

REVIEWS

MINA SAMUELS

The Queen of Cups—A Novel

Bloomington, IN: Unlimited Publishing, 2006¹

Queen of Cups is the nurturer, filled with compassion. . . . She is full of creativity and artistry. She's also sexual and secretive. You'll pay a price if you cross her.²

I never in my life could be happy without her, & with her I must starve.³

Juliette Peirce is still a mystery. Little is known about her and there is a strong suspicion that we don't even know her real name. Still, we can

see glimpses of the life she must have led through diaries, correspondence, and the testimonies of neighbors who were interviewed sometimes many decades later. Despite her desire for secrecy, Juliette apparently loved to talk about her European past. But the surviving record is spotty and inconsistent, and people's memories unreliable. Juliette has been said to be a relative of Franz-Josef, ruler of the Austrian-Hungarian double monarchy, and to have bounced on his knee; she has been said to be a cousin of Bismarck, and to have sat on his arm; and she apparently also sat in Queen Victoria's lap. It's unlikely that's all true. Still there are common threads: that she lived for much of her young life in Nancy, that she had an Alsatian accent, that her father was of noble blood, that she had two sisters and two brothers (one of whom committed suicide while the other was a diplomat known to George Bancroft), and that she owned expensive clothes and jewelry. Why did she leave Europe and why was she so secretive about her past? There are several accounts given by Peirce and Juliette. On one account, she left France, pretending to elope with a fictitious man while renouncing her family and her inheritance so that her brother's gambling debts could be paid off. The secrecy was necessary to protect the family's honor.⁴ On another account, Juliette made one of the highest princes of Europe, a man of particularly bad character, her enemy after she exposed the scheming way in which he sought to trap a charming young girl into marrying him. In this account, the secrecy was necessary to protect Juliette.⁵ Samuels's account is simpler and more pedestrian, and it would not surprise me if that part of her story were closer to the truth, even though she is miles off with the rest. Her Juliette is raped by a powerful family friend, gets pregnant, is accused of having seduced the man, and shipped off to a discrete countryside clinic to carry the pregnancy to term. It doesn't come to that. The baby dies in the ninth month and must be surgically removed. What is left is a socially and physically damaged young woman. In this way Samuels combines in one fell swoop Juliette's departure from Europe, the abrupt break with her past, the secrecy, and Juliette's life-long gynecological problems.

In part Samuels's aim with *The Queen of Cups* is to get a better understanding of Juliette by writing a fictionalized account of her life.⁶ This is a laudable goal that should appeal also to Peirce scholars who seek to better understand Peirce. Quite a bit of research has been done on Juliette's identity, but in all of it Juliette herself is markedly absent. Victor Lenzen's "The Identity of Juliette" is a carefully crafted abductive tale, but one soon gets lost in the thicket of the genealogical underbrush of nineteenth-century European nobility.⁷ The same is true for the well over two dozen pages prosaically titled "Data Concerning the Second Wife of Charles Sanders Peirce," carefully collected by Max H. Fisch. In 1959 Harvard had appointed Fisch as Peirce's official biographer, but

Fisch found that he could not write Peirce's biography without knowing who Juliette was.⁸ It seems, however, that searching for Juliette's identity is a quite different enterprise than getting to know who she was. Samuels's fictional account is an attempt to do the latter. From reading Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* she had received the impression that Juliette was being blamed for Peirce's failure, and she began writing *The Queen of Cups* as "a defense of women maligned by history."⁹ But in the course of writing her purpose shifted. As Samuels explains in an interview about the book, "Ultimately I wanted to understand what kind of woman stayed with a man as difficult and self-destructive as Charles Peirce." Interestingly, the publisher has a different take on it. In the colophon he assures the reader that all characters in the book "are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously *without any intent to describe their actual characteristics*" (emphasis added).

