote of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte:

There is a ball every Tuesday, alternatively at Georgetown and on Capitol Hill. The clothes they wear are extremely becoming, [although] some display a little too much—among others, Madame Bonaparte who wears dresses so transparent and tight you can see her skin through them, no chemise at all.<sup>36</sup>

According to Calvert, at the party thrown by Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith, Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte wore “a dress so transparent that you could see the color and shape of her thighs, and even more!” Margaret Bayard Smith, who also attended the party, commented “But of Mad’m [Patterson Bonaparte], I think it no harm to speak the truth. She has made a great noise here, and mobs of boys have crowded round her splendid equipage to see what I hope will not often be seen in this country, an almost naked woman.”<sup>37</sup> She then explained that several women had left the room because they were offended by the lack of modesty, and that Patterson Bonaparte was told to cover up if she still wanted to be invited to social functions hosted by respectable. These women, who viewed themselves as virtuous American women, wanted to make it clear to the newlywed that even if her husband was French, Patterson Bonaparte had to

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<sup>35</sup> Gilbert Stuart, *Elizabeth Merry*, 1805, 73.5 X 59.8 cm, Oil on Canvas, Museo Lazaro Galdriano.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Mme H.J. Stier, March 2, 1804.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 46.

have American modesty in dress. Thomas Law, yet another guest at the Smith Party, added his commentary on Patterson-Bonaparte's marriage and fashion choices in verse:

I was at Mrs. Smith's last night  
 And highly gratified my self  
 Well! What of Madame Bonaparte  
 Why she's a little whore at heart  
 Her lustful looks, her wanton air  
 Her limbs revealed, her bosom bare  
 Show her ill suited for the life  
 Of a Columbians modest wife  
 Wisely she's chosen her proper line  
 She's formed for Jerome's concubine<sup>38</sup>

Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte's choice of an aristocratic husband, implied that she aspired to be an aristocratic wife, rather than be subject to the confines of a republican wife as defined by men<sup>39</sup> This choice was clearly reflected in her daring full embrace of French styles, with its low necklines, and revealing outlines and fabrics. Though fashionable by French standards at the time, historian Boyer-Lewis notes that "[t]o many, her [Patterson Bonaparte's] style of dress was unsuitable for the United States" in 1803.<sup>40</sup> Even if others also wore versions of the neoclassical style, Elizabeth's marital choice and wearing the style in the most French, i.e. daring way, meant that she became the one criticized, and in modern parlance, "slut-shamed" in letters, verse, and in person for her repudiation of republican virtue in both her marriage and her dress. As Patterson Bonaparte had not been content with marrying an American ("Columbian") man, critics like Law decided that the "little whore's" proper line was concubinage, like a royal mistress of the ancien régime. Her marriage was legal in America, but since it was an aristocratic marriage to a Frenchman, it was as inappropriate as her daring dress. It all made Patterson Bonaparte very

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<sup>38</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Mme H.J. Stier, March 2, 1804.

<sup>39</sup> See Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife."

<sup>40</sup> Charlene Boyer-Lewis, *Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte: An American Aristocrat in the Early Republic*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, (2012), 20-2.

famous, which she welcomed. In a time when elite American women were limited in their opportunities for fame equal to that of men, historian Charlene Boyer Lewis suggests, “great beauty, fashionable clothing, special talents, or bold manners could make a woman a celebrity”.<sup>41</sup> Bonaparte used her fashion, beauty and marriage to make herself a much-discussed name in Washington and American society, as opposed to being an anonymous wife in Baltimore. Bonaparte’s biographer also highlights Bonaparte’s agency in her fashion choices, remarking that “Elizabeth clearly understood the power of clothing since she chose outfits that were guaranteed to make a sensation, even a spectacle for public occasions.”<sup>42</sup> Far from being ruled by fashion, she used it to wield power in a society that harshly judged those who did not follow its rules. Desiring to live in Europe, she was not overly concerned with more conservative opinions. Her French style, like her French marriage signaled an allegiance to France, not the United States.<sup>43</sup> However, her brother-in-law did not welcome the matrimonial allegiance of this young woman.

Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte was ecstatic about her marriage, but her brother-in-law Napoleon was adamantly opposed to it, and had the marriage annulled. By 1811, Jerome had remarried to a German princess of whom Napoleon approved, dashing Elizabeth’s dreams for a life as a European, and consigning her to a life in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. People in Washington still remarked on her style of dress, though the revealing style became more common among Washington, D.C. women in the next few years. Catharine Mitchill, a senator’s wife, wrote of Patterson Bonaparte: “She outshines all the Ladies here for the splendor and elegance of her dress; even Mrs. M[adison] cannot sport Diamonds and pearls in such

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<sup>41</sup> Boyer-Lewis, *Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte*, 20-2

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

<sup>43</sup> For an in-depth discussion, see Boyer-Lewis, 77-78.

profusion,” but that “the evening I saw her, she was dressed very plain, at least that part of her body that was covered all.” Members of the opposite sex also took notice, as Mitchill “saw several of them take a look at her bubbies while they were conversing with her.”<sup>44</sup> Though her dream of being an aristocratic wife had slipped away, Patterson Bonaparte still had an aristocratic link through her son Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte. She also still sartorially aligned herself with French, still wearing revealing fashions and diamonds. Having become a part of Dolley Madison’s circle, she acquired more respectability but was still subject to barbs about her immodest and foreign dress.

By the mid-1810s, a greater number of younger Washington women adopted the French neo-classical styles, and as the city embraced styles it had previously rebuked as less than virtuous and unpatriotic, criticism came more from those from more traditionally-minded rural areas. Younger Washington women also seemed to have embraced a new level of ostentation, at least according to Catharine Mitchill, who wrote in a letter to her sister: “I think I have told you before that the ladies here dress very gay. The brilliancy of their dress on this occasion [a dancing] surpassed anything I have seen, except at the play house. Some of the Belles were covered with spangles. From the crowns of their heads to the soles of their feet. It had a very tawdry appearance and did not accord at all with my taste.”<sup>45</sup> Comparing the dress of Washington women to that of actresses and calling it tawdry, insinuated that these young women lacked good taste in dress and likely other behaviors, as actresses were still thought of as not being very virtuous. Louis McLane of Delaware was another concerned observer of Washington fashion. His distress at the way women dressed was apparent in a December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1817 letter to his wife,

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<sup>44</sup> Catharine Mitchill to her Margaret Miller, November 21, 1811, Catharine Ackerly Mitchill Papers, Library of Congress (Washington, DC).

<sup>45</sup> Catharine Mitchill to Margaret Miller, February 2, 1809.

Kitty, written after attending a party at the home of the French Minister. He bemoaned the “total want of decency” that was “shocking and infamous” and asserted that the discussion of it would offend his wife’s “delicacy.” He singles out two “shameful fair ones” who “outstripped the rest” by not bother to wear any modest covering over their chests. These women were the subject of “rude and disobedient jests” by two longtime residents of Washington. Dr. Thornton and Thomas Law, the latter of whom had written the derogatory verses about Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte the decade before. A “Mrs. Decatuer”, possibly Susan Decatur, war hero Stephen Decatur’s wife, is singled out by name as “being in the number of these nudities.”<sup>46</sup> This was not what McLane was used to in Delaware, and in a letter the following February, McLane remarked that Washington was “such a scene of vice and immodesty”<sup>47</sup> In contrast to his domestically focused wife back home, women in Washington dressed provocatively and involved themselves in public life and politics more. McLane surmised, based on these women’s dress and conduct “that tho’ a lady may maintain her absolute virtue, without a very large share of ugliness awkwardness or discretion, she cannot preserve the reputation of it.”<sup>48</sup> However, all women might not have been showing everything.<sup>49</sup> Women could moderate transparency with underskirts in addition to a chemise, and necklines could be higher or lower. It was largely a matter of personal style and choice. It is likely that women in relatively more cosmopolitan areas like Washington may have been a little more daring in dress than those in other locations, causing alarm to those from other regions. They were already more daring in public, commonly showing up to traditionally male arenas like the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court.

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<sup>46</sup> Louis McLane to Catharine McLane, December 19, 1817, Louis McLane Papers, Library of Congress (Washington DC)

<sup>47</sup> Louis McLane, February 7, 1818.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> For more information see “People are Talking: Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte and the Gossip,” *Maryland Historical Society*, uploaded June 2, 2013, accessed April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018. “Evening Dress: French,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

The city— if not irrevocably —seriously corrupted many women in the eyes of men who visited there. In contrast to the domestically orientated white women in the provincial regions that many congressmen hailed from, these women of Washington were too public, and to observers, this was expressed in their clothing that seemingly left too little to the imagination. At least no Washington woman had adopted the public dress of the government men. Rosalie Calvert wrote that her niece, Eliza Custis Law, a granddaughter of Martha Washington, “regrets that she cannot wear pants.”<sup>50</sup> However, congressional wives did not completely disavow being fashionable. Catharine Mitchill commented on their interest in fashion when she remarks that many congressional wives from rural areas “cannot procure the most fashionable goods. They therefore have to supply themselves with such things as they want, after they get here.”<sup>51</sup> It is however, hard to imagine that their husbands would countenance them attending events back home in “nudities,” a concern that Washington husbands did not seem to have.

