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Peg A. Lamphier. *Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 315 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2947-1.

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The Taming of Kate Chase Sprague

Peg Lamphier has written a fine account of a spectacularly troubled and ultimately failed marriage between Ohio born Kate Chase (1840-1899), daughter of President Lincoln's cabinet member Salmon Chase, and William Sprague (1830-1915), politician, Civil War officer and scion of a wealthy Rhode Island manufacturing family. Lamphier could hardly have selected a richer (or more notorious) "union," which she embeds in Victorian gender, political, economic, social, legal, medical and cultural history. Lamphier worked for the Salmon P. Chase Papers, edited by the late John Niven, and has an impressive command of those documents as well as the Sprague family papers. The letters, diaries, newspapers and divorce records provide solid evidence for her assertions regarding Kate's political acumen, as well as record the details of William's life and career. *Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage* is a good example of how feminist scholars have recast even the most familiar stories and in doing so offer fresh perspectives on the politically charged relationship between public power and private behavior.

Background on the two principal characters forms the early chapters of this eminently readable book. For the uninitiated, Katherine Chase was beautiful, smart, and the apple of her father's eye. Widowed three times, and haunted by the deaths of four children, Salmon Chase cherished his two surviving daughters–Kate and her younger sister Nettie–although his busy schedule guaranteed both would yearn for his attention into their adult lives. Well educated and politically precocious, Kate witnessed Chase's political rise in Ohio, where he established a reputation as an anti-slavery lawyer, and helped to found the Republican Party. In the 1850s, he was elected Ohio's governor and U.S. senator, and then, famously and with distinction, served as wartime secretary of the treasury and later as chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Happily for Salmon, the nineteen-year old Kate emerged as one of Washington's top hostesses, a talent she honed earlier in Columbus. Chase gave Kate carte blanche for decorating their elegant house on the corner of Sixth and E Streets. She combined dazzling physical endowments and political savvy to create and sustain support for her father's ceaseless presidential ambitions, thwarted in 1860, 1864, and 1868. Nevertheless, Kate's brilliant parties brought the Washington power elite together and kept both father and daughter in the public eye. After socializing, Kate plotted strategy and oversaw tactics to advance her father's career. She wrote letters, convened meetings, raised campaign funds, and in 1868 traveled to New York City to oversee his bid to become the Democratic nominee. As Lamphier argues persuasively, Kate Chase should not only be acknowledged as her father's "official hostess" but also as his "unofficial campaign manager" (p. 9). In 1862 at twenty-two, she was also eminently marriageable. Clad in designer gowns from Paris and adorned with sparkling jewelry and velvet ribbons, Kate had numerous suitors vying for her hand. Enter the dashing William Sprague.

Sprague came from a privileged, if troubled background. At age thirteen, his father was murdered; at twenty-six he inherited the family's prosperous business, including the manufacture of locomotives. Elected governor of Rhode Island in 1860, the boyish Sprague led one of the first regiments formed in response to the Union's call for volunteers in 1861. His able performance at Bull Run earned him a reputation as a hero. In 1862, the year he met and wooed Kate, William was elected as a Republican to the U.S. Senate. Their shockingly extravagant marriage on November 12, 1863 invited criticism but was attended by everybody who was anybody in Washington from the President on down.

At first glance, it seemed a charmed marriage, but events soon proved otherwise. Sprague's public accomplishments must be judged alongside his weakness for alcohol, his constant philandering, and his verbal and

physical abuse of his wife. From the start the seventeen-year marriage was stormy, and divorce rumors circulated as early as 1866. Kate and William managed to spend more time apart than together with deliberately public reconciliations satisfying anxious parents and prying reporters. Kate's devotion to her father may have caused some of the early tension. After the honeymoon, the young couple returned to live in Chase's home, and Kate continued to serve as her father's chief political aide, even as she was pregnant with the first of four children. After Salmon failed to capture the presidential nod in 1868, he retired to his estate in Edgewood, just outside the capital, where Kate visited him frequently until his death in 1872.

Kate's evident marital unhappiness was somewhat assuaged by trips to Europe, where she spent huge amounts of money furnishing their sixty-room mansion, "Canonchet" in Rhode Island. After years of enduring William's unfaithfulness, in the 1870s Kate embarked on an indiscreet affair with one of the most powerful and charismatic Republican politicians of the era, New York Senator Roscoe Conkling. It utterly ruined Kate. The lovers met most often at Edgewood, but it was at Canonchet that Sprague surprised them together and ran Conkling off the property with a shotgun. A messy and scandalous divorce soon followed, finalized in 1882. Kate's subsequent downfall was as rapid as it was tragically emblematic of women's unequal vulnerability to the harsh consequences of scandalous behavior. Secluded and shunned in a decaying Edgewood, reduced to eking out extra money by selling eggs and milk door to door in Washington City, Kate Chase Sprague died in 1899 at fifty-eight of Bright's disease.

What happened to the dissolute husband? William's career continued apace, although never fulfilling his early potential. He was reelected as U.S. Senator, serving until 1875. The Sprague fortune took a serious blow in the depression of 1873, but William was still able to live well at Canonchet with his second wife. He died in Paris in 1915. The reader should be advised that Lamphier openly dislikes William, describing him as "an abusive and unrepentant drunkard who spectacularly failed his family" (p. 10). Her assessment may be accurate, but the result is a work skewed more favorably toward Kate. The account of their lives is laced with scholarly discussions on political ideology, Victorian family dynamics, romantic love, companionate marriage, the varieties of manhood, and domestic violence. This analytical context is necessary for making the book more than a lurid tale about sex, scandal, and corrupt politics. Lamphier explores and explains the restraints society imposed on women and illuminates the achievements of Kate Chase, who boldly challenged the standards of her era.

Importantly, Lamphier reverses earlier portraits of Kate Chase Sprague as a selfish, spoiled belle who sought power for power's sake through the manipulation of powerful men, although she does not shy from discussion of her subject's many character flaws. Rather, Lamphier suggests that "Kate's ambition for the men in her life was fundamentally partisan and political," thus broadening the definition of political behavior for women (p. 251). Kate, she insists, should be seen as a prominent figure within the Republican Party of the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Daughter, wife, and mistress to politicians, Chase Sprague imbibed the Republican ideology that emphasized free labor and personal autonomy. This set of beliefs explained Kate's commitment to, and influence in, the Party throughout the 1860s and 1870s. The Republican Party's ideology made it inherently more welcoming to women, and the author points out that one possible result of the emphasis on "self-ownership" was the rise of divorces initiated by women in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Lamphier describes Kate's divorce as an act of political courage that struck a blow for "a powerful ideal of women's right to personal freedom" (p. 9).

In the end, Kate Chase Sprague commands respect as a complex, fascinating, and disturbingly tragic figure whose historical reputation deserved this thoughtful reconsideration. More broadly, *Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage* brings to light the importance of marriage as not only the most intimate of human relationships, but also as an institution with the most profound consequences for society.

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