THE HOME FRONT REVISITED: VISIONS OF UNION
FROM PROFESSIONAL WOMEN WRITERS OF
THE AMERICAN NORTH, 1859-1877

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2016

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ABSTRACT

Vera R. Foley: The Home Front Revisited: Visions of Union
From Professional Women Writers of the American North, 1859-1877
(Under the direction of Philip F. Gura)

This project reintroduces a series of recently recovered women authors of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. These women, I argue, form a print community whose fiction uses tropes of domestic disorder in order to reimagine the home not as rigidly hierarchical but as malleable to the needs of the women who inhabit it. Significantly, the Civil War seems to be a creative asset rather than an impediment to such revisionist fiction. While wives and daughters remained, often sans patriarch, on the home front, their perception of the shape of the American family and the institutions that undergirded it transformed. This print community of women authors narrated versions of that changed perception through its novels and short stories. Exploring this alternative vision of the American family at home reveals a literary reimagining of the terms of feminine domesticity, the depth and scope of which have not yet been fully acknowledged by scholars of literature or history.

“The Home Front Revisited” presents for the first time a network of literary and ideological connections between Lillie Devereux Blake, Elizabeth Stoddard, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Historically, their works have been read as responses to more famous male voices, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe. I, however, reintroduce them not as faded counterparts to canonical men but as members of a vibrant intellectual community of their own. To demonstrate the complexity of their developing visions of the American gender hierarchy, I posit a new series of thematic categories that
highlight these women authors’ shared concerns and responses to one another: (1) courtship conventions on the marriage market, (2) hierarchies of influence within the household, (3) gendered lines of inheritance, (4) the rhetoric of domestic slavery, and (5) women’s potential to act as wage-earners in the public sphere. Such critical contexts reveal the limitations of relying exclusively upon political suffragist rhetoric to represent nineteenth-century women’s visions of how the family structure might be productively transformed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my director, Philip Gura, for his support and guidance as I developed this project, and most particularly for introducing me to Elizabeth Stoddard and Lillie Devereux Blake. Many thanks also go to my readers, Joy Kasson, Tim Marr, Eliza Richards, and Jane Thrailkill, for giving generously of their time and expertise.

The institutional support I received from the University was integral to this project. In particular, I would like to thank the Department of English and Comparative Literature for awarding me a Dissertation Completion Fellowship that expedited the completion of my work. I would also like to thank the staff at the University of North Carolina libraries for their assistance with my searches for increasingly specific research materials, especially Tommy Nixon and Stewart Varner.

Any acknowledgements I make would not be complete without recognizing my extraordinary colleagues, who offered valuable insights into my project when it was still in draft form: Emma Calabrese, Josh Doty, Rachael Isom, Leslie McAbee, and Kym Weed.

I received valuable feedback on the sections of this work that I presented at conferences in 2015. I owe thanks to the audiences and organizers of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers (Philadelphia, November 2015) and the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (Durham, NC, November 2015) for their support of my presentations on Elizabeth Stoddard’s Two Men and Harriet Prescott Spofford’s The Amber Gods, respectively.
Finally, I know it would not have been possible for me to attend this program, much less complete this project, without the education and inspiration I received as an undergraduate from my professors at Mount Holyoke College, in particular Nigel Alderman, Christopher Benfey, and Donald Weber. I would also like to extend my thanks to Elizabeth Young, also of Mount Holyoke, for the guidance she provided regarding my research after I graduated.
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Law Before Literature: Women’s Rights in the Political Arena

“I do not ask society to require less of woman, but more of man,” declared women’s rights activist Caroline Healey Dall in 1861. In a series of lectures that she presented in January of that year, Dall enumerated the many failures of supposedly benevolent heads of household to fulfill their duties as patriarchs and agents in the public realm on behalf of their female dependents. Husbands and fathers, she asserts, routinely “deprive” their families of their right “to find man in his proper place, as counsellor [sic] and friend.” Unlike more “radical” members of the suffrage movement, Dall is willing to imagine an ideal household in which the husband remains “at the head of the family”—but she asserts that the American husband rarely fulfills the obligations that make this hierarchical domestic structure feasible. As his family’s only representative outside the home, a husband or father, she reasons, has a responsibility to use his greater power and “experience” to act as a guide and helpmeet to his wife and as a “spiritual custod[ian]” of his children. It is only when a patriarch commits himself to these domestic duties, Dall implies, that he can be trusted to wield absolute financial, legal, and moral power over his dependents. In essence, instead of demanding that women be released from their “separate
sphere” of the home, she implies that the sanctity of the American family may be preserved by
the return of the husband to the domestic fold.¹

