

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Charlene M. Boyer Lewis.** *Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte: An American Aristocrat in the Early Republic.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 277 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4430-4.



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As the beautiful daughter of a wealthy merchant, Elizabeth Patterson (1785-1879) was already destined for a life of comfort, yet her marriage to Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Jérôme in 1803 molded her into an American celebrity; she quickly became the subject of conversation on both sides of the Atlantic. Her marriage drew ire from Napoleon who did not see Elizabeth fitting into his schemes, and he had their marriage annulled after less than two years. Elizabeth never saw Jérôme again. In a politically motivated act, Jérôme married Catherine of Württemberg and served as the king of Westphalia from 1807 until 1813 when Napoleon's empire started to crumble. Elizabeth went on to live an eventful life in Europe and the United States, attending festive balls, gossiping among high society, and dabbling in her own business ventures.

Elizabeth instantly became an international celebrity after her marriage, and here Charlene M. Boyer Lewis is careful to distinguish the difference between celebrity and fame. The former came from acts, talents, or other forms of drawing attention to oneself, while the latter came through public services. Women such as Dolley Madison were famous. Elizabeth was a cause célèbre. She adopted fashionable and, for American tastes, provocative French clothing, which both capti-

vated and drew scorn from her peers. They were critical of her style of dress and increasingly aristocratic mannerisms. American women in the early Republic wore simple clothing that reflected their republican identities. They were expected to be good, domestic housewives devoted to their husbands and children. Elizabeth's clothes exposed her body and labeled her as a European aristocrat, a claim that Elizabeth had no qualms against. Elizabeth concerned herself with status, and in her own words, happiness meant to be handsome, to be a wit, to have a fortune, to live in Paris, and to have the freedom of the houses of the best circles (p. 164).

Elizabeth stood in stark contrast to her American peers as she derided the ideals of a republic and challenged societal norms. She despised how in America, women were limited to a domestic lifestyle, unlike in her beloved Europe where women had more freedoms. Elizabeth rebelled against the American standards of what it meant to be a woman as she idealized aristocratic behaviors. Her aristocratic tendencies, connections to Napoleon, and the possibility of her son inheriting an imperial title led to fears of French influence in the United States and a proposed amendment in 1810 to effectively strip one's American citizenship if they were connected to foreign nations. Although Elizabeth despised democ-

racy as a means of government and believed that some people were better suited than others for governing, she never really involved herself in any political endeavors.

It came as little surprise for many when she left the United States for prolonged trips to Europe, often staying for years at a time, only to return to the United States to settle business affairs and depart again. Her time in Europe was characterized by socialization among her peers and trying to find a suitable wife and position for her son Jérôme. After her failed marriage and Napoleon's fall, she saw her son as a viable asset for getting back into the European aristocracy if she could marry him into a titled family. Elizabeth made sure that young Jérôme received an excellent education to prepare him for aristocratic life, but to the chagrin of his mother, he chose to marry an American and lived out his life in the United States. Elizabeth resettled in Baltimore, Maryland, by the mid-1830s, claiming that Paris was for the young and the beautiful. The old order was rapidly fading as the rising middle class took over powerful political positions to Elizabeth's dismay. The life she desired was no longer viable.

Lewis's highly readable and engaging book is not or-

ganized like a typical biography, detailing a subject's life from birth to death, but as five thematic topics with some overlap: her fame, behavior as an aristocrat, independence, place as a woman in the Enlightenment Atlantic World, and relationship with her family. Much of her early and late years are not discussed in depth unless they are related to certain events; however, this does not detract from the work as readers still get a clear picture of Elizabeth's life and character. In addition, the research Lewis put into this work is quite thorough and incorporates sources from numerous archives, along with letters and journals from Elizabeth's contemporaries. Elizabeth herself took an interest in how others would view her and annotated much of her papers.

Perhaps what makes this work stand out as a biography is the treatment and juxtaposition of American and European societies. Throughout the work, Lewis examines and details what these societies were like and how Elizabeth fit into them. Readers will come away with not only who Elizabeth was and her rationale for her choices but also a detailed exposition of the values and views of American and European culture. Whether readers hail from academic backgrounds or a general interest in history, there is much to take away from this work.

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