

“ONE WOMAN SO DANGEROUS TO PUBLIC MORALS’’: GENDER AND POWER IN THE EATON AFFAIR

Kirsten E. Wood

After the election of 1828, speculation about Andrew Jackson’s plans for the nation simmered inside Washington, D.C., and across the country. During the campaign, Jackson had said little about his policy goals, and his supporters tailored their representations of his views to suit local audiences. As a result, neither his friends nor his foes knew quite what to expect when Jackson arrived in the capital city. Politically involved Washingtonians closely watched Jackson’s cabinet nominations to deduce his leanings. Predicting Jackson’s intentions proved quite difficult, however, as the cabinet brought together men of very different opinions on tariffs, banking, and internal improvements. Most observers agreed that Jackson’s choices, with the possible exception of Martin Van Buren, were a singularly undistinguished bunch.¹

Kirsten E. Wood is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. She would like to thank Drew Gilpin Faust, Richard S. Dunn, and the members of his research seminar, especially Ed Baptist, Sean Wilentz, Christine Stansell, Janet Coryell, Robert Gregg, and Karin Wood for their criticism and encouragement. Kirsten Wood is writing her dissertation on widowed slaveholders in the antebellum Southeast.

¹ See Richard Latner, “The Eaton Affair Reconsidered,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 36 (Fall 1977), 332, 335-38, 345-51; Marshall DeLancey Haywood, *John Branch, 1782-1863* (1915; rep., Raleigh, 1915); and Thomas P. Govan, “John M. Berrien and the Administration of Andrew Jackson,” *Journal of Southern History*, 5 (Feb. 1939), 447-67. For contemporary reactions to the cabinet, see George Mifflin Dallas to Samuel D. Ingham, Mar. 7, Nov. 24, 1829, George Mifflin Dallas Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia); *The Private Correspondence of*

Many politicians and their families were particularly critical of Jackson's choice for secretary of war, John H. Eaton, largely because of his "late unfortunate connection" by marriage to the notorious Margaret (O'Neil) Timberlake. On the basis of a decade's worth of local gossip, Washington's political wives had decided that Margaret Timberlake was an immoral woman to be avoided at all costs. In their opinion, her new husband's elevation to the cabinet brought Margaret dangerously close to the center of political power, where her "malign influence" would surely corrupt the country's leaders. As far as Jackson was concerned, however, these wagging tongues represented nothing more than snobbery and female meddling: "I did not come here to make a cabinet for the Ladies of this place."² For the next two and a half years, the ladies shunned Margaret Eaton, Jackson sought to prove her purity and bring her into society, and his political allies and subordinates tried to justify taking sides. Eventually, conflicting interpretations of Margaret Eaton's character and relationship to politics divided not only Jackson and the local ladies, but politically concerned Americans all across the country. In addition to spawning hot debate over the dangers that women posed to politics, this "Eaton Affair" also engendered controversy over the privileges and responsibilities of men in public life, issues that grew out of the rising tension between the president and his cabinet. Having provoked over two years of debate about female influence and male authority in politics, the Eaton Affair provides historians with an exceptional lens for viewing the workings of gender and power at the

Henry Clay, ed. Calvin Colton (New York, 1855), 222-23; Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York, 1932), 282, 287; *The Private Correspondence of Daniel Webster*, ed. Fletcher Webster (Boston, 1857), 469; Robert V. Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1988), 174; and Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991), 297, 303.

² Smith, *Forty Years*, 282. Most historians have called Margaret (O'Neil) Timberlake Eaton "Peggy," but in her (ironically titled) autobiography she insisted that she was always called Margaret or Madge. See Margaret L. Eaton, *The Autobiography of Peggy Eaton* (New York, 1932), 32. See also Nashville (TN) *Republican*, June 3, 1831; Jackson to John C. McLemore, Apr., 1829, in *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, ed. John Spencer Bassett (7 vols., Washington, DC, 1926-39), IV, 21. The phrase 'malign influence' described both Margaret Eaton and Martin Van Buren. William S. Hoffman, "John Branch and the Origins of the Whig Party in North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 30 (July 1958), 299-315.

start of the Jacksonian era.

From the end of the scandal in late 1831, historical treatments of the Eaton Affair have ranged from the dismissive to the hyperbolic. Many contemporaries sought to minimize the scandal, describing it as a "petticoat war." In his 1899 biography of John C. Calhoun, Hermann E. von Holst proclaimed that "No serious historian will be expected to enter upon the details of this once celebrated case of the American *chronique scandaleuse*." More recently, Merrill Petersen described the Eaton Affair as "comic relief" in the more serious tale of the political breach between John C. Calhoun and Andrew Jackson.³

Historians who find more significance in the Eaton Affair still disagree profoundly about its origins and consequences. In the last century James Parton made perhaps the largest claims for the Eaton Affair's significance, suggesting that Martin Van Buren's social sponsorship for Margaret Eaton shaped the subsequent political history of the nation because it ensured his position as Jackson's successor in the White House. In Parton's suggestive words, "the political history of the United States, for the last thirty years, dates from the moment when the soft hand of Mr. Van Buren touched Mrs. Eaton's knocker." In the 1930s, biographer Queena Pollack depicted the scandal as an example of class animus, while Leon Phillips's more recent book-length treatment of the subject argues that the participants saw real moral issues at stake. Like Parton, Phillips believes that Margaret Eaton was responsible for Van Buren's presidency. Most political historians, however, are much more tempered in their assessments and tend to concur that the Eaton Affair was important to the degree that it hastened or intensified the hostility between the president, his vice president, and the cabinet. In this vein, they argue that raw political ambition prompted either John C. Calhoun or Martin Van Buren to look for personal advantage in an otherwise insignificant social tiff. Richard Latner maintains that not ambition but policy—and specifically the tariff question—motivated cabinet members to take sides on the Eaton question. Whether their emphasis is on policy or ambition, political historians fail to explain why it was

³ Hermann E. von Holst, *John C. Calhoun* (1899; rep., New York, 1980), 84; Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York, 1987), 183.

possible for men in Washington to pursue political goals by choosing sides on the question of Margaret Eaton's sexual behavior. Furthermore, such interpretations often skim over the extensive newspaper war that exploded in the summer of 1831, in which masculinity and femininity were repeatedly and explicitly connected to the dissolution of Jackson's first cabinet. Finally, because many of the charges against Margaret Eaton involved behavior that other women in the capital routinely engaged in, we must also consider how and why men's responses to women's behavior became politically decisive at the moment of Andrew Jackson's accession to the presidency.⁴

All of the participants in the Eaton Affair used gendered language and logic to explain the scandal and thus shape its repercussions. Gender mattered because the interrogation of Margaret Eaton's sexuality raised questions about women's influence over men and about how men should behave toward women and toward each other. At the most basic level, the participants agreed that men and women had different characters and responsibilities, and that the exercise of power could easily become the abuse of power. Despite this general consensus, however, there was enormous room for conflict. Two issues were particularly divisive. The first concerned women's power, specifically the nature of women's influence on men and politics. The second concerned relationships among men, particularly among those who served the nation as appointed or elected officials. In her analysis of South Carolina, Stephanie McCurry has observed that "[a]ppeals

⁴ James Parton, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, (3 vols., New York, 1860), III, 287; Queena Pollack, *Peggy Eaton, Democracy's Mistress* (New York, 1931); Leon Phillips, *That Eaton Woman: In Defense of Peggy O'Neale Eaton* (Barre, MA, 1974). Charles Sellers has characterized the anti-Eaton faction as a "gathering bourgeois purity crusade," yet he too measures the scandal's political significance chiefly in terms of its effect on presidential aspirations and Jacksonian alliances. Richard Latner argues that Calhoun's allies in the cabinet disliked John Eaton because of Eaton's support for the Tariff of 1828. Samuel Ingham was personally and politically friendly to Calhoun, but John Branch and James Berrien were motivated chiefly by their dislike of the tariff and of Van Buren. See also Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 307; Latner, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson: White House Politics, 1829-1837* (Athens, GA, 1979); Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, IL, 1969), 309; Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990), 104; Claude Bowers, *The Party Battles of the Jackson Era* (Boston, 1922), 119-25; Latner, "The Eaton Affair"; and Daniel Feller, "Politics and Society: Towards a Jacksonian Synthesis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Summer 1990), 135-61.

to manly identity and manly duty . . . were not so many words tossed into the wind. Rather, they served as touchstones for a whole political culture." The Eaton Affair suggests that both masculinity and femininity were central to national political culture in this period.⁵

If the issues involved in the Eaton Affair were slightly different than previous interpretations have suggested, so too were the players. Historians have long known that cabinet secretaries Samuel D. Ingham, John Branch, and James M. Berrien disapproved of the Eatons, as did Vice President John C. Calhoun and Jackson's own nephew Andrew Donelson. Equally familiar is Jackson's stalwart defense of Margaret Eaton's purity. Less well understood, but perhaps more influential and certainly more numerous than these men, were the women who constructed their opposition to Margaret Eaton as an example of women's special gift for moral discernment. These women—the wives and daughters of Washington's politicians—not only started the scandal by shunning Margaret Eaton but also set the terms for the debates that followed both within the executive branch and in the public press.⁶

The struggle to control its meaning lent the Eaton Affair much of its dynamic tension. All of the people involved recognized that their careers depended in no small measure on their ability to convert others to their viewpoint. In this sense, the Eaton Affair is an excellent example in miniature of how "symbolic conflicts over cultural issues closely parallel or overlap with struggles over who gets what tangible resources."⁷ Jackson, his advisers, and the cabinet realized that the voters' reaction to the Eaton Affair could decide their political futures and the shape of the Jacksonian coalition. In a less obvious manner,

⁵ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995), 259.

⁶ See John Beeler Satterfield, "Andrew Jackson Donelson: A Moderate Nationalist Jacksonian" (Ph. D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1961), 53-54, 63-64, 74; Glyndon Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era, 1828-1848* (New York, 1959), 31-32; Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 67, 124; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 35-6, 87-88.