Dall’s solution to the increasingly prominent problem of women’s dissatisfaction with
their place within the American home is in fact more “radical” than its relatively conservative
language suggests. Historically, as Nancy F. Cott succinctly demonstrates, Americans had “seen
marital governance and political governance as linked along the same continuum”; the same
republican ideology that gave (white) men the right to vote for their political representatives
vindicated the right of the husband to act as a representative to his wife in the public realm, to
which women had only limited access.² But, despite the patriotic allure of benevolent
paternalism, concerns about these strategic limitations to the public agency of wives, and the
potential it created for abuse and neglect on the part of husbands and fathers, proliferated in the
American North, with its vibrant women’s right movement, following the Seneca Falls
Convention of 1848. Dall’s contention that “[s]ociety sets men free from every conceivable
family duty, without a word,” while simultaneously “bind[ing] women down” as they attempt to
compensate for their husbands’ apathy reflects more than a decade of similar arguments made by
celebrated proto-feminist activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, the
Grimké sisters, and many others.³ The socially and legally sanctioned family structure, they
asserted, was a source of conflict and oppression rather than the bedrock upon which the young
Republic was founded.

¹ Caroline Healey Dall, Woman’s Rights Under the Law: In Three Lectures, Delivered in Boston,

² Nancy F. Cott, Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

³ Dall, Woman’s Rights Under the Law, 152.
While women’s rights advocates protested with increasingly conviction the unmet needs of the American family over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, almost no consensus emerged as to what should be done to remedy the situation—or indeed what such a new, improved family might look like. For the more disillusioned members of the movement, legal protection seemed the surest means of regulating patriarchal excess. Stanton, for example, wrote in 1852 “[t]hat our present laws on marriage should be so remodeled, that the wife and children of the beastly drunkard and gross libertine, may more easily escape from such degrading associations.”

Convinced that the current domestic hierarchy did not have the necessary controls in place to inhibit husbands and fathers should they turn to violence or profligacy, she imagined the law intervening to enable wronged women and their children to create smaller, patriarch-free family units as needed. (More optimistic would-be reformers believed that such dissolute patriarchs could be redeemed via the intervention of institutions such as the Temperance Society, and the family hierarchy could thus remain essentially intact.) Other advocates of legal intervention focused on the economic sphere, demanding that a married woman be granted the right to keep and spend her own earnings as she saw fit, without the intervention or permission of her husband. According to Reva B. Siegel, “[i]n 1860, the census reported that only 15% of free women [in New York State] were engaged in paid labor,” a fact exacerbated by the reality that most forms of work in which women did engage—domestic labor, childcare, and so forth—were considered unworthy of financial compensation.

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statutes” or “joint property statutes,” which would theoretically free a wife from the tyranny of a husband who could dictate the terms of her labor as well as her spending power. Whether it was via the right to separate from her husband, modify his behavior, or gain for herself some level of autonomy within his home, disparate new visions of how the American family might be re-formed permeated the Northeast’s antebellum political imagination.

Such revisions to the traditional terms of domestic hierarchy were not limited to the sphere of women’s rights; in fact, this movement’s ties to the Northeast reflect the region’s prior connection to reformist experimentation at home. In the decade leading up to the Seneca Falls Convention, New England and New York underwent a deluge of utopian social experiments, often formed at the behest of highly educated male intellectuals. From the rural collectivist enterprise Brook Farm, to the communal phalanxes on the model of Charles Fourier, to religiously motivated separatist groups like the Oneida Perfectionists, dissatisfied idealists of the 1830s and 1840s were determined to find the social formula that would release them from the fetters of the capitalist nuclear household. Although members perhaps would not have described their enterprise in such terms, organizations like Brook Farm were built around masculine anxieties regarding their duties in the domestic sphere. When Charles Lane described the Transcendentalist community and other would-be utopian collectives in his 1844 essay for The Dial, he emphasized the value of “dissociat[ing]” the sexes from one another in pursuit of communal harmony. The Farm’s mission prioritized liberating the masculine realms of “mental education” and “industry” from the wife’s more “circumscribe[d]…desires and ambition.” While shared subsistence labor and a decentralized family structure were supposedly in the best

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6 Ibid., 1084, 1117 n. 149, 1142 n. 248, and 1144.

