Serious jesting | A close inspection of the Smith-Adams epistolary courtship based on their early love-letters, 1762--1764

Alaric Miller

The University of Montana

1997

Recommended Citation
Miller, Alaric, "Serious jesting | A close inspection of the Smith-Adams epistolary courtship based on their early love-letters, 1762--1764" (1997). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3531.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3531

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
The University of Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature **

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature  

Date  

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
"SERIOUS JESTING: A CLOSE INSPECTION OF THE SMITH-ADAMS
EPISTOLARY COURTSHIP BASED ON THEIR EARLY LOVE-LETTERS,
1762-1764."

BY
ALARIC MILLER
B.A. THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA, 1990
PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1997

Approved by:
Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School.

Date
4/28/97
"SERIOUS JESTING: A CLOSE INSPECTION OF THE SMITH-ADAMS EPISTOLARY COURTSHIP BASED ON THEIR EARLY LOVE-LETTERS, 1762-1764."

This essay tells the story of a lengthy epistolary courtship between Abigail Smith and John Adams, lasting from 1762-1764. Lasting for three years, the Smith-Adams courtship produced over fifty love-letters, which offers a rich framework for the study of gender relations in the New England region during the mid-eighteenth-century. By using their written words to explore courtship rituals in the eighteenth-century such as letter-writing, bundling, and gossip, along with the influence of an extended separation because of smallpox, we will see how courtship could be a formal process of emotional and gender education before marriage, and not just a financial contract coupled to love or superficial compatibility.

While separated because of smallpox inoculation, Abigail and John wrote their longest love-letters, which cover a broad range of topics that build the foundation to examine specific examples of love, power, order, and intimacy during their entire courtship. The Smith-Adams courtship was a time for discovery and education. It gave a prolonged chance for a prospective couple to get to know each other and to determine compatibility.

The Smith-Adams courtship was an emotional education, then, which came before the legal obligations of marriage, intended to discover whether or not Abigail and John were compatible in spirit, intelligence, and moral values. These lengthy, hand-written letters were an invitation to intimacy and because Abigail and John were not only the lead actors, but also the authors, directors, and producers of this play, they could use it also to define their feminine and masculine roles as well as to spell-out their emotional and personal needs.

I add to the social and cultural history of courtship in the eighteenth-century, for I borrow from literary studies to establish and clarify the Smith-Adams courtship story, and this paper contributes to the ever growing fields of gender history, education, epistolary studies and women's studies. In specific, I offer a far more positive view of the functions of courtship than recent works by other scholars.
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A WAY OF LEARNING.

CHAPTER I: THE EARLY COURTSHIP

A) "I NO SOONER CLOSE MY EYES:" DREAMS AND WISHES FULFILLED.
B) "THE GAIETY OF YOUR FANCY:" BUNDLING.
C) "NEVER SPEAK ILL OF ANYBODY:" GOSSIP.

CHAPTER II: THE STATE OF SEPARATION

A) LOVE IN THE TIME OF SMALLPOX.
B) "I AM OFTEN IN YOUR THOUGHTS:" THE ISOLATION OF TWO LOVERS.
C) "THAT BOLD SPEECH:" A NEBULA OF LIMINALITY.
D) "A CATALOGUE OF YOUR FAULTS:" A LOVE MAP.

CONCLUSION: "TILL DEATH US DO PART"
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Alan and Phyllis Miller, my parents, for all of your wonderful encouragement. Thank you Professor Kenneth Lockridge, Professor Anya Jabour, and all of the Professors in the History Department at the University of Montana. I am enormously grateful to everyone at Mansfield Library who helped me find the little things.

Thank you John and Angel Herring for your friendship. Thank you Hugh Ambrose for all the wonderful skiing we did and inspiring me to finally finish what I started. Thank you John Burbidge for your free-lance writing and your small but important editing work. I am indebted to all of my close rock climbing partners for their patience and good humor during the several years of writing this paper. Thank you Abigail Smith and John Adams for teaching me "The Art of Courtship."
"The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed."
Carl Jung

INTRODUCTION: A WAY OF LEARNING

The Smith-Adams courtship letters provide a fabulously rich foundation for the study of gender relations and courtship in the mid-eighteenth-century. The primary goals of this paper are: 1) To explore letter-writing in courtship as a communicative art form used by Abigail Smith and John Adams to measure and test each others' character and intuition - a form of emotional testing and education; 2) To use the Smith-Adams letters as a case study to examine several courtship rituals in eighteenth-century America, such as the writing of love-letters, bundling, and gossip, as well as to evaluate the influence of a separation because of the smallpox inoculation. In sum, to decode the subtle messages hidden in the physical evidence of their letters, which are beautiful, passionate, and poetic artifacts which are key to understanding the full function of this courtship and perhaps others; 3) And finally to analyze what I call
"serious jesting," meaning the overall courtship game played by Abigail Smith and John Adams in the context of the gender system of the time. I intend to probe these three themes by contexting and unpacking these letters one by one, and for the most part in chronological order, by drawing out various dimensions of the courtship as I proceed.

If one of these purposes dominates, it will be to show that courtship was not always simply a contest in the war of the sexes or in family dynastic battles, but could also be an important time for men and women to use their best judgement in selecting a mate. Particularly in families where dynastic wealth was not an overwhelming factor. Courtship gave a prolonged chance for prospective couples to get to know each other and to discover whether or not they were temperamentally compatible for a life-long relationship.

At this point, we need a working definition and a social context for courtship in the eighteenth-century. Courtship is defined in Webster's dictionary as "the act, process, or period of wooing," along with the, "social activities leading to engagement and marriage." A long walk in the woods, or casual flirting with innocent embraces would have been considered "courting" but not a formal
courtship.¹ The latter implied a progression towards marriage and the verb "to court" was used more broadly to describe this intense socializing between men and women.² In this essay, the word courtship is used in reference to rituals or activities that were expected to lead to marriage.

The Smith-Adams courtship, then, can be view as the personal evaluation of a life-long investment plan. I argue that when both halves of a couple contain high-powered personalities, that marriage became a calculated power merger of these personalities, rather than merely a love story. And certainly Abigail and John become one of early America's most intriguing power couples. In this train of thought, courtship is the same as looking into the stock portfolio of a company before you buy it, one wants to look at the list of the securities and assets first - of course caveat emptor. I tend to think that no man or woman really wants to make a investment of diminishing returns when it comes to marriage, but there was more to Smith-Adams story than just a business deal. For one thing, in the


²Ellen Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control." p. 410
eighteenth-century, the legal subordination of women to men in matrimonial affairs made it difficult or impossible to receive a divorce. For another, this meant that women had to be suspicious, and especially Abigail Smith, because the first was often the only courtship and they had to get it right.

Yet power was not the only issue. Historians use the word "modern" to describe a marriage that was based on a foundation of compassion, mutual respect, and romantic love. A lengthy courtship, then, was an important way to achieve such a marriage. In this case, I argue that Abigail Smith exercised her power during courtship - a woman's only expression of power until she became a widow - to demand a loving union of equals, not one of dominance, submission, disgrace, or mistreatment.

The Smith-Adams courtship both was and was not unique. Perhaps holding a suitor at safe distance could be very advantageous for many women, especially if they had money. In its initial arms-length quality and duration the Smith-

---


Adams courtship was not in grievous contrast to other courtships in the eighteenth-century. Yet, although the Smith-Adams courtship was a success story as were many others, we need to understand that success had a prolonged wearing in their case, and failure was possible. Courtships could end in rejection, which created a sense of failure and sometimes generated rage and fury in the rejected person. Indeed, courtship could be wildly problematical for both men and women. In these respects, then, the Smith-Adams courtship was different.

As we will see, by writing letters during a long courtship, Abigail helped John replace any idea he had about the patriarchal ideal of male authority with a flexible view of gender roles, and above all the emotional relationships in marriage. Abigail exercised the dominant will in this courtship by educating her future mate, but it was a two-way

---


street. By the end of their courtship, each had earned the other's confidence, admiration, and friendship, without sacrificing the passion that also marked their letters.

Yet, to see this from still another perspective, this courting pair were, in the special qualities of their courtship, not totally outside sheltery frame of their culture. In the middle of the eighteenth-century, when Abigail and John began courting and writing letters, a new understanding of marriage and the relationship between men and women which glorified a partnership of equals, reciprocal love and respect had begun to emerge. Where did this new understanding of marriage come from? Daniel Scott Smith argued that the modernization theory best explains the changes in the structure of the family in the eighteenth-century. Smith suggests that the hardest evidence for the decline in the absolute power of parents over their children's marriages was seemingly economic. By the middle of the eighteenth-century, parents did not have the money or land to pass onto their children, thus they had little control over them. The direct "parental-run marriage

---

7 Anya Jabour, "Hearts Divided." p.14

system" was disappearing. Further, with the companionate marriage as an emerging ideal, a woman could delay marriage and take her time to select a mate carefully. Perhaps remaining single for a while was already becoming an attractive prospect to some women in the eighteenth-century. Losing freedom was not. (Tradition also decreed a careful courtship however; in the Smith-Adams case, by Abigail's marriage portion she was making a major contribution to her future husband's finances, thus she controlled her destiny before entering the marriage.)

Perhaps a demand for love as the basis of marriage involved fundamental change in power relations within the family. Indeed, the ideal of a "companionate marriage" also demanded a reassessment of the power relations between the sexes since it depended on a greater sense of equality and sharing. By examining the early love-letters, we will see how Abigail and John aspired, as early as the 1760s, to the new ideal of a "companionate marriage." This young couple would soon live in an age that "the pursuit of happiness" was one of mankind's unalienable rights. Also,

---

9 Ellen Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control." p.412

on many levels, there were fundamental changes happening in early American society prior to the American Revolution. ¹¹ And changing social attitudes towards marriage and family were part of this larger picture.

Letter-writing over a prolonged period allowed Abigail Smith and John Adams to learn for themselves, through investigation and teaching, if the other person offered a good prospect of mutual love, honor, and companionship. ¹² All of these were important elements and essential for a modern or companionate marriage. Mutual education through courtship created a legendary relationship that lasted fifty four years. As we will see, the Smith-Adams courtship illuminates the relationship between two young people, much the same as a flash of lightning illuminates the sky: briefly, but with an amazing clarity that allows the reader to learn a great deal.

---

First and foremost, I would like briefly to explain


more about the research involved in unveiling the long and passionate courtship between these two famous Americans. I began simply with a desire to explore the Adams Papers. In 1954, the Adams Trust announced the opening of a fantastically rich repository to qualified scholars and a large program of microfilming and publishing of the documents, all of which were hitherto inaccessible archives of the Adams family. The Adams Papers consist of 35mm microfilms of letters, commonplace books, "Letterbooks," and miscellaneous writings that add to a total of 608 reels. If unrolled from their 608 reels, all of these documents would extend for over five miles. Even the most dedicated scholar would be hard-pressed to read all of these volumes. My problem at first with this research assignment was finding the moral conviction and intellectual strength necessary to keep the compass straight in such an enormous ocean of documents.

To overcome this confusion, I selected an obvious and

13This work and all academic investigations associated with this topic are in great debt to the Massachusetts Historical Society for making the original manuscripts available on microfilm.


15The Mansfield Library on the University of Montana has The Adams Family microfilm reels.
accessible target: Abigail Adams. And I must confess, it was Abigail's extraordinary face that first grabbed my attention. Let us, then, take a look at her, in Benjamin Blyth's portrait, painted in pastels in 1766. Abigail with her mask of determined will, seems to be relaxed, until we notice the self-assertive chin with a Puritan-set mouth, the eyes deep and sharp, sheltering a sensibility taxed by interior struggle. This was the face behind the intriguing letters and I wanted to know more. This desire, in turn, led me to the love-letters Abigail exchanged with her suitor, John Adams. The combination of romance and historical research the Smith-Adams courtship offered me was mind-boggling.

Sometimes I stroll along the rows of books in the library and wonder about the thousands, if not millions of lives recorded on paper. I sometimes wonder about the human craving for romance, our drive to make long term commitments, the sexual bond between men and women, and the intense passion that drags all of us through it. At the same time, exploration and discovery is what makes studying

---


Bernard Bailyn, Faces of Revolution. p.3."
history so interesting to me. With this, and the letters in mind, I set out to study all the biographies written about Abigail and John, which in turn eventually led me back to the letters themselves. My main goal was to uncover something fascinating that no other historian had researched.

After I had read all the biographies on Abigail and John Adams, what stood out and sparked my interest even further was the nearly universal neglect of the Smith-Adams courtship letters in the many excellent biographies of both Abigail and John. This is why my work on the Smith-Adams courtship became important. There was a huge gap in the historical literature that needed to be filled in. At first sight, nothing seems more important to all humans than the selection of a good mate. Yet, for some reason, all of the major biographers of Abigail and John ignored the long and passionate courtship process. Why was this so? I was sure that these other historians had looked at the early


love letters, but these biographers wrote within the traditional framework which viewed Abigail's life in the shadow of the towering figure of her husband. In short, they began Abigail's life with her marriage to John Adams and did not give her autonomous stature as an individual person separated from the men in her life.

