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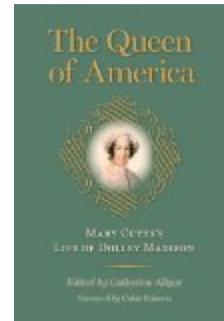
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Cutts, Catherine Allgor. *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*. Jeffersonian America Series. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. xvi + 218 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3298-9.

Reviewed by Giselle Roberts (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia)

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Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla



Historians are in the business of excavating meaning from fragmented stories and messy complexity. But more often than not, the researcher's workbench—and the sometimes baffling dance between primary sources, current historiography, and professional practice—hides from the reader's view. The detective work humbly looks on as the outcome, the interpretation, and the argument take center stage. Not so in Catherine Allgor's new book, *The Queen of America: Mary Cutts's Life of Dolley Madison*. Here, the architecture of research is laid bare in all its frustrating, ill-fitting glory, and the story of a First Lady and her nineteenth-century niece entwine in a fascinating study of American womanhood.

This book is essentially a story within a story. Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts was the niece of Dolley Payne Todd Madison, and the author of the account that “would become the foundation for all subsequent work” on the fourth First Lady (p. 8). Allgor's study features the manuscripts written by Cutts, which, after her death, were revised and published by her niece, Lucia Beverly Cutts. The documents are complicated, consisting of two memoirs on Madison written and edited by two kin during the nineteenth century. Cutts's first memoir covers Madison's family lineage and childhood ending with the War of 1812. Cutts's second memoir begins with the election of 1800 and ends shortly after Madison's death in 1849. The first memoir, argues Allgor, is more about Dolley, while the second concentrates on President James Madison and his retirement (although it skips the Madison presidency and the War of 1812 altogether). The relationship between the two documents is unclear. Scholars have often regarded them as first and final drafts, but their contrasting emphases suggest that they may be

separate, stand-alone pieces. This tangled tale involving Madison, Cutts, and the documents could easily befuddle a reader. Thankfully, Allgor has provided a framework for interpretation in the form of a substantial section entitled “Contexts,” comprising three essays. Here, Allgor explores the ways in which nineteenth-century ideals about womanhood shaped Cutts's portrayal of Madison; Holly Cowan Shulman examines historical inaccuracy in the memoirs; and Elizabeth Dowling Taylor presents the life story of Cutts. These essays are essential to a careful reading of the primary texts.

Thus, there are two manuscripts, and essentially two women. The Madison memoirs, Allgor posits, cannot be fully understood without Cutts, because it is a story “as much about a mid-nineteenth-century woman writer as [it is] about an early republican First Lady” (p. 3). Born in 1814, Cutts was the daughter of Congressman Richard Cutts and his wife, Anna Payne Todd Cutts (Madison's sister). Mary was an infant when the Madisons left Washington in 1817, but was a regular visitor at Montpelier, the Madison's country estate, and shared a close relationship with her aunt. In the 1830s, Dolley began assembling her papers, in part to supply material for an entry in the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*. After her death, the project was taken up by Mary. The memoirs are both the product of the two women's recollections and the cult of true womanhood. Allgor argues that Cutts's account of her aunt was framed by nineteenth-century ideals, “all of which ‘cover’ power with feminine language” (p. 9). While the story of Madison's birth during a visit to a fictitious uncle exposes a “whiff of failure and poverty” in the Madison family story, Cutts stifled any anomalies by claiming Madison's

elite Virginian heritage through Patrick Henry, a distinguished orator and “near relative” of her aunt’s (pp. 18, 20). Cutts also used filters of romantic love to describe Madison’s first marriage to Quaker John Payne, a union formed at the insistence of Madison’s ailing and financially bereft father. As First Lady, Cutts presents her aunt as the epitome of true womanhood: pious, benevolent, warm hearted, and revered by statesmen and slaves alike. Clothes and finery were the First Lady’s weakness, not “political weapons, expressions of personal vanity, or assertions of aristocratic privilege” (p. 32). Similarly, Madison’s penchant for parties grew from her love of people and were not interpreted by Cutts as a mechanism for garnering support for her husband or engaging in nation building. “It is not Mary’s lack of writerly ability that doomed her,” Allgor concludes, “but the layers of social and cultural gender repression that shaped the way Mary felt about how she had to present her aunt” (p. 1).

Shulman builds on Allgor’s analysis by comparing Madison’s relationships with her parents and siblings, her Madison in-laws, and her slaves to the portrayal of these relationships in the memoirs. In so doing, she skillfully exposes the “evidentiary foil[s]” and deepens our understanding of Madison, a woman who was not, as Cutts generously suggests, able to bridge family division or ameliorate slavery’s brutality with her kind heart and cheerful disposition (p. 45). Instead Shulman delves into the biographies of Madison’s brothers, who drank and gambled their way into dishonor and debt; to her unworkable relationship with her husband’s family; and finally, to her ambiguous stance on slavery, where her Quaker heritage sat uncomfortably next to her role as a plantation mistress. The First Lady and the heroine of

the War of 1812, Shulman argues, was also a slave owner, the “child of a dysfunctional family,” and “the widow left fighting her combative Madison family” (p. 69). Taylor concludes the analysis by introducing readers to Cutts—a woman who grew up in the shadow of the White House and cultivated a life of single blessedness framed by intellectual pursuits and a strong network of female kin. The memoirs that follow were books in progress. In reading the text, peppered with frilly phrases and romantic overtures (“Her countenance, beaming with inward happiness made friends wherever it glanced!” [p. 109]), we are reminded of the work of Allgor’s team who have so beautifully contextualized the memoirs, encouraging us to “‘look’ at Dolley as well as ‘listen’ to her—[and] her niece” (p. 69).

Allgor and her collaborators are to be congratulated for bringing these important documents to a wider audience. Madison’s memoirs have been meticulously edited, down to the detail of overlaying Lucia Cutts’s later edits over Mary Cutts’s original text. This makes for important, albeit slow, reading. The challenges posed by the documents, however, are minimized by Allgor’s decision to provide readers with a swag of interpretive tools from the outset. Contextualization and interpretation are often brushed over in documentary volumes of this kind, and Allgor demonstrates why it is so important to include them. The essays by Allgor, Shulman, and Taylor facilitate a deeper reading of the text, skillfully teasing out the meaning in Madison’s memoirs and Cutts’s story as an American woman writer. This book is documentary editing at its best, providing readers with fresh insight into our understanding of Madison and American womanhood.

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