

"Picturing the Resilient Self: William S. Elwell's Portrait of Dolley Madison and Older Women's Fame"

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During the nineteenth century, famous older women in the United States and Europe faced considerable pressure to depart the public sphere. Critics and other commentators believed that it was unnatural for women to maintain fame or creative careers after midlife, implicitly drawing a link between creative and procreative work. Despite this widespread perception, some exceptional women were able to maintain their public lives—and to attract adoration for doing so. This paper is a case study that attempts to explain why some famous older women were celebrated for their continued prominence in society while others were ridiculed for it. Through an analysis of the iconography, sources, and cultural *milieu* of William S. Elwell's 1848 portrait of First Lady Dolley Madison, it argues that older female celebrities were able to maintain their fame provided that the nature of their celebrity was not linked either to literal or metaphorical reproduction. Further, it makes a case for the importance of portraits like Elwell's to older female celebrities' ability to navigate the tensions between their own needs and the expectations of their admirers. While Elwell's portrait captures the glamour and charm that initially earned Madison her fame, it also reminds viewers of the reciprocal relationship and duties that bind together celebrities and their publics.

Recently, scholars including Devoney Looser and Francesca Blanch-Serrat have bent their attention to the intersection of age, gender, and celebrity in the nineteenth century (Looser; Blanch-Serrat, "I Mourn their Nature"). Their studies have been part of a broader investigation into the intersection of age and gender during the period that is typified by the work of Margaret

Morganroth Gullette, Teresa Magnum, Corinne T. Field, and Peter N. Stearns, among others. Building on these scholars' work on the pressure that post-menopausal women faced to recede from public life and embrace anonymity, Looser and Blanch-Serrat demonstrate that female celebrities in the nineteenth century often faced scorn for attempting to maintain their professional or public identities into later life (Hahn 34-25; Looser 34; Blanch-Serrat, "To Leave My Name," 179). Their studies show that older female authors faced pressure to put down their pens and resign themselves to a quiet private life as they aged. Reactions to their refusal to do so often took the form of scorn, ridicule, and statements that cast these women's continued professional work and public identities as unnatural (Looser 34; Blanch-Serrat, "To Leave My Name," 179). Fame, these reactions suggest, was a young woman's game—when women were allowed to achieve fame at all. Although Hahn, Looser, and Blanch-Serrat work on British authors, their conclusions are not limited to this context. Other scholars have demonstrated that literary celebrities' fame and reception often ran parallel on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, creating a shared culture of literary celebrity between Britain and the United States (Weber 7; Finnerty 21-33). Further, Corinne T. Field has noted that, while the nineteenth-century American context did allow for some variation in this attitude, the dominant cultural discourse of the young Republic followed the British example by scorning older women, generally (20).

Although common in the anglophone world, negative responses to older female celebrities were not universal. As this essay will demonstrate, certain exceptional women of the nineteenth century continued to assert their status as public figures well into their older age—and were even met with approval for doing so. First Lady of the United States Dolley Madison (1768-1849) was one such figure. After her husband's death in 1836, Madison returned to Washington D.C. from her family estate and revived her earlier reputation as one of the most important social vectors of the young nation. During this period, she was in constant demand as a hostess or guest and fielded frequent requests for her autograph. Although, as I will discuss later in this article, some members of the press criticized her for other facets of her life, the public largely

celebrated her continued presence in the Washington social scene and prominence in the public sphere.

This essay is a case study that considers how Madison was able to maintain her former public identity into old age—and do so without earning scorn from the press—when so many other women were not. It centers on a portrait of her that was completed in February of 1848, approximately a year before her death (fig. 1). The painting, by William S. Elwell (1810-1881), shows Madison against a simple backdrop gradient of black to brown. She wears a simple but elegant outfit consisting of a black dress with a white collar, a red shawl, a white turban, and jeweled earrings. As I will demonstrate in this essay, Elwell's seemingly simple portrait of the former First Lady draws attention to the complicated undercurrents that allowed—and also obliged—Madison to continue embodying the public identity she had shaped decades earlier. Through an analysis of Elwell's painting, its sources, and the circumstances of its sitter, I argue that the older Madison performed a version of her younger self in order to remind the American public of its duty to her as she lobbied for support during a financially precarious phase of her life. I also suggest that she was able to perform the persona that had first made her a celebrity because it was not linked to qualities that were seen as unnatural in a woman's older age.



Figure 1. William S. Elwell, *Portrait of Dolley Madison*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 64.1 cm. *National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution*, Washington, D.C. Photo: National Portrait Gallery. CC0.

DEFINING A FIRST LADY

Elwell's painting takes considerable inspiration from portraits completed during Madison's tenure as First Lady. To understand the later portrait's place in her personal iconography, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of its sources. As only the third woman to serve as a First Lady and the first to demonstrate a real enthusiasm for the social whirl associated with statecraft, Madison had considerable influence in shaping the role of First Lady, both in reality and in the visual arts. In portraiture associated with this novel role, she drew from two main sources of inspiration: her own public reputation and the norms of European queenship. While the former source provided direct, positive inspiration for her portraiture, the latter primarily provided a point of departure. Rather than adopting the formal and dynastic conventions of queenship, Madison developed a public identity that linked the role of First Lady to personal glamour and interpersonal connections.

