CHAPTER SEVEN

Two Women

During their two-year engagement that began on September 16, 1883, Woodrow Wilson and Ellen Axson exchanged more than seven hundred letters. Woodrow in Baltimore was the more frequent correspondent, often devoting several pages to himself—his challenges, his political thinking, his health, his insecurities, and his ambitions. Ellen, first from Georgia and then New York City, where she studied at the Art Students League, willingly shared in his self-analysis. To his reflections she added her own appraisals, in turn leading him to further introspection. But even the sensitive and accommodating bride-to-be occasionally warned him against too much solipsism. "'Know thyself' may be a very good motto," she gently chided five months into their engagement, "but there are others still better, for instance, 'forget thyself.'"

Shortly before the wedding ceremony, the prospective groom wrote Ellen from Johns Hopkins to complain about the then-emerging popular wisdom of "a woman's right to lead her own life," independent from an existence as auxiliary to husband and children. This supposed "right," he assured her, was a "pernicious falsehood." Granting to women the same rights enjoyed by men would threaten the family as an institution. Worse yet, it would erode the fabric of American society. Marriage alone, Wilson insisted, was a woman's "essential condition" for the performance of her "proper duties." It was "simply ridiculous" to argue that women "could live exactly the same life that men lead." It was even more unthinkable that a *man* would assume the duties "of the mother and the housekeeper!" This was heresy. "Oh," he lamented, "it is a shame to so pervert the truth!"

A few weeks later, he expanded on his ideas about the differences between men and women. "Women are much less tiresome than men," he wrote Ellen, "because their wonderful sympathy enables them to reflect the sentiments and opinions

one pours into their ears." Ellen was his ideal woman because she reflected his views "like a mirror without a flaw!" Yet only someone who believed his own ideas were flawless could want his female confidantes to reflexively agree with him.

In expressing himself so pointedly to his wife-to-be, Wilson was undoubtedly attempting to validate what he hoped and suspected: that she shared his convictions on these subjects. He was also laying down a marker in advance about the kind of marriage he expected the two of them to have. He must have been satisfied and relieved when, for her part, Ellen cheerfully affirmed his views. Her one and only longing, she replied five days later, was "to serve you, to be a comfort to you, to make life in some way easier and sweeter to you, to be to you all that a wife, and only a wife, can be." The two were in complete agreement that a woman's place was in the home, where she would serve as her husband's helpmate.

Wilson had other occasions to let his fiancée know what he expected in a wife. At one point, Ellen sent Woodrow an alarming letter describing the cruelty inflicted on her cousin by an abusive husband. The man had threatened to murder Ellen's cousin on multiple occasions (once, the threat came while holding a gun to her head). Wilson's attempt at a sympathetic response was bizarre. He provided Ellen with a list of the many good reasons that could prompt a husband to do such "desperate things."

One reason a man might threaten his wife, Wilson explained, is that she might simply be "an exasperating woman." Or she might be "a silly rattle-pate" who talked too much. Other grounds for a husband's understandable desperation included his wife's being "an icy prude" who denied him sex. His catalog of unpardonable female offenses went on: she might be "worldly." She might be "frivolous." Wilson could certainly understand a husband's complaint if his wife were a "sullen virago"—a woman presuming to act like a man. Any of these things, in Wilson's view, could constitute valid grounds for a husband's wanting a divorce or separation. (He did not generate even a short list of intolerable conduct of which husbands might be guilty.)

Having nearly exhausted the possible slights a man should never have to endure from his wife, Wilson clumsily added he was not suggesting Ellen's cousin was guilty of these offenses. And he gallantly drew the line at physically threatening a woman. His objection to this was based on chivalry, however, rather than the entitlement of both spouses to equal respect. For a husband to threaten his wife with a gun, he said, would be cowardly and therefore unworthy of a man.

This view of men's relationship to women reflected the then-prevalent norms of elite southern society—what historian Christopher Lasch later described as "that combination of patriarchal authority and the sentimental veneration of women which is the essence of the genteel tradition." It was a tradition idealized in Sir Walter Scott's chivalric novels, favorite Wilson reading since childhood.

The influence of Scott's works—exerted not only on Wilson but all of southern white society—was magnified by regional authors who borrowed heavily from the author's social canon.

