

### American Queen: The Rise and Fall of Kate Chase Sprague, Civil War "Belle of the North" and Gilded Age Woman of Scandal

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## Review

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**Oller, John** *American Queen: The Rise and Fall of Kate Chase Sprague, Civil War "Belle of the North" and Gilded Age Woman of Scandal*. Da Capo Press, \$19.70 ISBN 9780306822803

### Gender, Ambition, and the Enigma of Kate Chase Sprague

If “May you live in interesting times” is a curse, than so too is “may you be an interesting woman.” Kate Chase was an interesting woman in an age when women were not supposed to be interesting. To be honest, things haven’t changed much in the decades since the mid-nineteenth century. If you don’t believe me, read the Kate Chase biographies in order, and then read the reviews of those biographies. Historians and biographers have been using Kate for decades to pronounce judgment on her and on American women in general. Was she bad? Was she misunderstood? Was she a tragic hero? Is she a role model or is she a model of how women ought not act? Kate Chase books function as a is a kind of American bell weather, not unlike Jefferson or Lincoln books, evaluating democratic, moral and normative values. Thankfully, unlike Jefferson and Lincoln books, Chase books do not number in the hundreds. Nonetheless, there are two new books to add to the flock, Jennifer Chiaverini’s *Mrs. Lincoln’s Rival* and John Oller’s *American Queen*.

I have to admit I felt some reluctance at the thought of revisiting the Kate Chase field of battle. I have spent as much time with the Chase family as anyone alive, first as a graduate research assistant at the Chase Papers, then writing my dissertation and first book and lastly in the compilation of a documentary edition of Chase Family letters. I know a lot about Kate, but she remains an enigma to me. She’s one of the reasons I love history—she taught me that the past really is an undiscovered country and that we can only know a tiny portion of what was.

Kate’s father, Salmon P. Chase is no less frustrating. His biographer John Niven called him “a study in paradox.” By any measure Salmon was a deeply moral human. Unlike most politicians, then and now, he concerned himself with

doing the right thing as much as he did with manipulating power. His legal battles against the unfairness of the Fugitive Slave Act mark him as one of the great men of his time. His last act as a public man, just days before his death, was to cast the lone dissenting vote on *Bradwell v. Illinois* (1873), the Supreme Court case that said it was acceptable to discriminate against women who wanted to be lawyers. But spend much time reading his letters to his daughters and you quickly find him to be more irritating and infuriating than any father has a right to be. He expected of daughters all the right behavior and intellectual achievement that most nineteenth century fathers expected of their sons. He spent more time writing to his daughters about how they failed his expectations than he did writing words of love. But in doing so he raised a daughter interesting enough to live on in historical memory. That is quite a feat. After all, how many daughters of "great men" can you name?

Novelist Jennifer Chiaverini has apparently fallen under the spell of the great men's wives and daughters school of history. Before *Mrs. Lincoln's Rival* she wrote the novel *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker*, about the relationship between Mary Lincoln and Elisabeth Keckley and *The Spy Mistress* about Confederate woman and Union spy Elizabeth Van Lew. Chiaverini's most recent novel is *Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule*. Before writing historical novels Chiaverini made quite a career for herself writing the sixteen book Elm Creek Quilts series, books that fit in a sub-genre of crime novel called cozy mysteries. Because I am both a voluminous reader and a quilter I have read and entirely enjoyed the Chiaverini's Elm Creek books.

Given that the title of Chiaverini's Kate Chase book is *Mrs. Lincoln's Rival* I was expecting and dreading in equal parts the story of a fictional catfight. That is, I expected Chiaverini to fall for the old "Kate was ambitious and bad" thing that makes me want to poke my eyes out. No less irritating is the "Mary Lincoln as selfish, evil harridan" that permeates so much history. Indeed, historians (with some notable exceptions) have treated few women as harshly Mary Lincoln. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Chiaverini, for the most part, resisted these tropes. Admittedly, Kate Chase fares better under Chiaverini's pen than does Mary Lincoln, who is often seen in the novel through John Hay's eyes. Hay was most emphatically not in the Mary Lincoln Fan Club.

Chiaverini also uses the leeway created by fiction to get inside the Chase household and Kate's courtship and marriage to William Sprague. Sprague was selfish and abusive in the way only a rich alcoholic can be. History has been

weirdly kind to Sprague, more inclined to blame Kate for her poor taste in men, rather than hold Sprague accountable for the ruining the lives of almost everyone he touched. Chiaverini does a nice job imagining how Kate found fell into Sprague's net, including his almost instantaneous transformation from romantic lover to abusive husband after their wedding. In doing so she gives Kate credit marrying Sprague for love, rather than for more mercenary economic purposes.

