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And then about that Mrs. Robards affair—
That, too, they've told Adams and Clay—
Had it never leaked out, I'll make bold to declare
'Twould not be known to this day.

Though every objection I've answered enough,
Still the Adams men jabber and squall,
'Bout militiamen—marriages—morals & stuff,
And war—and the deuce knows what all.

The foregoing verses, part of a longer piece of anti-Jackson doggerel entitled “Groanings,” were created to deride Andrew Jackson’s pique at losing the presidential election of 1828. “Groanings,” of course, turned out to be a form of wishful thinking; Jackson won the election, garnering almost 56 percent of the popular vote. Yet this ribald projection of his defeat reveals a good deal about the campaign. Signed appropriately enough with the pseudonym Trash, it exemplifies a narrow but virulent strain of anti-Jackson rhetoric that drew on Rachel Jackson’s marital problems with her first husband, Lewis Robards, and her allegedly illicit union with the general. Some supporters of John Quincy Adams were clearly convinced that the voters would shrink from electing a candidate so tainted by marital scandal, and although the voters did not respond as anticipated, the Jacksons were deeply distressed by the public scrutiny of their private life. Rachel Jackson was already in declining health, but there is little reason to discount James Parton’s assessment that the political exploitation of the Robards affair contributed to her death in December 1828. The new president neither forgave nor forgot the great personal price of the

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1 Truth’s Advocate and Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor (June 1828), 235–36.
exposure. He entered the White House in mourning over the loss of his beloved wife and embittered at "the Adams men" who had raked up the scandal.2

The broad outlines of the so-called Robards affair, at least as they were sketched by Jackson supporters, portrayed the Jacksons as the innocent victims of a petty legal misunderstanding. Andrew Jackson married Rachel Donelson Robards in Natchez on the lower Mississippi River some time in 1791 on the presumption that she had been divorced from Lewis Robards by the Virginia legislature, only to discover that what they both had believed was a formal divorce decree was merely an authorization for Robards to sue for divorce in a civil court. Robards, however, did not pursue his option until 1793 in the newly admitted state of Kentucky, which had previously fallen under the jurisdiction of Virginia. In 1794, after a final decree had been issued and the Jacksons came to understand that they were not legally married, they participated in a second marriage ceremony. Now in 1828, some thirty-seven years after their initial union, their innocent mistake was being distorted in the vituperative heat of partisan politics.3

Supporters of John Quincy Adams proffered a far more sinister script, which they documented with citations from Robards's divorce decree. Their version of the story, as they were quick to point out, faithfully followed the court's conclusion that "the defendant, Rachel Robards, hath deserted the plaintiff, Lewis Robards, and hath and doth still live in adultery with another man."4 The other man, of course, was Andrew Jackson, a candidate now for the nation's highest office. Substituting the treachery of seduction for the innocence of a courtship undertaken in good faith, they accused the general not only of the legal lapse of living with his lady in a state of long-term adultery but also of the moral lapse of being the paramour in the original divorce action. Rachel Jackson in her youth was depicted as not having been a lady at all, but as a loose, impetuous, and immoral woman who willingly cast off her lawful husband for an arrogant and impassioned young suitor. The political implications of her illicit union were readily apparent: a vote for Jackson was a vote for sin. By raising the prospect of a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband living together in the White House, the Adamsites transformed the circumstances of the Jacksons' marriage into an intense and gendered political controversy.5

2 James Parton, who interviewed the slave in whose arms Rachel Jackson expired, suggests she died of a heart condition aggravated by the stress of the campaign; see James Parton, Life of Andrew Jackson (3 vols., New York, 1860), III, 154. For the influence of her death on Andrew Jackson's subsequent defense of the maligned Peggy Eaton and his enduring enmity toward John Quincy Adams, see James C. Curtis, Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication (Boston, 1976).

3 For the definitive pro-Jackson view, see A Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, in Answer to One from a Similar Committee, at Cincinnati, upon the Subject of Gen. Jackson's Marriage (Nashville, Tenn., 1827). All the pamphlets, handbills, broadsides, and election ephemera cited here are, unless otherwise noted, available at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. For a meticulous assessment of the extant evidence related to the Jacksons' first marriage, see Harriet Chappell Owsley, "The Marriages of Rachel Donelson," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 36 (Winter 1977), 479-92.

4 [Charles Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, in Reference to his Fitness for the Presidency (Cincinnati, 1828), 15. See also An Appeal to the Moral and Religious of All Denominations; or, An Exposition of some of the Indiscretions of General Andrew Jackson as Copied from Records and Certified by the Clerk of Mercer County Kentucky (New York, 1828), 4.
That controversy intersected national politics at an especially critical juncture. The expansion in voter participation, the proliferation of state political organizations, the growing consolidation of party loyalties, and the emergence of local campaign newspapers all contributed to the elements of mass politics that were taking root in the second party system. The coverage of the scandal was sweeping, transcending both state and sectional lines. The discursive terms on which the scandal was exploited were strikingly uniform, and the audiences that the coverage addressed were more accessible than in prior campaigns. Given the sheer influx of print and the broad spread of literacy among both men and women, people were now able to feed their hunger for sensationalism on an altogether unprecedented scale. Political spins on the Jacksons' early marital problems, then, reached a wide and engaged audience. This point is an important one; if the election of 1828 was both a journalistic and a political watershed, it was no less innovative in its organized manipulation of a sexual scandal.5

5 On the second party system, see, for example, Ronald P. Formisano, The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s (New York, 1983); Richard L. McCormick, The Party Period and Public Policy:
Adams supporters would insist that their reading of the scandal was neither innovative nor manipulative; it rested on eighteenth-century assumptions about the political import of marital virtue. Inasmuch as marital fidelity stood as a trope for national unity, adultery represented political chaos. In a culture that had thrived on seduction tales and imbued them with a republican ethos, here, after all, was

Rachel Jackson, in an undated engraving by C. J. Butte. Courtesy Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, The New York Public Library

American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era (New York, 1986); and Harry L. Watson, Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America (New York, 1990). For literacy, literature, and sensationalism, see David S. Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (New York, 1988); Jane Tompkins, The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 (New York, 1985); and Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America (New York, 1986). Both the scope and the nature of the Jackson scandal differed from those about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Assertions that Hemings, Jefferson's slave, was his mistress were not disseminated with the same efficiency; and Hemings, as the object of property, had a perilous claim on her own chastity. To the extent that a free white woman was viewed as the property of her husband, however, a further distinction between the two cases inheres in the fact that Sally Hemings was owned by Thomas Jefferson, whereas Rachel Robards, it was claimed, was stolen by Andrew Jackson. Nonetheless, the Jacksonians donned Jefferson's mantle by comparing "the falsehood, abuses, and calumny lavished on Thomas Jefferson" with the slander directed at Andrew Jackson. See Portland Spirit of '28, Oct. 29, 1828; see also Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833–1835 (New York, 1985), 236.
a flesh-and-blood seduction in which the man who would be president had played the serpentlike role of seducer to a woman who was already married. Such a man menaced the entire civic order: his callous disregard for the laws of marriage symbolized the raw power of evil over institutional efforts to uphold virtue. Furthermore, because the woman who was slated to share his bed at the White House was deemed unchaste and the legitimacy of her most intimate relations with him was contested, she too stood as a threat, albeit a lesser one, to the larger civic order.6

Such derogatory images of the Jacksons' sexual relations, together with pro-Jackson counterimages, exemplify Joan Wallach Scott's observation that political history has "been enacted on the field of gender."7 Political historians have drawn on the Robards affair to suggest a more sensational style of politics in this prelude to the second party system, but they have not been attentive to its substance. It is precisely because both parties attempted to appeal to their constituents' most deeply rooted beliefs and understandings about manhood and womanhood, passion and restraint, and divorce and marriage that their competing narratives of the Robards affair reveal important distinctions in their respective views.

Those distinctions make up the focus of this essay, which explores their meaning in the immediate context of the election of 1828 and then speculates on their broader implications. My thesis here is that in the campaign of 1828, political partisans delineated two discrete clusters of ideas about proper relations between the sexes, or, to put it another way, they developed two competing marital codes. One, the pro-Adams or proto-Whig code, was didactic and contractual with a persistent emphasis on the ties between household and polity; the other, the pro-Jackson or proto-Democratic code, was romantic and private with a distinct preference for heartfelt sentiments over precise legal forms.