⁷ Ronald P. Formisano, "Towards a Reorientation of Jacksonian Politics: A Review of the Literature, 1959-1975," *Journal of American History*, 63 (June 1975), 62; Jacob Katz Cogan, "The Reynolds Affair and the Politics of Character," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (Fall 1996), 389-417; Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals and Politics in the Election of 1828," *Journal of American History*, 80 (Dec. 1993), 890-918.

the careers of Washington's women were also at stake. Like the republican mothers and wives described by Linda Kerber and Jan Lewis, these women had parleyed their vision of female moral purity into a claim for political relevance. Where women saw themselves as powerful moral agents influencing the social order, however, Jackson's supporters preferred to see only men as significant actors on the national stage. Therefore, if Jackson could convince his audience in Washington and the nation that men alone should be the arbiters of political morality, women's role in the political order would be severely curtailed. In the end, Jackson's side won out, undermining the legitimacy of women's claims to political significance or moral guardianship and truncating the national political careers of Margaret Eaton's leading antagonists.⁸

After causing over two years of social and political disruption, the Eaton Affair began to subside in the early fall of 1831. By then the cabinet had resigned and been replaced, and popular attention had

⁸ On republicanism and public virtue see Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969); Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984); Appleby, "Republicanism and Ideology," *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), 461-73; Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976), 188, 201-02; Kerber, "The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation," *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), 474-95; and Daniel Rodgers, "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 11-38. For the classic interpretation of antebellum "true womanhood," see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151-74. For related ideals of womanhood, see Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies*, 4 (Summer 1978), 101-26; Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs*, 13 (Autumn 1987), 37-58; and Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977). For southern women of the slaveholding class, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988). After John C. Calhoun broke with Andrew Jackson because of myriad policy and personal differences, Calhoun's subsequent political trajectory became increasingly sectional. Samuel Ingham left politics after his short cabinet tenure. James Berrien remained in private life until 1841, and then became a Whig Senator, later joining the Know-Nothings. John Branch remained active in North Carolina and, later, Florida politics, but never became nationally prominent. Eaton himself became territorial governor of Florida and ambassador to Spain before opposing Van Buren's presidential run in 1840. *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson (22 vols., New York, 1928-58), II, 225-26, IX, 473-44; Haywood, *John Branch*, 1-2, 36-40, 46.

turned to other matters, particularly the nullification crisis. Singed by the bitter fight with his political subordinates, Andrew Jackson nevertheless emerged with his reputation largely intact. Logically, Jackson's victory should have meant defeat for the women who had opposed him, yet their fate was more complex. Many still insisted that they had been right to shun Margaret Eaton and continued to restrict their social activities in order to avoid her, much to Jackson's continued annoyance. By drawing attention to the power of Washington's most prominent women, the Eaton Affair may well have solidified the determination of some men, particularly the Jacksonians, to divorce feminine conceptions of morality from political life.

The Eaton Affair, like other defining events of Jackson's first term, helped shape the Jackson party and its protest against political elitism and government-sponsored economic development. The broad-based economic and social changes of the market revolution brought gender roles into question in households across the country; concomitantly, gendered contests over authority and power shaped the party that emerged out of popular anger at the market revolution and its consequences. Men who loved Jackson for protecting the rights of the farmer and the mechanic against the banker and the manufacturer also identified with the hero who insisted on his right and duty to avenge a defenseless woman and rebuke disloyal dependents.⁹ To the opposition, however, the Eaton Affair proved that Jackson's party stood less for the will of the people than for moral depravity and "executive usurpation." Since some men in the highest ranks of Jackson's own party shared this sentiment, the Eaton Affair represented a serious contest for the soul of the party. Most

⁹ For works that incorporate gender into the study of political culture, see for example McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*; Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, 1990); and Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge, 1982). Investigations of the connection between gender views and party development after the Eaton Affair have already documented distinct differences in the ways Whigs and Democrats regarded women. Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990); Elizabeth R. Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Sept. 1995), 494-521; Paula C. Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1900," *American Historical Review*, 89 (June 1994), 627-32; Hoffmann, "John Branch and the Whig Party," 314.

Democrats eventually decided that Jackson had been right to expose the machinations of his unmanly enemies who had tried to use women as pawns in their political games. Accordingly, Jacksonian Democrats sought to exclude women from their political meetings and discussions at least until the 1850s. Meanwhile, the new Whig party courted the support of evangelicals and benevolent reformers, male and female. Elizabeth Varon argues that for Whigs, women's support "bespoke the party's moral rectitude" and eased anxieties about partisan activity itself. This cultural aspect of party affiliation was well-established by the 1840s; in the early 1830s, however, the cultural content of Jacksonianism was still malleable, and the Eaton Affair had a decisive impact on how the infant party's leaders connected politics to their moral and familial values.¹⁰

Margaret Eaton is known to history because of her infamous place in Jackson's presidency, but her notoriety had its origins in her upbringing at the perimeter of the highest circles of Washington society. The daughter of a prosperous tavernkeeper, Margaret O'Neil had always been a marginal participant in the activities of Washington's social and political leaders. Since her father's hotel was a favorite among the city's officeholders, her family was well connected. Margaret herself was "very handsome," bright, an adept flatterer, and an easy conversationalist. The "uncles" who boarded at the hotel doted on her, and First Lady Dolley Madison reportedly was fond of her too. It is not difficult to imagine Washington notables introducing her to select social circles and eventually helping her to find a respectable husband. As it happened, however, Margaret's behavior made it difficult even for such powerful sponsors to launch her successfully into high society.¹¹

Young Margaret O'Neil's popularity with senators and congressmen was tainted because she often met them while she was tending bar at her father's hotel. Respectable ladies were rarely seen in taverns at this time and certainly never worked there. In addition, Margaret seemed determined to fulfill the stereotype that any woman in

¹⁰ Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too," 503. See also Formisano, "Reorientation of Jacksonian Politics," 63; and Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 309.

¹¹ Smith, *Forty Years*, 252; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 5, 10, 17-18; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 11, 16, 20-21.

such a setting must be sexually promiscuous. By the time she was sixteen, she had already tried to elope twice. From the vantage point of old age, Margaret recalled: "While I was still in pantalets and rolling hoops with other girls I had the attentions of men, young and old, enough to turn a girl's head."¹² Despite these youthful escapades, she married well, choosing Navy purser John Timberlake, a man from a respectable family and with good earning potential. However, the ladies of the capital were still unhappy with Margaret Timberlake. Although married, she continued to threaten their peace of mind by working in her father's bar—an inappropriate activity for any woman with lofty social ambitions. Some women may also have resented the time that their husbands or sons spent in the company of this woman "of much beauty." Most were simply disgusted by her unrestrained conversation with men and her refusal to seclude herself while her husband was away on his voyages. As a popular advice manual phrased it: "A turn for dissipation in *any* woman, is unseemly, but in a *married* woman, it is *criminal* in the extreme." During James Monroe's presidency, female disapproval of Margaret Timberlake took concrete form, as first Elizabeth Monroe and then many other prominent hostesses informed Margaret that she was no longer welcome in their homes.¹³

Disapproval of Margaret Timberlake grew more intense when she became acquainted with Senator John Eaton of Tennessee. The senator, like his friend and colleague Andrew Jackson, boarded at O'Neil's hotel. Margaret and John Eaton soon became close friends. Eaton also gave financial assistance to John Timberlake, whose career was floundering amid rumors of misappropriated funds. Margaret's critics took a cynical look at the friendship between Eaton and the Timberlakes and concluded that the widowed Senator and the grass

¹² Eaton, *Autobiography*, 12-18 (quotation at 11).

¹³ Martin Van Buren, *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* (1920; rep., 2 vols., New York, 1973), I, 341; Rev. John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and interesting subjects* (1792; 7th ed., Philadelphia, 1818), 292; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 21-29, 33, 36, 46-47; Pauline Burke, *Emily Donelson of Tennessee* (2 vols., Richmond, 1941), I, 104, 181, 257; Ben: Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia, 1886), 122; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 5, 17-23, 30-32, 34; Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 309; Jackson to McLemore, Apr., 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 20; Margaret L. Coit, *John C. Calhoun, American Portrait* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), 193.

widow were conducting an adulterous affair. When John Timberlake died at sea in mysterious circumstances in 1828, Washington gossips whispered, probably incorrectly, that he had killed himself upon learning of his wife's infidelity.¹⁴

Margaret Timberlake's marriage to John Eaton on New Year's Day, 1829, did nothing to stop the rumors. The union shocked many Washington residents, who could only believe that the wealthy and respected John Eaton had taken leave of his senses. Margaret Bayard Smith, wife of an officeholder and a long-time resident of Washington, reported to her sister that several women who had been invited to the wedding "declare they will not go . . . and if they can help it will not let their husbands go."¹⁵ When these women realized that Jackson was likely to reward his old friend with a cabinet post, they shuddered at the thought of Margaret Eaton becoming a "cabinet lady." Cabinet appointment or no, they vowed that they would never socialize with the woman whom they had long ago barred from their homes.

The widespread hostility to Margaret Eaton originated in prudery and politics. To some Washingtonians, Jackson's patronage of the Eatons seemed to be the second phase of his general attack on American morality. The first step had been Jackson's marriage to Rachel (Donelson) Robards in 1791, a married woman who had not yet received her divorce. Norma Basch argues that the inadvertent illegality of this marriage became campaign fodder in 1828, when John Quincy Adams's partisans sought to focus attention on Jackson's morals. Adamsites depicted Jackson as a vile seducer who "tore from a husband the wife of his bosom." Washingtonians also worried that the Hero of New Orleans would bring rough, rowdy ways (and people) to the capital. Concern for sexual propriety was thus at a peak when Jackson came to office, and it quickly focused on Margaret Eaton's connection to the new administration. Margaret Smith reported that

¹⁴ The financial ties among the O'Neils, John Timberlake, and John Eaton were complicated and were made even more so by the accusation that Timberlake died in debt to the federal government. Some thought that financial guilt, not cuckoldry, pushed Timberlake to his alleged suicide. Pollack, *Peggy Eaton*, 60-61, 66-67; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 24-25, 46-47, 53-55; Remini, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 173-74.

¹⁵ Smith, *Forty Years*, 253; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 22-3; Latner, "The Eaton Affair," 339; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 24-5, 54-60, 70.