The earliest high-profile portrait of Madison was painted by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). Stuart was one of the most prominent portrait painters of the Early Republican period, when Madison had already begun hosting gatherings

for then-President Thomas Jefferson. Stuart's portrait of Madison, painted in 1804, portrays her in a style typical of the early-nineteenth century (fig. 2). She wears an empire-waist gown and sits against a backdrop of a column and curtain that reveals a cloudy sky in the background. Madison sports what would become her trademark, dark, face-framing curls as she peers out at the viewer with a sidelong glance and wry but good-natured smile. Gold trim ornaments her dress and echoes her looped necklace.

An 1817 work (fig. 3) by Bass Otis (1784-1861) from shortly after the end of James Madison's presidency closely accords with the construction of Madison's identity in the 1804 portrait. Although Otis dutifully recreates the signs of age that have affected the First Lady since she posed for Stuart, he also faithfully replicates the wry, humorous, and warm expression on the outgoing First Lady's face. Her fashion, as in the Stuart painting, is decidedly elite. She wears a satin dress with delicate gold trim that is set off by a string of black pearls. In deference to her greater age, her previously un-capped curls are partially covered by a gold-speckled blue bonnet decorated with a translucent fabric that has been gathered to convey the impression of large ruffles.



Figure 2. Gilbert Stuart, *Portrait of Dolley Madison*, 1804. Oil on canvas, 26 x 24 in. *White House Collection/White House Historical Association*, Washington, D.C. Photo: White House Collection/White House Historical Association. CC0.



Figure 3. Bass Otis, *Mrs. James Madison*, 1817. Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in. *New-York Historical Society*, New York. Photo: The New York Historical Society. CC0.

Both Stuart and Otis's portraits allude to the quality for which Madison was, arguably, most famous: her glamour. By 1804, Dolley had been married to James Madison for a decade. Even before the marriage, she was a sought-after social figure due, in large part, to her striking personal charms and fashionable self-presentation (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 22). After James accepted the role of Secretary of State in 1800, under President Thomas Jefferson, Dolley's charisma and fashion became an important part of her public persona. As Catherine Allgor has noted, she used her popularity and personal appeal to help transform her family's residence in Washington, D.C. into a kind of unofficial social and political venue during the Jefferson administration (41). When James was inaugurated as president in 1809, she took on the public persona of "Queen Dolley" by dressing in elaborate gowns and dresses that rivaled the couture of European queens. Her seemingly royal style of dress paralleled her adoption—and adaptation—of regular gatherings reminiscent of the social whirl of European courts. Otis's 1817 portrait of the First Lady not only shows continuity with Stuart's earlier work, but aptly captures Madison's decision to use the role of First Lady to impart prestige to the young republic through her personal charisma and glamour.

Although Otis and Stuart lavish loving attention on Madison's jewelry and costume in their paintings, the friendly and vivacious expression with which they painted her was equally vital to the First Lady's persona. Madison's role

as the social consort of the leader of the American Republic required hosting and attending frequent public engagements. Madison, following the examples of former First Ladies Martha Washington and Abigail Adams, presided over salons and social meetings frequented by the leading figures of the new nation (Abrams 22). Scholars have credited Madison, in particular, with shaping the role of First Lady, pointing to her ability to create social circles that facilitated political compromise as well as her eager adoption of the role of White House hostess (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 79). Her social facility also contributed to the strength of her husband's administration. As Betty Boyd Caroli, Carl Sferrazza Anthony and Gary D. Wekkin have noted, she effectively served as the architect of a kind of domestic intelligence network that provided information on James's political opponents (Wekkin 604; Caroli 13-17; Sferrazza Anthony 81-88). Key to her public persona, as Allgor has noted, was Madison's ability to create calm and sociable atmospheres through her personal charm and considerable soft skills (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 102). Each of the early portraits alludes both to her ability to ease tensions and her shrewd understanding of when to do so through her gentle and good-natured expression. Madison's earlier portraits and self-presentation, then, emphasized her status as a symbol of American prestige and her ability to facilitate connections among the leaders of the Early Republican period.

However, the qualities that Madison's portraits did not include were, I would like to suggest, just as important to defining the First Lady's public identity as the glamour and sociability they put on display. In particular, official portraits of Madison make subtle distinctions between "Queen Dolley's" role in American society and that of actual monarchs and their consorts. A notable difference is the portraits' tendency to shy away from portraying Madison's entire body—a decision that was often but not always shared by predecessors Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. In the visual language of European courts, the royal body, whether that of a king or of a queen, was a powerful metaphor for the monarchy itself. Perhaps the most famous example of this trope is Hyacinthe Rigaud's portrait of *Louis XIV* (1701), which swaths the French monarch in *fleur-de-lys*-bedecked ermine, reminding viewers of the king's

most famous proclamation: “I am the state.” Official portraits of queens in France, England, and other European monarchies typically portrayed royal women in full length, as well. Where the kings stood as a literal manifestation of the body politic, however, queens’ bodies were a symbol of dynastic continuity. Indeed, a common subject in queenly portraits was that of the mother with her children. The Austrian-born Queen Marie-Antoinette of France had Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun portray her surrounded by her offspring in 1787 while the British Queen Charlotte also celebrated her children in a 1764 portrait by Allan Ramsay (fig. 4; fig. 5). Often, the royal heirs stand in or are held nearby the queen’s lap, making coded reference to her primary role as a vessel for birthing the new king and perpetuating the dynastic line (Sheriff “The Portrait of the Queen” 50-51; Sheriff “The Cradle is Empty” 197-198).