On the relation between fact and fiction, Samuels confesses that though she has made historical research the springboard for her imagination, she did not consider herself bound to historical facts. "I found in my first draft," she explains, "that I stuck too closely to the historical record, and the story was stilted. I needed to let my imagination take over more . . . so I could create a story that flowed." And she adds further that her job as a writer is to make her characters "believable as people, not to render with exactitude their life as it really was. A novel is, after all, a story, not a biography." Still, it could be argued that Samuels's book isn't really a novel, as it very explicitly purports to be a fictionalized account of the relationship between two actual people.

This leaves us with the interesting question: How much should we stick to historical fact when trying to portray Juliette, especially when confronted with a historical record that is so spotty, suspect, and contradictory? To answer this question we should begin by distinguishing artistic license from clumsy mistakes. Even in a work of fiction the latter are better avoided. Unfortunately, the book suffers quite badly from them. In Samuels's account Juliette enters Peirce's study for the first time in 1878, and this is what Juliette sees:

Charles had books on subjects ranging across math, physics, chemistry, and philology—works of Royce, Santayana, Bradley, Bosanquet, Russell, Agassiz and his father, Benjamin Peirce's, books on mathematics. There were old books, too, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works like Robert Boyle, Summas, Duns Scotus, and the Greek texts—Tacitus, Cicero, Plato, Aristotle and the like. (Samuels, 127)

Does it really need to be said that in 1878 Russell was only six and Santayana fifteen, that Royce had not published any books yet, that Duns

Scotus is a thirteenth-century figure, that "Summas" is not an author but a genre of medieval literature, and that Tacitus and Cicero were Roman orators? Mistakes like these are not confined to this passage only. Samuels has Peirce refer to his student Christine Ladd by her married name, even though she did not marry before she finished her Ph.D. Herbert Peirce is transformed into Peirce's older and only brother. Edward Hegeler is rebaptized Rudolf Hegeler. Gifford Pinchot is made an influential forester while still a student at Yale. And Arisbe was named after the colony of the ancient philosopher Miletus. There is more, but I'd better leave it at this. Most of these mistakes are pretty innocuous in the sense that they are unlikely to affect the story, but they shake its credibility, and most readers will at least pick up on a few of them.

There are other discrepancies, however, that do affect the story and our understanding of the central characters. When Samuels's Juliette first meets Peirce at a costume ball at Hotel Brevoort, Samuels writes that Juliette was dressed as a bird. In real life Peirce's first impression of Juliette was quite different, giving us a much more introverted Juliette: "When I first saw this dear young lady, she had on a very thick brown veil. It hid her face from me, but it did not hide the delicacy, the nobility, the truth, and the strength of her heart."¹⁰ Samuels makes Juliette a painter, whereas the real Juliette had an active interest in theatre and was apparently quite good at it. She pays attention to Juliette's hysterectomy, but leaves out that during the surgery a seven-pound fibroid tumor was also removed—and this while Juliette weighed only ninety pounds. Instead of looking seriously into the Peirces' monetary issues, Samuels prefers to give a rather superficial and false account of a woman who over and over again selflessly and secretly bails out the "wasteful" philosopher. Samuels writes, mistakenly, that Peirce broke radically with his family after his mother died. She also tells us she went to Paris where she visited "the places Juliette might have gone." But why? Paris is notoriously absent in the historical record. All the evidence suggests that Juliette came from Nancy, and in a quick chronology of her European past, jotted down by Peirce on a scrap of paper, we find Trèves, Cologne, Frankfurt, Geneva, Hamburg, and Aix la Chapelle, but no Paris. Why didn't Samuels go to Nancy? How different was Nancy in those days from Paris? Does it give us a different Juliette? Most importantly, however, is that the historical record very strongly suggests that Juliette had a noble background of some sort. Instead Samuels has her grow up in a Russian gypsy camp and has her later intermingle with the Parisian bourgeoisie. It is interesting to contrast Samuels's account with Victor Lenzen's carefully crafted "The Identity of Juliette," mentioned earlier, which positions Juliette in an entirely different milieu.