Such schematic constructions can hardly do justice to the sensibilities of the voters whom they addressed, much less to the intent of the politicians who framed them. Most Americans undoubtedly espoused elements from both codes in an ambiguous and overlapping fashion. Although we should not dichotomize these codes too neatly in linking them to the values of male voters or their disfranchised wives, the contrast between them provides us with a slender shaft of dazzling paradigmatic clarity. Crisply juxtaposed as they were in a campaign that was waged on the threshold of the Victorian era, they shed considerable light on latent nineteenth-century tensions over the boundaries of marriage and the definitions of love. Furthermore, because the two codes embodied the growing instability of key political terms, they afford a fresh angle of vision on changes in the political culture. To the extent that both parties constructed their debate over the Jacksons' marriage and morals as a contest between freedom and virtue, on the one hand, and power and corruption, on the other, they framed it in familiar republican language that they suffused with new and contested meanings.

A sharp calculus was as important in the political constructions of the Robards affair as any transcendent moral vision. At one level, the codes embraced by the two parties were reflexive responses to their immediate electoral needs. Given the apparent youthful indiscretion of the Jacksons, Adams supporters had a compelling incentive to champion strict governmental control over domestic relations, and Jackson supporters had a vested interest in defending the principle of marital privacy. The Adamsites, after all, aimed to take votes away from the ever-popular Jackson by exposing his sexual transgression, while the Jacksonians rushed to defend him against a potentially fatal political assault. At a second and still intensely partisan level, party leaders shaped their appeals to comport with the ethnic and religious stripes of their constituents. Religious outsiders such as the Catholics and freethinkers among the Jackson supporters would have little enthusiasm for encoding rigid moral prescriptions into a reformist Protestant legal system, while evangelicals were bound to find Jackson's lack of sexual self-discipline morally repellent. More was at stake here, however, than transient campaign strategies. At a third and less-conscious level, the layers of meaning compressed into the conflicting narratives of the Robards affair embodied the components of competing value systems. As it turned out, the vagaries of the Jacksons' union in the early 1790s served as a highly evocative emblem for profound political and moral tensions in the late 1820s.

Thanks to Daniel Walker Howe's reconceptualization of the reforming role of evangelical Christianity in antebellum political culture, we can link the intense interest that these incipient Whigs demonstrated in the Robards affair to a broader commitment to moral didacticism, self-discipline, and institutional reforms. In the Whig view of the world, which was informed by the fervent moralism of the Second Great Awakening, the state had an important and legitimate interest in delineating and controlling the boundaries around marriage; it consisted in employing law to enhance marriage as a social institution. We can also locate the defense fashioned by incipient Democrats in a larger framework of political secularism, cultural pluralism, laissez-faire government, and broad-based egalitarianism, at least as it pertained to white men. Marriage, by implication, was a matter of individual and local concern.

Adams supporters relied on a characteristically evangelical ideal of masculinity to sing the praises of their Unitarian leader. They celebrated Adams as a respon-
sible, self-restrained Christian gentleman, a man of sincere piety, impeccable purity, and prodigious intelligence, who had devoted himself unstintingly to a spacious and progressive national vision. Jackson supporters, by contrast, embraced a vividly romantic ideal of manhood. They underscored the general's bravery at the Battle of New Orleans, his chivalry as the protector of endangered women, and his close-ness to nature as a man of the frontier. By identifying their candidate with the physical prowess and self-sufficiency that Americans associated with westward expansion, they placed him beyond the artificial constraints of formal authority. With regard to womanhood, they were notably muted, relegating its ramifications to a realm outside the political arena. Still, they persistently deployed the concept of feminine weakness in binary opposition to that of masculine strength, thereby using it as a foil for their heroic definitions of masculinity.

For Adams supporters, however, who highlighted the role played by male chastity in adhering to the vows of marriage, gender distinctions were more oblique. Both parties extolled the principle of female chastity, but Adamsites imbued it with a more activist cast.

Though rumors about the Jacksons' marriage had long been bandied about, they assumed tangible political shape in the spring of 1827, a full year and a half in advance of the election. In an effort to combat a Jacksonian offensive that began almost as soon as the previous presidential campaign had ended, charges against the Jacksons were launched early and often. Charles Hammond, a friend and supporter of Henry Clay, unleashed what might be considered the first salvo by printing the story in the March 23, 1827, issue of his paper, the Cincinnati Gazette, where he named Jackson as the paramour in the affair. He reprinted this version in his special campaign journal, Truth's Advocate and Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor, in January 1828, and he reprinted it yet again in an anonymous pamphlet entitled View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, in Reference to his Fitness for the Presidency. As Hammond himself avowed, he was committed to disseminating the story as widely as possible. Citing the "large edition" he had published in pamphlet form, he proudly proclaimed that his article had been "extensively read amongst the people."12

Hammond and editors like him took the lead in exploring the political implications of the scandal and in promoting its exposure as a conscientious public service. According to Hammond, not only was adultery in general an issue of public concern, but the consequences of electing an adulterer to high office were a decidedly public matter. Charges that he was violating the Jacksons' privacy could not obviate


12 Cincinnati Gazette, March 23, 1827; Truth's Advocate and Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor (Jan. 1828), 4–20; [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations.
the profound influence sexual mores exerted on all other social and political relations. "It will not much longer avail the Jacksonians to denounce the discussion of this affair as an unmanly and dishonorable act," he insisted, linking the authority of government to a respect for the rules of marriage, for "the moral sense of the community begins to assert its proper influence, and assign to seduction and adultery their appropriate estimation."13

Hammond's obsession with the Jacksons' sexual transgressions was by no means typical of all pro-Adams editors. The exposure of the Jacksons' marital history unfolded in two forms: one blunt and astonishingly unrestrained, the other rather more refined and covert; only select newspapers carried the story in full.14 Respectable pro-Adams papers were often reluctant to address the Robards affair directly, but they subtly intensified the damage Hammond had inflicted with inference and innuendo. Sometimes a single issue would do the job. Around the same time Hammond first published his version of the story, the *Daily National Journal*, an influential Washington paper that had been the beneficiary of Adams's patronage when he was secretary of state, introduced readers to a similar version of the story by reprinting excerpts from a pamphlet written by Thomas Arnold. Arnold, whose animus against Jackson was as intense as Hammond's, denounced the general as a reckless and unstable adventurer who "spent the prime of his life in gambling, in cock fighting, in horse racing," and who, "to cap off all his frailties . . . tore from a husband the wife of his bosom."15

This last phrase, which was reiterated throughout the campaign, depicted Jackson's offense more as an abduction than as a seduction. It implied not only that wife stealing was an affair between men, in which one man violated the sexual rights of another, but also that it was one of Jackson's most heinous crimes. It signified his inability to honor the most elemental of contracts, along with his readiness to employ force. Implicit here was the all-important notion that the obligation of sexual fidelity as set out in the marriage contract was more than a metaphor for obligations in the social contract: as the source of all contractualism among men and thus the foundation for social stability, it was one of its most vital components.16 The *Daily National Journal* asked its readers to imagine the uproar if Adams or Henry Clay "were to take a man's wife from him pistol in hand," and it urged them to give special credence to Arnold's assertions because he was a congressman from Tennessee and would therefore know the facts. The readiness of this paper, one of the two most conspicuous political organs of the day, to reprint such provocative excerpts attests to the thoroughness with which the story was broadcast.17

13 *Truth's Advocate and Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor* (March 1828), 117.
14 This impression is based on a canvass of 1828 newspapers and special campaign extras held by the American Antiquarian Society. See Bradford Dunbar, comp., "Campaign Newspapers Published before 1877, Including Holdings at the American Antiquarian Society," typescript, 1980 (reading room, American Antiquarian Society).
15 *Daily National Journal*, March 26, 1827; Thomas Arnold, *To the freeman of the counties of Cocke, Sevier, Blount, Jefferson . . .* (Knoxville, 1827). Arnold's pamphlet went through at least two editions.
17 *Daily National Journal*, March 26, 1827. This paper, which began as a semiweekly in 1823 when John Quincy Adams was secretary of state, was considered the special organ of the president. The other major political organ
The story was, by any standard of political scandal, a stick of dynamite. As Robert V. Remini has put it, it held "enough ammunition to kill a regiment of presidential candidates."\textsuperscript{18} It also, however, carried the potential for backlash. Even in the heyday of freewheeling partisan politics, not all anti-Jacksonians were sanguine about raking up the Robards affair because to do so was to violate an emerging ideal of domestic privacy. To exploit the story for partisan political purposes was to subvert the conceptual boundaries middle-class men and women were constructing between the vaunted harmony of the home and the competitive turmoil of the outside world; even worse, it was to part the drapes they were drawing around their most intimate relations. As some editors realized, because the exposure ignored the deepening distinction between private and public life, it was at the very least insensitive, if not in fact counterproductive. After carrying the story, the \textit{Daily National Journal} waffled and turned to champion the right of privacy inherent in the doctrine of separate spheres, the differentiation between home and the world. It castigated those writers who were using the "weapons of political hostility to lay waste the happy valleys in which domestic felicity ought to live remote from the feuds and discords of public life."\textsuperscript{19} Like competition in the marketplace, political campaigns unfolded a world apart from the quiet recesses of domestic life.