Yet clearly, even a glance at the letters showed that long courtship process which educated both Abigail and John convinced them that, before the legal obligation of marriage, they were compatible in spirit, intelligence, values, and energy. Abigail and John's marriage was not simply one that endured, but a relationship that was adept to mature through long phases of separation, revolution, war, and childbearing. Consequently, I argue that their courtship set the framework for their life-long relationship and that the ensuing story is meaningful. It also extends the parameters of what we know about eighteenth-century courtships in general.

But first, we need to find out who Abigail and John were before they started their courtship. Abigail Smith was the middle daughter of three children born to William and Elizabeth Smith in 1744. Her father, William, was an
ordained minister of the North Parish Congregational Church of Weymouth, Massachusetts, a small town located fourteen miles southeast of Boston. The town of Weymouth consisted mainly of small farms and woods.\textsuperscript{20} Her father had descended from a prosperous family of merchants and her mother, Elizabeth, came from one the colony's old and prosperous families: the Quincys. Albeit the family lived well, the Smith's had no great fortune and presumably fit in with the upper middle-class of their time.

Abigail Smith never attended a formal school. This was not because of the prevailing casual attitude towards the education for females, but rather because of her poor health when she was young. Her mind was trained at home and there was no shortage of teachers: her parents, her older sister Mary and her husband Richard Cranch, and her grandparents all helped to cultivate her intellect.\textsuperscript{21} All of these people proved to be remarkable teachers. As a young woman, Abigail also learned to cook, sew, spin, nurse, and manage a household, for that would be her occupation, but she did

\textsuperscript{20}Charles W. Akers. \textit{Abigail Adams: An American Woman.} p. 5

much, much more. The Smith's library was not large, but they owned many of the popular eighteenth-century classic books, which Abigail had access to and was encouraged to read. In fact, a visitor at the Smith's house was permitted to take down any book from the shelves and browse away to their heart's content. In this respect, Abigail's liberated pursuits may have set a standard of tolerance and sensibility that she had to have to create a good life with a husband.

At any rate, clearly the atmosphere at the Smith's house was free for intellectual pursuits. Abigail was infected with a great zeal for literature, reading and comprehending difficult books came naturally for her. For instance, on an early encounter (circa 1761) with John Adams in the Smith's house, Abigail was in the corner of a family room reading a book. The story goes that John crossed the room and inquired what she was reading; Abigail held up the book and it was John Locke's on Human Understanding. Supposedly John smiled and said, "A big book for such a

---

22Edith B. Gelles, Portia p. 27.

23Charles W. Akers, Abigail Adams: An American Woman, p. 15

little head." Then Abigail replied, "You think so, Girls are not to know anything, I'm told, beyond the kitchen and parlor. Yet Girls too may have their curiosity."

Abigail must have lowered her voice and pursed her lips as she continued, "And even a little head, Mr. Adams, may posses a longing for knowledge, or at least for understanding." This brief exchange might seem quaint, but it was the first of many and the chemical reaction between their personalities had begun. At this encounter, Abigail, sixteen years old, had left a man ten years her senior quite speechless. While John was foolish to speak so patronizingly to her, revealing the task she would face in courtship, this encounter must have stirred John Adams profoundly and he did not lose interest in her. From the beginning, their courtship would reveal a contest of intellectual equals, not a patriarchal structure that perpetuated John's dominance. We will see this serious jesting between them again and again. Beneath it, lay Abigail's determination to be treated as an intellectual and emotional equal.

*Ibid. p.233. Bowen does not reveal her source on this story, so we really do not know if this encounter happened or not. Her work is historical fiction, however the letters I provide of the Smith-Adams courtship prove that meetings like this one occurred.*
At this time in his life, John Adams had not done anything in particular worth talking about (compared to later in his life).\textsuperscript{26} At the onset of his courtship with Abigail Smith, he still lived with his mother and he was twenty seven years old.\textsuperscript{27} John was born the oldest of three sons (John, Peter, Elihu) to John Adams senior and Susanna Boylston Adams in 1734. His family lived on a small farm in Braintree, Massachusetts, ten miles southeast of Boston.\textsuperscript{28} Beside farming, his father was a cordwainer - a hemp rope maker - which provided modest means for the family and landed them well below the Smiths in social status, despite John's Harvard degree and a beginning in the law. This difference would be a vital factor in the Smith-Adams courtship. Social leverage was, along with passion, Abigail's guarantee that John would keep coming on long enough for her to test and educate him.

\textsuperscript{26}John Adams enjoyed a brilliant career in the law; then as a Founding Framer his ideas imbued the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of 1787; then he served as Ambassador to France during the American Revolution; then he served as Vice-President for George Washington; then he served as the second President of the United States; then he and Thomas Jefferson died on the same day, July 4th 1826.

\textsuperscript{27}L.H. Butterfield, ed. \textit{The Adams Family Correspondence.} (New York. 1965) vol. 1 p.23

\textsuperscript{28}Catherine Drinker Bowen. \textit{John Adams and the American Revolution.} p. 234.
Young John Adams had little besides a decent education to start with: "no books, no time, no friends, it is my destiny to dig treasures with my own fingers. Nobody will lend me or sell me a pick axe," he wrote. He drove himself relentlessly and pledged himself to seize upon every opportunity in life. In 1754, after John graduated from Harvard, he launched, after a short stretch on schoolteaching, upon a career in law. He had no one to share his life with and John dedicated his time seeking a reputation in the practice of law.

By the end of 1761 things would change precisely because John then met a young, beautiful, intelligent, and socially superior woman named Abigail Smith, whom he met through his close friend of Richard Cranch. By the following year their acquaintance became a courtship, deepening into an enduring attraction. Although marriage to Abigail Smith would bring a good family name, a dowry of household goods, a moderate cash gift, and the prospect of inheriting some land, from a later perspective it is clear that these advantages were shallow compared to what John

---

Adams would find in Abigail Smith herself. Perhaps he himself came to realize this through the long process of courtship.

Although today the search for someone to love - and ultimately marry - takes place in a very different setting from that of the eighteenth-century, it has not lost the tremendous impact it has on individual lives. In fact, few individuals come to maturity without experiencing the delight, pain, confusion, excitement - and learning - that accompanies the choice of a mate. Let us, then, take a more in-depth look at the courtship and early love-letters of Abigail Smith and John Adams.

The Smith-Adams courtship can be divided into clearly defined and distinct stages. The first stage was an early conventional stage which lasted from October 4, 1762 [the first letter John Adams wrote] to the early spring of 1764, during which Abigail Smith and John Adams played the familiar games of courtship. The preliminary stages of the Smith-Adams courtship were not unique, but still offer a remarkable record of courtship in the eighteenth-century,

---


and it is this phase which will be the subject in this first chapter.

The second phase of the Smith-Adams courtship was marked by a month long separation because of the smallpox inoculation, and this was when the courtship really changes gears and becomes unique and wild. The second stage lasted from the early spring of 1764 to the date of Abigail and John's wedding on October 25, 1764, and will be the subject of chapter two. Each chapter contains small segments that represent an extended analysis of a single aspect or topic in relation to the Smith-Adams courtship as a whole, but these generally succeed one another within each chapter according to the strict chronology of the courtship.
CHAPTER I: THE EARLY COURTSHIP

Through the lens of a very special eighteenth-century subculture - letter-writing - we will see the Smith-Adams courtship unfold and ripen in its early stages, from late 1762 to the early spring of 1764. What follows here, is a selective view of the Smith-Adams courtship by examining the content, form, and subtle messages in their early letters, which gives us the framework for exploring the rest of their courtship. While in its three years of maturation, there were perhaps as many as fifty actual meetings between
Abigail and John, but many of these meetings went unrecorded. What is offered here, then, is an epistolary courtship. To be more specific, this is the study of the letter-writing courtship, because the only real record we have of the Smith-Adams courtship is letters they wrote to one another.

By the middle of the eighteenth-century letter-writing had developed into an art form, lending this age the distinction of the golden age of letter-writing. It can be argued, then, that letter-writing formed an important part of the social education of young men and women. In the eighteenth-century there was no cinema; there was, of course, no radio; and there was certainly no television or E-mail.

Save for sex and drinking, people found entertainment in language, either in books, newspapers, letter-writing, or in friends' anecdotes, rumors, or clever structuring of words. Moreover, language exquisitely handled was the medium which provided a young couple to negotiate with and discover one another. In the eighteenth-century an important component of conversation was courtesy; ladies and gentlemen were courteous - in gender specific ways - in

---

32 Ibid. p.58
conversation, manner, and behavior. Therefore, letter-writing conventions developed that translated manners to prose style. Above all, letters, like polite conversation, were supposedly civilized and the forms of address among ladies and gentlemen were courteous. As we will see, such was not the case in the Smith-Adams courtship.

Within its frame, letter-writing was a testing position between two clever people, with an aggressive challenge from one side followed by intellectual probing from the other. This is what makes the Smith-Adams courtship letters fun to read. To a degree, such was expected in courtship. But more than most Abigail and John exploited many of the advantages courtship opened between a man and a woman. This can be seen in their first letters exchanged between October of 1762 and April of 1763.

On October 4, 1762, John Adams opened his epistolary siege by writing to his sweetheart Abigail Smith and started with an aggressive challenge by demanding kisses. "Miss Adorable: By the same Token that the Bearer hereof sat up with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many

33Edith B. Gelles, Portia. p.59

3Ibid. p.60
Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O'Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account," he demanded. Seemingly this letter was quite aggressive for a new courtship, but John starts to spell-out what he desired from their relationship. As he continued, "I presume O have good Right to draw upon you for the Kisses as I have given two or three Million at least, when one has been received, and the Consequence the Account between us in immensely in favours of yours." This letter contained many different strong messages. In the first place, John was trying to be manly by declaring authority to demanding kisses, which was a claim to her physical body. In the second, he describes intimacy as reciprocal exchange and revealed that the balance was immensely in his favor. More importantly, John admitted that Abigail controlled the power to reject him early in their courtship.

Quite obviously, from the beginning, their relationship involved various forms of touching, kissing, and intimate contact so common to eighteenth-century courtship.

Editorial Note: In selecting the quotation for this paper, I have followed the policy of Professor Kenneth Lockridge and the William and Mary Quarterly in not indenting or single-spacing of long passages, the aim is a more readable text. All of the letter quotations in this paper were taken from L.H. Butterfield ed. The Adams Family Correspondence. (New York, 1965) volume 1. Hereafter, referred to A.F.C.
Nonetheless, John was not teasing; such shows of male sexual aggression were common courtship etiquette. And a female response was expected. According to some scholars of women's experiences in early nineteenth-century America, self-control and something they call a "passionlessness" was expected of the women in nineteenth-century courtship customs. This term was used to convey the view that women lacked sexual aggressiveness, that their sexual appetites contributed a very minor part to their motivations, that lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic. This was simply not true in the Smith-Adams case or of eighteenth-century courtship in general. As we will see, Abigail does fit in with this paradigm and she showed a lot of aggression in sustaining the courtship.

From her perspective as a woman in the mid-eighteenth-century, Abigail Smith was raised to maintain the sexual boundaries in any relationship she might have with a man. Still, up to this point in her life, Abigail's experience with men was positive. Her father was kind and generous and her older sister's husband was one of Abigail's teachers.

---


37 Ibid. p.220
Moreover, Puritan theology in which she was raised, the daughters of Eve, if anything, were considered more prone to excess of passion because their rational control was seen as weaker than that of a man. Abigail Smith was not weaker in rational control of her passions, but rather she enjoyed the freedom to express it and the passion never died in their courtship letters. To the contrary, the letters grow with intensity and so does her passion for John. As we will see, Abigail Smith was aggressive and John Adams admired her for it. In this frankness they both expressed and stretched the bounds of eighteenth-century courtship.

John Adams took it upon himself to observe the boundaries of eighteenth-century courtship rituals, but there was no doubt that the physical passion between them was heating-up. On February 14, 1763, he wrote a long letter to vent some passion after a storm has detained him from seeing his love. "Accidents are often more Friendly to us, than our own Prudence. I intended to have been at Weymouth Yesterday, but a storm detaining me from so much friendly, and social Company, and perhaps blessed to you, or me or both, for keeping me at my Distance," he informed

38Ibid. p.224

39A.F.C. p. 3
Abigail. Furthermore, through his letters John warned that both he and Abigail should shoulder the responsibility of controlling their love and passion. Arguing that both genders shared the mutual accountability for physical passion, "For every experimental Phylosopher knows, that the steel and the Magnet or the Glass and the feather will not fly together with more Celerity, than somebody And somebody," he stated. As we will see, however, a more important aspect of the courtship was intellectual harmony. I suggest that both John and Abigail were looking for a mate that appreciated the others' educational accomplishments and independent mind. Letter-writing allowed them to explore the goals and desires of their future mate, and here too, they did so with playful frankness and intensity which established the possibilities of eighteenth-century courtship.