Then there are the omissions. There is no mention at all of Juliette's travels to Egypt or of her acting. There is no mention of James Mills

Peirce, the real older brother of Peirce, who met Juliette in Egypt, and who, as an active but very discrete homosexual, must have had his opinions about the imprudence of his younger brother and Juliette.¹¹ About such indiscretions Simon Newcomb wrote to his wife in 1883:

Charlie Peirce's wedding is different from what I supposed. It is the widow of a Count Portales, a Frenchman, not our Swiss Pourtales. They have been so intimate for some years as to cause a great scandal; indeed it is said they have been more than once expelled from hotels.¹²

James Mills Peirce also found Juliette easily excited and depressed, something that is noted by various people and generally attributed to her suffering from a prolapsed uterus. While Samuels speaks amply of Peirce's extravagance with money, she remains wholly silent about Juliette's, and makes no reference to her treatments for tuberculosis, which proved a substantial financial burden. There is also no mention of Peirce's repeated complaints in correspondence to friends and family (especially during the mid 1880s) that Juliette was the cause of his ruin.

Finally, there are the things Samuels mentions for which there is no real evidence, most significantly, the recurrent violent episodes where Peirce strikes women working in his household, slamming one even with a brick in the head, and having him at one point almost slap Juliette in the face with the barrel of a gun.¹³ Rather than a careful analysis of the relationship between two people, the book reads like a standard case of battered wife syndrome: Juliette justifies to herself her husband's aggressive and destructive behavior and she latches on to small signs that the situation might improve or that seem to reveal the softer true self of her husband. One so much wishes that Samuels had paid closer attention to the facts rather than let the story run away from her in predictable late twentieth-century directions. It makes her story a very superficial one.

Samuels also pays ample attention to Peirce's drug use, painting a picture of someone who, derisive of doctors, opts for self-medication through a cocktail of laudanum, valerian, opium, and morphine, adding cocaine in the mix as early as 1880 to stay alert. In Samuels's account, Peirce is thoroughly addicted by 1907. For Samuels's Juliette the dawning moment occurs when Peirce is found in a Boston boarding house covered in filth, emaciated, and surrounded by empty vials of morphine. When William James brings the shivering Peirce to Milford, he confides:

He tells me that he is writing, but I see nothing of it, and what he shows me is often wandering and imprecise. It is not the work of the great Charles Sanders Peirce. It is the work of a man delirious with the pain of his illness and who knows what else. (Samuels, 240)

Presumably these wandering and imprecise writings include the famous manuscript 318, Peirce's "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," his last series of *Monist* papers called the "Amazing Mazes," and his discovery of a matrix method for three-valued logic.¹⁴ In brief, the image we are left with is that Peirce spent the last seven years of his life as an incurable drug addict, the poisoned remains of a burned-out genius.

From Peirce's physician, Dr. Alto Pobe, however, we get quite a different picture, both about Peirce's drug use and his attitude toward physicians. Pobe, who took care of Peirce from 1907 until his death in 1914, later reminisced about his house calls:

When I arrived he would often tell me all his symptoms and diagnose his illness. Then he would tell me the whole history of the medical treatment for this illness. Then he would tell me what should be prescribed for him now. He was never wrong.¹⁵

Pobe also testified that Peirce took cocaine for the last two years of his life "to complete his work and ease his pain."

There is also an insightful diary entry of Peirce, dated 26 November 1911, that contradicts Samuel's account of Juliette's role in Peirce's drug use, namely that Juliette was utterly unable to keep drugs out of her addicted husband's hands. Peirce, who died of colon cancer, wrote

In the afternoon, I suffered so much on my bowels that in view of Juliette's excessive reluctance to give me antikam (which she keeps where I can't get at it,) I took *fourteen* quarter grains of sulfate of morphine, to my great regret. I could not stand the torture.¹⁶