Figure 4. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie-Antoinette and Her Children*, 1787. Oil on canvas, 275 x 216.5 cm. *Palace of Versailles*, Versailles. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.



Figure 5. Allan Ramsay, *Queen Charlotte with her Two Eldest Sons*, 1764. Oil on canvas. 257.8 x 165.0 cm. Royal Collection Trust, London. Photo Credit: Royal Collection Trust. Public Domain.

Madison did not have her entire body shown in official portraits, nor did she have herself portrayed with her son (who was, in any case, the product of her first marriage rather than her union with James). The distance between Madison's public role as articulated by her early portraits and her private identity as a mother is a key component to her self-presentation as America's First Lady. Queens' bodies were valued for their reproductive potential and ability to continue their husbands' lines—a point that is made clear in Ramsay and Vigée-Lebrun's paintings of their respective queens. Madison, however, was an American First Lady who had lived through a revolution fought, in part, against the very institution of monarchy and kingship. While the role of First Lady is in many ways tied up in the discourses of Republican Motherhood, the First Lady's importance was not linked to her ability to bear an heir to the presidency (Parry-Giles and Blair 567). To draw too liberally from the images of actual European queens in her portraiture—and that of First Ladies generally—would suggest otherwise. Images that focused on Madison's personal charms and suggested her facility as a hostess, then, were typical of a shift away from queenly portraits and their emphasis on reproduction (Weber 33-72). In turn, they signaled a new kind of public identity that was still coalescing around the

role of First Lady.

Madison and her predecessors in this role were no doubt aware of the need to craft their public identities with care. The project of picturing the leaders of the new republic without relying too heavily on the visual language of monarchical authority was a difficult one. Perhaps the most famous example of a work that balanced the need to project authority to foreign nations with the parallel need to embody American republican ideals is one that Madison herself had a hand in saving during the War of 1812: Stuart's 1796 *Lansdowne Portrait* of George Washington (fig. 6). The painting adapted the conventions of full-length portraits of European monarchs, going so far as to show Washington in full-length against the backdrop of columns, sky, and flowing curtains with an elaborate chair reminiscent of the thrones that feature in paintings of kings. Yet he appears in simple black clothing, surrounded by emblems of democracy and the new republic. As Donna R. Hoffman and Alison D. Howard argue, the *Lansdowne* portrait purposefully omitted many monarchical conventions to suit the American paradigm (146). In this way, the portrait allowed Washington to appear as a figure worthy of the attention of kings, but also to appeal to the republican and egalitarian ethos of the American nation.



Figure 6. Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 257.6 x 158.7 cm. *National Portrait Gallery*, Washington, DC. CC0.

As Paul Staiti has shown in “Gilbert Stuart’s Presidential Imaginary,” this

concern was not limited to Washington's presidency. Thomas Jefferson, too, was preoccupied with the project of ensuring that the President was not considered above the rest of the nation (169). As an influential hostess during the Jefferson administration and a close collaborator with Stuart, Madison would likely have been privy to discussions of how to embody and picture the new nation. Further, as Allgor has argued, Madison's own reputation as the "queen of hearts" was a testament to her keen awareness of the relationship between political and public identity (Allgor, "James and Dolley Madison" 59-74).

As First Lady, then, Madison crafted an identity that carefully balanced the need to establish the prestige of the United States with pressures to avoid the trappings of European monarchical norms. Her reliance on an established personal iconography—and the unique nature of that iconography—allowed her to navigate this project with seeming ease. Her personal glamour stood in for royal finery while her approachable demeanor in her portraits removed the suggestion of royal *hauteur*. Further, it was her approachability and ability to create social connections—and not a fertile body—that made her a valuable asset to the administration. By shaping her role as First Lady in this way, Madison established a public persona that, as we shall see presently, would endure well past the end of her husband's presidency.

A RESILIENT PERSONA

Indeed, in her later life, Madison would easily re-inhabit her earlier persona, finding it compatible even with her changed circumstances. After the end of the Madison presidency in 1817, James and Dolley Madison left the nation's capital. They spent most of their time in their private home in Virginia. After James's death in 1836, however, Madison returned frequently to Washington until settling there permanently in 1844. She was now the widow of a president and no longer occupied any official—or even semi-official—role within the Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, or Polk administrations. Nonetheless, she wasted little time in reestablishing her earlier prestige among the Washington elite. During the final years of her life, the press frequently reported on her

appearances at state events and her proximity to powerful figures in Washington (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 145). A writer for the *New York Herald*, for example, noted the substantial crowd of Washington luminaries that gathered at her residence to celebrate the new year of 1845 (*New York Herald* January 5, 1845). Later that year, the same publication shared the news that she had visited Mount Vernon with the president (*New York Herald* May 30, 1845). When describing the New Year's celebrations of 1846, *The National Intelligencer* reported on the visitors at her home in the paragraph immediately following a description of the scene at the White House (*National Intelligencer* January 2, 1846). Madison was once again a fixture in the Washington social scene—and one with significant ties to the most influential figures of the period. Functionally, then, Madison resumed her earlier role as an archhostess and nurturer of social connections.