Jackson's enemies "laugh and divert themselves with the idea of what a suitable lady in waiting Mrs. Eaton will make to Mrs. Jackson and repeat the adage, 'birds of a feather will flock together.'" The threat of having bigamists and adulterers at the head of Washington society was, however, more horrifying than diverting to most. Unfortunately for the Jacksonian camp, this disgust was not restricted to disgruntled Adamsites, whose rancor easily could be explained.¹⁶

From the standpoint of moral consistency, the accusations of adultery hurled at Margaret Eaton should have stained John Eaton, but evidently they did not. John Quincy Adams censured him as "a man of indecently licentious life," but he also believed that Eaton was the only man in the cabinet "capable of a generous or liberal sentiment towards an adversary." Many Washingtonians pitied the secretary because of his wife's notoriety, paying little attention to his participation in her improprieties. Margaret Smith remarked that "every one acknowledges Genl. Eaton's talents and virtues," but Margaret's "previous connection with him both before and after her husband's death has totally destroyed" her reputation. Richard K. Call told Jackson that John Eaton had "one blemish and a thousand virtues." Even while resigning from the cabinet at Jackson's insistence, Berrien, Ingham, and Branch were careful to say that they esteemed John Eaton highly. Of course, Eaton himself interpreted the slanders against his wife as assaults on his own honor, despite such protestations of respect, and perhaps the rumor-mongers expected him to do so. A sexual double standard of conduct was clearly at work in shielding him from attack, but politics also played a role. John Eaton's standing as cabinet member and Jackson's close friend made many reluctant to condemn him directly. Other Jacksonians scarcely could denounce him without weakening their infant party: accusations against John Eaton from within the Jacksonian ranks could only increase the opposition's glee. In addition, smearing John Eaton with the brush of sexual indiscretion might have resurrected the slanders against Jackson's own morals. For those who were allied politically with Jackson, confining the attacks to Margaret Eaton made the scan-

¹⁶ Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics," 897; Smith, *Forty Years*, 259. See also Esther Singleton, *The Story of the White House* (2 vols., New York, 1907), I, 82.

dal seem less threatening, at least temporarily.¹⁷

After Jackson's inauguration, hostility towards Margaret Eaton quickly spread among Jackson's supporters, interrupting first the social interactions among Washington officials and later the political business of the administration. Politicking, government, and social life were closely connected in the capital, and not just during the Eaton Affair. Before well-organized mass parties came to dominate the American political landscape, officeholders and office seekers relied heavily on sociability and personal friendship to win and keep the support of colleagues and the voters.¹⁸ Washington gatherings such as dinner parties and balls were occasions not simply to meet with friends but also to make political contacts. Exclusion from this social intercourse was generally interpreted as a sign of both personal and political hostility; this is precisely what made the "petticoat war" into an internal crisis for the reigning party.

Despite the conventions that should have governed social interactions between political leaders and their families, Margaret Eaton's enemies publicly and repeatedly snubbed her at both official and unofficial gatherings. Margaret Smith proudly observed that the "virtuous and distinguished" celebrants at Jackson's inauguration scrupulously avoided any unnecessary conversation with Margaret Eaton. Many women refused to attend balls if they suspected she

¹⁷ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, comprising portions of his diary from 1795 to 1848* (12 vols., Philadelphia, 1876), VIII, 128; Smith, *Forty Years*, (quotations at 282, 252); Brig. Gen. Richard K. Call to Jackson, Apr. 28, 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 28; Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 100. For correspondence about the resignation of the cabinet, see the Washington (DC) *Globe* and *United States Telegraph* (Philadelphia) throughout the summer of 1831.

¹⁸ Donald Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton, 1984), 189-91, 204; Bowers, *Party Battles*, 31; *Kentucky Gazette*, cited in Frankfort (KY) *Argus*, Aug. 17, 1831; John C. Calhoun to James H. Hammond, Jan. 15, 1831, in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Clyde N. Wilson, W. Edwin Hemphill, and Robert L. Meriwether (22 vols., Columbia, 1959-95), XI, 299. On sociability in political campaigns see Richard Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 49 (July 1992), 401-30; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1890* (New York, 1982), 111-13; James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York, 1966); and William Gienapp, "'Politics Seem to Enter into Everything': Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1849-1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station, 1982), 15-69.

would be there. They avoided the parties Van Buren held for her, although diplomacy required that they attend the functions hosted by Margaret Eaton's friends in the foreign legations and in the White House itself. Cabinet wives hosted dinner parties and pointedly excluded the Eatons from their invitation lists. Floride Calhoun, wife of the vice president, refused to return the Eatons' calls. Indeed, according to the Calhouns' friend Virgil Maxcy, Floride stayed in South Carolina for most of Jackson's first term "to shun the Eaton woman." Emily Donelson, Jackson's niece and official hostess at the White House, was similarly obdurate. After visiting Margaret once, Emily declared she was "so much disgusted with what I have seen of her that I shall not visit her again." Martin Van Buren suggested to Emily that although the rumors about Margaret Eaton might inhibit "a close intimacy with that lady[,] they neither required nor would justify" shunning her at formal occasions. Emily chose to ignore this lecture. The "marked and universal neglect and indignity" directed at Margaret Eaton ultimately succeeded in forcing her "to withdraw from society." These slights were explosive because they interfered with the traditional expectation of sociability that governed the interactions among political families in the capital. This was especially remarkable because Margaret Eaton was a "cabinet lady," a rank just below the "first lady," and she was also a personal friend of the president. When Jackson's own friends and supporters snubbed Margaret Eaton, their actions suggested that women's moral scruples should take precedence over men's political alliances in shaping Washington's social interactions.¹⁹

¹⁹ Smith, *Forty Years*, 288; Levi Woodbury to Elizabeth Woodbury (quoting Virgil Maxcy), Nov. 29, 1829, Levi Woodbury Collection (Library of Congress, Washington, DC); Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 178; Van Buren, *Autobiography*, I, 344; Smith, *Forty Years*, 311, 305-06; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 210, 260; Eliza [Mrs. Josiah S.] Johnston to Henry Clay, Dec. 12, 1829, in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. James F. Hopkins, Mary W. M. Hargreaves, Robert Seager II (11 vols., Lexington, 1959-92), VIII, 135; Levi Woodbury to Elizabeth Woodbury, Jan. 1, Mar. 6, 1830, Woodbury Collection; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 63-4; Mary Lockwood, *Historic Homes in Washington; Its Noted Men and Women* (New York, 1889), 77; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 61-63, 107; Latner, "The Eaton Affair," 340; Edward Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the 'Era of the Common Man,'" *American Historical Review*, 76 (Oct. 1971), 1014. Like Floride Calhoun, Sarah Polk remained in Tennessee during the Eaton affair to avoid having to take a stand vis-à-vis Margaret Eaton. Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York, 1987), 60; Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, 309.

On the surface, concern for sexual morality united pro- and anti-Eaton contingents. Christian morality and republican political theory both suggested that political and sexual virtue were essential to social order. Few openly questioned the belief that the social order rested heavily on female sexual fidelity and the sanctity of marriage. However, even though all sides in the Eaton Affair abhorred sinfulness in women, ideas about women's capabilities and responsibilities—in short, their power—divided the partisans in the Eaton Affair. Many middle- and upper-class white women were convinced that they had a moral and social duty to regulate their own behavior and that of other members of their sex, for the good of the entire community. This task devolved on women because “their perceptions are more refined.” Those who doubted that women were usually men's moral superiors nevertheless conceded that “When the motive is adequate . . . women may shame the stronger sex, by their stern perseverance in the path of duty.” Washington women had a particularly expansive notion of the consequences of their vigilance: their moral supervision not only protected their own reputations, it also ensured that all American women could safely look to the capital, and to them, for examples of pure and dignified conduct. The first lady's proximity to the president and position in official society, for example, suggested she might “influence the destiny of nations”; therefore, everyone in her circle ought to personify unquestionable purity. As far as Floride Calhoun, Margaret Smith, and many other women were concerned, disregarding Margaret Eaton's official rank and disrupting the social customs of the city were vastly preferable to letting an immoral woman participate in those customs on a free and equal basis.²⁰

Washington was unusual among American cities because of the frequency with which leading members of society left and entered it, in a rhythm set by the political calendar. This impermanence, and perhaps a certain reserve in all social matters, made it difficult for the political elite to develop close friendships. In the early 1820s,

²⁰ Smith, *Forty Years*, 260; Frances Byerley Parkes, *Domestic Duties; or Instructions to Young Married Ladies* (3rd ed., New York, 1829), 352, 36; *The Laws of Etiquette; or, Short Rules and Reflections for Conduct in Society* (Philadelphia, 1836), 66; Virginia Cary, *Letters on Female Character, Addressed to a young lady* (Richmond, 1828), 42. For an analysis of how the first lady became a campaign issue in 1828 because of concern about Rachel Jackson's morals, see Basch “Marriage, Morals and Politics,” 902-04.

Margaret Bayard Smith complained that she felt like a stranger in the city she had inhabited for more than twenty years. Smith found that “the ceremonious intercourse of strangers” only gradually gave place “to the confidential intercourse of genial minds . . . from whence was springing up an intimacy, which in time might have ripened into tender friendship.”²¹ Newcomers quickly recognized the social stratification of the city, which according to Salmon P. Chase comprised “three distinct classes”:

The first is composed of the [cabinet] . . . and the foreign ministers; the second of the lawyers, physicians Divines and gentlemen generally; the third of mechanics and artizans. Below these there is still another class comprising the labourers and slaves. These three classes are almost as distinct from each other as the *castes* of the Hindoos, and few have a very extensive acquaintance beyond the class to which they belong.²²

Women who accompanied their husbands to Washington following Jackson's election may have known something of the intricacies of official etiquette. Most of them, however, knew little about the furor concerning Margaret Eaton. When these newcomers were inundated with rumors about her infidelity, they looked for cues from long-term residents like Margaret Smith, who averred that to shun “one who has left her strait and narrow path” was “greatly to the honor of our sex.” Emily Donelson, who presided at the White House, quickly took up the banner of the anti-Eaton group. As her husband noted

²¹ Smith, *Forty Years*, 94 (quotations at 165, 204). Kathryn A. Jacob suggests that in the 1820s, the “rapport” between official and residential elites (her terms), which had shaped social life in the city since its founding, slowly began to decline because of population growth and snobbery. Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D. C., after the Civil War* (Washington, DC, 1995), 5, 29, 33. See also Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1833), II, 135-36, 138-39.

²² Chase to Hamilton Smith, May 31, 1827, in *The Salmon P. Chase Papers*, ed. John Niven (3 vols., Kent, OH, 1994), II, 17-18. Although etiquette books were still relatively rare in America in the early 1830s, travel literature and more rarely conduct manuals sketched some aspects of Washington society. Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*; Eliza Leslie, *The Behavior Book: A Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia, 1854); *Etiquette at Washington; together with the customs adopted by polite society in the other cities of the United States* (Baltimore, 1850); *Morrison's Stranger's Guide and Etiquette, for Washington City and its vicinity* (Washington, 1864). For an analysis of the meanings of antebellum etiquette, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1982), 1-32, 92-123.

later, this was only to be expected: "It is impossible that a delicate female, introduced to a new social circle . . . should not be governed in some degree by the view of character which she found prevailing." Emily Donelson soon became an avid leader of the anti-Eaton campaign, calling "promptly upon all the Strangers in this popular movement." Eliza Johnston, wife of Louisiana Senator Josiah S. Johnston, thought that the decision to exclude Margaret Eaton was "arbitrary"; nevertheless, reflecting that "perhaps I have taken a wrong view of the subject," she felt compelled to leave Margaret's visit "unreturned." The attentiveness of the anti-Eaton partisans and their preempting of the moral high ground made it difficult for other women to remain impartial.²³

For many women, shunning Margaret Eaton was quite simply a moral imperative. The Pennsylvanian Deborah K. Ingham, who was new to Washington, quickly adopted Mrs. Smith's point of view, perhaps because she desired "to be very social." Admiring Emily Donelson as "a rare example of female excellence" for her stand against Margaret Eaton, Mrs. Ingham wrote: "I am prepared to defend our course—and will not yield one inch of ground." And yet, despite the efforts of Emily Donelson and her female allies, Margaret Eaton was never entirely isolated. Bachelors and widowers like Martin Van Buren, James Buchanan, and Sir Charles Vaughn had no close female kin turning them against her. Some women, too, such as Mrs. Amos Kendall, Mrs. William T. Barry and Minerva Bankhead, became friendly with her. The women who visited Margaret Eaton either disbelieved the gossip or did not care to please Margaret Smith or Emily Donelson—perhaps because they felt that their husbands' careers were better served by politeness towards the Eatons.²⁴

Women's descriptions of Margaret Eaton suggest that they were concerned by her manners—what we might call her personality—as well as her allegedly immoral behavior. Their remarks frequently emphasized a lack of self-control that was not merely sexual: she had a

²³ Smith, *Forty Years*, 289; Andrew Jackson Donelson to Jackson, Oct. 25, 1830, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 189; Eliza Johnston to Clay, Dec. 12, 1829, in Hopkins, Hargreaves, and Seager, eds., *Clay*, VIII, 135.