On April 20, 1763, in a letter that became the new and lasting model for the eventual Smith-Adams correspondence, the character and voice of John Adams suddenly changed and became strikingly different from his initial letters opening the courtship. To start with, John changed his salutation

"A.F.C. p.3"
for his girlfriend. Previously, it had been unstable, and a little patronizing. Ranging from "Dear Madame" to "Miss Adorable" and "Miss Jemima." Now, he invoked her as "Diana." John wrote, "Diana: Love sweetens Life, and Life sometimes destroys Love." His new salutation for Abigail was a reference to the Roman Goddess "Diana." She was the great goddess of the moon, hunting, and she supposedly watched over pregnant women.

It is natural in courtships to assign pen names [pet names] for each other; it is a manifestation of affection. This was very conventional in eighteenth-century letter-writing. Pen names were part of the letter-writing exercise to avoid signing one's name and to choose a name from classical history or mythology.¹¹ This was evidently done not only to display one's literary attainments, but also to gain -or pretend to gain - at least temporary freedom from Puritan morals and manners.¹² John Adams used the pen name "Lysander." Lysander was a Roman general, but the reference was murky to exactly who he was, maybe that was his point.

¹¹L.H. Butterfield, The Book of John and Abigail. p.4 Later in life, Abigail chose Portia as her pen name. Portia -the virtuous Roman matron of history and the learned woman Jurist in The Merchant of Venice. p.4

¹²Ibid. p.4
At any rate, pen names also allowed a more relaxed feeling about the serious topics during courtship that demanded candor.

Perhaps John's reference to Abigail as a goddess implied that John felt she controlled sort of power over him. Was it mythical power or real power? In the purest form, power is the ability to act or enforce one's will on someone or something. Abigail could have rejected him, denying not only sex but her resources as well, and that would have been real power. More importantly, John Adams was tormented by this power she controlled over him, as so many would-be patriarchs of his generation would have been, but John was not a patriarch. If female power evokes male response, there was something in John's personality that allowed him to acquiesce to this power and not rage against Abigail. In the Smith-Adams case, to be more specific, power was the ultimate aphrodisiac.\textsuperscript{3}

Powerful elements within John began to emerge, easing his need to push and strike at the world, as we will see,

\textsuperscript{3}Kenneth A Lockridge, \textit{On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage}. (New York University Press. 1992.) p.86

"Power as an aphrodisiac" is a old idea, but I must cite Henry Kissinger in a discussion about American Presidents and the power relationship with their wives. "Love and Politics," \textit{George}. Oct. 1996.p.130
this theme of becoming softer towards the world and other people because of his relationship with Abigail becomes paramount in the life of John Adams. John felt the world, directly and sensitively and without thinking about it expressed his feelings with a vividness that makes his prose almost come alive.

On April 20th, 1763, John Adams wrote, "I Wonder if the Fires of Patriotism do not soon begin to burn!" revealing his ambition for a career in the political world that would soon consume most of his life. Recall, the year of 1765 would bring the Stamp Act Crisis and it marks John's emergence into the world of public controversy. "And now I think of it, there is no possible Way of diminishing the Misery of Man kind so effectually as by printing this letter," he reasoned. In letter after letter, humor flowed naturally from his dramatic human encounters. As mentioned, he signed the letter off with his new and unique salutation, "To the great Goddess Diana.""5

In the face of these overtures, and with a traditional reluctance, Abigail Smith did not return a letter until August 11, 1763, although several meetings must have intervened. From her parent's house in Weymouth, she began

"A.F.C. p.6
her first letter with a calm, familiar, almost marital salutation for her suitor. "My Friend: If I was sure your absence today was occasioned, by what it generally is, either to wait upon Company, or promote some good work, I freely confess my mind would be much more at ease than at present it is. Yet this uneasiness does not arise from any apprehension of Slight or neglect, but a fear least you are indisposed, for that you said should be your only hindrance," wrote Abigail. In short, she wanted more attention from John, more than just letter-writing. Addressing John as "My friend" was not unique for eighteenth-century letter-writing customs, but it revealed a sense of equals in courtship etiquette. In a single letter, then, her first reply, Abigail reveals that John's initial letters have not been a monologue sent by a madman into the void.

Abigail seemed to open her heart and "freely confess" her mind in this letter, her apprehension was not because John was neglecting her attention, she simply missed his company and wanted to pursue this relationship more. Instantly, Abigail changed the topic with great ease to politics in response to John's comment "The Fires of

"A.F.C.p.6
Patriotism." Discussing politics with her suitor in a letter was quite unusual for a young women in the eighteenth-century. "It is a tottering Building, and often reminds us that it will finally fall," she responded. Young Abigail Smith, as well as John, saw the American Revolution in their future; she saw the building tottering. Her ability to discuss serious topics and then switch to the mundane was extraordinary.

Abigail Smith and John Adams's correspondence showed that the middle of the eighteenth-century was indeed "a golden age of letter-writing." The Smith-Adams epistolary courtship was able to grow and flower, slowly into an important testing position which would serve as the ground of later, energetic efforts to educate each other. Ordinary discourse between men and women was governed by clearly understood conventions. There was gallantry by the male, signaling dominance; and then there was modesty and discretion by the female as a sign of submissiveness. At the start, the Smith-Adams courtship letters were very conventional, but this set the stage for the fun to come later on. Next, we will explore how letter-writing allowed

"A.C.F. p. 6-7

"Edith B. Gelles, Portia, p. 58.
the Smith-Adams relationship to escalated to a new and subtle psychological level.

"I NO SOONER CLOSE MY EYES:" DREAMS AND WISHES FULFILLED

On Saturday morning August 21, 1763, John wrote a fabulously rich letter to Abigail narrating a dream he had, thereby opening still another stage of intimacy. This is the only recorded dream we have of John Adams, there is no evidence in the historical literature that others exist. On that August morning he wrote, "Last Night--I lay, in the well known Chamber, and dreamed, I saw a Lady, tripping it over the Hill, on Weymouth shore, and Spreading Light and Beauty and Glory, all around her." Then he vividly described the woman in his dream making another reference to a Roman Goddess. "At first I thought it was Aurora, with her fair Complexion, her Crimson Blushes and her million Charms and Graces. But I soon found it was Diana, a Lady infinitely dearer to me and more charming," he declared. A dream is a peculiar state of mental activity, shortly stated, dreams are ideas that you wake up from, and John's image of Aurora, the Roman Goddess of dawn seemed a brilliant and romantic way to woo his girlfriend. By reflecting over this dream,

*A.F.C. p.8
it becomes possible to get closer to understanding it.

If dreams are windows into the future of one's life, then close inspection of a dream reveals inner ambitions, goals, emotions, and desires of that person. The Smith-Adams courtship contained a few important dreams that stood in need of explanation. With close inspection of these dreams, it is possible to understand the relationship to waking life, the subtle meaning of dreams, and the significance of dreaming to the Smith-Adams courtship. Abigail Smith and John Adams' dreams were declarations of affection and another factor in the emotional education of Abigail and John.

Sigmund Freud argued that romantic dreams, sexual dreams, fantasies and desires that arise essentially from mental impulses and represent manifestations of mental forces which have been prevented from expanding freely during the daytime. So how does this apply to the matter at hand? What were the hints, symbols, and the subtle nondirect representations hidden in their dreams that the grand master of psychoanalysis would want us to look at?

Perhaps all humans want someone to curl up with and

---

dream with at night, to find comfort in each other's company, to relinquish the day and receive the night, to make an orderly retreat from the boundaries of daily life that contain us. John proved in his dream that he wanted someone to share his life with and this person was Abigail Smith. "Should Diana make her Appearance every morning instead of Aurora, I should not sleep as I do, but should be awake and admiring by four, at latest.--You may be sure I was mortified when I found, I had only been dreaming," John testified. This dream was the opportunity to give in and admit to love and weakness and his desire to continue this courtship. As he wrote, "The Impression however of this dream awaked me thoroughly, and since I lost my Diana, I enjoyed the Opportunity of viewing and admiring Miss Aurora. She's a sweet Girl, upon my Word. Her breath is wholesome as the sweetly blowing Spices of Arabia."\textsuperscript{51} Freud has suggested that dreams are a liberation of the spirit from the power of external nature, and a freeing of the soul from the bonds of the senses.\textsuperscript{52}

In the interpretation of dreams, it is advisable to divide the dream into separate elements and to find

\textsuperscript{51}A.F.C. p.8

\textsuperscript{52}Sigmund Freud, \textit{On Dreams}. p.14
associations attaching to each of the fragments separately. For example, this dream followed two distinct streams of thought and then ended in a confluence. The first stream of thought was that John Adams associated his girlfriend with the Roman Goddess of dawn, perhaps the dawn of his emotional life and another reference to the power Abigail must have aroused in him. The second stream of thought in this dream was that when John awoke and found himself mortified loosing the impression of Diana, he wanted Aurora - Abigail - there every morning to fulfill emotional needs. It was a conventional, rather stiff dream, but a symbol of desired intimacy all the same.

Abigail Smith also dreamed of her suitor. Her dream was recorded eight months later during the separation because of smallpox, but Abigail's dream fits in nicely here. Moreover, there exists only one other recorded dream of Abigail's and it was much later in her life, on the eve of her daughter's marriage. From this, I concluded that dreams were very personal and private for Abigail, as they are for many of us. In her rare and very haunting dream, I discovered that Abigail revealed impulses and strange mental forces which must have been prevented from expanding freely during her day.
"What does it signify," Abigail questioned, "why may not I visit you a Days as well as Nights?" in a letter written on Friday morning April 20, 1764. Abigail experienced a strange omen that night and recorded her most unconscious self, if we accept dreams to be the manifestations of such. With great emotion and detail Abigail described what some might call a nightmare. "I no sooner close my Eyes that some invisible Being, swift as the Alborack of Mahomet, bears me to you. I see you, but cannot make my self visible to you. That tortures me, but it is still worse when I do not come for I am then haunted by a dozen ugly Sprights," she reported. What do these spirits mean? In this dream, Abigail can see John but seemed to be trapped on different plane, haunted by spirits. If I experienced this dream, I would not be able to close my eyes the rest of the night. Then the chemicals in her brain really began to churn, and Abigail must have tossed and turned during this nightmarish encounter. "One will catch me and leep into the Sea, an other will carry me up a precipice (like that which Edgar describes to Lear) then toss me down, and were I not then light as the Gosemore I should shiver into atoms-an other will be pouring down my throat stuff worse than the witches Broth in Macbeth," she elaborated.
The impression of this dream was that she wanted a partner for protection during the night, but there was uncertainty in her future. "Where I shall be carried next I know not, but I had rather have the small pox by inoculation half a dozen times, than be sprighted about as I am." The dark and haunting images revealed a remarkable dream, which will be placed in context later. In the first half, Abigail was obviously speaking from her heart. She clearly enjoyed being with John and greatly enjoyed his companionship. Yet in the second half, she vividly discussed haunting images which were her subtle plans to manage and manipulate her lover for the benefit of the relationship. Interestingly enough, this dreamed proved that Abigail had read and comprehended Shakespeare.

In these dreams Abigail and John tested the future of their correspondence by addressing the intimate realm of dreams and pleasure each of them received in the thoughtfulness of such intense letter-writing. In his dream, John was willing grope for love. In her dream, Abigail was blatantly asking John to see her. Dreams are intimate, yet risky, because they offer insights into a persons ambitions, goals, and the inner-self. Men and women

---

who are too aggressive at the beginning of courtship might suffer unpleasant consequences: rejection. Perhaps getting too close, touch too soon, groveling too much, or in this case write too much in a dream, a suitor might run the risk of being repelled. The invitations in the Smith-Adams courtship became steadily more conspicuous.

Dreams allowed this young couple to convey their affections to one another by using a very subtle form of communication. Dreams are very complex and difficult emotions to analyze, and are open to individual interpretation. These dreams were complex, intriguing, and compelling, and they offered details of hidden emotions. The Smith-Adams courtship would continue and further engage in a series of unobtrusive tests to reveal the fitness of the proposed partner for matrimony. John and Abigail's dreams revealed one more transition in the Smith-Adams courtship, now we turn from dreaming about being together to actual physical intimacy regulated by a eighteenth-century courtship ritual: bundling.

"THE GAIETY OF YOUR FANCY:" BUNDLING

"It is better to be looked over than to be overlooked," Mae West once said, and I think she captured the essence of
courtship rituals in any generation. This section deals with letters written between September of 1763 to the early winter of 1764. I will analyze the eighteenth-century courtship ritual of bundling and how it applied to the Smith-Adams courtship. We will also see the interaction of a mutual friend, Hannah Storer Green, and her influence on Abigail and John's courtship. Physical intimacy is an important step in any relationship. In the eighteenth-century, bundling allowed physical intimacy without sex. The exact origins of bundling are unclear, but it flourished about the middle of the eighteenth-century along the Northeastern and Atlantic seaboard.