The Elwell portrait's presentation of Madison suggests that the First Lady also used the arts to reassert her fundamentally unchanged identity. Although the painting makes concessions to her more advanced age in the form of the slight cloudiness of her eyes, her greater skin laxity, and additional lines in her face, it largely upholds Madison's personal iconography. She appears with the same gentle and wry smile that first appeared in Stuart's painting, wears earrings and a pin that subtly echo the jewelry of the earlier portraits, and sports dark curls (likely hair pieces) that peek out from underneath her turban and frame her face. Although her dress is relatively plain—a point to which I will return later in this essay—her white turban has a satiny shine and a fashionable red shawl drapes around her shoulders. Although her eyes are cloudy, she peers out at the viewer as if contemplating how to draw them into conversation in a social setting. Overall, she appears, still, as a fashionable, dignified lady with a gentle but honed wit who is ready to engage in conversation with anyone who might approach her. Indeed, in its pose and expression, the Elwell portrait seems merely to update the example provided by Stuart and Otis's works and to reassert Madison's social facility.

Unfortunately, we have little written evidence of whether and to what extent Madison and Elwell collaborated when determining what form the portrait

would take. However, it is likely the former First Lady's preferences would have influenced the final form of the portrait. Art historians have long noted that portraiture is a collaboration between artist and sitter; there is no reason to suspect that Madison and Elwell are exceptions to this general rule (West 37). Further, other images of the First Lady from this period suggest that the portrait accords with her preferred method of self-presentation. During roughly the same period as Elwell's portrait, two photographers approached Madison to capture her image. These were John Plumbe Jr. in 1846 (fig. 7) and Matthew Brady in 1848 (fig. 8). The photographs that resulted from these requests are still extant and suggest Madison's interest in maintaining the illusion of her unchanged self. Just as in the Elwell portrait, she has chosen to wear dark, curled hair pieces. Her turban also appears alongside a shawl that closely resembles the one in Elwell's painting. The conformity of Elwell's piece with these photographs suggests that Madison habitually and consciously presented herself in this way, visually asserting continuity between her present and past personas.



Figure 7. John Plumbe Jr., *Portrait of Dolley Madison*, 1846. Daguerreotype, 19 cm x 11 cm. *National Portrait Gallery*, Washington, D.C. CC0.



Figure 8. Matthew Brady, *Dolley Madison*, 1848. Daguerreotype, 4 ¼ x 5 ½ in. *Library of Congress*, Washington, D.C. CC0.

The respective aesthetics and perception of painting and early photography, in turn, further suggest her desire to be perceived in this way. Recently, Audrey Doussot has demonstrated that many nineteenth-century celebrities leveraged beliefs about photography to control their public image (Doussot, n.p.). In the 1840s, the medium was in its infancy. The invention of the daguerreotype (the first form of photography) in 1837 and its presentation to the world in 1839 sparked an immediate discourse about its impartiality and perfect replication of the observed world. In our contemporary moment, we are well aware of the many artistic impositions (angle, cropping, *mise en scène*, etc.) inherent to taking a picture that complicate and challenge this belief. However, the daguerreotype's fine detail—Marcy J. Dinius has noted that the resolution is equivalent to a 140,000-megapixel digital image—and the fact that light rays rather than an artist's hand created the image easily contributed to early beliefs about its exact and objective replication of reality (Dinius 1, 8). These beliefs filtered their way into print culture, leading to the expectation that daguerreotypes accorded closely with reality. As Dan Schiller has argued, this

expectation was so ubiquitous that it may have contributed to early photography's adoption of many of the conventions of the Realist style (88). The perceived veracity of daguerreotypes, in Doussot's reading, allowed celebrities to craft an image of themselves that, when photographed, would be perceived as their real selves. That Madison balanced the visible signs of aging that the finely detailed Brady and Plumbe daguerreotypes inevitably captured with a coiffure and costume that provided the illusion of youth therefore suggests a conscious attempt to control the public's perception of her. Although the images acknowledge her older age, they also take steps to temper its impact on the viewer's experience.

Elwell's painting of Madison, by virtue of its medium, emerged from a different set of aesthetic expectations for the portrayal of famous figures. In the first half of the nineteenth century, an ideological gulf existed between the idealization of the "grand manner" of painting and the minute imitation of reality (Williams 16-17). The "grand manner" advocated, broadly speaking, for the generalization of optical reality in favor of capturing essential truths about a subject or sitter. Fine details and accuracy, adherents of this mode believed, interfered with the transmission of fundamental truths. Elwell was likely trained in this tradition, as his teacher Chester Harding studied for three years in London, where this style was still favored by arts academies (Pennington 164). Certainly, he seems to have taken some artistic liberties to capture the spirit of his sitter. The warm tones of Madison's red shawl, her rouged cheeks, and the sepia gradient in the background enliven Madison and allude to youth and liveliness rather than to her advanced age. Further, the blurring of the contour lines of her face partially disguises her increased skin laxity. Despite such concessions to painterly norms, the portrait, in fact, adheres more closely to the aesthetics of imitation that were already associated with daguerreotypes. Elwell records the fine lines of her forehead and cheeks as faithfully as the sheen on the curls of her dark hairpieces. In bridging the aesthetics of idealization and imitation, Elwell's painting aligns with the discourses of accuracy and veracity associated with the newer, photographic medium. As a result, its image of Madison as older but fundamentally preserved by time acquires a greater truth-

value.