²⁴ Deborah Ingham to Emily Donelson, Nov. 28, 1830, Andrew Jackson Donelson Papers (Library of Congress); "Reply to John Eaton's Address," [Oct. 19, 1831], in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 476-47; *Washington Globe*, July 25, 1831; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 62, 66-68, 97; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 78, 80; Pollack, *Peggy Eaton*, 88, 103-04. Smith wrote of Samuel Ingham: "He is a good man, of unimpeachable and unbending integrity." Smith, *Forty Years*, 287.

“violent temper” and was said to be “one of the most ambitious, violent, malignant yet silly women you ever heard of.” Eaton represented the polar extremes of female misbehavior: the feminine sexual temptress and the masculine hot-tempered harridan. By implication, her female critics claimed for themselves the qualities of discernment, restraint, modesty, and self-discipline. This kind of labeling could be a rationalization for confining women and their speech to domestic spaces and subjects, but in Jacksonian Washington, women like Floride Calhoun, Margaret Smith, and Emily Donelson used it to justify actions of their own that had profound significance outside their homes.²⁵

Floride Calhoun constructed perhaps the most discreet attack on Margaret Eaton. A popular hostess in Washington since the early 1820s, in the face of the Eaton scandal she declared herself “a stranger” in the capital, returned home to South Carolina, and left it to “the ladies who resided in the place” to decide on Margaret Eaton’s innocence. The Calhouns claimed that the demands of pregnancy and childcare kept Floride at home; in other words, she was not a snob but a devoted mother. In fact, this member of South Carolina’s planting elite had no tolerance for Eaton’s social climbing and informal manners and returned home in order to avoid even the minimum contact with the Eatons that official etiquette would require.²⁶

By removing herself from the capital, Floride Calhoun had denounced Margaret Eaton in unmistakably forceful terms. Margaret Smith, on the other hand, had no intention of leaving her long-time Washington home to make her point. For decades she had enjoyed “intimate” acquaintances with the likes of Henry Clay, William H. Crawford, Peter B. Porter, and William Wirt. After the 1828 election, Smith was determined not to let the changing of the political

²⁵ Smith, *Forty Years*, 252; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 183; Smith, *Forty Years*, 318, 259; Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” *American Quarterly*, 23 (Oct. 1971), 562-84; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 11-35. By her own admission, Margaret Eaton had a “mercurial temper” which she had not “learned to restrain” when she was young. Eaton, *Autobiography*, 24.

²⁶ “Reply to Eaton’s Address,” in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 476, 477. Coit, *John C. Calhoun*, 133, 198-200; Calhoun to S[amuel] D. Ingham, Sept. 26, 1829, Calhoun to F[rancis] W. Pickens, Aug. 1, 1831, both in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 80, 446; Levi Woodbury to Elizabeth Woodbury, Nov. 29, 1829, Woodbury Collection. According to Margaret Smith, when Floride Calhoun left Washington in March 1829, she did not intend to return for at least four years. Smith, *Forty Years*, 290.

guard destroy the social world that she had done much to create. One of the most knowledgeable and popular women in the city, she thrived on conversations with men about politics (recording their substance, particularly her winning points, in letters to her sisters). To Smith, Margaret Eaton represented a very different kind of female influence, apparently based on sexual attractiveness more than on the quality of her mind. If Eaton's demeanor raised questions about social interactions between the sexes, Smith might have had difficulty defending her own "interesting conversation" with political men. By vociferously condemning Eaton's version of feminine presence, Smith sought to elevate above suspicion her own participation in political society. Her antipathy to Eaton led some to question her husband's avowed allegiance to Jackson, but Smith dismissed this hypothesis, proposing instead that she and her husband each had a right to individual opinions. For her, "the principle, whether vice shall be countenanced" was more important than her husband's political alliances.²⁷

Of all the women in the capital, Emily Donelson had the most difficult path to tread in her opposition to the Eatons. When she arrived in the capital, long-term Washingtonians had wondered if the young Tennessean would understand "the usages of good society." Her father, Captain John Donelson, worried that his "diffident" daughter would fare poorly in the "high life" of the capital. Emily had to win the esteem of the established ladies, and this may have been a motive for attacking Margaret Eaton. The situation was extraordinarily delicate: Donelson owed Jackson her rank as official White House hostess, yet the honor would become meaningless if she alienated Washington society by cultivating Margaret Eaton. Still, after crossing Jackson, she could not expect to remain long in his house. Ultimately the tension between the Donelsons and Jackson grew so severe that Emily returned to Tennessee, only to find that her

²⁷ Smith, *Forty Years*, 137, 147, 170-6, 181-85, 190-93, 201-04, 306, 321 (quotations at 190, 321). This point must be considered carefully, because Smith did not believe that a woman should dictate her husband's political actions. After the 1824 presidential election, for example, Smith and her friends were horrified by the rumor that Stephen Van Rensselaer's wife had convinced him to vote for Adams and against Crawford: "it is supposed [he] is absolutely governed by his wife and it is said, she has written earnestly on the subject—he might be afraid to disobey." Even a woman possessed of a perfect moral compass should not dictate to her husband: she should merely illumine the proper path. Smith, *Forty Years*, 193; *The American Chesterfield, or Way to Wealth, Honour, and Distinction* (Philadelphia, 1828), 220; Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady*, 276, 293.

family had taken Jackson's side. Her own father believed that she should have "consulted her uncle Jackson" before deciding against the Eatons and that she was "duty Bound" to obey his wishes. Caught between her feelings, her respect for her uncle, and her loyalty to her husband (whose position was similarly vulnerable), Emily Donelson sought refuge in the language of female morality. Moral scruples, she argued, required her to defy Jackson and her family. Emily's appeal to morality masked her rebelliousness and earned her the respect of Washington women such as Deborah Ingham and Rebecca and Margaret Branch, John Branch's daughters.²⁸

Even when Emily Donelson finally appeared to bow to Jackson's will, she maintained that such a course would not compromise her principles. She wrote to her husband, Andrew:

I would be willing were I to return to the City, to visit Mrs. E. sometime officially, this I do not think would be inconsistent as I have done it before. I am willing to make this apparent change of opinion to please our dear old uncle, and I hope in time he will justly appreciate our motives.

Donelson justified her "apparent change of opinion" as acquiescence to the demands of official etiquette, arguing that this said nothing about her opinion of Margaret Eaton's chastity. Thus, while submitting in part to the will of powerful men, she maintained the principle of female self-determination where morality was concerned.²⁹

Although Emily Donelson, Margaret Smith, and a handful of others had very specific, personal motives for framing their resistance to Margaret Eaton in moral terms, all of the women involved had reason to act as part of a "popular movement" to stamp out vice. The ladies wanted to exclude Margaret Eaton entirely from their society because they believed that even the slightest contact with a sinful

²⁸ Smith, *Forty Years*, 308; Satterfield, "Andrew Jackson Donelson," 51n, 56n; Emily Donelson to John H. Eaton, Apr. 10, 1829, Donelson Papers; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 176, 199, 231-56.

²⁹ Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 260; Donelson to Jackson, June 10, 1830, Jackson to Secretary Eaton, Aug. 3, 1830, Jackson to Major William B. Lewis, Aug. 17, 1830, Jackson to Mary Eaton, Oct. 24, 1830, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 145-46, 168, 174, 187-88. See also Norma Basch, "Equity vs. Equality: Emerging Concepts of Women's Political Status in the Age of Jackson," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 3 (Fall 1983), 297-318; Basch, "Invisible Women: The Legal Fiction of Marital Unity in Nineteenth-Century America," *Feminist Studies*, 5 (Summer 1979), 346-366; and Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1986).

woman could irreparably harm their own reputations. Further, they worried that others might be drawn to the admittedly attractive and amusing woman if the social ban were relaxed. Finally, they found strength in numbers. By presenting their behavior as compliant with the judgment of their female peers, individuals shielded themselves from accusations that they were being idiosyncratic or unfair. By acting as a group, guided only by propriety, they tacitly rebutted the charge that they were "arrogating" any right to "control in any way the etiquette of this place." This argument fit with contemporary assessments of women's strength. In the words of one advice writer, the influence of an individual woman was "limited," but "collectively we hold in our hands the happiness or misery of living multitudes." In a political climate that celebrated the will of the people, it was heady stuff indeed for women to ally with each other in the name of virtue and female purity and thereby to challenge powerful men.³⁰

When the ladies of Washington expressed their hostility to Margaret Eaton in the language of moral absolutes, they stood on firm ground. Men who dismissed these women as poor judges of character questioned the powerful assumption that women were unusually sensitive to morality. This assumption was at the heart of a very useful division of labor, in which the allocation of virtue and moral guardianship to women freed men to behave self-interestedly in the marketplace. It was possible, however, for critics to suggest that morality was a cover for other sentiments, like elitism or jealousy. Eaton's supporters attacked the "arrogant, exclusive, aristocratic and insolent pretensions" of the ladies of Washington. The Albany *Argus* railed against "old tabbies" and "broken down dowagers" who gossiped and slandered because they were "envious of another's good fortune." With some justification, pro-Eaton sources frequently accused Washington's ladies of using moralistic language to camouflage their determination to make breeding and birth the keystone of social rank. The most prominent of Margaret Eaton's detractors came from families whose social pre-eminence was unquestioned. The Calhouns, Branches, and Berriens came from the upper reaches of the planter elite in their respective states. Eaton's allies, on the other hand, boasted humbler origins. Still, to dismiss women's reactions to Eaton as simple elitism is to ignore their insistence that morality—in general

³⁰ Eliza Johnston to Clay, Dec. 12, 1829, in Hopkins, Hargreaves, and Seager, eds., *Henry Clay*, VIII, 135; Burke, *Emily Donelson* I, 187; Parkes, *Domestic Duties*, 352.