7 Ibid., 1074-1089.
interests of both men and women, the cessation of individual patriarchal obligation to a nuclear family of dependents in favor of the brotherly quest for enlightenment was clearly one of the great advantages of joining such collectives.\(^8\)

In light of such rhetoric, it is hardly surprising that these experimental societies were notorious for their inability to attract married couples to their ranks. Indeed, Lane acknowledged that only four such couples remained at Brook Farm three years after the Association’s inception. One of the distinctive aspects of the campaigns for legal reform that grew from the later women’s rights movement of the 1850s was the insistence of proto-feminists like Stanton or Dall not merely that women should have the right to leave the confines of the private sphere, but also that the contributions they made as caretakers and helpmeets within the home had real, unacknowledged value. Quantifying that value was undeniably a problem: in market terms, childcare, housekeeping, and cooking were not lucrative enterprises, and in fact were nearly always unpaid when undertaken by the mother of the house. Yet as the war loomed, the movement remained convinced that expansions upon their legal right to political and economic participation would enable them to revise the terms of their role within the family. Dall’s 1861 speech on “The United-States Laws” contributed to this vision of legislative reform, which used increased maternal agency on multiple fronts as a countermeasure against paternal self-indulgence. Like many utopians, she called for “a new conception of the dignity of labor on the part of both sexes on the part of the educated classes, men as well as women”—but unlike Lane and his compatriots, she situated public service, social activism, and artistic expression (all activities that women could pursue without transgressing the limits of “their” sphere) alongside participation in overtly masculine occupations, including “the heads of firms…the proprietors of

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mills, [and] the builders of ships.”

Many different forms of womanhood, and many different paths to domestic harmony, jostled for attention on the political front, none of them seeming to gain sufficient traction to instigate change on a national scale.

The internal conflicts within the movement over what women’s place in the family should be, and how the application of the law might get them there, were naturally exacerbated by the consuming political debate that swept not only the Northeast but the nation as a whole: the question of slavery. Unlike the women’s rights movement, which often found itself relegated to the status of a regional or local curiosity unique to ultra-liberal Northern enclaves, abolitionist discourse was of national importance. Legal interventions such as the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 forced the industrializing North to repeatedly confront the uncomfortable reality of its own complicity in the sins of the agrarian South, whose plantation economy was firmly grounded in a system of slave labor. The debate was drawn along starkly sectional lines: Northern abolitionists decried the bondage of the African-American population and the manifold physical and spiritual abuses that stemmed from it, while Southern plantation owners and their allies objected to what they considered such activists’ uninformed meddling in their social and economic affairs. The various members of the Northern women’s movement were united as abolitionists by their shared sectional conviction of Southern perfidy, but divided as proto-feminists by disparate visions of their place as women within the family and the nation.

Abolitionism itself of course challenged its white practitioners: it demanded that both men and women deal with issues of de facto and de jure race relations that were often both deeply seated and largely unspoken in middle-class culture—but as an organizing principle, it tapped into a

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shared regional consciousness among progressive Northerners that the women’s movement simply could not match.

Thus, although the decade before the Civil War saw a dramatic expansion in political rhetoric by and about American women, the push for legal intervention on behalf of women’s suffrage and other related causes declined with predictable rapidity during the war years. The advent of the war itself brought political activity on behalf of women’s rights virtually to a halt, as proto-feminists joined with other abolitionists to support the military agenda of the North. Stanton and Anthony, among many others, devoted themselves wholeheartedly to advocating the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which would eliminate the institution of slavery; they saw this labor as an extension of the progressive political shift that would also enfranchise their own demographic. Stanton writes retrospectively of the “mammoth petition” that consumed an “entire year” of soliciting signatures and tallying names as an inspiring period for members of the movement not merely as abolitionists but also as women.10 “The new nation demands the highest type of womanhood,” she and her fellow members of the Loyal Women’s National League proclaimed in 1864.11 Civic-minded mothers and daughters, sisters and wives, had been instrumental, they reasoned, in forming the newly liberated nation that was taking shape as the war drew to a close. It was only natural, in light of their loyalty and obvious capability on the political front, that they too would be enfranchised; indeed, Stanton and her allies were confident that the Fourteenth Amendment would guarantee their equal rights as citizens alongside men.


What these optimistic Northern women did not anticipate was the extent of the conservative backlash that the war would instigate politically on the home front. If the 1850s represented a period of, albeit small-scale, success among reform initiatives in New England and New York, the early 1860s saw a dramatic reversal in this trend. For example, while the 1860 New York legislature created a statute on marital property reform that “represented an unmistakable advance” in the proto-feminist “drive” for “equal rights” on the economic and legal fronts, Siegel notes that “[i]n 1862,” the same legislative body “quietly repealed the inheritance and custody provisions” that would have had the most direct effect upon women’s influence within the domestic hierarchy.\textsuperscript{12} Such reversals represented a growing anxiety among nominally progressive Northern governments, both during and after the war, regarding the shape of the American family. As Cott has compellingly demonstrated, American statesmen had historically hailed the domestic hierarchy of marriage, in which the husband and father represented his dependents in the public sphere, “as a voluntary union based on consent” that directly reflected the democratic values of “the new government” after the Revolution.\textsuperscript{13} The advent of the Civil War resoundingly called into question the efficacy of this democratic system; as a result, politicians attempted to support the survival of representative democracy by controlling an aspect of the Union over which they still had jurisdiction. With fathers and husbands removed to the war front in droves (many never to return), it seemed that the domestic hierarchy that undergirded representative politics could easily become antiquated. As women across the North became de facto heads of household, it became the duty of state governments to “enforc[e] civic dependency” among American wives and “potential wives,” in order to preserve the broader

\textsuperscript{12} Siegel, “Home as Work,” 1145.

