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978-0-521-55650-7 - The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain

Susan K. Harris

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Passionate readers both, Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain courted through books, spelling out their expectations through literary references as they corresponded during their frequent separations. Their letters reveal Olivia Langdon not as a Victorian prude, as many twentieth-century critics have portrayed her, but as a thoughtful intellectual, widely read in literature, history, and modern science. Not surprisingly, the letters show Twain as a critic, a suitor who lampooned Langdon's interests even while he sought to win her love. While Langdon's letters show her carefully considering her culture's array of possible role models, Twain's exhibit his conservatism about women's nature and roles. At the same time, they show him resisting many of his culture's basic assumptions. Working with Langdon's own letters and diaries as well as Twain's, Harris traces the complexities of Langdon and Twain's courtship within their larger contexts, showing how they negotiated their relationship through the mediums of literature, material culture, and the dynamics of the extended family.

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*Dedicated to the memory of Darryl Baskin,
first director of the Elmira Center
for Mark Twain Studies at Quarry Farm*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have dedicated this book to the memory of Darryl Baskin because his interest in Elmira history was directly responsible for its inception. I first visited the Elmira Center for Mark Twain Studies at Quarry Farm in 1988. Though I had published a book on Twain in the early 1980s, I had moved away from Mark Twain studies and did not think I would ever return. But Darryl was searching for speakers for the center's lecture series, and someone gave him my name. I flew to Elmira and Darryl picked me up at the airport. On the way to the farm he lectured me on Elmira's demography, past and present. I remember that ride as a kaleidoscope through local history, a series of historical juxtapositions. By the time we reached the farm I wanted to know more. Over the next few years I returned to the area several times to explore its possibilities. By 1992, when the National Endowment for the Humanities granted me a fellowship to research a study of Olivia Langdon's reading, I knew I was hooked.

In the course of researching and writing this book I have incurred more debts than ever before. Most important is my debt to Quarry Farm itself. One of scholars' few perks is the occasional chance to actually live in a historical house, and I know that I speak for many members of the Mark Twain community when I say that for me staying at Quarry Farm has been among the most moving experiences of my life. At this writing, I have been acquainted with the house for seven years, and it has become a part of my life – tranquil mornings in the study or on the porch,

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stormy nights in the kitchen or parlor, the memory of my daughter's eighth birthday celebrated on the lawn, the thought of our Brooklyn-born cat, ecstatic at being brought out of the city for the summer, killed on the road and buried with a hundred other cats in the area behind the barn. Over the years, I have come to know the ghosts who so kindly keep alive the past embodied here, and I thank them for succoring me and mine as they succored so many refugees from the furious pace of our American lives.

But my debts are not only to the dead. In historical studies the present makes the past possible, and that is hard work. Darryl Baskin's sudden death in 1992 was made bearable only by the leadership of Gretchen Sharlow, currently director of the center. Gretchen's energy, dedication, and scholarship have been invaluable, and her humor has sustained us all. With Gretchen, the rest of the Elmira Center staff – from Mark Woodhouse, the librarian at the Mark Twain Archives in Elmira College's Gannett-Tripp Library, to former caretaker Gail Early and current caretaker Karen Ernhout – has made this study possible. To all of them I owe my heartfelt thanks.

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I am indebted to other people and institutions as well: to the

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Finally but not least, I am indebted to the friends who – unpaid – have read this manuscript and encouraged me to improve it. My first reader was Howard Kumin, my father, who read it while it was very much in draft and urged me to make it more accessible to general readers. My second reader, a year later, was Joan Hedrick, whose acute criticisms of what I had hoped was my final draft stimulated three more months of revisions, aimed both at making the text still more accessible and at clarifying my concepts and expanding cultural contexts. Both Gretchen Sharlow and the reader for Cambridge University Press corrected factual errors. My friend Bonnie Stretch, herself an editor, and my friend and colleague Ann Carter Rose combed the manuscript for style. Shannon Nichols helped me prepare the manuscript for publication, and Chris Weinmann cheerfully undertook the indexing. At the last moment, when I was struggling with the copyedited version on a trip abroad, Terry Webster, of Murdoch University in Western Australia, provided me with sorely needed advice and encouragement. To all these kind friends I am deeply indebted. Whatever factual errors remain, whatever lapses of grace are evident, are wholly my own responsibility.

Finally – but no, I have already said “finally.” To the bedrock, the basis, the field of possibility for all my work, I thank Billy Joe and Kate, for their love and support and for simply being there.

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A NOTE ABOUT NAMES

Some readers may be disturbed by my referring to Olivia Louise Langdon Clemens as “Langdon” throughout this book. I do so because I find it offensively familiar for biographers and critics to refer to their subjects by first name. Additionally, when the subject is a woman, calling her by her first name is both patronizing and denigrating. On principle, then, I do not use first names alone.

I also realize, however, that my principles occasionally entail confusion, largely because women’s last names change. Many women are also happy to be known by their husbands’ surnames. Nevertheless, for consistency’s sake, I have decided to stick to “Langdon” even after Olivia Langdon becomes Olivia Clemens. One of the few places I bend this rule is in sections of Chapter 5, where I discuss the Clemenses’ first child, Langdon Clemens. There I refer to him as “baby Langdon” and to his mother as “Olivia.”