and women's moral agency in particular—constituted an inseparable element of social rank.³¹

The gendered reasoning and images used by the women who shunned Margaret Eaton became the basis for the arguments advanced by men who sought to attack the Eatons. In order to deflect charges of insubordination, Calhoun, Branch, Berrien, and Ingham claimed that they were merely conforming to a decision that the women had a right to make. Calhoun defended his wife's choice to snub Margaret Eaton, insisting that women's social "censorship is too high and too pure to be influenced by any political considerations whatever." Since the "purity and dignity of the female character mainly depend" on that censorship, it was folly indeed for any man to interfere. Samuel Ingham agreed that "it belonged to society alone to determine such matters." John Berrien thought it was not necessary "to decide upon the truth or falsehood of the statements" but only "to ascertain the general sense of the community of which I had recently become a member; and having done so, to conform to it." John Branch explained that the prejudice against Margaret Eaton "was a sentiment resting in the breast of the female community of Washington City and the nation, which was not to be suppressed or obliterated." As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued for antebellum southern white society, "when sufficiently aroused, women could exercise considerable power in determining who belonged in polite company, who was unacceptable, and their husbands had to go along." In defending their wives, these men were defending their decisions not to overrule them. By deferring to women in social matters, they could claim to be neutral about the Eatons, a stance they hoped would shield them from Jackson's anger.³²

³¹ "Candor" in Nashville *Republican*, supplement, Aug. 19, 1831; Albany (NY) *Argus*, June 10, 1831; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 78; Pollack, *Peggy Eaton*, 102, 105-06, 198-99. The ascription of moral labor to women never entirely absolved men of the need to be politically moral and accusations of political venality remained potent throughout this period. Bloch, "Gendered Meanings of Virtue," 56; Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: The Origins of American Feminism, The Woman and the City, 1800-1860* (New York, 1978), 67-68; Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 151-74. Though positions in the Eaton affair cannot easily be broken down by class, region, or age, there is evidence that the anti-Eaton families had higher social standing than the pro-Eaton contingent.

³² "Reply to Eaton's Address," in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 477; Washington *Globe*, July 25, 1831; Levi Woodbury to Elizabeth Woodbury, Jan. 9, 1830, Woodbury Collection; Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, VII, 185; John Branch to the Roanoke *Advocate*, reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, Sept. 16, 1831; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 347-48.

In developing their brief for female authority, the anti-Eaton men elaborated some unusual images of female power, perhaps inadvertently. Women's opposition to Margaret Eaton, they said, could not "be suppressed or obliterated." Indeed, women were "uncontrollable and omnipotent" in matters of social intercourse. Calhoun argued that the moral issues identified by his wife and other women were "paramount to all political considerations, & [he] was prepared to meet the consequences . . . be they what they might." Duff Green, editor of the *United States Telegraph*, even argued that a lady had a "freeborn right" to choose her own society, interesting words in a period when white men were obsessed with protecting their own political rights. If virtuous women were "omnipotent" in social matters, immoral women were potentially as powerful in politics. Therefore, although moral women upheld the virtue on which republican society depended, immoral women could subvert the republic by teaching men to disregard their civic duty. The most lurid imaginations suspected that Margaret literally had seduced both her husband and Andrew Jackson himself, and perhaps many other men. In this dichotomous construction of womanhood, women seemed capable of shaping the social order in ways men ignored at their peril.³³

Leading Democrats in fact were especially quick to articulate the fear that Margaret Eaton might be the real power behind the president, perhaps because their prospects in the party were very materially linked to her fate. Samuel Ingham lamented Jackson's "deplorable infatuation" with Eaton's cause (which supposedly gave her control over presidential patronage). Duff Green charged that she "threatened all who did not enlist as her partisans with her influence and her vengeance." Virgil Maxcy, a Calhoun intimate, observed within a month of Jackson's inauguration "that the U.S. are governed by the Pres[iden]t—the Pres[iden]t by the Sec[retar]y of War—& and the latter by his W[ife]." Even after the reorganization of the cabinet, Margaret Eaton's influence continued to alarm her enemies. In 1831, Calhoun complained that positions in the new cabinet were "most disgracefully purchased, by subserviency to Mrs. Eaton." Occasionally, her critics made explicit the gendered basis of their discomfort with Margaret Eaton's alleged political clout. The Roanoke

³³ Nashville *Republican*, Sept. 9, 1831; "Reply to Eaton's Address," in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 476; *United States Telegraph*, July 6, 1831. Louis McLane speculated that Margaret Eaton had at least "eleven doz." lovers. Remini, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 174.

Advocate congratulated John Branch for his refusal "to be hemmed to the petticoat of a modern Cleopatra," a phrase that presumed both the illicit sexual power of Margaret Eaton and the effeminacy of her male supporters. Suggestions that proper male and female gender roles had been inverted received perhaps their most succinct expression in the accusation that "Mrs. Eaton is the President."³⁴

Margaret Eaton's influence over Jackson was in fact minimal. Jackson was certainly invested in defending the Eatons, and Margaret Eaton took every opportunity to get further declarations of support; however there is no evidence that she had special access to the president on matters of policy. As for her alleged control of patronage, historians have uncovered only two cases in which Eaton secured appointments for friends, while previously Margaret Smith, Floride Calhoun, and other women had openly sought patronage appointments for their friends. Nevertheless, as critics began to murmur against Jackson's "spoils system," they associated Margaret Eaton's apparent influence with her alleged sexual immorality, suggesting that Jackson's abuse of patronage stemmed from his infatuation with an immoral woman.³⁵

The exposition of women's powers constructed by Calhoun and the dissenters in the cabinet must be understood in terms of their deteriorating relationships with Jackson. Policy differences on banking, internal improvements and the tariff already had created tension in the executive branch. Calhoun's many differences with Jackson were damaging his reputation, but the South Carolinian was not yet ready to abandon his presidential aspirations and therefore had to present his opposition to Jackson in the best possible light.³⁶ As Jackson's ap-

³⁴ Nashville *Republican*, Aug. 26, 1831; Duff Green to John B. Helm, May 20, 1831, V[irgil] Maxey to Calhoun, Apr. 6, 1829, Calhoun to S[amuel] Ingham, May 4, 1829, in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 386, 17, 378; Hoffmann, "John Branch and the Whig Party," 304; Jackson to Donelson, July 10, 1831, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 311; Richmond *Enquirer*, June 28, 1831.

³⁵ Smith, *Forty Years*, 155, 276, 299; Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 302; Hamilton, ed., *James Monroe*, VII, 196; Webster, ed., *Private Correspondence*, 501. Although Margaret Eaton did not herself dispense patronage, Jackson was unlikely to appoint someone he knew to be an outspoken enemy of hers; in that sense, her accusers were correct. Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 104.

³⁶ For policy differences in the cabinet, see Latner, *Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, chap. 2. For correspondence on the Seminole affair, see Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, and Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, throughout the spring and summer of 1830. Much of this correspondence was published contemporaneously in newspapers.

pointees, Berrien, Branch, and Ingham needed to explain why they were under no obligation to yield to Jackson's demand that their families socialize with Margaret Eaton. They attempted to do this in two ways. Drawing an artificial line between social and political relationships, they suggested that the matter was best left to women. In the process, the secretaries also implied that the ladies wielded more authority than Jackson himself. In addition, claiming that Margaret Eaton was a menace to the republic, they proposed that she had forfeited masculine protection and earned public exposure and humiliation. Depicting the resistance to Margaret Eaton as a moral issue and a female prerogative allowed Calhoun and the three cabinet secretaries to represent themselves as the victims of Jackson's inappropriate campaign to defend the indefensible. To excuse themselves, they had to acknowledge both Margaret Eaton and their own wives as women with considerable power over men.

The images of female power that developed in the anti-Eaton arguments were nowhere to be found in the language of Margaret Eaton's defenders. Indeed, it is much more difficult to deduce from their words any picture of women's character. That in itself is a clue: to Jackson and John Eaton alike, *men*, not women, were the important actors in the scandal. John Eaton ridiculed the notion that one woman could be "so dangerous to public morals, and so formidable in influence and power, as to require all this strong array of cabinet counsellors" to defeat her. He described his wife as "'lone and powerless,'" an innocent, maligned wife and mother. Andrew Jackson similarly believed that Margaret Eaton was a hapless victim, a "virtuous and much injured female." At worst, she was guilty of "imprudencies." Jackson had long believed that slander was perhaps the greatest danger virtuous women could ever face. This interpretation owed much to the campaign slanders that had caused Rachel Jackson so much pain during the 1828 election. Jackson shied away from the suggestion that women should defend themselves against calumny; rather, his emphasis on female innocence also stressed female passivity. For him, as for his allies in the press, women constituted "a sex which looks [to men] for protection."³⁷

In attacking Margaret Eaton's enemies, pro-Eaton voices also focused attention away from women's actions. Pro-Eaton newspapers

³⁷ *The Age of Jackson*, ed. Robert V. Remini (New York, 1972), 31; Jackson to Major William B. Lewis, Sept. 10, 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Jackson*, IV, 73, 227; Philadelphia *American Republican* reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, July 15, 1831.

described the offending women as “tabbies,” “superannuated,” and “broken down.” (They did not, interestingly, refer to them as witches or harpies—common folkloric descriptions of powerful women.) John Eaton himself sought “to make husbands answerable for the sayings of their wives” and challenged several men whose wives had gossiped about Margaret.³⁸ The code of honor required that John Eaton confront men, not women, when he sought to restore his and his wife’s reputations. This displacement exemplifies the patriarchal expectation that men alone should represent their families in public. It also helped mask the fact that men’s honor depended in part on the behavior of women whom they could not always control. The costs of bad behavior for women were, of course, high; yet the severity of the sanctions is an accurate gauge of the threat that errant women posed to masculinity.

Public opinion on the matter of women’s power seems to have sided more with the Jackson-Eaton interpretation that powerful women were dangerous and moral women needed masculine protection. When the cabinet resigned in 1831 and the Eaton Affair became a staple subject of newspaper editorials, some editors bemoaned the practice of “dragging female character into public discussion.” It took “more than Vandal cruelty” to drag “innocent and unoffending” women from “the sanctuary of domestic happiness.” Women did not belong, they wrote, in “an arena of public gaze.” This argument surely reflected some sincere discomfort with public examinations of female character, but it also was an attack on Jackson’s and Eaton’s enemies, who sought a lengthy and embarrassing dissection of Margaret Eaton’s foibles. Calhoun’s friends in the press also suggested that decent women displayed “modesty and retirement.” Such “soft and gentle” creatures deserved to be sheltered. However, when women’s behavior manifested “cunning, ambition, and intrigue,” it was “time to speak out” and expose female immorality, according to the Connecticut *Herald*. In other words, only unwomanly behavior could make a woman newsworthy.³⁹

Newspaper comments rarely noticed any uplifting aspects of women’s power in Washington politics. Focusing on the “malign in-

³⁸ Albany *Argus*, June 10, 1831; Jackson to John C. McLemore, May 3, 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Jackson*, IV, 30-31.