What gave the Robards affair its real clout, what distinguished it from the formulaic and politicized seduction tales of the revolutionary era, and what made it at once so scandalous and so modern was the very same concept of domestic privacy, which was being breached now in an unprecedented torrent of print. As Michel Foucault observed, "What is peculiar to modern societies . . . is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it \textit{ad infinitum}, while exploiting it as the secret."\textsuperscript{20} It is precisely because sex, according to the new standards of gentility, was to be confined to the private recesses of the bedroom that it could be deployed so effectively in the partisan presses. And it is precisely because this discourse about sex was construed as the revelation of a secret that it could assume titillating qualities. One consequence of this salacious underside of the campaign of 1828 was the transformation of domestic privacy, in the sense of denoting a realm distinct from and unconnected to that of the political order, into a very public issue.

By aggressively championing an antipolitical notion of privacy, the politically astute Jacksonians compensated for a shaky factual defense with a compelling ideolog-

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\textsuperscript{18} Robert V. Remini, \textit{The Election of Andrew Jackson} (Philadelphia, 1963), 152.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Daily National Journal}, April 12, 1827.

tical offense. Their outrage against the obscene collapse of private-public boundaries blunted traditional republican appeals to the principle of marital virtue. In the end, they definitively depoliticized the republican conception of virtue not so much by feminizing it as by privatizing it. Since their own charges of a corrupt bargain between Adams and Clay during the election of 1824 focused on the public arena, they were able to claim the high road here and denounce every manifestation of the administration's willingness to penetrate the sacred recesses of the Jacksons' domestic life. An early campaign issue of the *Albany Signs of the Times* claimed, "The editor disavows every attempt to destroy private character, or to enter the sacred retreats of domestic life, for the purpose of dragging forth the unsuspecting victims of foul mouthed slander." As the election drew near and the thoroughness of the exposure became apparent, the same editor ventured that few candidates "have suffered more from the tongue of the slanderer, or the pen of a licentious and unprincipled faction, than ANDREW JACKSON."

But the Jacksonians went even further; they construed privacy as constituting an area properly closed off from the scrutiny of any person, political or otherwise, who stood outside the domestic circle. Their protests against the Adamsite presses went beyond conventional notions of slander to anticipate the legal concept of an injury to a person's feelings as a result of the information technologies of mass culture. And Jackson was invariably the martyr in all of this. Verbal assaults on his wife, in this tack that assumed the complete corporatism of marriage, were deemed assaults on him from which he suffered doubly, because they impugned her honor as well as his and because he subsumed her suffering. Since the "inmost recesses of his family, the honor of his wife," and "his domestic peace" had all been invaded "to serve the purposes and prop up the hopes of a falling party," it was evident "no man has been more foully slandered." Substituting the crime of wife slandering for that of wife stealing, a pro-Jackson broadside averred that "the most unfounded calumnies have been invested and reiterated by the amalgamation hirelings against the wife of his bosom."

Although Jackson supporters worked to deflect republican analogies between government and marriage, they embraced other elements of republicanism with gusto. By highlighting the motives of the administration in dredging up the Robards story, they counterpoised the hollow partisanship embodied in such a ploy against the cooperative goals of a truly republican ideology. To be sure, both parties denounced the evils of party at the very moment they were creating the second party

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21 In the four-way contest of 1824, in which Jackson received a plurality of both the popular and electoral votes, the election devolved into the House of Representatives; Clay was accused of throwing his support to Adams in return for his appointment as secretary of state, a traditional stepping-stone to the presidency. Fueled by their outrage over "the corrupt bargain," Jacksonians began the next campaign almost immediately. *Albany Signs of the Times*, Jan. 5, 1828, Sept. 27, 1828.


23 *Vindication of the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson in Reply to the Richmond Address, signed by Chapman Johnson, and to Other Electioneering Calumnies* (Boston, 1828); Dr. Noah J. T. George, *A Biographical Chart, Exhibiting at one View the Principal Events in the Life of General Andrew Jackson* (broadside).
system, but Jacksonians were convinced that the calculated exploitation of the Robards affair afforded vivid proof that the Adamsites were engaged in a vicious conspiracy. Their insistence on a plot by the administration to corrupt the morals of the nation with the spread of its lurid stories evoked Patriot charges against the British during the revolutionary era. Antebellum voters, like their revolutionary fathers, were exhorted to exhibit the utmost wariness against so devious an enemy. A voter who finally switched to Jackson wrote that he was deceived for a time by "the base falsehoods" but was later convinced that Jackson "has been traduced and libelled for mere party purposes." 24

Nevertheless, Jacksonian attacks on the selfishness of party displayed a distinctly modern resonance. The corruption of the political process and thus of the entire nation was viewed as a direct corollary of the administration's willingness to ride roughshod over the sacred domain of a person's private life. The Jacksonian insistence on locating the source of the administration's corruption in its conflation of public and private spheres diverged from the complementarity between spheres that had been assumed in the revolutionary era. And yet the degree to which the Jacksonians departed from an older construction of virtue that had pivoted on a far less dichotomous conception of separate spheres was obscured by the familiar terms in which they denounced the corruption. They avowed that the administration's spreading of licentious stories, driven as it was by insatiable electoral greed, was an intricate conspiracy to deceive the people. As a Maine editor put it, "We view the scurrilous abuse and calumny heaped upon the best citizens of our country, by the coalition party through the administration presses, to be a vile attempt to corrupt the moral good sense of the people, and to defame the general character of the nation." Jackson, who like Adams held himself officially above the political fray, contributed to the notion that the administration was bent on corrupting the public when he signed off at the end of a letter for public consumption with the following: "Trusting to the justice of an intelligent people, I have been content to rely for security on their decision, against the countless assaults and slanders, which are sought so repeatedly to be palmed upon them." 25

Administration journalists, however, had both republican political theory and evangelical moral fervor on their side. They invoked a man's regard for the fundamental ground rules of marriage as an acid test of his character, and character was the issue that legitimated their carrying the Robards story in the first place. By running for office, the Daily National Journal reasoned, Jackson "provoked if not invited an investigation of his character," along with every facet of his life. The Robards scandal, another Adamsite insisted, represented "an affair in which the National character, the National interest, and the National morals, were all deeply in-

24 Boston Jackson Republican, Sept. 3, 1828. For a similar shift in loyalty, see John Quincy Adams Exposed and Andrew Jackson Vindicated by a Federalist (n.p., 1828).
volved,” and it was therefore “a proper subject of public investigation and exposure.” Indeed, We the People argued that a candidate should regard the relentless scrutiny of his private life as a test of his republican principles, and if he were unwilling or unable to take that test, he should not run for public office. “If Gen. Jackson cannot withstand investigations of his character, or if his friends shrink from them and threaten violence to the hand that chalks out their imperfection, neither he, nor his party, is calculated for office, or to administer the laws to a republican people.” A speech delivered against Jackson in Natchez, the scene of the alleged adultery, relied on the familiar equation of private virtue with the public good: if Jackson’s “private life has been a continued scene of rashness and consequent errors, his public life is more deeply stamped.”26

Adams’s private life, on the other hand, presented a pristine contrast. Jacksonians, of course, attacked Adams’s character relentlessly, alleging that he had been corrupted by living too long abroad, that he was mesmerized by the trappings of royalty, and that he had used public funds to purchase a billiard table for his own amusement at the White House. But his private life yielded up no scandal that was even remotely comparable to that of the Robards affair. A few random accusations that he prostituted a young American woman to the desires of Czar Alexander I when he served as a diplomat to the czar’s court held little credibility and were not pursued with any degree of persistence. The kind of hard legal evidence that accusers used to document the Robards scandal was simply unavailable for Adams; even the most intemperate verbal assaults against him focused largely on his public record. “While his enemies have assailed his political course with a rabid fury,” the Weekly Marylander observed, “few have ventured to impeach the morals or devotion, in which he is so justly pre-eminent.” Those who scrutinized his private life “stood ashamed and rebuked at the brightness and holiness of that which they had intended to injure.”27

But Andrew Jackson’s private life was quite another matter, and its public import pivoted on a set of evangelical convictions about the affinities between self-government and national government. If a modicum of law and order was dependent on the sanctity of the marriage bed, it was no less dependent on the self-restraint of men against the depredations of their own passion. As Charles Hammond put it, until the present political contest, America had been a land “where no man can succeed to a place of high trust who does not respect female virtue: or who stands condemned as the seducer of other men’s wives, and the destroyer of female character.” Would readers, he queried, “give sanction to conduct, which

26 Daily National Journal, Oct. 14, 1828; [Hammond], View of General Jackson’s Domestic Relations, 1; We the People, April 12, 1828, April 19, 1828. For a similar statement on Jackson’s private life, see also An Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of the Presidential Election: With a Special Reference to the Nomination of Andrew Jackson containing Sketches of his Public and Private Character (Utica, 1828), 37. On character and republicanism, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870 (New Haven, 1982), 9.