In the simplest form, bundling meant young men and women paying court to each other, in bed, in the dark, half naked. In early America, as an extra precaution, a wooden board was often placed in the bed to divide the pair. More important, it was doubtful (certain in the Smith-Adams case) that sex was never a product of such arrangement.

---

54 Here I must cite television. Mae West was an actress in the 20th century and quite the expert on courtship. Desmond Morris used her in a show on P.B.S. discussing courtship and mating.


56 On the virginity of Abigail and John before their marriage, see Charles Akers, Abigail Adams: An American Women. p.17
Bundling placed a young couple in bed together for the purpose of carrying on the courtship, not ending it in disgrace, for a well placed scream would have brought instant aid if harm was intended. In the Smith-Adams case, bundling was another courtship ritual which moved Abigail and John closer towards marriage.

Some historians argue that bundling was only a lower-class custom. However, it seems quite possible that the custom transcended class boundaries and was an important educational ritual for many young people, regardless of their class. Historian Mary Beth Norton argues that bundling was a custom which led to indiscretions and a young couple could use or present their parents with an ultimatum that demanded consent to marriage that had not gained prior approval. At any rate, bundling in this case may have been a positive influence on the Smith-Adams courtship.

On September, 12 1763, before they departed, Abigail Smith closed a long letter with a sober and candid tone to inform John Adams that she would accompany him on a trip

---


5Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters. (Harper Collins 1980.) p.56
that he was about to embark on. "The original design of the letter was to tell you, that I would next week be your fellow traveler provided I shall not be any encumbrance to you, for I have too much pride to be a clog to any body. You are to determine that point," she informed John. Even at seventeen, Abigail was a precocious young woman as this letter disclosed. She made John Adams determine whether or not she would go on this trip, a smart and safe move in the courtship game. Moreover, this trip was a major turning point in the Smith-Adams courtship.

By 1762, John Adams had begun traveling the Inferior and Superior court circuits, and his court circuit riding continued for fourteen years. It is not known where John Adams went on this trip, but quite possibly to attend a court session in Worcester. Abigail Smith travelled with John and she wrote an account of the trip in a letter to her friend Hannah Storer Green that was unfortunately destroyed. As we will see, Hannah becomes a major actor in the early part of the Smith-Adams courtship. She helped with the emotional education of both Abigail and John. Nevertheless, the one thing we do know, by the winter of 1763, after this trip together, John and Abigail were trying to fix a wedding

\[\text{A.F.C.p.9}\]
date.

What happened on this trip? One can only speculate. But here are some facts: it was winter time, no historical evidence exist to prove that a chaperone accompanied Abigail and John, and most important they had the freedom of choice to engage in this special courtship ritual of bundling. Perhaps Abigail and John slept in separate rooms in a roadside tavern or with friends and family somewhere. If so, I suggest that one of their rooms was empty in the morning. We may never know. Whatever the situation was on this trip, the fact remained that from this point on, Abigail and John's courtship would end in marriage. All of this added up another step forward in the Smith-Adams courtship. Interestingly enough, John Adams had publicly stated, in early 1763, that "I cannot wholly disapprove of bundling." This was about as close as his prudence would allow him to get to this topic.

The idea was this: an all-night conversation allowed both people to explore each other's minds and temperaments in some depth, while the physical intimacy provided a socially approved means of obtaining sexual satisfaction.

---

before marriage. Bundling also allowed experimenting in sexual compatibility with a series of potential spouses without running the risks of pregnancy without the commitment of marriage.\textsuperscript{61} Modern birth-control allows a couple to find out whether or not they "fit" before marriage, but Abigail and John did not have this luxury.

Unfortunately Abigail's destroyed letter describing the several day journey becomes a crux in uncovering what happened on this trip, however we do have the return letter from her friend Hannah Storer Green in which she made some revealing comments about bundling and marriage. On November 23, 1763, Hannah Storer Green wrote to Abigail Smith discussing her letter for what must have been bundling and the transition to marriage that Abigail alluded to. "Now I shall proceed upon your former letter, wherein you give an account of your journey. I could not help laughing at the gaiety of your fancy, in supposing that there was any resemblance between that and Matrimony," Hannah observed. From the context, it is clear what Hannah was referring to, and that she had experienced the frustration and the teasing that went with bundling. It was Hannah's letter that first

\textsuperscript{61}Lawrence Stone, \textit{The Family and Marriage in England 1550-1800}, p.607
grabbed my attention to the topic of bundling. Of course, I cannot prove that bundling occurred on this trip, but something serious did. Hannah's laughing was the second point which grabbed my attention, because this was a major turning point in the Smith-Adams courtship and Abigail was giddy about something. More importantly, Hannah was amused by Abigail's "fancy" that she thought that now after traveling and spending the night together that she understood the long commitment of marriage. Abigail, of course, had a great deal to learn and teach.

Interestingly enough, John Adams and Hannah Storer Green had almost married several years earlier. Supposedly John, had broken off the attachment to Hannah or, rather, had had it broken off for him by an accidental interruption that dispelled Hannah's wiles. This saved John from a marriage that "might have depressed me into Absolute Poverty and Obscurity, to the end of my life." This revealed that Hannah did not fit his definition of a good mate. Perhaps his definition here is a rich important woman, but

---


he also wanted a courtship which he could control the course of. What ever his reasons for breaking off the engagement, it was quite clear he wanted someone with patience. Nevertheless, John and Hannah had patched their problems up and a healthy friendship continued. Now, Hannah, a married woman, was actually assisting in the Smith-Adams courtship.

In sum, it seems that the popular custom of bundling was another important development in the Smith-Adams courtship. This custom was another source of education for young couples in the eighteenth-century to examine a potential mate's character. It was also a perfect courtship ritual for people without modern birth-control. Bundling in its simplest form amounted to the sexual education of a couple.

Abigail and John were becoming partners in building a life together on a pattern that was agreeable in the present, and most importantly promised affluence and power to come in the future. In the winter of 1763, however, at the very time they were probably bundling, by listening to what others said about the person in the relationship, Abigail and John were using another educational tool, gossip, to explore each other further. Eventually, such gossip would prove nearly explosive.
"NEVER SPEAK ILL OF ANYBODY:"

Gossip operated as a positive force in the Smith-Adams courtship. The clearest definition of gossip refers to the person who talks, the person who listens, the content of the message, and the process. A more complex definition includes the telling of secrets, lies, rumors, and malicious scandals and the word can be used a noun or verb.

In the Smith-Adams story, gossip is simply defined as the telling of tales about a person or persons who are not present. More importantly, gossip transferred significant information to the participants which was pertinent to this courtship. For people without television, gossip provided a universal form of entertainment. More importantly for the Smith-Adams courtship, gossip furnished a more subtle mechanism to help in the choice of a partner.

In a letter on September 12, 1763, Abigail reported an interesting bit of gossip to John. "Have you heard the News? that two Apparitions were seen one evening this week hovering about this house, which very much resembled you and

---


a Cousin of yours," she claimed. To modern eyes, one might think that John was stalking around her house late at night, and was caught like a deer in headlights. We know he lived within four miles of the Smith's house and he was a good horseman, because of all the travelling he did to court circuits by horse. At any rate, Abigail questioned John further: "How it should ever enter into the head of an Apparition to assume a form like yours, I cannot devise. When I was told of it I could scarcely believe it, yet I could not declare the contrary, for I did not see it, and therefore had not that demonstration which generally convinces me, that you are not a Ghost." This paragraph may seem humorous, but it contained serious elements clarifying the Smith-Adams courtship emotional education and future.

First, was the fact that someone in the family saw him as a ghost hovering around the Smith's house meant that John Adams was "in" with the family. Secondly, this bit of gossip that the apparition which looked like John was a light-hearted accusation and was meant as an invitation. At this time, maybe Abigail's mother or sisters viewed John as ghost, but source was never discussed. In the eighteenth-

"A.F.C. p.9
century, cruder forms of parental and family influence were eroding away and gossip was slowly creeping in to replace it as an important courtship ritual. Moreover, friends and family were discussing their impressions of the Smith-Adams courtship and were conveying their messages back to Abigail and John.

On another level, gossip could be used to hurt someone. Hannah Storer Green, in fact warned Abigail about the ill affects of gossip. "I know nothing more irksome than being just at the door of Bliss, and not being in a capacity to enter; and where every ill natured person are passing some rude unpolished joke upon them," Hannah charged. "They may call it wit, if they please, but I think it bears the name of shocking indecency." Hannah must have been talking about the malicious side of gossip, which simply can be defined as the telling of tales about a person or persons who are not present to inflict harm. All people gossip; it can wreck a relationship, strain peoples confidence, hurt their ego, and most of all--crush them. As Hannah explained, "I've experienced it, and it galls me every time I think of it; but I desire to be thankful that it is over with me, and

---

that I am now happily rewarded for what I then suffered."®

If we assume true gossip circulates within a small group of people, then gossip provides a means of defining this group. Only members who are "in" - in this case, married persons who have courted - can tell stories about the behavior of others.® But as Hannah continued: "What surprises me the most, is, that any one who has been in the same situation, should be so inhuman as to inflict a punishment, for no crime, upon their creatures, and they must know it to be such if they had any feeling when they were married."® So "useful gossip" could only come from trusted members of the inner circle, then it could truly be useful.

John Adams was in this group which gossiped back-and-forth and he evidently requested Hannah Storer Green's opinion on the subject of matrimony. Within the small circle of friends, a bit of gossip was circulating that Abigail and John could not agree on a date for their marriage and thus they might be unfit for marriage. John seems to have asked Hannah's advice on this canard. But


®®® A.F.C. p.10
again, we only have Hannah's return letter in which she obliged John with the candor expected from a close friend. The real significance of this letter, in correlation to Smith-Adams courtship, rested not in the actual advice Green offered, but first of all in the fact that John could ask a woman "friend" for wisdom and advice. And this gossip would certainly circulate among friends and family.

On February 20, 1764, Hannah wrote to John Adams, "Sir: I think myself greatly indebted to you, for the honor you do my judgement, in referring so important a debate to my decision; and I ought, in strict justice, to apologize for my not answering it before; however, I trust to your Candor to excuse the seeming neglect, I say seeming, for I have not been unmindful of you, but have well considered the thing, and shall give my thoughts upon the matter with freedom." 71

The very existence of this dialogue revealed the sincerity and care in which friends crossed boundaries in sensitive relationship, and served to assist in what was a collective social process.

Recall, Hannah and John were almost married at an earlier date and candor between men and women was very important and respected. Hannah's letter contained the

71 A.F.C. p.11
voice and tone of a older and wiser sister giving advice. Hannah continued, "But before I proceed to answer the grand point in debate, allow me to ask a question Viz. Why April excluded? Is it because you will neither of you condescend? If so, you are neither of you fit Subjects for Matrimony in my opinion, and will not have my Vote in the matter..."

This was strong advice coming from a friend, a friend who did not approve of their engagement, especially when they could not agree on the simple thing like the date in which to tie the knot. It also let John and Abigail know what others' might be saying.

Next, Hannah brings up an interesting point, the potent and touchy question of proper mate selection and the commitment John Adams signed up for. "Aya, Lysander you may stare if you please, thinking, I suppose, that you have applied to the wrong person; however there is no drawing back now," she asserted. Perhaps John Adams received this letter and stared blankly, lost, wanting something direct and simple, logical and aesthetic. This was not at all like the situation here. Hannah pushes the point one step further to help educate John. "I look upon you both as reasonable beings, I cannot fairly suppose the want of
Condescension to be the reason," wrote Hannah.

All of this was reasonable and fair advice coming from someone with an objective point of view, although Hannah did seem pedantic. As she resumed her instruction and explained how she believed that honesty was paramount in any relationship. "Well then to be honest and honesty you love I know, because it saved you once, when you was tried for a Crime which you richly deserve a Noose," she wrote. The crime for which John Adams deserved the noose was in reference to his previous jilting of her, but she still respected his honesty. Hannah argued further, "I do not at all approve of March, 'tis too Blustering a month for Matrimony, neither do I think it necessary you should stay till May, but I would have you take the Medium, for April is a very salutary month...Therefore April is the month I pitch upon you may be sure and I dare say you will find it far preferable to March, and tho' by it you remain a miserable Bachelor one month longer yet I hope it will be made up in years of Matrimonial happiness." All of this information would circulate as gossip and was important in Abigail and John's educational process. Gossip also confirmed the

72A.F.C. p.11
73A.F.C. p.12
observation that the choice of a martial partner for eighteenth-century American couples was normally a collective, rather than an individual decision."