A woman’s character and reputation could impact how people viewed her clothing choices, giving her some leeway if her character and reputation were viewed positively, and incurring extra censure if they were viewed negatively. In contrast to Elizabeth Merry and Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, Washingtonians and Americans viewed Dolley Madison as a respectable republican wife, even if the position of president’s wife, or First Lady as the position is now known, required a little flexibility in the definition of supportive republican wife. Upon becoming the First Lady in 1809, Madison had been the wife and gregarious counterpart to James Madison for fifteen years. Unlike Elizabeth Merry, she consciously utilized her gifts to support her husband, not overshadow him. Unlike Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, with whom she socialized with, Madison had married a good republican man. This sterling reputation largely

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<sup>50</sup> Rosalie Stier Calvert to Isabella van Harve, February 18, 1805.

<sup>51</sup> Catharine Mitchill to Margaret Miller, November 21, 1811.

insulated Madison from fashion criticism as first lady. During the Jefferson administration she consciously chose moderation in fashion, a choice evident in Gilbert Stuart's 1804 portrait of her. In the portrait, Dolley wears a mildly low cut, cotton white dress with gold trim, sheer outer sleeves, as well as a golden shawl and chain.<sup>52</sup> She is fashionable but restrained; elegant but still a Republican wife. During her time as First Lady, she would adopt a more elaborate style as demonstrated by 1817 painting by Bass Otis, which features Dolley in a more ostentatious style: she wears a shiny white dress, a small sheer shawl with golden embroiders, a free-standing lace collar and colored pearls, and blue turban with pearls embroidered on, and a sheer outer layer.<sup>53</sup> This alteration in style was the result of Dolley's efforts to create a more cohesive, refined and welcoming political society than Jefferson had left her and her husband. She utilized her social skills and fashion to demonstrate that America had the same level of refinement as Europe, without the corruption. Rather than rejecting everything European, as Jefferson attempted to do, Dolley sought to adapt its best aspects in a republican fashion.

Today, the First Lady is usually expected to buy American, but Dolley bought French when possible, even having the American commercial agent in Bordeaux, William Lee, buy clothing for her in France. Lee accepted this momentous task, but not apparently trusting his own judgement, enlisted the help of two French women.<sup>54</sup> Once she received the shipment in spring 1812, an appreciative Dolley reported back that the "valuable items" were "beautiful," but was concerned that the bill had come to two thousand dollars after duties, lamenting "I am afraid that I shall never send for anything more."<sup>55</sup> Fashion was expensive, but Madison felt her style

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<sup>52</sup> Gilbert Stuart, *Dolley Madison*, 1804, 74.14 x 61/28cm, Oil on Canvas, White House Historical Association.

<sup>53</sup> Bass Otis, *Mrs. James Madison*, 1817, 73.7 x 61cm, Oil on Canvas, New York Historical Society.

<sup>54</sup> *A Yankee Jeffersonian; selections from the diary and letters of William Lee of Massachusetts, written from 1796 to 1840*, edited by Mary Lee Mann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)

<sup>55</sup> Dolley Madison to Ruth Barlow, April 19, 1812, *The Papers of Dolly Madison: Digital Edition*, University of Virginia.

reflected her position and that of her husband so she needed to exude elegance. She accomplished this through a combination of French fabrics and a more subdued American interpretation of French styles, choosing simple, but not diaphanous designs. Dolley also “eschewed the diamonds long favored by European royalty for more modest pearls.”<sup>56</sup> This less “flagrant” and Americanized approach to French fashion, coupled with her reputation as the preeminent republican wife, mostly won praise, not censure.<sup>57</sup> On the day of her husband’s inauguration, Dolley’s fashion sense impressed society grand dame Margaret Bayard Smith, who complimented Dolley as looking “extremely beautiful” dressed in white with a “bonnet of purple velvet” at the inauguration ceremony, and marveled about Madison’s ensemble at a ball that night:

She [Dolley] looked a queen. She had on a buff colored pale velvet, made plain, with a very long train, but not the least trimming, and beautiful pearl necklace, earring, and bracelets. Her headdress was of the same coloured velvet and white satin (from Paris) with two superb plumes, the bird of paradise feathers.<sup>58</sup>

The turban was Madison’s trademark, and helped to elevate a less ornate dress into an exotically inspired outfit. Turbans originated in the Middle East but had been co-opted by European fashion. They became very popular in the early 1800s, with the “Festoon of Fashion” noted that “[t]urbans have taken the place of oblong caps” back in 1802.<sup>59</sup> Writing of an evening at the presidential levee in which one of Dolley’s famous “squeezes,” parties where members of both political parties as well as both men and women could attend, Mary Boardman Crownshield, wife of James Madison’s Secretary of the Navy, she and Dolley were dressed similarly, “both

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<sup>56</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 224.