The former First Lady's presentation of herself as essentially unchanged despite the passage of time was well-received. Despite the common expectation for older women to retire from the public sphere, Washington society reacted favorably to the return of their "Queen Dolley." Members of the press even (and often) insisted upon denying or downplaying the decades that had passed between the end of her husband's presidency and her return to the capital. While some writers acknowledged her advanced age (the *Raleigh Register* for example, remarked that Mrs. Madison and Mrs. Hamilton had a combined age of "more than 170 years!"), others asserted that the lady was fundamentally unchanged by the passage of time (*Raleigh Register* January 24, 1845). In a column from the sixth of January 1847, the Washington Correspondent of the *Atlas* recorded visiting Madison and noted that "the last five or ten years have made but little impression upon her appearance—and she looked, today, as animated and interesting, as when I first saw her seven years ago" (*Boston Daily Atlas* January 6, 1847). A poetic homage to Madison by Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney expressed a similar sentiment. The poem, entitled "To Mrs. Madison" reads:

Time is prone away to sweep
Charms of youth we fain would keep;
Sparkling lustre from the eye,
From the cheek its ruby dye,
From the smile its power to rest
Warmly in the soften'd breast.
Yet, he sometimes leaves behind
Mental treasures more refin'd,
Jewels of the heart, that grow
Brighter for the touch of woe;
Gold in sharp alembic shriven,
Gems that catch the hue of Heaven.
Lady! of the noble mien,
Still in soul and grace a queen,

He to thee strange love hath shown,
 Spare'd youth's gifts and left his own!
 L.H.S. (Sigourney)

Madison has the favor and “strange love” of time here, for he has “spare’d youth’s gifts and left his own” wisdom with her. Further, Madison is exceptional in this quality, as the poem asserts that “time is prone” to act on other mortals with an unforgiving influence. Together, Elwell’s portrait and tributes like these assert that, although in her late seventies, Madison retained her youthful identity and was still worthy of celebration and esteem for her public role in society. While, certainly, the gender of the poem’s author may account for the gentler response to another woman occupying the public sphere, it is notable that responses to the First Lady in the press largely accepted her performance of her younger self as both natural and successful.

Madison’s positive reception was as exceptional as the Sigourney poem’s characterization of the woman herself. Often, the public framed famous older women’s continued prominence in the public sphere as an unnatural rejection of the normal course of life. This narrative is especially notable in critical responses to female writers. Looser notes that many critics “felt uncomfortable” when older women published. Further, that some commentators viewed women’s creative writing, in old age, as an unnatural turn from the expectation that they “[prepare] for death.” (qtd. in Looser 15). Although Burney’s final published work received some praise from critics, Looser notes that an infamous review from the *Quarterly Review* equated the style of the novel with the infirmities and failings of old age, furthering the idea that for a woman to create in her old age was unnatural. Blanch-Serrat’s work on the English poet Anna Seward (1742-1809) provides further insight into what, exactly, critics saw as unnatural in this process. Key to her analysis of why Seward’s attempts to self-canonize through posthumous publishing is the tension between the act of literary creation and the infertility associated with the “old maids” who so often chose to forsake motherhood for authorship (Blanch-Serrat, “To Leave My Name,” 19-20). A woman’s authorship could easily be accepted, as Rebecca Davis has noted, in her child-bearing years or

when it focused on the topic of motherhood specifically (4). To pursue a profession as an “old maid,” however, was to participate in a practice that European and Euro-American society had viewed with deep suspicion or derision—and even occasionally legislated against—for over a century (Froide 15-43; Lanser 297-324).

If the creative work of authorship became a replacement for bearing children, the continued work of publication past middle age would of course be understood as unnatural. Indeed, as Blanch-Serrat demonstrates, at least one review of Seward’s posthumous works celebrated her early works by aligning them with “her youth, her sex, and the freshness of her fame [which] excited an enthusiasm in her favor” (qtd. in Blanch-Serrat, “To Leave My Name,” 20). However, it goes on to note that “her powers declined as age advanced” (qtd. in Blanch-Serrat, “To Leave My Name,” 20). These women—famous for their literary creativity—become targets for scorn when they continued to create and publish past the age in which they were fresh and youthful. The use of these terms, in turn, linked authorial creativity with women’s fertile, child-bearing years. This framing of their fame and public identity limited its viability to the pre-menopausal period of their lives.

Madison’s fame, however, was of a different kind. As discussed earlier, she had gained fame for reasons separate from any understanding of her reproductive potential. Her public role had little to do either metaphorically or literally with the ability to (pro-)create. Instead, she was a metaphorical bridge, and her old age did not separate her from this function. In fact, her advanced age enhanced her ability to act as an interpersonal link. As a widow, she would be understood as a “relict” of her husband and, thus, allow for a kind of connection to his memory (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 145). Further, as a member of an older, storied generation, she acted as a point of contact with the past—and famous figures lost to time—more generally.

Americans were aware of the potential to use Madison as a conduit for metaphorically contacting luminaries of the past. Among the most common types of letters preserved in Madison’s collected correspondence are requests for copies of the signatures (or autographs) of Madison’s family members and

acquaintances who shaped the early Republic (Serruys; Cist). As Josh Lauer has shown, collecting the autographs of the founding generation of Americans served as a ritual that could help to form a collective national identity (Lauer 143-163). In turning to Madison for access to these bonds, autograph seekers encouraged her to function in much the same way as she had during the Jefferson and Madison administrations: as a mechanism for creating national unity through interpersonal connection. Certainly, Madison was famous in her own right. However, her main utility lay in her ability to provide access to others—just as it did when she presided over the social scene of the Jefferson and Madison administrations.

