

Thomas Jefferson and Maria Cosway: A Gordian Love Affair



Complete Correspondence with Critical Commentary

M. Andrew Holowchak

Series in American History



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For Monica, who made this book possible.

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Preface

Every biographer of Jefferson, at some point, has to grapple with Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Maria Cosway. Almost all biographers focus on Jefferson's celebrated, perhaps infamously so, *billet doux* of October 12, 1786—an inordinately lengthy letter, written wholly with Jefferson's left hand because of a fractured right wrist and, in my estimation, the most incredible letter of the thousands of letters he has penned. In that letter, a love-struck Jefferson, despondent after Cosway's departure from Paris *en route* to London, struggles to express his feelings for her. His struggle takes the form of a debate of sorts between his rational and moral faculties, housing respectively reason, the faculty of intellect, and feeling, the faculty of the moral sense. Scholars typically focus on the nature of that debate and wrangle among themselves about whether Head or Heart wins the debate, and I note that there is no scholarly consensus on the winner. All at some point state the obvious: that the relationship does not eventuate successfully.

Yet among the very many who note the genuineness of feelings between the two—there are strangely a few scholars like Onuf who acknowledge merely friendly flirtation and nothing more—almost all admit reciprocity of affection. The intense and overwhelming feelings that Jefferson clumsily expresses for Cosway in his *billet doux* are also felt, though perhaps less overwhelmingly, by Cosway. Her many pouty letters on their separation—while Jefferson is in Paris and Cosway is in London—are, they argue, evidence of reciprocity.¹ That, of course, makes for a more attractive and marketable narrative, but that hypothesis is untenable. Poutiness was part of Cosway's personality, and she often used it to large effect whenever she was aware of someone having interest in her.

Scrutiny of the letters between the two does not evince reciprocity of feeling. While Jefferson, in his ham-fisted manner, somewhat unreservedly expresses his love for Cosway in his *billet doux*, a careful examination of their letters shortly thereafter shows that she does not share the depth and intensity of Jefferson's feelings. I find it incredible how that is missed by most scholars. To set that record straight is a large motivation for this book.

¹ E.g., John Kaminski, *Jefferson in Love: The Love Letters between Thomas Jefferson & Maria Cosway* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 22–23, and George Green Shackelford, *Thomas Jefferson's Travels in Europe, 1784–1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 65–74.

A second motivation for this book is that there has never been a collection of all the letters of Jefferson and Cosway. John Kaminski, in 2001, has an edition that has the letters between the two till 1790, but he, unfortunately, ends there, and there is, I show in this edition, more to their story that needs to be said, and that “more” can only be unpacked by examination of their late-in-life letters.

Other than significant biographies of Jefferson, there are several important books that have a bearing on the Jefferson-Cosway relationship.

Helen Duprey Bullock wrote *My Head and My Heart: A Little History of Thomas Jefferson and Maria Cosway* in 1945. The motivation for her “little history” is the recent acquisition of 25 missing letters of the Jefferson-Cosway correspondence. She is an advocate of reciprocated love.

There is also, as I have already mentioned, John Kaminski’s collection of their love letters: *Jefferson in Love*. He ends his collection in 1790, I suppose because the ardor between the two morphs into affectionate amicability. Yet during that time, the letters show “deep and passionate love” that may have been consummated.² Ending the collection in 1790 is, I argue, a mistake. While Jefferson’s feelings for Cosway are immediate and intense upon their first meeting and while those feelings slowly abate over time, it is very probable that Cosway, late in her life, when she is without her husband and when she is relegated to her school for girls in Lodi, comes to love Jefferson in a manner that she before could never have imagined. If that is so—and I argue that it is, and that is a third incentive for this book—then it is necessary to include the entirety of their correspondence.

The most significant book on the affair is Carol Burnell’s *Divided Affections: The Extraordinary Life of Maria Cosway: Celebrity Artist and Thomas Jefferson’s Impossible Love*. The book is “dramatized with conversations” for improved narrative flow, though historical purists, of whom I am one, might find that objectionable. Still, it is meticulously researched, and thus, it is invaluable to those wanting to gain access to the mind and life of Maria Cosway. That, however, proves to be a second defect of the book. Because it is so meticulously researched, it would have been better crafted as a scholarly book without the defect of hyper-concern for narrative flow through fictive conversations. A third defect, also related to narrative flow, is that passages from letters between the two are often not explicated in context. For illustration, Burnell, when writing of the gossip concerning Cosway and singer Luigi Marchesi (chapter 4), includes a snippet of Cosway’s letter of February 6, 1789, to Jefferson. That snippet includes black “intrigues, calumnies, and injustices,” but Cosway’s

² John Kaminski, *Jefferson in Love: The Love Letters between Thomas Jefferson & Maria Cosway* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 38

letter is not self-referential—she is not expressly alluding to calumnies concerning her affairs—but it is about British political corruption. Of the Jefferson-Cosway relationship, Burnell rightly acknowledges unrequited affection because of key differences in personality between the two. Jefferson is not a “forward-moving man” but an “ethereal spirit” who possesses not the will to win over the gallant, somewhat free-spirited artist.³

There are two other essential books that shed light on Maria Cosway.