Given Peirce's condition, hiding the antikam, a common painkiller at the time, and not the morphine, was a wise decision. By 1911, Antikamnia had gained substantial notoriety. Several people had died from it because its active ingredient was a heart depressant. Peirce suffered from a heart condition for which he took strychnine, which made morphine for him, certainly, the safer drug. Peirce's reluctance to take morphine also comes out in a 1907 letter to his childhood friend Mary Huntington in which he writes that he took a grain of morphine each day for a week—apparently to curb his neuralgia—and that he did so with great reluctance.¹⁷ And Juliette remarks that even shortly before his death Peirce refused to take any of the opiates left behind by Dr. Pobe, preferring to ease his pain instead by writing.¹⁸ So, contrary to Samuel's account, till the bitter end Peirce seems to have preferred philosophy to drugs.

This is not to imply that Peirce had no problems with drugs at all. There is, for instance, a rather grim 6 March 1907 letter from Juliette to Alice James that lends support to Samuel's account that in 1907

Peirce was addicted to morphine, at least in Juliette's eyes, though it seems alcohol may have been the real problem.¹⁹ Also, about a year later, Peirce's brother Herbert voiced his suspicion that Peirce may have become addicted to morphine, though he immediately added that it "does not by any means deprive him of his faculties."²⁰ What this reveals is that the story of Peirce and Juliette is far more complex and nuanced than what we are given in *The Queen of Cups*.

Samuels has her story end with the drug episode of 1907. In fact, one gets the strong impression that by that point she had practically abandoned the project. *The Queen of Cups* reads very much like an unfinished book that is hastily patched up and mailed to a publisher. For instance, after having Juliette learn from *Nation* editor Wendell Phillips Garrison that her husband was thinking of killing himself, certainly a life-changing event, Samuels, without even digesting the fact, immediately jumps nine years forward. In the few remaining pages that conclude the book she never goes back to it. Interestingly, the real Juliette had been faced early on with an actual suicide attempt during which Peirce took "some dose of opiate or other narcotic as to require the aid to two physicians to restore him to sensibility."²¹

So where does this all leave us? First, as an attempt to discover what kind of woman Juliette was, the book fails badly. Samuels gets too much carried away with her entirely fictional account of Juliette's European past, and she pays too little attention to the life that Peirce and Juliette spent together. Regarding the former, Samuels has made no inventory of what we do know of Juliette's past, but simply latched on to a few scraps of information and ran away with them. It is hard to defend that this somehow gives us an adequate picture of Juliette. At the same time it should be said that Samuels's account of why Juliette had to leave Europe and why she needed to be so secretive sounds more convincing than the accounts given by Peirce and Juliette. Second, as an attempt to answer the question why someone would stay with a man as difficult and self-destructive as Charles Peirce, the book fails as well. Not only does she have no notion of the kind of woman Juliette was, she has no idea who Peirce was either. She should have been courageous enough to make the story entirely fictional, with invented names for its central characters, rather than hijacking the lives of Charles and Juliette. From the copious notes on the mental and physical health of the Peirces, compiled by David Pfeifer and Max Fisch, which I was privileged to read this summer (though it was a rather depressing experience), I get much more a picture of two spoiled, complicated, and emotional individuals who fell in love with each other and spent the next thirty years trying to cope with it, years during which they were also scarred by health and financial problems, not to speak of America's Puritan morality.²²

Instead of agreeing with Samuels that the historical record can be sacrificed when it impedes the flow of the story, I side with James Joyce,

who wrote his aunt Josephine in November of 1921: "Do you remember the cold February of 1893. I think you were in Clanbrassil street. I want to know whether the canal was frozen and if there was any skating."²³ Joyce was finalizing his epic novel *Ulysses* and he wanted to make sure he had his facts right even when he was describing something as removed from reality as Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness while she was slowly falling asleep.²⁴ Stories, like rivers, always flow somewhere—obstacles only make their course more interesting. Good historical fiction tries to get the most out of the facts and then some; it doesn't ignore them in favor of the predictable and the mundane. With Mina Samuels's *The Queen of Cups* we learn more about the strictures of the author's imagination than that we get any insight into the real lives of Charles and Juliette.