27 On the accusations against Adams, see Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 130, 134. Weekly Marylander, Nov 6, 1828.
is calculated to unhinge the fundamental principles of society?” For Hammond self-
control and social control were entirely inseparable aspects of the constraints men
needed to impose, both on themselves and on others, in order to achieve a higher
order of freedom. Moral reform, in other words, depended both on individual con-
science and on any external authority that helped to reshape individual conscience.
In the absence of a serious reverence for the boundaries around marriage, whether
it took the form of lapses by individual men and women or emanated from a failing
on the part of institutions, only political chaos could ensue. “Let all inducements
to the maintenance of conjugal fidelity be broken down: let all veneration for the
marriage state and covenant be destroyed; and let me then ask, what there is in social
life worthy of regard?” The answer was clear: “Show to the world your abhorrence
of a man, who disregards the laws which even savages revere.”

If the ties between conjugal fidelity and law and order were too much of a moral
abstraction, there was the more tangible problem of the example an adulterous
president would set. Voters were urged to consider both the seriousness of Jackson's
offense and the significance of the office. All forms of fornication were deemed
despicable, but Adamsites distinguished the severity of the crime with the sex and
marital status of the partners. The problem here, they argued, went well beyond
a petty indiscretion with an unmarried female that rested “upon a peculiar freedom
of manners too little regardful of the restraints of society”; Jackson's offense ranked
as “gross adultery,” and as such carried dire consequences. Fear of public censure,
one powerful incentive to remaining virtuous, would evaporate with the election
of Andrew Jackson, and seduction might become the order of the day. It would be-
come impossible to censure a man “who may seduce his neighbours wife, and take
her to live with him in adultery,” because the dishonor would be obliterated by “his
being no worse than the President of the United States.”

The obligation to set a good example for the nation extended to the president's
wife. Just as her husband stood as a representative American man, she stood as a
representative American wife, wifehood being the only proper status for a respect-
able adult woman. If she were “weak and vulgar,” a combination that implicitly
linked sexual promiscuity in a woman to a rank in the lower classes, she might be-
come the object of ridicule that would be directed ultimately toward her husband.
But even more important was her effect on the members of her own sex, who would
look to her as a model. Adamsites urged voters to consider the problematic relation-

28 [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, 20, 18. For a significant debate about the intent
and consciousness of antebellum reformers, see the essays by John Ashworth, David Brion Davis, and Thomas L.
Haskell in The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation, ed.
Thomas Bender (Berkeley, 1992), 107-99. For two pivotal older works stressing the social control side of reform,
see Paul Johnson, A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York,
1978); and Anthony Wallace, Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution
(New York, 1978). For a more plastic view of class, especially as it relates to participation in temperance societies,
see Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge,

29 Appeal to the Moral and Religious of All Denominations, 4; [Hammond], View of General Jackson's
Domestic Relations, 18.
ship between all the virtuous women in the nation and the degraded woman who would now be sitting in the White House. Would the women of the republic abandon their self-respect to humble themselves "before this modern Jezebel"? Framed in the most rhetorically provocative way, the problem Rachel Jackson brought to her husband's quest for the presidency was summed up in this simple question: "Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband to be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian Land?"30

"American Jezebel," "profligate woman," "convicted adulteress"—the denunciations pulled Rachel Jackson from outside the margins of political discourse toward its very center. Chief matron among matrons, so to speak, she was invested with a specific political function that provided the basis for a public assessment of her morals. Had there been no scandal, she would have taken her place with the wives of other candidates in the peaceful recesses of the domestic sphere. The problem was not only that she had defiled the domestic sphere and, in so doing, forfeited the respect for privacy accorded virtuous women but also that she was an emblem for all women. Because she was cast as a negative model for the members of her own sex, she became, to borrow a phrase from Mary Poovey, a border case, a challenge to the binary logic in the gendered opposition of separate spheres. It was widely understood that, by living in the White House at her husband's side, she would preside "at the head of the female society of the United States."31

Furthermore, in a spectrum of representations that ranged from abduction to seduction to unalloyed passion, most Adamsites invested Rachel Jackson with some responsibility for her own sexuality. The acerbity of the attacks against her inferred that she had been an active, willing, and even eager participant in the decision to leave Robards and take up with the general. She too had been passionate. She too had been ruled by her appetites and was therefore beyond the constraints of her own government, not just of those imposed by a government of men. She, like her paramour, was individually responsible for committing the crime of adultery. The problem with her divorce, moreover, was not the emergence of the institution of divorce per se, but that she was the defendant in a divorce action that was the direct and inevitable consequence of her own unbridled passions. A New York pamphleteer warned, "When the rein is so given to indulgence, that it runs the whole race, and ends in divorce and marriage, the most favorable estimate we can make of the parties, is that they are mere creatures of passion, and the victims of its ungoverned predominance."32

Almost four decades of domestic tranquility, which even Jackson's most adamant foes conceded were marked by his wife's exemplary behavior, could not erase the

30 [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, 2; Appeal to the Moral and Religious of All Denominations, 5.
fact that she was irredeemably fallen. There was to be no quarter given here. The same pamphleteer, referring to a scandalous murder conspiracy of the day, asked, “Can forty years of exemplary virtue restore the wretched Elsie Whipple to the station she has lost in society? Would we not be startled at the bare suggestion, that forty years hence she might be placed as the wife of our President at the head of the females of our country?” Elsie Whipple was a married woman who had plotted with her lover, Jesse Strang, to put an end to her marriage by putting an end to her husband. After failing in an attempt to poison him and almost killing her son in the process, she goaded Strang into doing the killing. Convicted of the murder in August 1827, Strang, who had abandoned his own wife, poured out his confession in a pamphlet designed to make Elsie Whipple’s guilt as manifest as his own.

The most extravagant of the anti-Jackson propagandists, then, compared the act of adultery on the part of a woman to the murder of her husband. That comparison served as a warning that vigilance was required to keep the White House pure. If Jackson bullied his fellow Tennesseans into admitting his spouse “AMONGST MODEST WOMEN,” warned the Massachusetts Journal in an uncanny presentiment of the tack he would take with Peggy Eaton, the controversial wife of his secretary of war, “HE SHALL MEET A FIRMER RESISTANCE BEFORE HE FIGHTS HER AND HIS OWN WAY INTO THE PRESIDENTIAL MANSION.” Tagging Jackson with the sobriquet “the Great Western Bluebeard,” the paper projected yet another allusion linking sexual relations to murder. Indeed, so unrestrained were the attacks of the Massachusetts Journal and so confident were some Jacksonians that they would backfire, that they reprinted the paper’s harshest denunciations in a pamphlet for their own political distribution, with an appendix citing the dates of their sources. A section entitled “Abuse of Mrs. Jackson” included the following:

Who is there in all this land that has a wife, a sister or daughter that could be pleased to see Mrs. Jackson (Mrs. Roberts [Robards] that was) presiding in the drawing-room at Washington. THERE IS POLLUTION IN THE TOUCH, THERE IS PERDITION IN THE EXAMPLE OF A PROFLIGATE WOMAN—“HER WAYS LEAD DOWN TO THE CHAMBERS OF DEATH AND HER STEPS TAKE HOLD ON HELL.” And shall we standing in a watch-tower to warn our countrymen of approaching danger seal our lips in silence, in respect to this personage and HER PARAMOUR, great and powerful as he is and captivating as he renders himself with his “bandanna handkerchief”, “his frock coat”, his amiable condescentions, and the fascinations of his BAR-ROOM and PUBLIC TABLE TALK.