Indeed, John Adams and his miserable bachelor hood would have to wait quite a while. Hannah closed the hypercritical letter, "Tell Diana that I'm set upon April, and that it will be the height of impropriety in her, to set up her will (in the case especially) in opposition to yours and mine, for I'm sure you'll join me now you know what wonderful effects the April Sun has." Hannah encouraged them to solve this problem, but was willing to use them against each other. "However, A Word to the wise is sufficient, therefore I bid you Adieu, with assuring you that I am Your Friend and Well-wisher." Using gossip, Hannah was making John Adams reconsider the importance of marriage and the sacrifice it took. In short, she was educating him.

Nonetheless, his marriage to Abigail would have to wait because in the spring of 1764, John would be inoculated with smallpox. Anyone who traveled as much as John was likely to contract the disease, so he made the difficult

---


75A.F.C. p.12
decision to be inoculated. Despite vows and passions, there was a long forced separation and Abigail and John's letter-writing increased in volume, length, and love.

Gossip was a positive, informal, but compelling influence on Abigail and John's romance. The legal subordination of women to men in the matrimonial relationship made it difficult for a wife to defend herself in the event of mistreatment. With some of John's personality qualities, he could have easily become a domestic autocrat. A meek woman would have been crushed. Gossip circulating within a group allowed many people to help with the decision to continue the courtship towards marriage. Women had to get it right. Conducting a lengthy and detailed courtship was one way to do it. Gossip enabled romantic partners to learn about personality characteristic's that might be disagreeable in a prospective mate. The next important test that the Smith-Adams courtship would have to endure was the test of a month long separation because of the nasty disease, smallpox.
CHAPTER II: THE STATE OF SEPARATION

In the early spring of 1764, an epidemic of smallpox broke out in the city of Boston. Waves of fear always
accompanied these outbreaks. Death from the disease was typically nasty, and deliberate immunization against smallpox had become widespread on the North American continent in the mid-to-late eighteenth-century. The mode of administering the disease and the course it took when so administered are vividly described in the Smith-Adams courtship correspondence.

In this chapter we will see how Abigail Smith and John Adams were affected by the life-threatening inoculation of smallpox and how their courtship was strengthened by this crisis. Abigail and John would be separated from April 7th until May 9th of 1764. Almost a month of total separation as John Adams prepared and eventually was infected with the smallpox. John was in Braintree for the first week of April preparing and then he went to Boston on April 11th of 1764 to receive the inoculation. Abigail did not receive the inoculation until 1776, because she did not travel as much and thus was not in as much danger. As we will see, this month long separation allowed an unusual time for Abigail and John to play the game of "serious jesting." I suggest

---

76 A.C.F. p.14

77 See L.H. Butterfield, The Book of John and Abigail. p.143. Without telling John, Abigail and her children were inoculated in Boston in 1776.
that the fear and danger of death brought this couple closer in body, health, and spirit.

---

**LOVE IN THE TIME OF SMALLPOX**

On April 7, 1764, knowing that John Adams was in Braintree preparing for the dangerous smallpox inoculation, Abigail Smith wrote another charming letter to her suitor inquiring about his health, and revealing the fear which underlay this episode. "How do you now? For my part, I feel much easier than I did an hour ago. My Unkle having given me a more particular, and favorable account of the Small pox, or rather the operation of the preparation, than I have had before," she wrote. Abigail's uncle was Cotton Tuft, who had been inoculated with the smallpox and since John was soon to follow, the ensuing discourse was largely devoted to the subject. Also, a discussion of the danger of inoculation and the fear and closeness it created is appropriate here, because, even when contracted by inoculation the disease could be extremely contagious and fatal.

Understand that physicians in the eighteenth-century recognized that inoculated smallpox was far less dangerous.
than smallpox taken "in the natural way." On the one hand, inoculation protected the individual; but on the other, it was still a great threat, even when carefully managed, to others in the community who had not had the disease. In addition, there was famous controversy surrounding doctors' enthusiasm for inoculation and the numerous town regulations and provincial laws prohibiting it except when, as occasionally happened, outbreaks of the disease got far beyond control, as such an outbreak had in early 1764.®

Abigail continued her letter with a reassuring tone, "He speaks greatly on favor of Dr. Perkins [John's physician] who has not, as he has heard lost one patient...and he is full in the persuasion that he understands the Distemper."® The method of inoculation was to transfer the infection by introducing matter from a smallpox pustule into a slight wound made in the patient's skin. Occasionally the patient developed a severe case of smallpox from such treatment, and some died. But usually the symptoms were slight--a few score of pox only; and immunity proved equivalent to that resulting from

®A.F.C. p.14
®®A.F.C.p.14
®®®A.F.C. p.15
contracting the disease naturally.®

Interestingly enough, opponents still criticized the practice both as interference with God's will and as wanton spreading of dangerous infection among healthy people. Still, under the pressure and fear of the inoculation, Abigail Smith had great confidence in the choice of a doctor and the care John was receiving. "I hope you will have reason to be well satisfied with the Dr., and advise you to follow his prescriptions as nigh as you find your Health will permit."® She closed her letter on the sad note, understanding that she and her suitor would be separated for a great deal of time, "Keep your Spirits up, and I make no doubt you will do well enough. Shall I come and see you before you go. No I wont, for I want not again, to experience what I this morning felt, when you left Your Abigail Smith."® Fear, then, made Abigail and John share emotions that taught them how deep their compatibility was. 

On April 7, 1764, the very night on which John received

---


®A.F.C. p.15

®A.F.C. p.15
Abigail's preceding letter, he sat down at eight O' clock and returned one of his well-known and exquisite responses. "For many Years past, I have not felt more serenely than I do this Evening. My Head is clear, and my Heart is at ease. Business of every Kind, I have banished from my Thoughts," he mused. Then John spelled out his timetable for the immediate future, which was the preparation for the smallpox inoculation. He would eventually have to go to Boston for the final stage of inoculation. As he wrote, "My Room is prepared for Seven Days' Retirement, and my Plan is digested for 4 or 5 Weeks."

At this time, John Adams understood the long time ahead of being locked-up and sequestered from his sweetheart, but he was not alone. For the town of Boston voted to allow anyone and everyone to be inoculated during the following five weeks. Interestingly enough, Boston quickly became one great hospital not only for Bostonians but for outsiders who flocked there, including some from other colonies where inoculation was forbidden. At this time, John Adams was still in Braintree attending a preparatory hospital and was preparing for an extended stay in Boston. The fear and

---

\[^{5}A.F.C.\] p.16

\[^{6}A.F.C.\] p.14
danger of smallpox was bringing Abigail and John closer together. In fact, this separation helped the Smith-Adams courtship succeed. I suggest that this shared experience of danger helped merge their love and understanding of one another, to endure what became a lifetime of separation.

In spite of the danger, John Adams must have slept well that night. For the next morning, Sunday April 7, 1764, he renewed writing the same letter and described the details of his health. "We took turns to be sick and to laugh. When my Companion was sick I laughed at him, and when I was sick he laughed at me." The reason for being sick was the preparatory treatment of the body by a milk and vegetable or "cooling" diet and purgatives which was then in vogue and was followed by doctors and patients. John continued to vividly describe the preparation of administering the inoculation and the effect on his body. "Once however and once only were we both sick together, and then all the Laughter and good Humor deserted the Room," he wrote. His letters were filled with details of the sickness and preparations for receiving the smallpox.

At any rate, John was preparing to leave for Boston and

67A.F.C. p.14
68A.F.C. p.16-17
he would be gone for at least a month or more and have to put his life on hold. "My Garden, and My Farm," he exclaimed, "give me now and then a little Regret, as I must leave them in more Disorder than I could wish." Undaunted and still flowering under the therapeutic sun of love, he poured out his soul. "But the dear Partner of all my joys and sorrows, in whose Affections, and Friendship I glory, more than all other Emoluments under Heaven, comes into my Mind very often and makes me sigh," he wrote.

On April 8, 1764, as the departure date of her suitor came closer, Abigail wrote to John, "Mr Cranch and my Sister have been here, where they hoped to have found you. We talked of you, they desire to be remembered to you, and wish you well through the Distemper." Here Abigail was gossiping with her older sister Mary Smith Cranch, who was married to Richard Cranch, a good friend of Johns Adams. Recall, gossip develops a mode of intimacy that reflects not only the social but psychological bonding of the teller and listener. And by using the power of this bond, a successful gossip may manipulate opinions to enhance his or her status,

---

89A.F.C. p. 18
90A.F.C. p.19
or to destroy the status of others."  

Abigail continued, "Mr. Cranch told me that the Deacon with his children design for Boston next Saturday and that they propose going by water--that the Deacon would have you go with them, but I would by no means advise you to go by water, for as you are under preparation you will be much more exposed to take cold." This excerpt revealed great thought and concern for John's health and safety, which would make anyone feel loved and cared for. Abigail closed this letter with a interesting tone, "I am very fearful that you will not when left to your own management follow your direction--but let her who tenderly cares for you both in Sickness and Health." To stand by someone in sickness and health revealed her commitment to John well before they were married. She was stating her vows and commitment to John.

John Adams wrote to Abigail on April 11, 1764, explaining that his mother, Susanna Adams, gave her blessing to the Smith-Adams courtship and eventual marriage.

"Hitherto I have written with the Air and in the style of

91 Edith B. Gelles, "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case." p.668

92 A.F.C. p.19

93 A.F.C. p.19
Rattle and Frolick; but now I am about to shift to the sober and the Grave.--My Mamma is as easy and composed, and I think much more so than I expected," he told Abigail. Perhaps this passage seems to show that parents continued to have some, if little, influence on their children's decisions, but certainly not dictating them. This was consistent with an increasing absence of strong parental involvement in the marriage process of their children."

Speaking for his mother, "She sees We are determined, and that opposition would be not only fruitless, but vexatious, and has therefore brought herself to acquiesce, and to assist in preparing all Things, as conveniently and comfortably as she can. Heaven reward her for her kind Care, and her Labour of Love!" " According to historian Ellen Rothman, the absence of parents from the courtship scene exemplified to low level of parental surveillance and intervention that middle-class couples experienced in the eighteenth-century. In short, parents tried to stay out of the process. However, one must realize that sons and daughters did seek their parents opinion when they

---

9"Daniel Scott Smith, "Parental Power." p.425
95A.F.C. p.22
96Ellen Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control." p.411
considered marriage.

John closed this letter with a hint of the future he had planned for his prospective wife and the house they would soon live in. "I long to come once more to Weymouth before I go to Boston. I could, well enough. I am as well as ever, and better too. Why should I not come? Shall I come and keep fast with you? Or will you come and see me? I should be glad to see you in this House, but there is another very near it," where I should rejoice much more to see you," he informed Abigail. This was very significant because John would go from living with his mother to living with Abigail. On the other hand, Abigail would go from living with her parents, right into living with John. Abigail Smith agreed to move into his world and build their life together on his property, but if there was mistreatment her parents would not be close to intervene. John reassured his love, "and to live with you till we shall have lived enough to ourselves, to Glory, Virtue, and Mankind, and till both of us shall be desirous of Translation to a wiser, fairer, better World. I am, till then, and forever after

---

"The house he is referring to now known as the birthplace of John Quincy Adams, which John had inherited and which he and Abigail would move into after their marriage in October. This also meant that John still lived with his mother in the house next door. See A.F.C. p.23"
will be your Admirer and Friend, and Lover."  

The preparation for the smallpox inoculation was over, but a month long separation was about to launch another test of the Smith-Adams courtship. John Adams would have go to Boston for the final and very dangerous stage of inoculation; Abigail Smith stayed at her parent's house in Weymouth. Typically, patients were locked-up in a hospital and infected with smallpox. This meant total separation for almost one month. The Smith-Adams courtship entered a new stage as it took on another challenge, the separation ahead.  

"I AM OFTEN IN YOUR THOUGHTS:" THE ISOLATION OF TWO LOVERS

The smallpox inoculation would physically separate Abigail Smith and John Adams for almost one month [April 11th to May 9th, 1764.] What follows, then, is the story of a separation which actually energized the Smith-Adams courtship and their emotional bond. This month long separation also set up their ability to tolerate the heavy strains caused by John's active political life and the separations that his career required. The Adams' marriage would survive fifty four years and had the ability to absorb such trauma as war, revolution, nation building, and long

---

88 A.F.C. p.23
separations because of a political career. This was only the start.

From a hospital room in Boston, just before darkness on Thursday evening April 12, 1764, John started a long letter to amuse himself and to communicate with his sweetheart. "Dr. Diana: I have Thought of sending you a Nest of Letters like a nest of Basketts; tho I suspect the latter would be a more genteel and acceptable Present to a Lady," he decided. His reference to Abigail as a doctor was most curious, because a doctor obviously held superior medical knowledge and he did not try to mask his deference to her authority in this matter. "But in my present Circumstance I can much better afford the former that the latter. For, my own Discretion as well as the Prescriptions of the Faculty, prohibit any close Application of Mind to Books or Business—Amusement is the only study that I follow," John wrote to Abigail.