The public's enthusiasm for Madison's ability to create bonds was not limited to personal connections. Americans also viewed her as a point of contact with history, itself. In a letter from December 18, 1847, Mrs. Elizabeth Fries explains that she was compiling reminiscences about the ladies of the Revolutionary War period and wished to interview Madison. Although Madison gently declined the request, wryly noting that she was not quite that old, Fries's project provides insight into the public's interest in the First Lady (Ellet; Madison, January 3, 1848). As the foundation of the American Republic gradually fell out of living memory, concrete links to this period in the national history acquired special value. As a living link to this by-then revered period in history and the famous figures who populated it, Madison moved from linking individuals socially to connecting different eras in history. When taken in combination with the press's praise for her supposedly unaltered physical form, requests like Fries's reframe the public's acceptance of Madison's reentry into the social scene as a function of the specific nature of her fame and her relationship with the American nation's past.

Although she did not write explicitly on this point, Madison's correspondence from this period does suggest that the First Lady actively chose to portray herself in a way that played into this blurring of past and present. Letters she exchanged with Elizabeth Christine Bryant Dietz during this period (1848) discuss at least two portrait projects: the Elwell sitting and a daguerreotype copy of an 1817 work by Joseph Wood (Madison, December 8,

1847; Dietz March 22, 1848). The surviving letters between the two women do not always make clear which images and references belong to which project. For this reason, they do not offer clear insight into the Elwell portrait itself. However, these letters do demonstrate Madison's interest in maintaining the illusion of her youthfulness around the time she sat for Elwell. A March 1848 letter from Madison to Dietz references the Wood painting and suggests that an unnamed artist might use it as a reference rather than meeting with her for a sitting (Madison, March 1848). While her frequent illness during this period might explain this choice, Dietz's response to her close friend suggests another motivation (Allgor, 2019). In response to Madison's note she wrote:

we have come to the conclusion that it will be more gratifying to ourselves & your numerous friends to have a portrait taken from life of one so loved & venerated [and] highly respected as yourself—it would appear *more natural* to us to see you as you *now* are than as you appeared some years ago and Knowing with what kindness & condescension you are always ready to extend to your friends, if in your power, has induced me to make the attempt...[emphasis in the source] (Dietz, March 22, 1848)

Dietz's letter suggests an intimate awareness of Madison's desire to obscure her greater age—as well as Dietz's own rejection of the idea that a by-then thirty-one-year-old image was an adequate record of Madison's true self. Dietz's careful emphasis on this point underlines the division between Madison's private life—and the expectations of her friends within it—and the demands of the public. Further, that she felt the need to invoke her friendship with Madison and to flatter her correspondent suggests Madison's reluctance to relinquish her connection to her earlier image.

When Madison returned to Washington, then, she gave every indication of wishing to emphasize the continuity between her younger and older selves—and the public readily accepted this framing of the First Lady. Rather than creating a completely new role for herself, she reasserted her status as the glamorous leading hostess of Washington. In practice and in representation,

she reaffirmed the public's perception of her as fundamentally unchanged. The degree to which she was successful owed much to how she had shaped the role of first lady and her unique public identity within it. Because she acted as a metaphorical bridge rather than engaging in creative activity that invited comparison to biological procreation, the fact of her greater years was no impediment to her public performance of her former self. Instead, her earlier role could easily expand to accommodate the public's new and growing desire to connect to the history and luminaries of the first decades of the Republic. By performing her younger self, Madison provided a visual reminder of her ability to serve this purpose.

However, it is important to acknowledge, once again, that images like Elwell's and the two later photographs also function as records of the First Lady's more advanced age. While this acknowledgment of the passage of time, as we have seen, alluded to her continued ability to serve the nation, it also suggested that the public could and should feel an obligation to her. I will turn, now, to a consideration of the benefits Madison stood to gain from her choice to continue performing her earlier self even as she allowed signs of her age and altered circumstances to enter the public eye.

MADISON'S MOTIVATIONS

As Graeme Turner has shown, the relationship between a celebrity and their public is reciprocal. Where the public gains a thrill or an enhanced sense of communal identity from their indirect contact with a celebrity, the celebrity benefits from the social and economic capital that comes with their fame (83-97). While Madison did not rely on the public to buy literary works or to attend plays in which she starred, she did find herself in the position of needing its support in another way. In her final years, she suffered from drastically reduced circumstances (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 145-146). James Madison had planned for her to be supported by the sale of his papers after his death, estimating that the sale would generate approximately \$100,000. In reality, the first sale to Congress yielded only \$20,000 (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 145). Further, her son's poor management of the Montpelier estate put the widow into considerable debt by

the time she returned to Washington (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 145). Although her friends provided her with a measure of support, they were unable to solve her considerable financial precarity. A second sale of a portion of James's remaining papers, then, became necessary to address her financial situation. Reminding the public—especially members of Congress—of the role she had played earlier in her life would underline its responsibility to her. In this context, her decision to portray herself as nearly unchanged by time can be understood as an attempt to appeal to the public's collective memory and sense of national duty in order to gain support.