The fanaticism of this assault suggests the intensity Adamsites could bring to their critiques of the Jacksons’ union. At a time of rapid expansion and growing urbanization, when both familial and social relations were readjusting to the de-

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33 Appeal to the Moral and Religious of All Denominations, 7; Jesse Strang, The Confession of Jesse Strang, who was Convicted of the Murder of John Whipple, At a Special court of Oyer and Terminer, held in and for the County of Albany, on the fourth day of August 1827 (Albany, 1827).
34 Political Extracts from a Leading Adams Paper, The Massachusetts Journal, Edited and Published in Boston by David L. Child (Boston, 1828), 10, 13. This pamphlet is available at the Boston Athenaeum.
mands of the marketplace, the formal ground rules for marriage became ever more important. The profligacy of Rachel Jackson could loom as a deadly pollutant to the political well-being of the nation precisely because marriage played so prominent a role in the Adamsites' quest for moral discipline. One consequence of their preoccupation with a strict adherence to the rules for marriage as they applied to both sexes, however, was a divergence from the gendered insularity that was the hallmark of domesticity. Despite editors' protests to the contrary, Adamsites viewed marriage less as a cooperative sanctuary affording protection from the turmoil of political life and mitigating the effects of market relations than as a model for the contractualism on which both the future of the polity and the life of the market depended. Since the trust implicit in the promise keeping of a contractual relationship is not without cooperative elements, the distinction here is one of emphasis. Nonetheless, it is an emphasis that clarifies the larger implications of their marital code. From this fundamental premise regarding the sanctity of the marriage contract, or more precisely the sanctity of contract in marriage (given their grudging recognition of divorce), flowed the Adamsites' subtle but persistent subversion of the doctrine of separate spheres.

The Adamsite impulse to make one sphere more like the other could run in both directions. Their preoccupation with the letter of the law in their moral assaults on Rachel Jackson reflected the new cognitive style that Thomas Haskell has attributed to the experience and ideology of market capitalism. Legal formalism was central to the case Adamsites were making in exposing the Robards affair, which was, among other things, a breach-of-contract story. The clear cause-and-effect rationale employed by the law in adjudicating breaches of contract made it the perfect arbiter of the rules for conjugal morality. To those who attested Rachel Jackson's innocence, her accusers noted that it was the law, the social institution properly designated to handle challenges to marital fidelity, that had pronounced her guilty of the crime of adultery. In making her offense a matter of judicial record, the law made her guilt a matter of incontestable proof. Emphasis on the details in the legal record represented Adamsite fact versus Jacksonian fiction; it set hard Adamsite rationality against hyperbolic Jacksonian rhetoric. Once the verdict was rendered, no "intelligent mind" could "doubt that Mrs. Jackson was unfaithful to her marriage vow with Robards" or "believe that she would have been guilty of the great indiscretion of flying beyond the reach of her husband, with a man charged to be her paramour, were she innocent of the charge."

But the law was no less instrumental in affixing the guilt of her great and powerful paramour, whose responsibility for the affair far outweighed her own. Sensing the

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36 On the new cognitive style, see ibid., 136, 153. Although divorce had been widely available as a legal option by the end of the eighteenth century, the Adamsite emphasis on the letter of the law with regard to divorce converged with the legislative efforts of many states to refine their divorce statutes; see Roderick Phillips, Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), 154-58, 439-61. [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, 8.
backlash they were creating in debasing Rachel Jackson, Adams supporters placed the blame for her humiliation directly at the feet of the general. If she suffered from the crass intrusion of politics into her private life, her husband had only himself to blame for subjecting her to an investigation that was bound to reveal her shame. Were he truly the gallant protector of women he claimed to be, he would not have run for the office in the first place. A caring husband "would never consent that the wife of his bosom should be exposed to the ribald taunts, and dark surmises of the profligate, or to the cold civility or just remark of the wise and good." Instead, he would have devoted his life to sustaining and comforting his "bruised and broken flower." It was Jackson's own supporters, complained the editor of the Daily National Journal, who were trying to divert public attention from the general by "making her the shield" with which to deflect the blows against him.37

The defensiveness of these responses reveals considerable uneasiness on the part of Adamsites regarding their exposure of the scandal. And yet they pursued it with great persistence because it encapsulated everything they feared about Jackson, and their fears about Jackson went to the heart of their campaign. Those fears were the fulcrum about which they defined and asserted their moral identity as an emerging political coalition. Indeed, Adamsites specifically aimed to be everything that Andrew Jackson was not. Allusions to the scandal were irresistible not only because they meshed so neatly with the lawless facets of Jackson's public career but also because they enabled Adams supporters to contrast Jackson's casual western ways with what Richard L. McCormick has labeled their "styles of Sunday behavior." Thus Adamsites could measure the "warm yet unobtrusive piety" of their man against the vices of an opponent "unfitted by his habits, his temper and his want of civil acquirements for the exalted station of President of the United States."38

For these proto-Whigs, who assessed the nation's increasingly sophisticated legal culture as the hallmark of its remarkable progress, the election of a military leader as undisciplined as Andrew Jackson presented a terrifying prospect. His utter lack of self-control, they predicted, would imperil the rights of individual citizens and serve as an influential model for the collective regression of the nation. It was perilous, one pamphleteer reasoned, "to put at the head of our government, a man who was never known to govern himself." His "disregard of the laws," alleged another, demonstrated his complete inability to conform to the government of others. Here was a man, the Weekly Marylander noted, who "openly violated the decalogue, and has not even shewn hypocrisy, that tribute which vice pays to virtue." A political orator observed that this man, in his private life, "exhibited the deformity and the danger of the human disposition when uninfluenced by either moral or legal restraints." Cruel, lawless, passionate, impetuous, violent, these were the qualities as-

37 [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, 11; Daily National Journal, June 22, 1827; see also ibid., Oct. 30, 1828.
38 McCormick, Party Period and Public Policy, 47; Weekly Marylander, Nov. 6, 1828; Address of the State Convention of Delegates from the Several Counties of the State of New-York to the People on the Subject of the Approaching Presidential Election (Albany, 1828), 2.
sociated with the Great Western Bluebeard; he carried a sword cane and, according to one broadside, was "willing to run it through the body of any one who may presume to stand in his way." Another broadside pointed out that this was "not the man to take the lead under our refined system of Government, and our WELL REGULATED CODE OF LAW."^^

Persistently employing an idiom that equated the political "refinement" of the nation with its citizens' acceptance of evangelical discipline, Adamsites set out to puncture what the Daily National Journal deemed "the fictitious splendor" thrown around Jackson's name by exposing his anti-Christian primitivism. There can be no mistaking their moral urgency. "Worshippers of Jackson and hickory poles," the Washington paper alleged, "wish to lead this happy people back to barbarism, where no laws were acknowledged but that of the club, or more recently the bayonet pistol." "Between the two candidates," proclaimed We the People, explicitly framing the election as a contest between infidel and evangelical, "the difference is as wide as between paganism and christianity." With Jackson setting the standard for national morality, predicted the Daily National Journal, "Two centuries would then be found to have been sufficient to carry us from puritanism to its antipodes." The Robards affair, as one broadside inferred, served to exemplify "the ungoverned temper, the inflexible resolution, the vindictive spirit, and the long established habits of Jackson." What better signpost of his utter lack of moral refinement than his unchecked erotic impulses? What better proof of his great capacity for public deception than the story he invented to mask his crime? To place such a man in the presidency along with his fallen woman was tantamount to inviting a confidence man with his painted woman to occupy the White House.40

The Jacksonian narrative of the Robards story was a defensive effort rendered necessary by the unremitting activity of the administration presses. Although the Jacksonians did not set out to give conjugal relations a political focus, they appreciated the need to address the moral ramifications of the Jacksons' irregular union. Public documents damaging to the Jacksons included both the private bill issued by the Virginia legislature permitting Lewis Robards to proceed with his divorce suit and the complaint and final decree filed in the Court of Quarter Sessions in Mercer County, Kentucky. Since this evidence was widely available, creating a defense that went beyond invoking the inviolability of domestic privacy presented a daunting challenge.

^39 A Brief Inquiry into Some of the Objections urged Against the Election of Andrew Jackson (n.p., [1828]), 4; Plain Truth (no. 4, [1828]), n.p.; Weekly Marylander, Oct. 30, 1828; Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of the Presidential Election, 37; A Short Account of some of the Bloody Deeds of Gen. Jackson (broadside); A Mirror for Politicians (broadside). For a list of the indictments against Jackson's violent and illegal public behavior, including his suspension of habeas corpus, his treatment of the Seminoles, and his penchant for dueling, see Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 118–24.