John Adams was in the most disagreeable situation. Perhaps it was bad enough being separated from his lover and friend and all he had was letter-writing for entertainment. "Now Letter-Writing is, to me, the most agreeable Amusement (I can find): and Writing to you the most entertaining and
Agreeable of all Letter-Writing," he confessed. Then, John interrupted himself during this long letter with a sequence of questions designed to allure Abigail's attention. He wanted the thoughtfulness of his letter-writing to be appreciated by Abigail. Some of his letters were twelve to fifteen pages long, written by a quill pen on rigid hemp paper and it took a great deal of time to compose them. "Shall I continue to write you, so much, and so often after I get to Town? Shall I send you, an History of the whole Voyage?" he questioned. "Shall I draw You the Characters of all, who visit me? Shall I describe to you all the Conversations I have?"

John Adams clearly enjoyed the physical act of writing, along with the thinking through the events of the day and sorting them out in very long and complex sentences. John Adams was bored because of his secluded life and his project of writing a journal for his sweetheart was his only escape. He skipped from topic to topic and described everything around him in detail. "Heaven forgive me for suffering my Imagination to straggle into a Region of Ideas so nauseous And abominable: and suffer me to return to my Project of

99A.F.C. p.24

100A.F.C. p.24
writing you a Journal," he informed Abigail.

Apparently John had in mind a sort of half-fictional journal of the Plague or the Inoculation, whose characters were the people around him. "You would have a great Variety of Characters--Lawyers, Physicians (no Divines I believe), a number of Tradesmen, Country Colonels, Ladies, Girls, Nurses, Watchers, Children, Barbers. But among all These, there is but one whose Character I would give much to know better than I do at present,"\(^{101}\) he wrote. Of course, the character he wanted to know better was Abigail Smith. John wanted to invest more time with her, but he warned Abigail that intimacy brought one closer to the dark side of her personality. "Intimacy with the most of People, will bring you acquainted with Vices and Errors, and Follies enough to make you despize them,"\(^{102}\) he wrote.

John then lightens up by asking Abigail whether or not she wanted him to continue with his drawing of characters. "What say you now my dear shall I go on with my Design of Writing Characters? --Answer as you please, there is one Character, that whether I draw it on Paper or not, I cannot avoid thinking on every Hour, and considering sometimes

\(^{101}\text{A.F.C. p.24-25}\)

\(^{102}\text{A.F.C. p.25}\)
together and sometimes asunder, the Excellencies and Defects in it." 103 Seemingly, at this time, all of John's positive thoughts were generated by Abigail.

On April 12, 1764, Abigail Smith returned a letter to John and the intellectual "parry and thrust" began to intensify, along with a growing emotional harmony. "My Dearest Friend: Here am I all alone, in my Chamber, a mere Nun I assure you," she wrote. But instantly, her tone in this letter changed and there was something beginning to ferment within Abigail. "After professing myself thus will it not be out of Character to confess that my thoughts are often employed about Lysander, out of the abundance of the Heart, the mouth speaketh, and why Not the Mind thinketh," 104 she suggested. Abigail continued her letter: "...you tell me that you sometimes view the dark side of your Diana, and there no doubt you discover many Spots—which I rather wish were erased, than concealed from you." 105

Abigail was asking him to reveal something that he noticed in her character that was dark or contained

103 A.F.C. p. 25
104 A.F.C. p. 25
105 A.F.C. p. 26
mysterious "spots." "Do not judge by this, that your opinion is an indifferent thing to me, (were it so, I should look forward with a heavy Heart,) but it is far other ways, for I had rather stand fair there, and be thought well of by Lysander than by the greater part of the World besides. I would fain hope that those faults which you discover, proceed more, from a wrong Head, than a bad Heart,"¹⁰⁶ she wrote. Abigail hoped that these spots were only shortcoming that could be corrected, but maybe he viewed her innately bad.

Responding to the cheap gift that John had made fun of, Abigail corrected him and compared the letters to gold or silver. "The Nest of Letters which you so undervalue, were to me a much more welcome present than a Nest of Baskets, tho every strand of those had been gold and silver," she asserted. "I do not estimate everything according to the price the world set upon it, but according to the value it is of to me..."¹⁰⁷ Yes, obviously the letters she received from John were more important than material objects. The value of materials such as gold and silver were not as important as communication.

¹⁰⁶A.F.C. p.25
¹⁰⁷A.F.C. 25
And as we shall see, in this time of inoculation, communication will be what she most seeks. To begin with, Abigail certainly wanted John to describe everything he saw and all the people he encountered. As she answered his questions, "You ask whether you shall send a History of the whole voyage, characters, visits, conversations. It is the very thing that I designed this Evening to have requested of you," so John was one step ahead of her. "I know you are a critical observer, and your judgment of people generally pleases me," Abigail informed him. But, deepening the communication here, she felt that John was too harsh on some people.

As she wrote carefully, "Sometimes you know, I think you too severe, and that you do not make quite so many allowances as Humane Nature requires, but perhaps this may be owing to my unacquaintedness with the world." Perhaps this was her way of hinting that she does not want him to judge her too harshly. "Your Business Naturally leads you to a nearer inspection of Mankind, and to see the corruptions of the Heart, which I believe you often find desperately wicked and evil,"¹⁰⁸ she wrote. Or, is she saying here, that John is too hard on himself, as well as on others and

¹⁰⁸A.F.C. p.26
potentially on her?

Abigail Smith closed this letter with an interesting story about her mother interrupting her letter-writing. She had hinted previously at the subtle involvement of her parents in regard to her courtship with John Adams. And it was clear that her mother needed persuasion. Now, Abigail notes with obvious pleasure that "My Mamma has just been up, and asks to whom I am writing. I answered not very readily. Upon my hesitating--Send my Love said she to Mr. Adams, tell him he has my good wishes for his Safety."\textsuperscript{109} Some historian argue that parents who tried to control their children's courtships were considered misguided.\textsuperscript{110} Perhaps children who allowed their parents to influence the course of their courtship were weak and irresponsible. There are no references to direct parental interference in the Smith-Adams courtship letters. And evidently, the danger in which John was about to stand, softened Mrs. Smith's heart toward their match.

Now, Abigail's mother had obviously approved of John Adams and it was clear that Abigail now had freedom of

\textsuperscript{109}A.F.C. p.27

choice in the matter. It was clear that Abigail Smith acted upon her own will. In fact, Abigail's father, the Reverend Smith, enjoyed talking about the law and encouraged John Adams to describe in detail various court procedures and tell how they differed from England. He obviously approved. Both of Abigail's parents now showed signs of affection towards John, and Abigail was free to marry John because found him suitable. It was a subtle complex business.

The separation because of the smallpox inoculation was allowing the Smith-Adams courtship to grow and flourish, by testing Abigail and John's ability to be apart yet close. Their ability to deal with long separations would become an important factor later in their marriage. With the long separations and isolation that John's active political career would demand, even a healthy marriage would be greatly strained. The shared crisis of the smallpox inoculation in the Smith-Adams courtship provided a sensation of mutual responsibility. In the same way, crisis and isolation of public life would create a sense of shared burden that would bring this couple closer together after their marriage.

More importantly, at this stage, the separation allowed Abigail and John a certain freedom to explore new aspects of
each other's character. In one sense, this month long separation was just another part of a courtship process that was in so many ways a transitional period, a rite of passage during which a person might throw aside restraints and act bolder or out of character. Yet, because of inoculation a unique situation occurred in the Smith-Adams courtship. They were totally separated and their courtship became fully epistolary, in the face of possible death. In the end, after much travail, this unusual situation would allow Abigail (and John) to transgress certain definitions of femininity (and masculinity) and to evolve the mode of communication which would distinguish their marriage as well.

"THAT BOLD SPEECH:" THE NEBULA OF LIMINALITY

The focus of this section is on a process of emotional testing and gender confrontation, an interval between April 16th and May 7th, the heart of the period John was in Boston, actually inoculated and was waiting to see whether this inoculation carried death with it. During this time, the world of the Smith-Adams courtship was turned upside-down and which allowed the lovers a certain space for unusual freedom. How did Abigail and John use this freedom? As we will see, the nebula of liminality in the Smith-Adams
courtship was much like the liminality during a revolution or certain festivals in which people are expected to act abnormally. For example, in this section we will examine a series of bold, blunt letters that also display an undercurrent of deepening affection and increasing compatibility. I argue that this bold exchange could only be written during a courtship, or perhaps, a revolution.

The eighteenth-century was a time when only men could vote, own property, and hold public office. Furthermore, the exclusion of women from political life had deep roots in early American society. These restrictions on a woman's rights outside of the domestic sphere was a part of a complex set of laws, habits, and traditions. From her letters, we will see how Abigail Smith was one young woman who refused to accept this narrow-minded definition. I must confess that there was more than just the separation that allowed this outbreak of boldness. For one thing, while the fixed date of their marriage had been set, Abigail still had the power to reject him. The dead-line of the legal subordination was coming close, however, Abigail really wanted to test their compatibility. Yet all she got from

---

John were witty, brittle letters full of masculine courage in the face of death. In the letters that follow here, written while Abigail and John were still separated because of the smallpox, there emerged a remarkable difference in the tone from the first letters in this series. And Abigail Smith was the reason why.

On April 16, 1764, Abigail Smith must have felt more power of freedom in her mind than ever before and she expressed it exquisitely. The tone and character of her letters from here on contained what they called in the eighteenth century as "saucy." She wrote to her unsuspecting suitor a very blunt and bold letter. "I think I write to you every Day. Shall not I make my Letters very cheap; don't you light your pipe with them?" she questioned. "I care not if you do, tis a pleasure to me to write, yet I wonder I write to you with so little restraint," then she boldly decided, "for as a critick I fear you more than any other person on Earth, and tis the only character, in which I ever did, or ever will fear you." The first thing that grabbed my attention was her making fun of her cheap letters, but instantaneously she switched to very serious and aggressive mode of thought. It seemed clear that she did not fear him at all, rather she was taunting him with
very direct and blunt talk. Announcing that she was steeping outside feminine stereotypes to meet him mind to mind, albeit not with out fear.

It was almost as if she wanted to poke him in the chest and provoke him, and that was exactly what she did. "What say you?" she bluntly questioned, "Do you approve of that Speech? Don't you think me a Courageous Being? Courage in a laudable, a Glorious Virtue in your Sex, why not mine? (For my part, I think you ought to applaud me for mine.) Exit Rattle. Solus your Diana," Abigail protested. This letter was spectacular and it jumps out right out at you. In the first place, Abigail was quite conscious that her courageous speech would evoke some response from John, in fact, she wanted to provoke a reaction on purpose. In the second, Abigail was standing up for her gender and refused to accept any narrow definition John might have of her female identity, most importantly, she did not like being considered weaker or lacking courage.

Abigail really began to test his character and patience

---

112 A.F.C. p. 32. Interestingly, this was the earliest letter in their correspondence that was printed by Charles Francis Adams, in his several editions of his grandmother's letters. See Abigail Adams Letters ed. C.F.A. 1840, p. 7-8. Charles Francis was the first historian to look at the Smith-Adams courtship letters, but all he did was recopy them.
in this letter. She continued to press and obviously was trying to get his blood churning. "And now pray tell me how you do, do you feel the venom working in your veins, did you ever before experience such a feeling?" she added. Then, just as Abigail revealed and examined her aggression; she turned it off. "This Letter will be made up with questions I fancy—not set in order before you neither.---How do you employ yourself? Do you go abroad yet? Is it not cruel to bestow those favours upon others which I should rejoice to receive, yet must be deprived of," she hesitated, and continued to explain why she was taunting him. Abigail informed John, "This is a right Girls Letter, but I will turn to the other side and be sober, if I can—but what is bred in the bone will never be out of the flesh." 113 Meaning, if he did not like her courageous and bold speech, it was just too bad. And that she nonetheless had trouble stepping entirely out of the "girlish" modes of address expected of her, and which were "bred in the bone" in all women.

On April 17, 1764, John answered Abigail's bold letter. At first, he seemed to welcome her emotional openness and disregard any of his feminine stereotypes. Then suddenly he

113A.F.C.p. 32
wrote: "You had best reconsider and retract that bold speech of yours I assure You," he vowed. Then John tried to make a threat, "For I assure you there is another Character, besides that of Critick, in which, if you never did, you will always hereafter shall fear me, or I will know the Reason why." Was he asserting sexual dominance here? If it was a jest, it was a clumsy one. John continued venting and hinted that besides her bold speech, there were faults in her character he noticed. Assuming now fully the role of "Critick" in which she most feared him. Again, if this was in jest, it was clumsy indeed. "Oh. Now I think on't I am determined very soon to write you, an Account in minute Detail of the many Faults I have observed in you. You remember I gave you an Hint that I had observed some, in one of my former Letters. You'l be surprized, when you come to find the Number of them,"\textsuperscript{114} he declared.