George C. Williamson publishes *Richard Cosway, R.A.*, in 1905. The title misleads, for it is equally a biography of Maria Cosway. The book is a good starting point for scholars interested in Maria Cosway, and we are indebted to Williamson for his early research, though his critical insights are tempered by the Victorian moral strictures of his day. For instance, Williamson has access to Richard Cosway’s travel diary, which crudely and bluntly tells us of his amorous affair, while married, with fellow artist Mary Moser. The diary can no longer be found, and we are wholly dependent on Williamson’s account of Richard Cosway’s salaciousness during his time of separation from his wife Maria, though Williamson is so disgusted by that entry that he mentions only that regard for morality demands that he overpass it without inclusion in his book and discussion of it.⁴

Gerald Barnett, in 1995, writes a biography of the Cosways and dilates considerably on the artistic side of the couple. His large contribution, following Williamson, is that he shows that both Cosways, as artists, are considerable and serious talents. Following Williamson, he, too, is a conservative critic. Barnett’s reassessment does not suffer “the handicap of ridicule and malice which detractors once heaped on the name of Cosway.” He adds, “Former fictions and misconceptions which distorted reality are set in focus.”⁵ The fictions and misconceptions to which he refers include the scandalmongery concerning the salaciousness of the Cosways, Richard especially, and critical condemnation of their abilities as artists. Barnett is inclined to take lightly all condemnations.

This book, the tripartite incentivization of which I have given above, is a collection of all the letters between Jefferson and Cosway. There is also a lengthy introduction that discusses the lives of both but focuses on Maria Cosway, for information on Jefferson’s life is freely accessible. There are, in addition to the introduction, six chapters to the book. Chapters 1 through 4

³ Carol Burnell, *Divided Affections: The Extraordinary Life of Maria Cosway: Celebrity Artist and Thomas Jefferson’s Impossible Love* (London: Column House, 2007), 225.

⁴ George C. Williamson, *Richard Cosway, R.A.* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905).

⁵ Gerald Barnett, *Richard and Maria Cosway: A Biography* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1995).

cover successively the years 1786, 1787, 1788, and 1789. Chapter 5 covers the years 1790 through 1805. As there are no known letters between 1806 and 1818, the final chapter covers the years 1819 to 1824. There are no letters exchanged in the final two years of Jefferson's life.

There are two procedural points that I make. First, all letters are from Princeton University Press' collection of Jefferson's correspondence. I include none of its copyrighted annotations and interpolations. Second, all translations from Italian to English are mine, and thus, any egregious errors in translations are mine.

I have taken certain liberties in the crafting of this book: two large and one small. First, I write beyond this preface of past events in the present tense. That I have chosen to do in some effort to bring life to them. I hope that historical purists, wedded wholly to the use of past tense to write of past events, will not find objectionable my unconventionality. Second, in translating Cosway's Italian prose into English, my aim has not been to capture her sentiments as literally as possible but to capture the meaning as precisely as possible. Thus, I sometimes add to the Italian to make plain the meaning in English. Decades of experience in translating other languages into English (e.g., Greek, Latin, German, French, and Ukrainian) has taught me well that translations, focusing too much on literalness, often obfuscate the meaning in the language to be translated. I consequently translate with a certain degree of plasticity that might irk literalists. Last, I have tended to remove all dashes in the letters where there is a change of subject, and I have separated the text, thereby making an additional paragraph. Also, I tend to break long paragraphs in letters into separate paragraphs where there is a sharp change of subject. That has the added benefit of shortening paragraphs for ease of assimilation. I justify this last liberty by appealing to Jefferson, who ever maintained the rules of a language must answer to its usage, and usage over time changes.

There are 25 figures in this book. All are public domain.

I end with a comment. This book has been a labor of love. I have thoroughly enjoyed the examination of their correspondence and critical analysis of it. It would, I maintain, make one hell of a movie!

I thank the good folks at Vernon Press for such an exemplary job of bringing the labor of love so handsomely to life!

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