^40 Daily National Journal, Oct. 11, 1828, June 7, 1828; We the People, April 12, 1828; Daily National Journal, June 24, 1828; A Voice of Warnings! to the Freemen of Steuben (broadside). I am indebted here, of course, to Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women.
The Jacksonians responded with a series of redeeming counterimages celebrating their hero's reliance on the frontier codes of Tennessee where honor, friendship, and loyalty counted for more than legal fine print. Although it is tempting to define this line of their defense as "tradition-oriented"—an appeal to the values of an older and simpler society—it was liberally laced with the nature-affirming values of nineteenth-century romanticism. Even the language the Jacksonians employed to contest Adamsite definitions of marital legitimacy drew on the cult of sincerity and sensibility that was itself an outgrowth of religious revivals. Indeed, their devotion to the authenticity of emotion and the validity of individual experience embodied sentiments unleashed by the soft, nonrational side of the Second Great Awakening.41

It was in this context of authenticity and sincerity that the frontier emerged as Jackson's definitive personal experience. "His strong manly sense, his integrity and warmth of heart, soon gathered a circle of friends around him, of the blunt yeomanry of that district," noted a supporter intent on valorizing the lessons learned in the wilderness over the niceties of the parlor; "he imbibed their frank and generous spirit," he conceded, "and perhaps partook of their faults." Although no political spin could cast the act of wife stealing in a favorable light, emphasis on the wilderness enabled the Jacksonians to recontour the ground rules for divorce to accommodate persons living on the frontier. This slippage, from a strict adherence to the letter of the law to a reliance on its fundamental spirit, not only was the key to their defense but also embodied their more generalized opposition to the excesses of formalism. Their populist appeal to a simpler and more transparent form of justice undoubtedly resonated with hardworking farmers and laborers, who distrusted the burgeoning refinements of the American legal system. The general emerged as a man who intuitively grasped the inner truth of the law buried within its arcane technicalities. An open-hearted, western man like Andrew Jackson, who was the "punisher of Booty and the protector of Beauty," might very well transcend some specific legal forms because he was in touch with the reality that gave the forms meaning.42

A detailed narrative affirming the Jacksons' adherence to the spirit of the law constituted the core of their defense. This project began with the creation in 1826 of the Nashville Committee, which went to work combing Tennessee for depositions

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41 For an emphasis on Jacksonian traditionalism, see Lawrence Frederick Kohl, The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era (New York, 1989). For Andrew Jackson's readiness to defend his honor, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," American Historical Review, 95 (Feb. 1990), 57-74. I am not denying the role of honor in antebellum society, but I am suggesting its diminution, even in the South. Jackson, as Greenberg notes, may have been more than willing to assert his manhood through physical combat, but his supporters' efforts to suppress such combative images suggest a shift was already under way. On the diminution of dueling, see Robert H. Wiebe, The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion (New York, 1984), 328-29. On the cult of sensibility, see especially Jan Lewis, The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia (Cambridge, Eng., 1983).

42 [John Kintzling Kane], A Candid View of the Presidential Question, by a Pennsylvanian (Philadelphia, 1828); Delaware Democrat & Easton Gazette, March 13, 1828. On Andrew Jackson's appeal to men who worked by the sweat of their brow, see Kohl, Politics of Individualism, 26-27; on his adherence to a higher order of justice, see John William Ward, Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age (New York, 1955), 56-57.
validating the Jacksons' story. Tagged by the administration presses as the "White-washing Committee," it consisted of nineteen prominent Tennesseans, most of whom were practicing lawyers or appellate court judges. The result of this august gathering of the general's old friends was the publication of a pamphlet designed to refute "the newspaper charges against General Jackson and his lady." Opening with an overview of the Jacksons' marital history and concluding with a series of letters and depositions from longtime friends and neighbors, the pamphlet addressed the most damaging of the Adamsite charges.

The primary goal of the committee was to establish the unqualified guilt of Lewis Robards in bringing his marriage to an end and to obliterate any notion that Andrew Jackson won his wife by challenging Robards to a duel and then seizing her at gunpoint. Relying largely on the testimony of Jackson's old lawyering companion, John Overton, who offered his version as the real story underneath the legal story, the committee created a melodrama in which love and gallantry filled the vacuum created by a cruel and hopelessly failed marriage that unraveled in a harsh and dangerous frontier setting.

Inasmuch as the villain here was the first husband, the melodrama had an unorthodox twist, pivoting on the irredeemable nature of his depravity. The evil inherent in Lewis Robards, according to the Jacksonians, emanated from a pathological jealousy that so obscured his judgment and inflamed his anger as to render him incapable of sustaining his marriage vows. In the fall of 1788 and in the third year of her marriage, Rachel Donelson Robards "was compelled . . . by her husband" to leave Kentucky and seek a home with her mother, a widow living on the Tennessee frontier. John Overton, who had been boarding with the Robardses, explained that "Capt. Robards and his wife lived very unhappily on account of his being jealous of Mr. Short," an otherwise unidentified attorney also boarding with the Robardses. Lewis Robards, however, alternated between fits of jealousy and periods of contrition, and as he came to regret the expulsion of his wife, he besought Overton to do what he could to restore harmony between them.

This brings the narrative to the Donelson compound on the banks of the Cumberland River, where a group of young lawyers, including John Overton and Andrew Jackson, came to seek their fortunes in the winter of 1788–1789. That winter

43 Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, 3. For a more general defense of Jackson's character, see Vindication of the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson, originally published in the Nashville Republican and attributed to Major Henry Lee (Boston, 1828).

44 Apart from James Parton, Andrew Jackson's engaging nineteenth-century biographer, who had the advantage of interviewing many of Jackson's contemporaries, John Overton's affectionate portrait remains the only extended and intimate view we have of the Jacksons' controversial courtship and marriage. Overton, however, distorted his correspondence with Jackson, citing the confidential nature of their relationship. See Robert V. Remini and Robert O. Rupp, Andrew Jackson: A Bibliography (Westport, 1991), 6. On the tensions between a single, authoritative legal story and other varieties of narrative, see Carol Weisbrod, "Divorce Stories: Readings, Comments, and Questions on Law and Narrative," Brigham Young University Law Review (part 1, 1991), 143–96.

45 Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, 4, esp. 24–25. Short's identity is unclear; there are four Shorts listed on the 1790 tax rolls in Kentucky: see Charles B. Heineman, "First Census" of Kentucky (Washington, 1940), 86.
Overton did arrange a reunion for the Robardses, whereby it was agreed they would live on a preemption on the south side of the Cumberland. Yet the setting at the Donelson compound was more than such a man as Robards could contend with. Overton, who had introduced Jackson into the Donelson household, described the living conditions as “Jackson and myself, our friends and clients &c occupying one cabin, and the family another, a few steps from it.” For a brief period in 1789, then, the unstable Lewis Robards, his lovely wife Rachel, and the dashing Andrew Jackson all lived in exceedingly close proximity.

It was only a matter of time before Lewis Robards’s uncontrollable jealousy was directed toward Andrew Jackson, whose “character and standing added to his engaging and sprightly manners” were sufficient “to inflame” Robards’s obsessively jealous mind. When Overton warned his good friend Andrew Jackson about Robards’s suspicions, and Jackson, “conscious of his innocence,” remonstrated with Robards on the injustice that he had done his wife, Robards turned “violently angry and abusive.” But even though he threatened to whip Jackson, and Jackson replied “that if he insisted on fighting, he would give him gentlemanly satisfaction,” no physical violence took place. Instead, Robards declared he was determined not to live with his wife. Yet as he changed his mind once again, Jackson found it prudent to give up boarding with the Donelsons. When Robards finally left for Kentucky in the spring of 1790, it was with “the avowed intention of returning and settling” near the Donelson compound. However, Thomas Crutcher, who rode back to Kentucky with him, insisted he declared on the way home “he would be damned if ever he would be seen in the Cumberland again.”

Although the opposition could read the trouble with Short as evidence of another extramarital liaison, the first part of the narrative created a plausible alternative to the Adamsite version of the story. The Jacksonians, after all, did not aim to condone illicit sexual relations; rather they sought to expand the definition of licit sexual relations to incorporate the Jacksons’ union by recounting Robards’s guilt. If jealousy was not a legal ground for ending a marriage, desertion was, in many jurisdictions, and that implicitly was Robards’s conjugal fault. When the members of the Nashville Committee took up the public record, however, their heroic efforts to cast Robards as the villain were less convincing.