In his closing paragraph, John tried one more desperate attempt to assert control over the situation, by turning to some insinuation he heard. "By the Way I have heard since I came to Town an Insinuation to Your Disadvantage, which I will inform you off, as soon as you have unravelled Your

\textsuperscript{114}A.F.C. p.34-36
Enigma,\textsuperscript{115} he confessed. What a nightmare for Abigail, for here the "Critick" was armed with gossip - the very force which may have destroyed John's previous courtship.

Abigail quickly responded on April 19, 1764, with a veritable explosion of fury, frankness, and power. She called on John to inform her of any bad comments on her character, freely assuming the challenging stance of a man while frankly calling him a woman. "Why my good man, thou hast the curiosity of a Girl. Who could have believed that only a slight hint would have set thy imagination a gig in such a manner," she replied. Abigail controlled the game, "And a fine encouragement I have to unravel the Mistery as thou callest it. Nothing less truly than to be told Something to my disadvantage. What an excellent reward that will be? In what Court of justice did'st thou learn that equity? I thank thee Friend such knowledge as that is easy enough to be obtained without paying for it." Abigail challenged his masculinity and his role as a lawyer and she beamed with self-confidence and defended herself against the gossip. "As to the insinuation, it doth not give me any uneasiness, for if it is any thing very bad, I know thou dost not believe it. I am not conscious of any harm that I

\textsuperscript{115}A.F.C. p.35
have done, or wished to any Mortal. I bear no Malice to any Being. To my Enemies, (if any I have) I am willing to afford assistance; therefore towards Man, I maintain a Conscience void of offence," she bragged. There was a certain confidence radiating from Abigail here; she was saying that she was blessed with qualities any man would want. Her growing confidence was astounding, and she was testing his confidence and his capacity to share and be trusted with her confessions and feelings.

When confronted by a dominant person many people shrink, curl-in their shoulders and bow, but not Abigail Smith. Abigail maybe had won the battle against those insinuations, but there was still the list of many faults that John had observed in her. She confronted John to fulfill his promise to tell her the list of faults he noticed in her character. "Yet by this I mean not that I am faultless, but tell me what is the Reason that persons had rather acknowledge themselves guilty, than be accused by other. Is it because they are more tender of themselves, or because they meet with more favor from others, when they ingenuously confess. Let that be as it will there is something which makes it more agreeable to condemn ourselves.

116A.F.C. p.36-37
than to be condemned by others," she strongly hinted.
Moreover, Abigail told John to be careful in his word choice when accusing someone of faults. "But although it is vastly disagreeable to be accused of faults, yet no person ought to be offended when such accusations are delivered in the Spirit of Friendship." Then with unparalleled candor Abigail called on John, "I now call upon you to fulfill your promise, and tell me all my faults, both of omission and commission, and all the Evil you know, or think of me, be to me a second conscience, nor put me off to a more convenient Season. There can be no time more proper than the present, it will be harder to erase them when habit has strengthened and confirmed them. Do not think I trifle. These are really meant as words of Truth and Soberness--for the present good Night."

Indeed, Abigail's words were sober and she truly felt that the spirit of their relationship hinged on candor and honesty.

Sometime in the evening of April 20, 1764, Abigail picked up her pen to continue her letter. Her boldness seemed to wane for a moment, replaced by a passionate tenderness, but in no way did she retract her bold speech of the day before. It was here, at this crucial moment, that

\[\text{A.F.C. p.37}\]
she related her dream to him, the dream of being unable to make herself visible to John, and of being cast, falling into the sea, into oblivion – a symbol of the perils of uniformed commitment if ever there was one. And she closed this letter on a serious note. "But heigh day Mr. what's your Name? --who taught you to threaten so vehemently," then she paraphrased John's earlier letter, "a character besides that of critick, in which if I never did, I always hereafter shall fear you." Perhaps she might fear him when he becomes her husband, so she was testing him now.

Then in the next paragraph, Abigail again stood up to him without fear as she continued to save the relationship. "Thou canst not prove a villan, impossible. I therefore still insist upon it, that I neither do, nor can fear thee," she assured John. Abigail, then instructed John on the virtues of a healthy relationship without fear and control. "For my part I know not that there is any pleasure in being feared, but if there is, I hope you will be so generous as to fear your Diana that she may at least be made sensible of the pleasure," she contested.

In the courtship dance, Abigail was stepping far out of her place as a young woman. But it was quite clear she felt

---

\(^{118}\text{A.F.C. p.38}\)
she still commanded John's intellect as well as personal admiration and she would remind him of these loyalties. Also, it was transparent that to her, their relationship would have to be a union of equals whatever their conventional gender roles. A healthy and loving relationship cannot be built on fear of one another. I have suggested that letter-writing resolved this problem before they tied the knot. If so, it was Abigail and John that made it happen.

Evidently Abigail wrote to John on April 25, 1764, but the letter was lost. Perhaps it was an innocuous letter, for his reply to it of April 26, contains absolutely no response to her blast of April 19th and 20th. It does go beyond the usual news of his waiting, and is perhaps tempered by relief and gratitude that the inoculation will not kill him. His letter contains a renewed sense of his affection for her. But not a reply to her challenges and indictments in any of her letters.

Abigail Smith would not let these issues go. On April 30, 1764, she tried yet again to express her desire for a closer relationship, in which she could step out from behind the curtain of gender stereotypes without fear of a "Critick." She spoke of him standing his trial by
inoculation "like an oak." In the next sentence said, "O by the way you have not told me that insinuation to my disadvantage which you promised me. Now methinks I see you criticizing-- What upon Earth is the Girl after."\footnote{A.F.C. p.41}

Then, suddenly realizing he would not grasp the train of thought that led her from "like an oak" to "insinuations to her disadvantage" she mocked his certain failure to grasp so difficult a connection. "Where is the connection between my standing the distemper like an oak, and an insinuation to her disadvantage? --Why I did not expect that a short sighted mortal would comprehend it, it was a Complex Idea it I may so express myself. And in my mind there was a great connection. I will show you how it came about."\footnote{A.F.C. p. 41} What she means here is that she will explain the connection - the inner workings of her mind as she writes this letter to him. "I did expect this purgation of Lysander would have set us on a level and have rendered him a Sociable creature, but Ill Luck, he stands it like an oak, and is as haughty as ever."\footnote{A.F.C. p.42}

What she had meant is becoming clear with this
restatement and is quite revealing. She is saying that in the face of death, they should have become at least spiritual equals, able to share their deepest needs and feelings. But John was being a typical male, stoic as an oak and haughty too, by rejecting her pleas for intimacy with a silly, unbecoming, and gossipy remark criticizing her. In this manner, Abigail utterly turned the tables on John Adams, and she proceeds to press her advantage ruthlessly, becoming his "Critick" and accuser.

Abigail continued with her letter: "Unsociable Being, is another charge. Bid a Lady hold her Tongue when she was tenderly inquireing after your wellfare, why that sounds like want of Breeding. It looks not like Lysander for it wears the face of ingratitude. I expect you [to] clear up these matters, without being in the least saucy." Then, at the end of this letter, she backs off, allowing John to reply half in jest if he must: "As to the charge of Haughtiness I am certain that is a mistake, for if I know anything of Lysander, he has as little of that in his disposition, as he has of Ill nature. But for Saucyness no Mortal can match him, no not even His Diana." She

\[122\] A.C.F. p.42
concludes, "Yours unfeignedly." 

In sum, the bold courageous speech that Abigail Smith made was a rite of passage during courtship and she meant to provoke John by testing his character. This was a gray clouded area in which she could say and do things not normally permitted. In fury, she stepped far beyond any feminine stereotypes. She made her point quite clear to John that he better respect her emotional needs and personal freedoms. She did not want a domestic autocrat for a husband and Abigail still possessed the power to reject and end this courtship.

During this sudden, bold exchange of April 16th - 30th, 1764, the Smith-Adams courtship letters turned their gender roles up-side-down. Was such blunt talk normal in courtship, and if so, would this privilege be rescinded when Abigail and John were married? Absolutely not. As we will see, the answer to this question comes to light ten years later during the American Revolution in a letter that became one of the most famous letters Abigail Adams ever wrote. 

Young Abigail's bold and courageous speech was not an

---

123 A.F.C. p. 42
124 A.C.F. p. 370. Her famous letter is known as "Remember the Ladies."
aberration then, it just took certain circumstances to bring it forward.

"A CATALOGUE OF YOUR FAULTS:" A LOVE MAP

This section examines two letters written between May 7th and May 9th of 1764, in which John listed all the faults he saw in Abigail and she responded to every one with amazing charm and articulate clarity. Of course, Abigail Smith and John Adams were still separated because of the smallpox inoculation.

Why do we fall in love with one person and not the other: Why him? Why her? The answer came with John's letter on May 7, 1764. Recall, in her letter of April, 30th, Abigail had seemed implicitly to offer her suitor a compromise, by which, as long as they would discuss such serious issues essential to true intimacy and compatibility. These issues could be discussed in a light jesting and mock threatening tone - for it was in this tone that she ended her letter of April, 30th. If this bantering tone would protect John, while still revealing him to her and her to him.

The relationship, she seemed to be saying could go forward. After a short interval John accepted, and the
relationship was sealed. For in this tone, they proceeded to chart which might be called "love maps" - mental pictures of the perfect mate. I suggest that love maps are certain temperamental features of a person that strike the other person as appealing. Abigail and John developed subliminal templates for what turned them "on" and what turned them "off." These are features that they loved and admired in each other, cast as if they were critical, gossipy attacks on each other's "worst features." By this dance, Abigail and John agreed implicitly to exchange devastating actual gossip, for the tender pseudo-gossip by which lovers told one another what they most needed and most admired.

From his hospital room in Boston on May 7, 1764, John Adams sat down at his desk and began to play with pen. "I promised you, Sometime agone, a Catalogue of your Faults, Imperfections, Defects, or whatever you please to call them," he announced. However, John had taken his time to respond, but he felt the time was right. "I feel at present, pretty much a Leisure, and in a very suitable Frame of Mind to perform my Promise," he wrote. John paused for a moment to warn Abigail that this list of faults was for her education and she should not take it too seriously. He
understood very well the slippery slope he was stepping onto. "But I must caution you, before I proceed to recollect yourself, and instead of being vexed of fretted or thrown into a Passion, to resolve upon a Reformation--for this is my sincere Aim, in laying before you, this Picture of yourself," he wrote.

Before we examine John's detailed list of faults, I have chosen to quote Abigail's return letter and taken the liberty of meshing these two letters together by using a point-counter-point model. In short, I believe by intertwining these two letters a more readable narrative comes to life in this case. This next sequence revealed a witty series of parries and thrust; a game between two people on the verge of a life time pledge.

John, of course, nonchalantly advised Abigail of her first fault and started the playful-jousting. "In the first Place, then, give me leave to say, you have been extremely negligent, in attending so little to Cards. You have very little Inclination, to that noble and elegant Diversion, and whenever you have taken an Hand you have held it but awkwardly and played it, with a very uncourtly, and indifferent, Air. Now I have Confidence enough in your good

A.F.C.p.44
sense, to rely upon it, you will for the future endeavor to make a better Figure in this elegant and necessary Accomplishment."\(^ {126}\)

Abigail composure was remarkable and she responded with the tone of her typical charm. "I thank you for your Catalogue, but must confess I was so hardened as to read over most of my Faults with as much pleasure, as an other person would have read their perfection." She began with clinical precision by dissecting Johns list of faults, with a calculated calm that he probably did not anticipate. Responding to her awkwardness at cards, "Lysander must excuse me if I still persist in some of them, at least till I am convinced that an alteration would contribute to his happiness."\(^ {127}\) Abigail saw right through his game; this was not a fault at all! Perhaps John was suggesting how Abigail suited his standards just fine as she was.

To modern eyes, John continued what might seem like a prosecutor's attack, but in fact was not. "Another Thing, which ought to be mentioned, and by all means amended, is, the Effect of a Country Life and Education, I mean, a certain Modesty, sensibility, Bashfulness, call it by which

\(^ {126}\)A.F.C. p.44 John's letter May 7th

\(^ {127}\)A.F.C. p. 47. Abigail's return letter on April 9, 1764.
of these Names you will, that enkindles Blushes forsooth at every Violation of Decency, in Company, and lays a most insupportable Constraint on the freedom of Behaviour," he argued. Obviously, he felt that the country life style was actually very attractive and probably was warning against any changes. Perhaps this meshes with his Puritan distaste for the excessive fashion of the city.

Most mortals would agonize under the lash of such long-winded criticism, but not Abigail Smith as she admonished, "I avoid that Freedom of Behaviour which according to the plan given, consists on Violations of Decency, and which would render me unfit to Herd even with the Brutes." Then Abigail corrected one of John's narrow-minded assumptions, "And permit me to tell you Sir, nor disdain to be a learner, that there is such a thing as Modesty without either Hypocrisy or Formality." Abigail would be modest, but in her own way.