³⁹ Richmond *Enquirer*, June 24, 1831; Philadelphia *American Republican* reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, July 8, 1831; Philadelphia *Inquirer* reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, July 15, 1831; Connecticut *Herald* reprinted in *United States Telegraph*, June 25, 1831.

fluences" of immoral women suited the partisan purposes of pro-Calhoun presses and affirmed that the good woman confined herself to her "domestic firesides." The editors who supported Margaret Smith, Floride Calhoun, and Emily Donelson nevertheless did not endorse the active role in public affairs that their interference in this matter implied. Clearly most men were reluctant to accept the logical extensions of their arguments that women were "the bone and sinew of the country."⁴⁰

The debate over women's influence and motives in the Eaton Affair paralleled a related debate over men's conduct. No one contested the legitimacy of male power in general; rather, the concern was how men should exercise their authority. Repeated attempts failed to harmonize contradictory views within the executive branch about the Eatons in particular and power in general. Towards the end of 1829, Jackson sought to end the conflict by rebutting the charges against Margaret Eaton in a special cabinet meeting. Branch, Berrien, and Ingham scorned this effort, and the tension simply mounted. Several months later, Congressman Richard M. Johnson visited the three secretaries with a plan that might save the cabinet: they could appease Jackson by inviting Margaret Eaton to a few large parties while continuing to exclude her from their more intimate affairs. The cabinet members refused. Each failed compromise further eroded Jackson's faith in his cabinet. Finally, he suspended its meetings.⁴¹

With every new confrontation, rumors flared up about an overhaul of the cabinet. By the fall of 1829, the Charleston *Mercury's* warning that "the proper administration of our national affairs" depended on "harmony of feeling" within the executive branch probably sounded like a censure of the cabinet. However, reorganization could be harmful to Jackson's political alliances. North Carolina's congressional delegation threatened to defect from Jackson's party if he expelled Branch from the cabinet. Other allies worried that Jackson's obsession with the Eaton Affair was overshadowing the needs of both the party and the nation. According to one observer, the Eaton Affair caused "the President and his sage counselors more trouble than all the other subjects brought before them." These rumors delighted supporters of Clay and Webster, who hoped to see the

⁴⁰ Nashville *Republican*, June 3, 1831; *United States Telegraph*, June 24, 1831; Jackson to Major William B. Lewis, Aug. 17, 1830, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 173.

⁴¹ Washington *Globe*, July 11, 1831; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 72, 84, 95-7; Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 102.

Jacksonian coalition destroy itself over Margaret Eaton. Throughout this long ordeal the dissenting secretaries and Andrew Donelson made a virtue of consistency that verged on sheer obstinacy. Donelson urged Branch "that with Mr[.] Ingham and Berrien you should maintain your ground as long as there is an inch to stand on." Similarly, Ingham's friend Samuel McKean admired his "determination not to submit to a course of self degradation." Perhaps they were hoping that unblinking steadiness would force Jackson to retreat; if that was their intention, they misjudged Old Hickory.⁴²

In early 1831 the crisis finally arrived. Calhoun's long-concealed attempt to censure Jackson for his 1819 invasion of Spanish Florida came to light and destroyed any hope for a reconciliation with the vice president. The open rupture helped convince Jackson to take dramatic action. Accounts vary as to who originated the plan, but eventually Van Buren and Eaton offered to resign, a move that they expected would compel the other Secretaries to step down as well. Unfortunately for Jackson, Branch, Berrien, and Ingham refused to follow suit, protesting that their work had not been adversely affected by the Eaton Affair. Jackson ultimately had to request their resignations, which were given grudgingly, in Berrien's words, "simply in obedience to your will."⁴³

As Robert Remini has observed, "The dissolution of the cabinet stunned the nation." The reluctance of the press to discuss the tawdry charges against Margaret Eaton had kept most Americans in the dark about the scandal, but now the resignations made headlines all across the nation. The opposition reacted with glee, while Jacksonians hotly debated the propriety of dismissing the cabinet. In the process of contesting the legitimacy of Jackson's methods, popular attention shifted away from Margaret Eaton and womanhood and toward masculinity: both the president and the ex-secretaries now spoke about

⁴² Charleston *Mercury*, Nov. 7, 1829; John Vance to Clay, Dec. 28, 1829, Robert P. Letcher to Clay, Dec. 21, 1829, Josiah S. Johnston to Clay, Apr., 1830, in Hopkins, Hargreaves, and Seager, eds., *Henry Clay*, VIII, 164 (quotation), 159, 187; Latner, "The Eaton Affair," 342; Duff Green to Calhoun, Nov. 19, 1830, in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 261-62; Richmond *Enquirer*, July 5, 1831; Jackson to Brig. Gen. John Coffee, May 13, 1831, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 281-2; Hoffman, "John Branch and the Whig Party," 299, 302-03; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 283; Samuel McKean to Samuel D. Ingham, Apr. 8, 1831, Gratz Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

⁴³ *United States Telegraph*, June 23, 1831; Nashville *Republican*, July 8, 1831; Remini, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 202; Phillips, *That Eaton Woman*, 111-13; Hoffmann, "John Branch and the Whig Party," 303; Van Deusen, *Jacksonian Era*, 45-46.

the privileges and duties of men. Pro- and anti-Eaton men shared certain basic beliefs about the nature of manhood. They believed that behavior in the home as well as in the public eye was an index of masculine character. Men who held positions of public trust were "doubly bound" neither to "shock the public feeling nor bring discredit upon the country." Most men also agreed that autonomy was a fundamental attribute of manhood. This autonomy included the responsibility for the comfort, security, and honor of their families. Any outside interference jeopardized the manhood of fathers and husbands. A man's "good name" was a significant part of the "inheritance" that a man expected to bequeath to his children.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, these areas of agreement did little to breed harmony among the feuding Jacksonians. Berrien, Ingham, and Branch all presented themselves as the victims of Jackson's personal willfulness. They believed, as did many others, that Margaret Eaton was somehow responsible for Jackson's decision to force them out of the cabinet. All three claimed that Jackson had sent Richard Johnson to deliver an ultimatum: socialize with Margaret Eaton or be removed from office. John Branch protested that social intercourse between his family and the Eatons "was a matter which did not belong to our official connexion" with Jackson. Similarly, James Berrien denied "altogether" Jackson's right to interfere in the matter: "I would not permit the President or any other man to regulate the social intercourse of myself or family." Samuel Ingham considered "the charge of my family to be a sacred trust, belonging exclusively to myself." The trio's rendition of Johnson's intercession seemed to prove that

⁴⁴ Remini, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 204; *Richmond Enquirer*, June 28, 1831; Latner, *Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, 32-33, 44-47; Jackson to Ephraim H. Foster, June 22, 1832, in Bassett, *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 451. For a more general discussion of how Andrew Jackson's exercise of power shaped the presidential office, see, for example, Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York, 1975), 267, 279. On men in public trust see Frankfort *Argus*, July 20, 1831; Remini, ed., *Age of Jackson*, 29; and *Niles' Weekly Register*, Aug. 6, 1831. For examples of conduct literature for men, see *The American Chesterfield* and *The Young Man's Own Book: A Manual of Politeness, Intellectual Improvement, and Moral Development* (Philadelphia, 1833). Works highlighting the connection between antebellum party politics and practical economic concerns about independence include J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978), especially the preface; Harry Watson, *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict: The Emergence of the Second American Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 1981), chap. 7; and Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York, 1988), 338-73.

Jackson sought to control "the private intercourse of society," and that he had dissolved his cabinet in a fit of pique against men who commendably refused to let him meddle in their family lives. "If the cause of truth," Berrien announced, "can be prostrated by the arm of power," then he would resign his office gladly. Thus, while the three men had lost their cabinet positions, they suggested in departing that Jackson had lost all sense of proportion.⁴⁵

Branch, Berrien, and Ingham interpreted the Eaton Affair as a long series of challenges to their independence. They resisted Jackson's attempts to make them socialize with the Eatons not simply because their wives refused to or because they either liked Calhoun or disliked Van Buren, but also because they felt that acquiescence would unman them. Ordinarily, their concept of service would require them to obey the just demands of their patron and political superior; however, their manly duty to protect their female dependents superseded any claims Jackson might have on their obedience. The president's nephew and personal secretary, Andrew Donelson, similarly resented Jackson's interference with his family life—although he was even more dependent on Jackson than the secretaries. John C. Calhoun's domestic authority was not at stake in quite the same way, since his family spent most of the crisis in South Carolina. Still, Calhoun thought that Jackson's understanding of power verged on the tyrannical. More to the point, Calhoun feared that Jackson intended to choose his own successor, and in Calhoun's eyes this would "destroy" the party and "embarrass the country" (and remove him from the line of succession).⁴⁶

That the exercise of power was inextricably connected with ideas about manhood is unsurprising in a scandal that connected sexuality to political corruption. Even where sexuality and women were not explicitly involved, power and manhood often were intertwined in antebellum America. The dynamics of power in the Nullification Crisis, which followed hard on the heels of the Eaton Affair, exhibited a similar connection. Calhoun's theory of nullification owed nothing to the

⁴⁵ Nashville *Republican*, Sept. 16, Aug. 22, 1831; Washington *Globe*, July 25, 14, 1831; Pendleton *Messenger*, Aug. 17, 1831; Nashville *Republican*, Sept. 16, 1831; Jackson to Secretary Eaton, July 14, 1830, in Bassett, ed., *Jackson*, IV, 163-64. The *Globe* insisted that Johnson acted independently, without any instructions from Jackson. Washington *Globe*, July 11, 1831.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 232, 283; Duff Green to Calhoun, Sept. 7, 1829, Calhoun to J[ohn] Mclean, Sept. 22, 1829, Calhoun to S[amuel] D. Ingham, May 4, 1831, in Wilson, Hemphill, and Meriwether, eds., *Calhoun*, XI, 74-75, 75-76, 378.

earlier scandal, since he wrote his "Exposition" of states' rights in 1828, and yet, as Michael Rogin has noted, the two conflicts were "totally intermingled." Protective tariffs constituted "a flagrant abuse of federal power" no less than Jackson's attempt to force Margaret Eaton onto Washington society. In both cases, Calhoun and his supporters insisted that there should be limits to Jackson's power. Both crises permitted Calhoun to portray himself as an underdog defending the weak against a tyrannical power. In Stephanie McCurry's words, nullifiers depicted the tariff controversy as a battle "over hearth and home, over the right of the yeoman freeman to enjoy his property and rule his household without threat of invasion or violation," language strongly reminiscent of Calhoun's position in the Eaton Affair. Calhoun's experience with the Eatons surely heightened his sensitivity to oppressive uses of federal power. Similarly, Jackson's fury at the unyielding defiance of his subordinates may have made him all the more intolerant of South Carolina's extreme version of states' rights.⁴⁷

Where Calhoun, Donelson, and the dissenting secretaries understood the Eaton Affair as a contest between a tyrant and defenders of household independence, Jackson and John Eaton saw chivalrous protectors of female virtue arrayed against self-interested connivers. John Eaton told his wife, "I can fight your battles and my own," envisioning a physical contest to restore both their reputations. Jackson likewise believed that a husband should defend his wife's good name above all else. He announced: "nor will I ever be *silent* when female character is wantonly assailed." Manliness demanded a thorough rebuttal of all insults offered to one's female dependents, and the most manly form of reproof was the duel. Jackson was notorious for his duels with men who had besmirched his wife's honor. Insults to Margaret Eaton begged a similar response; according to one Jackson supporter, "Old Jackson would fight *him* self for Eaton if he *could* get a *chance*."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Rogin, *Fathers and Children*, 272; Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 117, 215-77; McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 276. The classic account of the nullification crisis is William W. Freehling's *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Crisis in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York, 1965). See also Faust, *James Henry Hammond*, 39-57, *passim*.