In an extraordinary demonstration of loyalty to the general, men with years of legal experience conveniently set aside their knowledge of the law. Consider the letter from James Breckenridge, who had sat in the Virginia legislature and served on the judiciary committee, whose task it was to report on the Robards bill. Side-stepping the fact that Lewis Robards was the petitioner before the legislature and therefore the aggrieved party, Breckenridge avowed that Robards was presented as a man “of vile, wild habits and harsh temper.” His wife, by contrast, was “lovely and blameless in her disposition and deportment,” and she was so cruelly treated, Breckenridge claimed (suddenly raising the possibility of physical abuse), “as to make a

46 Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, 26.
47 Ibid., 4-5, 20, 26-27.
separation necessary to her happiness.” Regarding his own affirmative vote on the Robards bill, he averred, “If Mr. Robards alledged incontinency . . . I am very sure that I thought her innocent, and that my vote was intended to liberate her, as the injured party.” As for the verdict of the Kentucky jury that found her guilty of adultery, Thomas Allen, one-time clerk of the Kentucky court issuing the decree, noted it was an ex parte proceeding “with nothing shewing that the defendant had any kind of notice of the existence of that suit.” Ignoring the widespread acceptance of presumptive service, a procedure whereby publication of the suit in a local paper sufficed as notice, Allen underscored the defendant’s inability to present her side of the story. He also observed, as if to undermine the husband’s motive in bringing the suit when he did, that Lewis Robards remarried almost immediately after the divorce.48

Even more problematic was the sequence of events following Robards’s departure from the Donelson compound. The Nashville Committee claimed that after hearing rumors that Lewis Robards was coming to bring her back to Kentucky, Rachel Robards fled downriver to Natchez in January 1791 under the protection of Andrew Jackson. Jackson, it was alleged, left for Nashville as soon as he had safely deposited his charge with family friends and returned to marry her in the summer of that year only after hearing that a legislative decree had been issued. Nonetheless, as the ever-vigilant Charles Hammond observed, “If Jackson and Mrs. Robards had been married at or near Natchez, they would long since have produced some evidence to support their own assertions . . . and published it to the world!”49

The final function of the Nashville report was to repair the damage to Rachel Jackson’s honor by presenting her as “deserving and enjoying the kindest attentions of her female acquaintances.” Underscoring the “free and unreserved intercourse” among a handful of respected Virginia families who first settled along the Cumberland River, these women invested her marriage to Andrew Jackson with the seal of community approval. Elizabeth Craighead, widow of Thomas Craighead, the west Tennessee Presbyterian minister, avowed that “no lady ever conducted herself in a more becoming manner.” Sally Smith, widow of Tennessee senator Daniel Smith, claimed Robards “was spoken everywhere as a man of irregular habits and much

48 Ibid., 13–14, 22–23. The committee insisted that Hugh M’Gary, who had served as a witness against Rachel Robards, never saw her with the general until September 1791, after their first marriage; he had testified against her out of anger against the general, with whom he had a disagreement while traveling in Indian country.

49 Ibid., 28–29. For an informed account speculating that they first married in February or March 1791, see Owsley, “Marriages of Rachel Donelson,” 491; for a popular account that has them marrying in August 1791 at Springfield, Thomas Green’s plantation on the banks of the Mississippi River near Natchez, see Peggy Robbins, “Andrew and Rachel Jackson,” American History Illustrated, 12 (Aug. 1977), 22–28; for Hammond’s skepticism, see Truth’s Advocate and Monthly Anti-Jackson Expositor (March 1828), 117–18. Andrew Jackson’s papers include documents relating to the marriage and divorce of Rachel Donelson and Lewis Robards and to the Jacksons’ second marriage, but there are no documents for the first marriage. Two alternative scenarios for the Jacksons’ first union come to mind: one is that the first marriage took place in Natchez, a foreign jurisdiction, either before the legislative bill was passed or with the knowledge that the bill was not a divorce decree (perhaps they were attempting to create a legal loophole by marrying in a foreign jurisdiction); the other, which Remini espouses and which seems more plausible, is that they did not formally marry. See Harold D. Moser, Sharon Macpherson, and Charles F. Bryan, Jr., eds., The Papers of Andrew Jackson (3 vols., Knoxville, 1984– ), I, 423–28; and Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767–1821 (New York, 1977), 65–67.
given to jealous suspicion." Mary Bowen, widow of William Bowen, identified herself by her deceased son, a Tennessee congressman, and by her father, who had married Patrick Henry's sister; she declared, "Not the least censure ought to be thrown upon any person but Mr. Robards." In a revealing rationale for the credibility of her version of the story, she observed that "This was the language of all the country, and I never heard until now that there was any person living who had entertained a different opinion, except Mr. Robards himself, in whose weak and childish disposition, I think the whole affair originated." 50

As for Charles Hammond's accusation that the woman Jackson "took to his bed" was unchaste, and that "he had himself destroyed that chastity, if indeed it existed at the time," the Jacksons' friends responded by privileging the "language of the country" over the stipulations of the law. Rachel Jackson was deemed chaste in the sense of being morally free to enter into a second union, and Andrew Jackson was portrayed as enough of a gentleman to appreciate that fact. Despite the volition implicit in her remarriage, however, her role in the Jacksonian narrative was an altogether passive one. The recognition of her chastity was entirely dependent on the general's chivalry. As Sally Smith noted, her minister husband gave the Jacksons' union his benediction when he observed that "it was a happy change for Mrs. Robards and highly creditable to General Jackson who . . . evinced his own magnanimity as well as the purity and innocence of Mrs. Robards." Commenting in a similar vein on Jackson's remarkable empathy for the helplessness of women, Overton noted that "in his singularly delicate sense of honor, and in what I thought his chivalrous conception of the Female sex, it occurred to me that he was distinguishable from every other person with whom I was acquainted." 51

Rachel Jackson, the focus of so much political newprint, bore the public assault on her character with anguished resignation. As she put it to a friend in the summer of 1828, "the Enemieys of the Genls have Dipt their arrows in wormwood & gall & sped them at me." She lived long enough to witness her husband's victory, only to die "A consort True, who shar'd his cares—but could not his honors view." In the prolific effusions of national mourning, she became the pathetic object of an ocean of sentiment. Only in death, it seems, when every vestige of her volition was forever obliterated, could the Jacksonians depict her chastity as a virtue that was her own as opposed to being a gift from the general. "A being so gentle and so virtuous," proclaimed her tombstone, "slander might wound but could not dishonor." "Far from the reach of the venom'd dart," intoned a broadside memorial, "By wretched Malice thrown in vain." The words affirming her honor stand inscribed on a silk broadside designed to decorate a respectable parlor: "She died—in all she held so dear—Unsullied name—unspotted worth." 52

50 Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, 14–17.
51 Ibid., 17, 28; see also [Hammond], View of General Jackson's Domestic Relations, 19.
“Lines Written for the United States Telegraph, on the Death of Mrs. Jackson,” c. 1829.

Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.
Although the larger implications of this seemingly narrow focus must remain speculative, the contest over the Robards affair raises a host of compelling questions about the nexus of gender and politics in the second party system. Narrowly construed, the contest crystallized around two specific issues: the definition of marital transgression in the context of Andrew Jackson's sexual behavior and the import of a candidate's sexual behavior in the political life of the nation. It also impinged on a host of related issues, albeit only implicitly. It is not hard to imagine how an antebellum voter might have linked the Adamsites' insistence on an active governmental role in policing the boundaries of marriage to a drive for internal improvements and a strong protective tariff. Nor is it farfetched to tie the Jacksonians' reliance on localism and personalism in defining marital legitimacy to an antipathy to banks, bureaucracies, and an aggressively activist government.

The great promise in a gendered political focus such as this, however, lies not so much in its capacity to illuminate policy goals, which were persistently muted in the campaigns of the second party system, as in its power to reveal the appeals resonating beneath the surface of conscious political discourse. Because marriage by virtue of its universality afforded homely material for thinking analogically about the social order, and because gender by virtue of its alleged naturalness required no thinking at all, the Robards affair could serve as an evocative reference point for deep cultural conflicts that were customarily unexpressed. With hindsight it is possible to see that the vexing tensions between such ideals as responsibility and freedom, social discipline and self-expression, and ecumenicism and pluralism—tensions that embattled politicians could not even comprehend fully themselves, much less articulate clearly for the public—were encapsulated in their narratives of the Robards affair. At a level that defies precise definition and surely merits further analysis, individuals translated competing paradigms for manly men, womanly women, and licit gender relations into divergent visions of the social order. Not only did these paradigms help voters far from the seats of political power choose their party affiliations but they also enabled each party to define itself by sharpening its antagonism to the values of the opposition.53

How, then, did these paradigms play out in the election of 1828? In this case, the pious Christian gentleman from Massachusetts was no match for the chivalric hero of New Orleans. But given Jackson's popularity in the election of 1824 and the unpopularity of John Quincy Adams, it is risky to read Jackson's subsequent victory as broad support for the freedom of informal marital arrangements; his popular majority might have been even larger had the scandal never surfaced. Surface it did, however, and it was not sufficient to defeat him. If a majority of the voters was at least willing to tolerate the prospect of "a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband" living together in the White House, it is probably because they refused

53 On negative reference groups, see Howe, "Evangelical Movement and Political Culture," 1224–25.
to characterize the Jacksons' union in those terms and opted to believe instead in
their adherence to the spirit of the law. Legislative petitions from the period indicate
that numerous men and women tried to put a swift and inexpensive end to their
marriages by appealing to extralegal community codes and by demonstrating sup-
port from friends and neighbors. Others simply walked away from their marriages
and began unions anew. We can hypothesize that the marital difficulties of An-
drew Jackson represented an experience that the common men to whom he ap-
pealed did not believe disqualified him from serving in the office. Furthermore, as
the elaborate defensiveness of the Adamsites indicates, their unremitting assault on
Rachel Jackson may very well have "unmanned" them and driven some fence-sitters
into the Jackson camp.