In Wilson's chivalric framework, women were required to be submissive precisely so that men could protect the weaker sex. There was man's work, and there was woman's work. The latter most certainly included housework, ideally with the help of servants. To stress this point, Wilson informed Ellen of his outrage over a recently married Wellesley graduate in his rooming house at Johns Hopkins. This woman, he felt it important his fiancée know, kept "neither her person nor her room tidy." In Wilson's view this was a grave offense "that will certainly convince her husband of the necessity of a divorce when she undertakes to keep house for him." The fact that the woman was an accomplished scholar, "versed in several languages and on speaking terms with one or two sciences," seems only to have counted against her, since it distracted her from housekeeping.

His long-distance romance with Ellen was a more successful business for Wilson than his pursuit of a degree at Johns Hopkins. He abruptly wrapped things up at the school in his second year without completing either the required dissertation or the reading requirements for the Ph.D. he had originally set out to earn. As he had with law school, Wilson simply grew tired of Johns Hopkins's rigorous course of study and frequent examinations. "I shall make no special effort in reading for" the Ph.D. degree, he announced to Ellen in the middle of the fall semester of his second year, "and I shall pass no more examinations." True to his word, he soon abandoned the enterprise entirely. "I have given up . . . conclusively," he sighed to his fiancée in February. He quit Johns Hopkins after the spring semester, never to enroll again.

At the time, Wilson believed he didn't need a Ph.D., given the surprising success of *Congressional Government*, published only a few months before. Yet the book could hardly be considered a work of original scholarship on the actual functioning of Congress and the executive branch. It contained only fifty-two citations, mostly to secondary sources such as the *Nation* and the *North American Review*. "I have no patience for the tedious toil of 'research,'" Wilson admitted to Ellen shortly after the book's release. Even though he was living an hour from Washington by train, Wilson only stopped by the Capitol once during his years at Johns Hopkins. But *Congressional Government* was such an audacious attack on the Constitution's system of checks and balances that it garnered instant media attention.

The reviews were mixed. Newspapers in New York and San Francisco panned it, as did Harvard's A. Lawrence Lowell, whose critique came in the form of a lengthy article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that listed numerous fallacies and errors of analysis. Wilson's notion of grafting the main features of a parliamentary system

onto the Constitution would be utterly impractical, Lowell warned, rendering the presidency and the judiciary dysfunctional and the Congress uncontrollably powerful. The parliamentary form and the American system of checks and balances each has its advantages, he noted, but attempting to mash them together as Wilson proposed would produce an out-of-control Frankenstein's monster.

Equally forceful, but entirely supportive, were the *Nation*, the *Yale Literary Magazine*, and newspapers in Philadelphia and Minneapolis. When Wilson decided to take on his critics in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in the process offering even more eye-popping proposals such as restricting the introduction of legislation to senior members of the majority party, it produced still more criticism and simultaneously recharged his supporters.

Congressional Government was released in January 1885, but the debate in the popular press would extend well into the following year. The controversy unquestionably helped the author. Despite his lack of seasoning, he was now gaining national media attention as a scholar. Buoyed by the initial public notice and at last armed with a teaching offer—at the new women's college in Bryn Mawr, near Philadelphia—Wilson left Johns Hopkins in the summer of 1885. He was now 28 and his fiancée, Ellen, was 25. It was high time, he felt, that he got his first job, so that at last they could be married.

Fittingly, the June wedding was in Georgia, where they each grew up. Both of Ellen's parents had died since she turned 21—her mother in 1881 from infection following childbirth, her father only the previous year, by suicide after a prolonged depression—and so her grandfather gave her away. Like Woodrow's father, Ellen's grandfather was a Presbyterian minister who had been a faithful supporter of the Confederacy and of slavery. The couple honeymooned in the South as well, at the very resort where Woodrow had first introduced Ellen to his family.

Ellen was and would remain exactly the kind of woman he wanted. Intelligent yet submissive, she shared her husband's convictions about the superiority of white men over all others, and their entitlement to a greater civic role than all others—including women, including even herself. Yet at the very moment he married Ellen, another woman was about to move into the center of his life. Like Ellen, this woman was intelligent and talented, but in all other respects she was Mrs. Wilson's opposite. She was a firm believer in women's political equality, women's suffrage, and women in higher education, the professions, and the workplace.

Woodrow Wilson would be terrorized by her.