The cross examination, of course persisted, but now with a more mocking and jesting tone, in which he informed her of her imperfection on not singing well. "In the Third Place, you could never yet be prevailed on to learn to sing. This I take very soberly to be an Imperfection of the most

\[128\text{A.F.C. p.47}\]
moment of any," he noticed. Maybe he felt that the purpose of a wife was for entertainment - that was a quality he wanted in his wife. "An Ear for Musick would be a source of much Pleasure, and a Voice and skill, would be a private solitary Amusement, of great Value when no other could be had." John Adams also gave an example in which he felt musical talent would be a benefit for their future family. "You must have remarked an Example of this in Mrs. Cranch, who must in all probability have been deafened to Death with the Cries of her Betsy, if she had not drowned them in Musick of her own," he informed Abigail.

Abigail returned with a modest acknowledgement of her natural fault, "As to the neglect of Singing, that I acknowledge to be a Fault which if possible shall not be complained of a second time, nor should you have had occasion for it now, if I had not a voice harsh as the screech of a peacock." This was high-spirited banter and clearly both agreed, she should not sing.

"In the Fourth Place," John continued, "you very often hand your Head like a Bulrush. You do not sit, erected as you ought, by which Means, it happens that you appear too

129 A.F.C. p.45
130 A.F.C. p.47
short for a Beauty, and the Company looses the sweet smiles of that Countenance and the bright sparkles of those Eyes."

Moreover, John equated her poor posture with another blemish that was more troublesome. "This Fault is the Effect and Consequence of another, still more inexcusable in a Lady. I mean an Habit of Reading, Writing, and Thinking," he joked. There was no doubt that he admired Abigail's intellect more than anything else. However, John pushed the point, "But both the Cause and the Effect ought to be repented and amended as soon as possible."\textsuperscript{131} John Adams was a man of the enlightenment and understood that the education of females was very important for the future of this country and important to his political career. In a democracy, due to the looseness of structure, requires highly educated and independent men and women if it is to remain viable.\textsuperscript{132} John was joking about female education.

Abigail knew John's admiration of her intellectual skills and that she commanded his mental as well as his personal respect. Abigail evoked a sense of powerlessness and humility in him. Recall, she was the goddess "Diana" with leverage and power. Abigail played his game, "The

\textsuperscript{131}A.F.C. p.45

\textsuperscript{132}Henretta and Nobles, \textit{Evolution and Revolution.} p.176
Capotital fault shall be rectified, tho not with any hopes of being looked upon as a Beauty, to appear agreeable in the Eyes of-Lysander, has been for Years past, and still is the height of my ambition." She sincerely loved him and they would be chained to each other by this investment of marriage in which selfishness had no place. She agreed to change for him.

John's list of faults continued, but he now switched to a physical fault he noticed in her and he could not mask his frustration. "Another Fault, which seems to have been obstinately persisted in, after frequent Remonstrances, Advices, and Admonitions of your Friends, is that of sitting with the Leggs across," he noticed. Further in the paragraph, he tried to disguise his true message, "This ruins the figure and the Air, this injures the Health. And springs I fear from the former source vitz. too much Thinking. These Things ought not to be!" Here again, John was linking Abigail's irregular posture with her free intellect, declaring he could accept both.

Abigail delivered a brilliant counterpunch by accepting the "fault" he noticed in her. "The 5th fault, will endeavor

\[133\text{A.F.C. p.47}
\]

\[134\text{A.F.C.p.45}\]
to amend of it, but you know I think that a gentleman has no business to concern himself about the Leggs of a Lady," she warned John. Then, with her usual charm, she gave into his pretended desires and admitted she would cross her legs for him. "For my part I do not apprehend any bad effects from the practice, yet since you desire it, and that you may not for the future trouble Yourself so much about it, will reform."  

At any rate, eventually John arrived at the last fault he noticed in his future wife. "A sixth Imperfection is that of Walking, with the Toes bending inward. This Imperfection is commonly called Parrot-toed, I think, I know not for what Reason," he wondered. "But it gives an Idea, the reverse of a bold and noble Air, the Reverse of the stately strutt, and the sublime Deportment."  

Apparently, he liked the way she walked, and this was not a fault at all, there was something attractive in her gait.

Nevertheless, Abigail Smith did not care about her gait. "The sixth," Abigail wrote, "and last can be cured only by a Dancing School. But I must not write more."

Quickly, she changed the subject and felt she should not add

---

\[135\text{A.F.C. p.47}\]
\[136\text{A.F.C. p.45.}\]
to the list of faults by writing too much. "I borrow a hint from you, therefore will not add to my faults that of a tedious Letter—a fault I never yet had reason to complain of in you, for however long, they never were otherways than agreeable to your own," she claimed.

Taken as a whole, this list of imperfections and replies contained a comical, lighthearted tone and the dashed-off phrases vividly convey that John and Abigail had spent a lot of time watching and observing each other. The warmth and charm of this communication, with its masterful insights, disguised and subtle negotiations, leaves no doubt that John sought to show that he wanted more of a reliable measure of Abigail's integrity than instinct and affection would provide. He found his answer in her brilliant retorts. From Abigail's perspective, she wrote without restraint, and in the process she also found exactly what she was looking for. The game was over! On May 9th, 1764, the Smith-Adams courtship letters came to an abrupt stop. John Adams returned from Boston and for the next five months, he and Abigail did not write. I assume that they were able to spend the summer together and did not have to communicate by letter-writing.

137 A.F.C. p. 47
In sum, we have the real power dance completed, and intimacy achieved in the process - or as much as Abigail would get from John. Abigail and John's love maps were unfolded. The Smith-Adams courtship was over; the long marriage was just beginning. Hard work and compromise were two key factors in the Smith-Adams courtship, which translated over into their life-long investment plan. Abigail and John's love maps, revealed in his catalogue of her faults and her brilliant counter responses, brought the courtship full circle.

The Smith-Adams courtship survived a three year testing ground. Their letters proved that the changes reflected in their courtship were fundamental, indicating a shift in the definition of marriage and gender roles. This banter would not be rescinded once they were wed. In fact, it continued until they died. Love maps allowed these two lovers to resolve conflicts before they began and avoid a disgraceful marriage. All of these factors help make the Smith-Adams courtship a success.

~ ~ ~ ~

CONCLUSION: "TIL DEATH US DO PART"

Abigail Smith and John Adams were married on October
25, 1764, in the Weymouth parsonage, by her father Reverend Smith, a month before her twentieth birthday and a year before John turned thirty. The union of these two souls would last fifty four years and produce many generations of great American citizens.

As we all know, the discourse between Abigail and John did not end with the legal obligation of marriage, nor did the intellectual jousting that resulted in their well-known and remarkably revealing series of letters stifle with the comfort of the many years they spent together. In fact, Abigail and John continued to keep close written correspondence, while enduring war, revolution, and long separations because of John's political career, all the while increasing the volume and scope of the topics; both would long remember their courtship as period when emotions pushed hard against the margins of caution.

Recall, a "companionate" or "modern" marriage was based more on friendship, shared interest, mutual passions, rather than on control, incompatibility, or cruelty. I argue that courtship was, is, and forever will be the most

138 Charles Akers, Abigail Adams: An American Woman. p. 17
important time for a couple to achieve this ideal. We have seen the merger of two personalities in a lengthy courtship and the chemical reaction that helped this bond form and converge. I have suggested that courtship was an important time for men and women to use their best judgement in selecting a mate. By examining several of the courtship rituals used by Abigail and John, we have seen a process of emotional education unfold. Abigail and John used letter-writing, bundling, and gossip to express their personal goals and desires.

In form and content, the Smith-Adams courtship offers an excellent case-study of gender negotiations in the eighteenth-century. Abigail and John's courtship was not in grievous contrast to other courtships of the era. It was not unique, yet very important.\(^\text{140}\) Ellen Rothman similarly draws a picture of middle-class courtships that were successful. She argues that sexual passion, of course, is natural between men and women and courtship gave couples an opportunity to educate themselves.\(^\text{141}\) Controlling passion, then, is a major factor in a successful courtship. Perhaps this was why the Smith-Adams courtship was lengthy.

\(^{140}\)See Joy and Richard Buel, *The Way of Duty.* p. 80

\(^{141}\)Ellen Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control." p. 421
Abigail's forwardness was not unique or purely an individual phenomenon, rather both John and Abigail demonstrated roughly the same drive and ambition. It was normal for people to woo each other slowly, caution during courtship was characteristic in the period.

I have suggested that it is from the Smith-Adams courtship letters that we can recreate a sense of understanding of the emotional education during courtship. A parallel story has been told by Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel in their book The Way of Duty. One of the obvious differences was that Mary Fish experienced three different courtships with three men. In specific, during her second courtship, Mary draws a "Portrait of a Good Husband" in which she spelled out to her suitor what she wanted from their marriage. Mary used courtship to test the character of her future mate. She was very successful in finding good husbands to share her life with. By the time of her third courtship, Mary was a veteran and the process was easy for her.

From the Smith-Adams lengthy epistolary courtship emerged a relationship that remained a remarkably happy and enduring partnership. The second generation of the Adams
Family had none.\textsuperscript{142} Ironically, all of Abigail and John's children botch their courtships and marriages. Paul Nagel suggests that the second generation of Adamses had no happy marriages and this seemed to darken Abigail's view of the world.\textsuperscript{143} In specific, their daughter Abigail junior (Nabby) experienced a failed courtship and then a especially disastrous marriage. Perhaps it was ironic that John Adams chased away a remarkable young man named Royall Tyler and gave his blessings to a man that would abandon his daughter later in life.\textsuperscript{144} Nabby's story was tragic and revealed the darker side of a failed courtship. Maybe there is magic in love? I do not pretend to know, but using the Smith-Adams correspondence I have come closer to understanding that the selection of a good mate is a difficult process, and you can not blame parents for their children that blunder.

The themes of failure in courtship seem more widespread in the historical literature than successful ones. A formal courtship was expected to end in marriage. Courtship is an investment of time, energy, and emotions. Why do some

\textsuperscript{142}Paul Nagel, \textit{Descent From Glory: Four Generations of John Adams Family.} (Oxford University Press. 1983.) p. 56

\textsuperscript{143}Ibid., p. 56

\textsuperscript{144}Edith Gelles, "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case." p. 668
courtships fail and others succeed? I suggest that at every juncture in the courtship game each partner must respond correctly, otherwise the courtship fails. Anyone during courtship can take a foolish risk, write stupid things, or reveal too many dark secrets and I would add that Eros enjoys the human mating game, for no other aspect of our behavior is so complex, so subtle, or so compelling. Rejection in the Smith-Adams case would have been phenomenal in creating intense turmoil and pathologies in John Adams. This is reminiscent of Kenneth A. Lockridge's work on Robert Bolling, in which Bolling teaches us the "poetry of rejection." Robert Bolling was a poet who seemed to be disgusted with the whole business of courtship. Courtship was difficult for Bolling and the rejections he experienced created a sense of fury toward women and the power of rejection they possessed.

However, rejection did not happen in the Smith-Adams courtship and both deserve equal credit in the successful partnership they built. For Abigail and John were not only the lead actors, but also the authors, directors and

---


146 Ibid. p.48
producers of this play. The Smith-Adams courtship commands attention because they did it right with no map to follow. Their emotional mapping was lengthy, profound, and successful.

The conclusion I draw is that a successful courtship is one that ended in a happy marriage, with a lot of children that were fortunate, dominant, and flourishing; which was exactly the outcome of the Smith-Adams courtship. Abigail Smith and John Adams were masters of the art of courtship.

It is in this perspective, that we must see, not only the endurance of this marriage - a monument to courtship well constructed - but also Abigail's famous remark to John Adams in the midst of the American Revolution. In 1776, writing to her husband, Abigail urged the men of the Continental Congress to "Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or
Representation.\textsuperscript{147} She did not care who was going to be Prime Minister in the new Republic; she was Queen. Abigail did not even care if she had the right to vote; she merely wanted lawmakers to provide women with more legal protection, especially against the power of their husbands.\textsuperscript{148}

John's reply was cast in jest: "Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat."\textsuperscript{149} Now, we can see from the courtship that Abigail Smith had negotiated the freedom to think and express such thoughts, and John Adams in turn had taught her, that a critical reply was partly in jest and that he knew the justice of her causes.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{147} A.C.F. p. 370
  \item \textsuperscript{148} Henretta and Nobles, \textit{Evolution and Revolution}. p. 174.
  \item \textsuperscript{149} A.C.F. p. 382
\end{itemize}
Bibliography


Chinard, Gilbert. *Honest John Adams.* Little and Brown. 1933


Gundersen, Joan R. and Gampel, Gwen Victor. "Married Women's