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NOTES

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1. Substantial parts of the book can be found on Google Books (accessed 27 August 2007).

2. <http://www.bewitchingways.com/tarot/cups/queen.htm>. (Accessed August 9, 2007.)

3. Charles Peirce in a letter to James Mills Peirce, 5 April 1894. (R L 339, where the L refers to "letters," and the R to Richard S. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967]).

4. This story is related by William James's son Henry in what is the most extensive connected account of Juliette's pre-Peirce life. A typescript of this account is preserved in the Max H. Fisch Papers, Institute for American Thought, Indiana University — Purdue University Indianapolis (further referred to as Max H. Fisch Papers).

5. This account is found in an unfinished letter by Charles Peirce to his sister Helen Peirce Ellis of 21 July 1907 (R L 129).

6. The book has its own website, www.thequeenofcups.com, which contains, in addition to a sample chapter, an extensive interview with the author as well as a biography of her. (Accessed August 9, 2007.) All references to Samuels's views on *The Queen of Cups* come from this interview.

7. Unpublished; carbon copy of typescript preserved in the Max H. Fisch Papers.

8. Unpublished; typescript preserved in the Max H. Fisch Papers.
9. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
10. Charles Peirce to Juliette Peirce, 22 April 1890 (R L 340).
11. See Hubert Kennedy's *Six Articles on James Mills Peirce* (Concord, CA, 2003), and his fictional biography *Sex & Math in the Harvard Yard: The Memoirs of James Mills Peirce* (San Francisco, 2002). Both are available on-line at <http://home.pacbell.net/hubertkl/> (accessed August 13, 2007).
12. Simon Newcomb to Mary Caroline Newcomb, 21 November 1883 (Simon Newcomb Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).
13. While we are on the subject, Mrs. Edna May Gassman, who knew the Peirces as a child, told Victor Lenzen that "Juliette hit Peirce with a plate and that Dr. Brackley had to remove a piece from his skull." (From an 11 July 1961 letter by Victor F. Lenzen to Max H. Fisch; Max H. Fisch Papers.)
14. This potentially impressive scholarly summation of accomplishments is simply lifted from the chronology included in the second volume of *The Essential Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), which is listed on the partial bibliography Samuels gives on the book's website. (See note 6 above.)
15. Interview with H.S. Leonard, circa 1933 (cited from notes copied by Max Fisch in 1959; Max Fisch Papers). This and the following information regarding Peirce's drug use, though not the analysis thereof, comes from an extensive collection of source materials related to Peirce's health compiled by David Pfeifer, initially in cooperation with Max H. Fisch. Pfeifer is currently writing a monograph on Peirce's medical history that is likely to shed a very different light on Peirce than Joseph Brent's *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*, 2nd edition (Bloomington, 1998).
16. R 1623.
17. Charles Peirce to Mary Huntington, 27 April 1907 (R L 212); quoted by Pfeifer. This and the above diary entry suggest that, contrary to Samuels's account, Peirce did not inject the morphine intravenously, but rather took it orally.
18. R 1644.
19. Letter preserved in the Max H. Fisch papers.
20. Herbert Peirce to Helen Peirce Ellis, 23 February 1908. Copy preserved in Max H. Fisch Papers; quoted by Pfeifer.
21. Op. cit. Herbert Peirce added, though, that in his opinion this must be seen as an attempt by Peirce to seek attention rather than to end his life.
22. See note 15 above.
23. James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. II, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1964).
24. ". . . the night coming home with Poldy after the Comerfords party oranges and lemonade to make you feel nice and watery I went into 1 of them it was so biting cold I couldnt keep it when was that 93 the canal was frozen yes it was a few months after a pity a couple of the Camerons werent there to see me squatting in the mens place . . ." James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Critical and Synoptic Edition*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984, rpt. in 1986), episode 18, line 552ff.