⁴⁸ Eaton, *Autobiography*, 91; Jackson to Brig. Gen. Richard K. Call, July 5, 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Jackson*, IV, 53; John Campbell to James Campbell, Jan. 6, 1830, Campbell Family Papers (William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC).

If the duel was sometimes appropriate, it could scarcely be used to settle Jackson's conflicts with Calhoun and the Donelsons. Jackson never understood the reasons his family and subordinates gave for disagreeing with him over Margaret Eaton. Instead, he believed that he had "a right to expect my advice in my own House and to my own family will be obeyed [*sic*]." Jackson felt that his secretaries were obligated to treat Margaret Eaton politely, first, because of her rank as a cabinet wife, and second, because he had vouched for her purity. He refused to accept their argument that their relations with the Eatons were none of his business. Indeed, Jackson had never expected his cabinet to challenge him on any matters of importance; rather, he anticipated that the cabinet would simply ratify his decisions, an expectation quite at odds with the experience of other presidents and their subordinates. Old Hickory's personality and military career probably inclined him to interpret disagreement as insubordination, but many non-military partisans shared his anger at his secretaries' intransigence.⁴⁹

To explain the defiance of colleagues and kin to themselves and to the public, Jackson and John Eaton turned again to ideas about manhood. Jackson long had suspected that those slandering Margaret Eaton had ulterior motives, and by the fall of 1829 he was convinced there was a plot to destroy him by injuring his friends and drawing away his supporters. After briefly suspecting Henry Clay as the mastermind, he decided that the real culprit was Calhoun, his own vice president, whose plan was to prevent Jackson's running a second time and thus clear the way for Calhoun's own advancement in 1832. Lacking character and manly candor, Calhoun, Berrien, Ingham, and Branch appeared to Jackson like nothing but a "wicked political combination of slanderers." Calhoun seemed "fit for any act of human depravity, that his selfish ambition may suggest," and slandering a woman in order to humiliate Jackson was precisely the sort of scheme so degraded a man would concoct.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Jackson to Mary Eaton, Oct. 24, 1830, Jackson to Secretary Eaton, July 19, 1830, Jackson to Brig. Gen. John Coffee, Dec. 6, 1830, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 163-64, 188, (quotation), 211, Van Deusen, *Jacksonian Era*, 38; Latner, *Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, chap. 2; Robert V. Remini, *The Revolutionary Age of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1976), 24; Rogin, *Fathers and Children*, 56, 59, 267, 270.

⁵⁰ Jackson to Brig. Gen. John Coffee, Dec. 6, 1830, Jackson to Mary Eastin, Oct. 24, 1830, Jackson to Coffee, Apr. 24, 1831, Jackson to Brig. Gen. Richard K. Call, July 5, 1829, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 212, 187, 269 (quotations), 51-52; Remini, ed., *Age of Jackson*, 31-32; *Nashville Republican*, Dec. 9, 1830, June

In the Jackson-Eaton moral universe, manliness manifested itself in unswerving honesty and chivalry. Accordingly, when Berrien, Ingham, and Branch claimed that Jackson had tried to use Colonel Johnson "to regulate the private or social intercourse of his cabinet," Jackson's allies in the press counterattacked. "What honorable and highminded man," they asked, "would remain in a cabinet after he was required to do a deed of infamy?" There was no question, "whether men of honor would have hesitated to throw up their commissions" under those circumstances. Since these three men remained in office for almost a year after being so insulted, they were either cowards or liars; in either case they were dishonored. Francis P. Blair wrote in the *Washington Globe*: that "Mr. Branch cautiously shrouds himself with innuendoes. . . . Why does he not act like a man?" In its most extreme form, such rhetorical abuse depicted the Eatons' slanderers as "weak and effeminate political trimmers," who collaborated with "old tabbies" in spreading "tea table mischief and excitement." Men who hid "under the skirts of such tea and toast intrigues" were likened to hens: they "should have feather breeches, and be made to hatch new laid eggs." Attacks on "men-gossips" undermined the credibility of both the men and the women who spoke against the Eatons and Jackson.⁵¹

Where the Jackson press lambasted effeminate slanderers, the anti-Jackson press castigated hypermasculine pugnacity. These contrasting views of male behavior received their fullest airing in the context of John Eaton's attempt to duel with Samuel Ingham. In late June 1831, Eaton asked his antagonists in the former cabinet whether they were responsible for an editorial in the *United States Telegraph* concerning their refusal to associate with his wife. All three denied it; but in responding, Samuel Ingham unwisely accused Eaton of being "not a little deranged." Eaton demanded "*satisfaction* for the wrong and injury you have done me." As Ingham had no intention of dueling

24, July 15, Aug. 26, 1831; *Washington Globe*, July 6, 23, Aug. 3, 1831; *Frankfort Argus*, Aug. 10, 1831; *Niles' Weekly Register*, Aug. 6, 1831; *Pendleton Messenger*, July 6, 1831; Eaton, *Autobiography*, 35, 87-88.

⁵¹ *Nashville Republican*, July 15, Aug. 12, 1831(quotations), June 3, 24, 1831, *Frankfort Argus*, May 8, 1831; *Washington Globe* reprinted in *Niles' Weekly Register*, June 11, 1831; *Baltimore Republican* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, Aug. 12, 1831; *Frankfort Argus*, June 8, 1831; *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *Washington Globe*, June 4, 1831; *Columbus Sentinel* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *Albany Argus*, June 10, 1831; *Hartford Times* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *ibid.*, June 3, June 24, 1831; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 295.

anyone, let alone a Tennessean who was likely a very handy shot, he left town. The furious Eaton then told a friendly newspaper editor that "Mr. Ingham was incapable of acting as became a man."⁵²

Public opinion was deeply divided over this abortive duel. Some argued that since Eaton was now "a private citizen," his challenge to Ingham was no "matter of national interest." Others suggested that the spectacle of ex-officials fighting in the streets belittled the dignity of the government, and they regarded Eaton's behavior as "an assault utterly unjustifiable." Still others recalled past examples of dueling officeholders, most notably Henry Clay, and asked whether Eaton's case was any different. Some considered Eaton's recourse to dueling as a justified rebuke for "a licentious invasion of his domestic privacy." Ingham was "unmanned by his fears" that Eaton intended to murder him. Eaton's defenders mocked Ingham's "unaccountable antipathy to the *open air*":

He still insists that he was within an ace of being foully murdered at Washington. Poor man, it will be some time before he gets this naughty idea out of his head. He ought to bathe his feet in warm water and take Motherwort. These hysterics are a 'parlous' thing and always go worst with old women.⁵³

Hostile editors returned the favor, describing Eaton as a "vulgar bully" and condemning duels as "fashionable murderers." They accused Eaton of sneaking around Ingham's office in the Treasury Building, hoping to assassinate him. In this light, Eaton represented overaggressive masculinity, a man who would resort to force to get his way even if reason and morality proved him wrong. Eaton's so-called "assassination" attempt confirmed the fears of those who suspected that Jackson (himself an experienced duelist) would inaugurate a kind of

⁵² Nashville *Republican*, July 8, 1831.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, July 8, July 15, 1831; Charleston *Mercury*, July 1, 1831; Washington *Globe*, June 28, 1831; Baltimore *Republican* reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, July 15, 1831; *ibid.*, July 8, 1831; Frankfort *Argus*, July 20, 1831; *United States Telegraph*, July 2, 1831; Philadelphia *American Sentinel*, reprinted in Charleston *Mercury*, July 1, 1831; Albany *Argus*, reprinted in Washington *Globe*, July 6, 1831; Camden *Journal* reprinted in Nashville *Republican*, Aug. 12, 1831. For dueling among public officials, see Steven Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore, 1991), chap. 1; and Joanne Freeman, "Duelling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (Apr. 1996), 289-318.

government-by-force popularly associated with frontier conditions.⁵⁴

Much of what the public read about the Eaton-Ingham drama derived from Ingham's publication of his correspondence with Eaton. This was an unwise choice. For the second time Ingham had sought public approbation by exposing his hot-headed adversaries (he had earlier published an account of the dissolution of the cabinet); for the second time his effort backfired. Not only did Ingham appear to be a coward, but many people believed that publishing the letters without Eaton's consent was "a flagrant violation of propriety." Ingham erred both by breaking confidence with his correspondent and by exposing the reading public to gossip about women. Ingham countered that Eaton was too "offensive" to deserve consideration, but most observers found this an insufficient justification for bringing a "private" and "delicate" matter into "the arena of public gaze."⁵⁵

The language of public and private propriety was used instrumentally in situations that often were contradictory. On the one hand, Calhoun's supporters insisted that the Eatons' "domestic affairs" had "lost their private relation, and belong to the public history of the country." In their minds this justified a lengthy examination of the scandal, which they hoped would discomfit Jackson. Further, they argued that Margaret's affairs were of public concern because she influenced political actions. At the same time, Calhoun's faction also believed that the Washington ladies' initial decision to shun Margaret Eaton was purely a private matter in which Jackson had no legitimate interest.⁵⁶ Jackson and John Eaton, on the other hand, called the duel with Ingham a private quarrel to forestall

⁵⁴ New York *Courier and Enquirer* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *Charleston Mercury*, July 6, 1831; *Baltimore Republican* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *Philadelphia American Sentinel* reprinted in *Charleston Mercury*, July 1, 1831; *New York Courier and Enquirer* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831; *Richmond Enquirer and State Gazette*, June 28, 1831; *United States Telegraph*, July 2, 1831; *Albany Argus* reprinted in *Washington Globe*, July 6, 1831; *Nashville Republican*, July 15, 1831, July 8, 1831; *Frankfort Argus*, July 20, 1831.