If allusions to her earlier life helped remind the public of their obligation to the former First Lady, these images' subtle acknowledgment of her changed circumstances helped to assert her need for this support. A key component of images of the older Madison is their presentation of her vulnerability. In the case of the Brady and Plumbe photographs, the accurate records of age and the associated bodily vulnerability that typically accompanies it might be explained away as a matter of physical reality. When developing his image of Madison, however, Elwell made conscious choices to record the slightly clouded eyes and lax skin that attested to her age. Indeed, although Elwell's portrait is very similar to the 1817 Otis portrait, it shows a marked advance in her years. A more dramatic departure from the earlier portraits is the abandonment of the more overtly glamorous clothing that earned Madison her royal nickname. Elwell paired her fine accessories and dark hairpiece with a faithful record of the simple, black, and old-fashioned styled dress that she frequently wore in the final years of her life, and which also features in the Brady and Plumbe photographs. This decision—likely a reflection of Madison's own preferences—tempered her persona as the glamorous “Queen Dolley” by alluding to her lack of access to the markers of wealth that had earlier been central to her identity.

Presenting a less glamorous image of herself to the public helped Madison perform another well-established role that invited public sympathy and strengthened her case for support from the government: the widow. In all of her late portraits, Madison wears a dark dress that alludes to her mourning for

her late husband. Although her devotion to James and devastation after his loss are both a matter of record, her public performance of this role must also be considered within the broader ecosystem of American attitudes towards older womanhood (Allgor, *Dolley Madison*, 144). The archetype of the black-bedecked older widow was a familiar one in mid-nineteenth-century America—and one that held a strong association with financial vulnerability. In a study of widows in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, for example, Lisa Wilson shows that an increase in the percentage of widows in poor houses from less than five percent to approximately 20 percent occurred between 1813 and 1828 (90-91). As W. Andrew Achenbaum has shown, the coexistence of women's old age and poverty was not limited to urban contexts. Older widows, he notes, were among the population most likely to find themselves in dire financial straits throughout the nation (29-30). This problem was so widespread that the passage of the Pension Act in 1836 led to over 22,000 widows of American soldiers receiving benefits from the government. The payments addressed the stark financial situation that followed their husbands' deaths (Finkelstein; Collins). The practice of providing support for widows was not limited to the federal level. In the southern states, legal courts also awarded economic support to widows. Importantly, and mirroring Madison's own strategies, the widows in these cases were obligated to prove their worthiness of support and protection (Molloy 274). Madison's decision to have herself portrayed in black would have signaled her alignment with these women and their need for financial support. Her reminders of the service she provided in her earlier years and her continued potential to serve the public provided evidence of her worthiness for this support.

The mechanisms Madison used to convey this image to the American people were well-chosen. Although the archive provides few indications as to when, where, and to what extent Elwell showed his painting, it is clear that the Plumbe and Brady photographs were well-known and easily accessible to the public. Brady and Plumbe were two of the most successful—and high profile—daguerreotypists in nineteenth-century America. Both recognized the exciting and entertaining quality of daguerreotypy, creating showrooms and galleries to

display their works and the famous faces captured within them. Indeed, Plumbe selected a site that also hosted wax figure displays and mesmeric demonstrations for his Washington studio. His flare for showmanship extended to participating in the May 1846 National Fair in the city, where he exhibited several of his daguerreotypes of celebrities—including his portrait of Madison (Krainik 16-17, 20). Although Brady catered to an upper class and thus more select population, he too welcomed the public to visit his studio and view his works in New York City. Further, although the venture ultimately did not materialize, he had planned to create a subscription series featuring images like Madison's: the "Gallery of Illustrious Americans" (Williams 42). Both Plumbe and Brady had established their reputations as well-known daguerreotypists and showmen before approaching Madison to request that she sit for them. By agreeing to be photographed, Madison guaranteed that her new persona and image would be seen by and available to the public.

Madison's public presentation of a humbled version of her former self would have helped to address skepticism about her financial need that arose during this period. The very engine of her fame—her identity as "Queen Dolley"—made it difficult for some to believe that she needed the money. The harshest critiques of this request came from the papers associated with the abolitionist Press, which expressed disbelief about her embarrassment of funds as an excuse for selling an enslaved man as plantation labor (*The Liberator*, March 31, 1848). In April of 1848, *The North Star* republished an article from the *Liberty Herald* that reported on additional sales (and attempted sales) of enslaved laborers and noted:

the reason assigned for Mrs. Madison's conduct in these cases is, that poverty and want forced it upon her.' Mr. Madison, it is said, left a good estate, including one hundred slaves. Mrs. Madison received \$20,000 a few years ago from Congress, for her husband's manuscripts, and is now boring for \$20,000 more for the balance of those same papers. (*The North Star*, April 14, 1848).

The presentation of these figures in conjunction with the idea that she had to

sell enslaved household staff to generate income is skillfully deployed to invite disbelief and outrage at the supposed greed and ill-will that motivated Madison's decision to discard her staff. The use of the term "boring," moreover, coded her attempt to gain a second payment as inappropriate for her status by evoking the manual labor of drilling and mining.