<sup>57</sup> Majer, “American Women and French Fashion,” 234, 237.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, 58, 62.

<sup>59</sup> “Festoon of Fashion,” *The Port-Folio*, Volume 2, Issue 21, (May 29, 1802).

with a little blue and flowers” and that she had “never seen her look so well.”<sup>60</sup> Some of the praise may have resulted for the similarity of their styles, but most women found Dolley the epitome of fashion.<sup>61</sup> For Dolley Madison, descriptions of being queenly and emulating French fashion were positives, because she used the tools of fashion wisely, almost always maintaining a conservative Americanism in her fashion, and not courting ostentation or indecent exposure. Catherine Allgor noted: “Located in the most visible, most influential position in American society and culture, Dolley fully exploited her position as social leader, creator of style,” demonstrating that an American elegance could be created without abandoning republican virtue.<sup>62</sup> The overly positive reaction to her sartorial choices demonstrates that her approach was well received by Americans, in contrast to the choices of her contemporaries Elizabeth Merry, Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, and the “nudities.” Dolley understood the politics of dress and used them in support of her country, as a good republican woman ought to.

The 1800s and 1810s were the highpoint for the more natural neoclassical style. Throughout the 1820s and especially by the 1830s, silhouettes became fuller and more structured, hiding the shape of women’s natural bodies from public view. As Valerie Steele remarks, “the fashion for neoclassical dress and no [or smaller] stays was regarded, in retrospect, as having been part and parcel of the Revolutionary Era,” with upheaval and disorder in government and politics being reflected in fashion.<sup>63</sup> Women’s bodies were now hidden, and the return of large skirts, as well as the appearance of gigot sleeves, made them less mobile. This occurred as women in Washington, D.C. found themselves being constricted in their power and

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<sup>60</sup> Mary Boardman Crowninshield to her mother, Feb 16, 1816, *Letters of Mary Boardman Crowninshield*, 1815-1816 (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1905), 54,

<sup>61</sup> One notable dissenter was 19-year-old Frances Few who wrote in her diary that Dolley “loaded herself with finery and dresses without any taste,” and singled out one outfit as most preposterous. “Diary of Frances Few,” edited by Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 29, No. 31 (Aug. 1963) 351, 353.

<sup>62</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 54

<sup>63</sup> Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 33.

freedoms. Washington women made an enemy of Andrew Jackson when they refused to accept Margaret Eaton, wife of the Secretary of War, as a social equal, provoking the Petticoat Affair. This sartorially named event resulted in the resignation of three Cabinet members, and the Secretary of War's appointment as a territorial governor and his wife Margaret far from Washington. As Catherine Allgor notes, while Washington women "won their battle, they lost the war," as they then found themselves shut out of Jackson's circle and the corridors of power afterwards.<sup>64</sup> Women and their dress were now less of a "threat" to the polity, but judgments about politically prominent women's dress did not disappear, and instead have become a prominent part of American political culture.

Powerful women of Washington D.C. were scrutinized for their dress in the 1800s, and remain so today, the only difference being that these women have careers and often complexions that would have horrified early nineteenth century Washingtonians. In 2007, an inch of then Senator Hillary Clinton's cleavage, not even a half-breast reveal, resulted in intense media attention as did the bare arms of the nation's first African American first lady Michelle Obama, two years later. In the 2016 election, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's clothing as well as that of Melania Trump, the wife of presidential candidate Donald Trump, were critiqued for their cost and styles. In summer 2017, female journalists were barred from the Speaker's Lobby in the U.S. Capitol because their bare shoulders were considered inappropriate. Allegedly, women of the Trump administration are expected to "dress like women," i.e. wearing dresses and skirts not pants and pantsuits. Much like their earlier counterparts, these women face judgements about themselves and their politics based on their clothing. Their bodies are not solely their own to adorn as they chose, but rather are subject to public review. If a woman's body cannot be easily

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<sup>64</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 236.

controlled, monitoring and critiquing the clothes upon her body will suffice. Imbuing notable women's clothing with political meaning, especially negative meaning, reflects a desire to see these women adhere to "traditionally female" traits such as modesty and deferral to men. Those who do are rewarded with praise, those who do not, incur disapproval and potential social punishment. Women with power are not, and have not been, the only ones subjected to sartorial policing. Regular women are asked "What were you wearing?" after sexual assaults, dress code rules oftentimes penalize girls for being "distracting to males," and transwomen, particularly those of color, face violence and even loss of life when they encounter those who see them as an aberration, a man in woman's clothes. The politics of female dress in America are enduring, and every bit as serious as traditional politics, affecting the standing and treatment of those who engage with them, whether they are an ostentatious virago to a nineteenth century misogynistic president, a nasty woman to a twenty-first misogynistic president, or any American woman just trying to navigate our society.