⁵⁵ *Nashville Republican*, July 15, Aug. 12, 1831; George M. Dallas to Samuel D. Ingham, May 8, May 19, June 10, 1831, George Mifflin Dallas Collection; Samuel McKean to Samuel D. Ingham, May 25, May 30, 1831, Gratz Collection. The problematic relationship between affairs of honor and public service can be gauged by the fact that Jackson, who had himself fought several duels, promised that he would fire any government officials who helped Eaton force Ingham to duel. See the letters from Jackson to various officials and their responses denying involvement, *Nashville Republican*, July 8, 1831, and many other newspapers in the same week.

⁵⁶ *United States Telegraph*, June 17, 1831.

public dissection of the Eatons' actions. Defending a woman from slander went hand in hand with shielding all women from the gaze of the newspaper-reading public. Further, because they saw the shunning of Margaret Eaton as motivated by masculine malice, not feminine morality, they believed that it deserved public scrutiny. Such contradictory claims suggest both the power and the malleability of the gendering of public and private.⁵⁷

Where Jackson and John Eaton reduced all women in the scandal to either victims or ciphers of male manipulators, anti-Eaton voices tended to celebrate the efforts of Mrs. Eaton's female detractors. At a National Republican celebration in Washington, for example, toasts went out to "Mrs. Donelson! Her example and unyielding propriety." Another lauded Mmes. Calhoun, Ingham, and Branch: "Their defense of the purity of their sex should be recorded in letters of gold for the use of future generations." The National Republicans' toasts deeply offended Jackson, to whom it appeared "that no greater indignity can be offered to a lady, than to toast her for political effect, or for any other cause, than her own intrinsick virtues." John Eaton's toast—"Where woman is the theme, palsied be the hand and blistered the tongue that could be raised but to defend her, or speak but praise to her"—was much more to Jackson's liking. The National Republicans were indeed using women "for political effect," as Jackson charged, but if we consider them as the precursors of the Whig party, which actively cultivated female partisanship, we may suspect that they were also beginning to articulate a self-consciously political notion of womanhood.⁵⁸

In late 1831, Jackson's interpretation of the Eaton Affair proved more convincing to the American people. After John Eaton published a portrayal of his wife as a powerless and innocent woman, even earlier opponents came to believe his story. The editor of the *Huntsville Democrat*, who had originally embraced Calhoun's accusation of improper "female influence," changed his mind when he read Eaton's account of the vice president's overweening ambition.⁵⁹ It was hardly

⁵⁷ See Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female World, Woman's Place: the Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), 9-32.

⁵⁸ *Nashville Republican*, Nov. 4, 1831; Burke, *Emily Donelson*, I, 294-95; Jackson to Andrew J. Donelson, July 11, 1831, in Bassett, ed., *Andrew Jackson*, IV, 311; Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too," 501-02, *passim*.

⁵⁹ *Huntsville Democrat* reprinted in *Nashville Republican*, Oct. 14, 1831. The *Democrat* was one of twelve newspapers cited in the *Republican* that viewed Eaton's statement favorably.

reassuring to think that the vice president was plotting against his elected superior, yet even that grim possibility seemed more acceptable than the thought that women—either Margaret Eaton or her enemies—had brought the cabinet to its knees. Popular understandings of politics could accommodate more easily official malfeasance than female control. Usurpation of power by officeholders was precisely what Americans under the lingering influence of republicanism had long been trained to fear; thus it was critical for Jackson to refute the accusation that he abused his power over the cabinet. At a time when the extension of white men's political privileges was a central political issue, there was precious little room for powerful women in most men's conceptualizations of politics, even though (and quite probably because) women and womanhood helped shape the political order.

The significance of the Eaton Affair for the study of antebellum gender relations and politics is twofold. The outcome of the Eaton Affair shows how assertions of power by and for women easily were quashed. As political parties in Washington became increasingly professional, social activities grew more sex-segregated, affording women fewer opportunities to discuss politics with men. The process of the scandal, however, suggests an additional interpretation. The arguments of the competing factions exposed not just the power and the negotiability of gender, but also the ways that men and women deployed gender roles as sources of authority. This latter point suggests the more important lesson to be found in the Eaton Affair.

Van Buren described the scandal as “in no proper sense political;” but then what was “proper” in a politics now open to the democratic impulses of the entire white male citizenry? The Jacksonian attack on the anti-Eaton factions stemmed in part from hostility toward privilege and elitism, and in part from the belief that women had no legitimate, direct role in political life. In all matters outside the household, men should act and speak for women. In addition, whether inside the household or out, Jackson believed that women and subordinate men owed loyalty and obedience to their masculine elders. Ultimately, this stance represented a desire to limit the freedom of dependents, particularly women, to think for themselves. It reflected both a limited faith in women's abilities and a defensive limitation of women's potentially extensive influence.⁶⁰

The widespread acceptance of the Jacksonian interpretation of the Eaton Affair makes it seem rather unlikely that women took much

⁶⁰ Van Buren, *Autobiography*, I, 339.

part in Democratic party politics at anything more than a symbolic level. Recent scholarship finds that women who lobbied their legislators in the coming decades were most frequently evangelicals, benevolent reformers, and Whigs. Political wives in Washington may have become more hesitant to act upon rumors after the Eaton Affair. Margaret Smith continued to write to her sisters about social squabbles in the capital, but she asked them not to repeat her tales, wondering if women had not gained "more than their share of power." "Mrs Eaton's affair," she recorded, began as "but a spark, but what a conflagration did it cause." It may sound contradictory to suggest that women like Smith became reluctant to use their power precisely at the moment when that power was most evident, but Smith and her peers saw their influence as a stabilizing force on politics. When it proved destabilizing instead they found the experience chastening.⁶¹

If women's influence inside Washington and in Democratic party circles declined or became more suspect in the wake of the Eaton Affair, we may need to reassess the significance of mass party politics for women. Both the spread of democracy for white men and the Whiggish affinity for female activism take on different meanings if in fact they emerged at a moment when national support for women's moral authority in politics was shrinking. We may ultimately conclude that women reformers were both more oppositional and more marginal in antebellum political culture than has been thought previously. If national politics were more frequently narrated from a southern or western perspective, powerful female reformers in the Northeastern states might look more anomalous, at least until the Civil War when female benevolence and reform began to expand across the country.⁶²

⁶¹ Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too," 495-96, 518-21; Mary Ryan, *Women in Public*, 135-41; Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 11-97; Smith, *Forty Years*, 310, 327. The development of a duty-based (as opposed to rights-based) women's movement has been a key question in much of the literature on European women and feminism. See, for example, Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800-1914* (New Brunswick, 1991); Clair Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany, 1984); Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in fin-de-siecle France," *American Historical Review*, 89 (June 1984), 648-76.

⁶² On women in politics see Christopher J. Olsen, "Women and Party Politics in the Old South: Mississippi in the 1840s and 1850s," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, July 19, 1996, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN; Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too." For a different view see Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and*

When examined more as a process, however, the Eaton Affair suggests a very different set of conclusions and speculations. Despite the claim that the scandal was "in no proper sense political," the Eaton Affair represents a moment when men were obliged to respond to a political problem originally defined by women. Further, women and men constructed the initial problem and their subsequent responses within a series of beliefs about gender. The uses of gender in the Eaton Affair show not only that upper-class white women occasionally could set political agendas for men of their class, but that these men and women believed that ideas about manhood and womanhood were central to the social order and thus fundamental to any political undertaking. Incidents such as the Eaton Affair can starkly illuminate the interplay between gender and politics, providing insights that may guide historians in interpreting less overtly gendered topics.⁶³

Finally, the Eaton Affair exposes the folly of trying to understand gender—a fundamentally relational concept—by studying only women. While men and women who shared similar racial and class positions often developed gender-specific ways of interpreting the world, as many historians have argued, women and men also had to communicate with each other, both inside and outside their homes and families.⁶⁴ The language of gender roles served not so much as a barrier to communication but as a way of negotiating and explaining difference. The Eaton Affair suggests that both men and women understood at some level that political power had much to do with their understandings of masculinity and femininity. To separate the study of social beliefs and experiences from that of formal politics, particularly those concerning the family, is to obscure both the centrality of masculinity in antebellum political culture and the reciprocal relationship between daily life and electoral and legislative politics. More important, drawing such arbitrary lines between politics and the rest of human experience perpetuates the unjustified assumption that the le-

Culture in a Southern Town, 1784- 1860 (New York, 1984), 225-36, 240-49. For women's Civil War activism, see Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York, 1992).

⁶³ Van Buren, *Autobiography*, I, 339.

⁶⁴ Arguments for and against the concept of women's culture have generated considerable heat in the last decade. Most historians now agree that race, class, religion, ethnicity, region, and even marital status, life cycle, and sexuality "compound" womanhood in ways that make a universal women's culture impossible. See Nancy Hewitt, "Compounding Differences," *Feminist Studies*, 18 (Summer 1992), 313-26; Suzanne Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*.

gally disenfranchised were also politically inert.

If the Eaton Affair concluded with the popular rejection of women's power as understood by the anti-Eaton factions, it also sparked a serious debate on the subject that would recur in different forms in the succeeding decades, as women's activism flourished. Jacksonian-era politicians may have hoped, with George M. Dallas, that "the difficulty about female associations" was "too insignificant . . . to be allowed to derange public action," but historians ought not to be misled.⁶⁵ The Jacksonians' determined effort to repulse the empowering interpretation proffered by the anti-Eaton women underscores the challenge that the Eaton Affair posed to their "masculinist" understandings of politics. The ladies who opposed Margaret Eaton developed a coherent justification for female authority in political life. The women of Washington were hardly feminist heroes and may not appeal to late twentieth-century observers, but they brought to the Eaton Affair a sense of their own moral and political agency. In the process they brought down a cabinet, and we might expect that other women, less privileged and visible, have also influenced politics in ways as yet unseen. To uncover their influence and its meaning to the men around them, we need to look ever more carefully at the politics of gender and the gendering of politics.

⁶⁵ George M. Dallas to Samuel D. Ingham, Nov. 17, 1830, George Mifflin Dallas Collection.

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin
Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of
Philadelphia,**
Margaret Nash 171
- "It Will Never Do For Me To Be Married":
The Life of Laura Wirt Randall, 1803-1833,**
Anya Jabour 193
- "One Woman So Dangerous to Public Morals":
Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair,**
Kirsten E. Wood 237
- Whig Women, Politics, and Culture
in the Campaign of 1840: Three Perspectives
from Massachusetts,**
Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray 277

THE EDITORS' PAGE 317