A closely related consideration is what the Robards affair can tell us about the
political culture. For one thing, it suggests that, by 1828, it was difficult to invest
marriage with the same political meaning it had carried in the postrevolutionary
era. Most Americans were no longer predisposed to view seduction, as John Adams
once did on reading Clarissa, as a political parable or to see the nation, as his genera-
tion had, as the family writ large. Metaphorical associations of household with polity
would reverberate throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, but
the shift in sensibilities that had already occurred at the onset of the second party
system had emptied the family of its most overtly political connotations. As a conse-
quence, the Adamsite exposure of the Robards affair was beginning to take on the
prurient overtones that mark the political exploitation of sexual scandals in our own
day. The ideal marriage could no longer stand as a trope for the ideal republic be-
cause the disjunction between public and private life had grown too large, and the
differences that inhered in the construction of separate spheres had turned opposi-
tional.

By keeping the separate spheres separate, not only did the Jacksonians incor-
porate this cultural shift more completely than did the Adamsites but they also put
it to the service of their laissez-faire agenda. The defense they created to validate
the general's marriage converged with their resistance to an interventionist govern-
ment driven by the aims of ecumenical reformers. In celebrating the sanctity of
privacy, the Jacksonians were upholding the very essence of the negative state. The
appeals they made to honor and community should not obscure the fact that they
deployed these familiar code words for tradition to support the principle of in-
dividual privacy, the ultimate value of the modern liberal state.

It is tempting to conclude that in reading the Robards affair as a political parable,
it was the Adamsites who looked backward. The postpresidential years of John

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34 Tennessee divorce petitions, for example, could carry up to seventy or eighty signatures. See Gale W. Bamman
and Debbie W. Spero, Tennessee Divorces, 1791-1838 (Nashville, 1985). On the alternatives to legal divorce, see
Phillips, Putting Asunder, 279–313.

35 On John Adams, see Lewis, "Republican Wife," 693; on the oppositional nature of separate spheres, see John
Ashworth, "The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," in Antislavery Debate, ed. Bender,
191–98.
Quincy Adams, the preeminent proto-Whig of the 1820s, present striking evidence of how closely he could mirror his father in linking seduction to national ruin. An epic poem he published in 1832 attributed the twelfth-century conquest of Ireland to the sexual incontinence of Dermot MacMorrogh, an Irish king who stole a neighboring king’s wife and set the stage for a foreign invasion. Although Adams never made the comparison explicit, it is only too apparent that MacMorrogh’s abduction of Dovergilda provided an almost perfect parallel with Jackson’s “abduction” of Rachel.56

And yet because the meaning of seduction was historically constructed, the metaphor was anything but backward looking as the Adamsites employed it. Starting from the premise of separate spheres, the Adamsites drew on the Robards affair to demonstrate the need for both sexual restraint and legal contractualism, thereby anticipating the large and influential strand of Victorian ideology that assumed that moral and material development were synergistically linked. Their reading of the Robards affair went to the heart of their reformist agenda because it espoused a narrowing of the double standard and incorporated law into their quest for social discipline. Like temperance, sabbatarianism, and antislavery, conjugal fidelity provided an issue that connected the electorate to the political ideology of the party. The framing of so morally explosive an issue in a human interest story with salacious overtones not only served to engage the average voter fully; it also introduced him, in deceptively traditional terms, to the modern world view of the Whigs.

As the foregoing observations suggest, one benefit of taking a narrow lens to a canvass of campaign literature is its capacity to illuminate the subtle transformation of familiar political terms. But when we employ the same lens to explore the ramifications of that transformation for women and the social construction of gender, the historical evidence becomes so thin that we are compelled to interpret its exclusions. Because this was a discourse about the boundaries of marriage, a pivotal social institution in the lives of women, its reticence about women is particularly striking. In contrast to the vivid images that clothe the persona of Andrew Jackson, the figure of Rachel Jackson remains a threadbare abstraction, a symbolic woman who was owned by men and whose chastity was contingent on male protection. What was at issue in the two narratives about the Robards affair was the nature of the protection. Whereas the Jacksonians entrusted female virtue (and its definition) to the purview of individual men (husbands, brothers, and fathers), the Adamsites inscribed it in a legal system controlled by male professionals (lawyers and judges).57

Both models, it would seem, were equally effective in sustaining gender hierarchies and obstructing female empowerment.

57 I am grateful to Mary Kelley for pointing out this distinction between the two marital codes in an earlier version of this essay. Michael Grossberg has used these two models to describe the shift in family governance during the nineteenth century that culminated in the special family courts of the early twentieth century: Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1985).
Nevertheless, the Adamsite model offered women a few rays of autonomy. In providing a place in the legal system to remedy conjugal lapses, it undermined the traditional corporatism of marriage and provided female divorce plaintiffs with a direct relationship to the state. More important, because the Adamsites' most extravagant censures of Rachel Jackson invested her with responsibility for her own sexuality, they challenged the stereotype of female passivity and opened the door to female self-assertion. If a woman could be "a modern Jezebel," she could be a Joan of Arc as well and exert herself as a force for righteousness. An ambivalent 1838 speech by John Quincy Adams encapsulated both the possibilities and the limits that Whig reform would afford antebellum women. Arguing for the right of his female constituents to petition Congress against the acquisition of Texas, Adams compared the role of these intrepid abolitionists to that of the heroines of the Old Testament while he justified their right to petition as a feminine act of supplication.58

Regardless of its limitations, the Whig ethos opened up political spaces for women. If, as Paula Baker has observed, women developed separate political traditions in the nineteenth century in which they enacted their gender identities, they also participated in and were influenced by the dominant male political traditions.59 It is not surprising that the reform agenda of the Whigs and later the Republicans would provide white, Protestant, bourgeois women with an ethos congenial to their modest self-assertion since it assumed an underlying consensus about key moral issues and functioned to render the distinctions between public and private less oppositional.

The insistence of the Jacksonians on the principle of individual privacy provided the men who gravitated toward their party with a buffer against the intrusions of evangelicalism, but it appears to have offered little to women as women. In fact, the Jacksonians' sharp demarcation between the public and the private not only contributed to the depoliticization of all that was private but it also masked the disparities inherent in the male appropriation of private power. Nevertheless, as the heirs of Enlightenment rationalism and natural rights, the Jacksonians contributed a critical ideological component to the political self-assertion of women. When the demand for individual rights that was so central to the Democratic ethos was appropriated by women, it provided a powerful counterforce to the equation of feminine virtue with self-abnegation. By the late 1830s, when women began to construct their own marital codes by demanding property rights for married women, they did so in the name of their moral superiority in the face of intemperate and irresponsible male spouses (the Whig model), but they did so also in the name of those private

58 On the potential power of women in radical evangelicalism, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York, 1985), 129–64. John Quincy Adams, Speech of John Quincy Adams, of Massachusetts, upon the Right of the People, Men and Women, to Petition . . . (Washington, 1838), 65.

islands of self-ownership, derived from the principles of the Enlightenment, that became the hallmarks of the negative state (the Democratic model). Finally, the competing marital codes delineated in the 1828 campaign prefigure a profound historical shift in gender relations by exposing the underlying instability in the prevailing synthesis about marriage. The debate over the Robards affair probed the gaping contradictions of a society committed to conjugal love on the one hand and lifelong monogamy on the other. In doing so, it confronted the vexing question of what would happen to a society when love broke away from the old moorings of responsibility and moderation, when men and women would not be bound by the constraints of self-discipline or the sanctions of law, and when the romantic self loomed as a wellspring of anarchy. The nineteenth-century construction of the romantic self, as Karen Lystra has noted, pivoted on a distinction in roles in which the inner self was perpetually at odds with the obligations of conjugal duty.

Faced with a choice between love and duty, the Adamsites opted for duty. In a highly limited sense, the Jacksonians did so as well, only they employed a less formal source of authority to define what duty was. In a more fundamental sense, however, they opted for love. Charles Hammond was prescient when he warned voters about the example that would be created by placing an adulterer in the White House. In the end, it was the passionate love story, the subtext of the “real” story the Jacksonians constructed to contest the legal story, that was the long-term legacy of the Robards affair.