Although abolitionists' responses to the First Lady's actions were an important facet of her public reputation, I do not mean to suggest, here, that they were the engine of Madison's turn to a humble self-presentation. Instead, it is the skepticism about her debt in these periodicals that, I suggest, helps to explain her concessions to modesty even as she asserted that she was the same woman she was thirty years earlier. As Madison herself noted in an 1834 letter, women were "ever losers, when they stem the torrent of public opinion" (Madison, December 2, 1834). The implied incredulity of the *North Star* demonstrated a need for Madison to balance her public performance of her glamorous younger self with one that emphasized her financial and bodily vulnerability.

The Elwell portrait's integration of her then-signature black mourning dress, its paring down of the glamour and jewels of earlier portraits, and its careful record of age's influence on her appearance, in this light, read as assurances of her neediness. Without removing all signs of the fashionable qualities that contributed to her status as a national celebrity, the portrait adds a sense of financial vulnerability to its presentation of Madison's bodily vulnerability. The similarity of this image of her to the photographs discussed above, moreover, suggests that Madison—whether out of necessity or social savvy—carefully presented herself in a way that contradicted the broader understanding of her as an economically comfortable—if not wealthy—woman.

CONCLUSION

The general—although not universal—approval with which Madison's return to social prominence was met and the eventual second sale of her husband's papers are testaments to her successful navigation of the personal circumstances and public expectations that shaped her later life. Elwell's

portrait of Madison, then, demonstrates one strategy that famous older women could use to maintain their public persona and justify their continued presence in the public sphere. Key to Madison's success in both of these endeavors were two factors: her ability to successfully perform her younger self and the fact that her importance as a celebrity was not a function of her ability to create—whether through her body or through her imagination. Elwell's careful record of the dark hair pieces and accessories attests to Madison's active performance of that younger self. Its concessions to the signs of age, in turn, are acceptable because Madison's advanced age only strengthened her importance as a figure who could establish ties between individuals—and across history. The special case of Madison's debt and the steps she took to escape from it by selling both humans and papers, in turn, draws attention to the ways in which the successful maintenance of a public image took on special urgency for older female celebrities.

The nature of Madison's fame as a social facilitator allowed her to age while avoiding censure for maintaining a public identity and presence. The roles she enacted were safely distanced from any suggestion of creative activity. This distance was created not only by her real activities, but also by the necessity of defining the role of First Lady in a way that did not hew too closely to European models that cast the queen as a vessel for the birth of a new king and, in turn, the security of the kingdom or nation. When Madison contributed to the health of her nation, it was primarily by allowing access to one influential figure or another and, through this access, soothing diplomatic tensions. By casting herself as a facilitator rather than a creator, Madison not only distanced herself from literal queenship, but existed outside the metaphor of procreation that cast women authors into the realm of the "unnatural" when they dared to publish past their youth and child-bearing ages. The public's continued acceptance of her as a public figure into her old age, then, was possible because of the exact nature of her fame.

Ultimately, Elwell's portrait and its place in Madison's larger project of self-presentation provide a useful framework for examining the reception of famous older women in society—and how the reciprocal relationship between female

celebrities and their public evolves over time. The strategies that Elwell and Madison used to represent the First Lady carefully responded not only to Madison's own needs and identity, but to the needs she fulfilled for the American public. In considering the careers and images of other famous women we may find that they—like Madison—maintained their fame and popularity by highlighting the specific advantages of their age and identity in fulfilling the changing social, cultural, and emotional needs of their publics.

CODA: FIRST LADY

In the case of American First Ladies, as a category, the changing norms and expectations of American women may render Madison's exact case fairly unique. Even during the nineteenth century, these women's public reputations ranged from being uneasy with high society (in the case of Rachel Jackson) to supporting lavish balls and capitalizing on their youthful energy (Julia Tyler); from influential advisors (Sarah Polk) to purposefully disengaged from the public sphere (Margaret Taylor). Further, throughout the nineteenth century the ideals of womanhood in America shifted dramatically, encompassing constructions as diverse as the cult of "True Womanhood" to the "New Woman" of the late century. Finally, few chose to be portrayed in their advanced age, even when they reached it. While the variety of personalities women have brought to the role of First Lady since Madison's tenure necessarily require meeting them and their portraits on their own terms, the deeply intertwined threads of their personas and the expectations of their publics nonetheless remain central to our understanding of images of First Ladies.

In the twenty-first century, public responses to Amy Sherald's 2018 official portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama have provided a marked case in point. Although many commentators praised the image, many others expressed dissatisfaction with it. Curiously, much of the commentary of either side centered on the question of whether—and to what extent—viewers were able to recognize what Mrs. Obama meant to them in the portrait. *The New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjodahl asserted that the generalized features and the portrait's

emphasis on the First Lady's dress allowed the painting to capture her "public role" (Schjeldahl 31). Others, as noted by Steve Johnson in the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of the piece, expressed their frustration in the work's generalization of the First Lady's features—particularly the substitution of *grisaille* modeling for her actual skin tone (Johnson, n.p.). These responses demonstrate only two of the varied meanings the American public associated with her identity. In this way, they call attention to the fact that Sherald's creation of the portrait mirrored the First Lady's own need to navigate public perception and opinion carefully. Whether viewers celebrated the portrait or expressed their discontent for it, however, their judgments only reinforce the implicit expectation that First Ladies and their images satisfy their publics' needs as individuals and as members of a national community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported, in part, by a grant from the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects at the University of Texas Permian Basin. I am grateful not only for this support, but also for the engaging and thoughtful feedback offered by the two anonymous reviewers of this study.

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