Much has been made of the so-called rivalry between Kate Chase and Mary Lincoln, but the historical record provides little support for the story. Kate, for example, never mentioned Mary Lincoln in any of her many surviving letters in any even vaguely derogatory manner. In treating Kate fairly, Chiaverini's novel is much less about a rivalry and more the story of a young woman's efforts to navigate the troubled political waters of Civil War Washington politics and the high expectations created by new ideas about romantic love. In that Chiaverini succeeds admirably, much to the irritation of the oddly numerous Kate-haters still around.

*Mrs. Lincoln's Rival* ends with the assassination of Lincoln, leaving much of Kate's story untold. Chiaverini does kindly supply her readers with an epilogue that accurately and empathetically summarizes the rest of Kate's life, but in doing so she frustrated some of her readers, who wondered why she quit just as the story was getting really interesting. Novelists, like historians, make hard choices about which story to tell and how to tell it. In focusing the novel on Kate's life during the Civil War Chiaverini opens a window on to one of our nation's most difficult stretch of years and she does so for readers who probably don't read many history books. That's yeoman's work in a culture that takes writing limited to 140 characters seriously.

Oller is strikingly less gentle with Kate. In his biography *American Queen* he calls her condescending, calculating, imperious and scheming, all by page 3. He contends she used her beauty and brains to seduce men, thus casting her as femme fatale. The difference between Oller and other authors who have taken this tack is that Oller admires Kate for her independence and assertiveness. He also claims, with not one whit of proof (but that people have been repeating it for decades) that Kate hated Mary Lincoln because Kate thought she would have made a better first lady. There is quite a lot of historical prose dedicated to Salmon P. Chase's supposed mania for the presidency, though in truth he spent no more time seeking the highest office in the land than did contemporaries like William H. Seward. Supposedly Kate drank the Kool-Aid and was every bit as

maniacal about the White House as her father. Kate may have wanted her Daddy to be president, but it's a long leap from there to "Kate hated the Lincolns." Chiaverini falls for this same bit of historical mythology, but Chiaverini gets to make stuff up because her book is fiction. To be fair, John Oller is not a trained historian. He is a journalist whose best-known book is a biography of the actress Jean Arthur (2004). Like Chiaverini, Oller has apparently caught the history bug. He is currently working on Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox" of the American Revolution.

It appears that readers enjoy Oller's take on Kate Chase, which should surprise no one. Ambition is a word with a gendered usage. Used on men it is meant to compliment, but used on women it condemns and chastises. Much of the Kate Chase literature is an argument over whether her ambition made her admirable or horrible. Readers then decide whether they like or dislike a Kate Chase book based on how they feel about female ambition. What few people consider is that the whole argument might be a red herring. If she had been as ambitious as some biographers contend why did she leave the political arena while still in her thirties? She was in the prime of her womanhood during the Gilded Age, when scandal and divorce would have been no real impediment to her remarriage to a rich and powerful man. Why did she live out her life quietly in France and then at her father's estate outside D. C., raising children and gardening? I don't mean this review to degenerate into an argument about Kate's relative ambition or not, but I think a historian's job is to consider all the evidence, think seriously upon it and not replicate past narratives just because they meet some cultural need to create cautionary tales about the dangers of female ambition. That we have not outgrown the need for these kinds of stories in the twenty-first century, on the eve of a presidential campaign season likely to contain a strong female candidate, worries me.

Oller's reviewers have praised him for his "fresh perspective" but most of his narrative line should be familiar to anyone who has read all the Kate Chase books. Oller is markedly less tolerant of William Sprague than many biographers have been and does a nice job describing the variety of ways in which Sprague wreaked havoc upon his family. Oller has also been praised for his use of new historical sources, though try as I might I could find few sources in his book that were not already in my biography of Kate. Still, Oller has created an immensely readable book. He melds fictional and historical writing into a pleasing narrative style, making him as talented a storyteller as Chiaverini. In this I think many historians, including myself, could learn a lot.

*America Queen* is above all, as are so many of the Kate Chase books, a morality tale about the boundaries of respectable womanhood. Kate is too ambitious, too interested in public politics. In inappropriately stepping over the boundaries of submissive and domestic womanhood, fate punishes Kate, leaving her with nothing but the shards of a ruined life. Oller commits himself to that version of Kate's life, but also does something really interesting with it—he admires her for being a survivor. It's a fascinating balancing act, and one not many biographers could pull off.

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