\textsuperscript{13} Cott, \textit{Public Vows}, 10.
national contract that Confederate secession had placed under threat. Although in 1864 Stanton and Anthony did not yet know it, their political demands had combined with other “wartime disasters” to create a specter of social change that the war-era and Reconstruction governments knew to “threate[n] known ways of life” that they believed the war had been fought to defend. The political front was now a decidedly hostile venue for reimaginings of women’s roles within the American family and society at large; the legacy of the war became, ironically, a profound impediment to politically focused women’s efforts to create meaningful legal change.

The Turn to Literature: Redefining Family on the Page

It is no accident that the same period that saw the reversal in the fortunes of the suffrage movement also witnessed the genesis of a new type literature by women. Since the formation of the United States following the Revolutionary War, many female novelists had of course used their fiction to comment upon the challenges and injustices that women faced, especially on the marriage market. Popular works such as Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791) or Hannah Webster Foster’s The Coquette (1797) dealt scathingly with the gendered double standards that allowed men to seduce with impunity inexperienced young women, while condemning and ultimately destroying the objects of their lust. As the new century progressed, authors of domestic fiction often used their novels to model the ways in which women could succeed in entering into emotionally fulfilling marriage contracts with morally upright men, despite intimidating social circumstances. Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Susan B.

14 Ibid., 96.

15 Ibid., 105.
Warner, and Maria Cummins were all successful practitioners of this literary project who published their work in the same Northern cities around which women’s rights activity circulated. Yet such antebellum novels, for all their willingness to depict feminine anxiety, discontent, and even transgression, work within recognizable conservative social structures. Heroines like Hope Leslie or Gertrude Flint might chafe at specific rules or roles that restrain them, but they use their rebellions as vehicles through which they can return to a stable romantic fold, ultimately marrying men they respect and admire, and who will become benevolent heads of their respective households. If such women decide to enter the economic sphere—as does Fanny Fern’s impoverished heroine Ruth Hall—it is not to escape the domestic obligations of family life but instead to fulfill those sacred duties when male family members have failed to do so. Critical these novels and novelists may be, but their goal was fundamentally different from that of the women’s movement, with its attempts to interfere with the social and legal definitions of women’s work, marriage, motherhood, and the separate spheres that removed such issues from the public realm.

Significantly, political activists like Stanton and Anthony, keenly interested in revising the domestic standards that the so-called “sentimental” heroines of the 1850s learned to negotiate, did not participate in the production of domestic fiction. This was not an aberration: even Margaret Fuller, the iconic literary women’s rights advocate of the 1840s, relied on the essay rather than the novel to communicate her ideas about gender roles and how they might be

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changed. The political women’s movement naturally imagined the legal realm as the site of productive change in the lives of American wives and daughters. It was through the language of voting rights, earnings statutes, joint custody provisions, and the overhaul of oppressive gendered contracts such as marital coverture or patrilineal inheritance that they believed the mores of domestic hierarchy could be transformed. Such was not the language of romantic fiction, and the rift between the interests of the two groups does not seem to have occasioned comment in antebellum proto-feminist circles.

This is not to say that sentimental novels cannot be, or have not been, read politically. Cindy Weinstein’s excellent study, Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature, is but one recent critical exploration of the “more subterranean level” at which sentimental authors such as Susan B. Warner express political ideas about, for instance, the institution of slavery via their white, middle-class domestic dramas. It is, however, to suggest that the social upheavals of the war era transformed many women’s expectations for their domestic homes, including their imagined potential to make a secure life for themselves by means of a traditional companionate marriage. Warner and Cummins believed in this model, but a newer generation of women authors was more skeptical. The new domestic literature of the 1860s is preoccupied, as its antebellum counterpart was not, with the question of what new dynamics between family members and romantic partners may be formed when the conventional social hierarchy ceases to apply.

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17 See especially Margaret Fuller’s most anthologized critical work, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, in The Essential Margaret Fuller, ed. Jeffrey Steele (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

With the onset of the Civil War, the worlds of both women’s activism and women’s literature in the Northeast—as elsewhere—adapted to the new, often painful, realities of a nation divided. While Stanton and her cohort turned to the patriotic cause of abolition, a new generation of women novelists began to explore the very issues that had preoccupied activists in the previous decade—albeit from a very different perspective. Rather than modeling techniques by which women could succeed in a society that required their integration into traditional patriarchal family units via marriage and motherhood, these authors began to explore the sobering aftereffects of such apparently “successful” negotiations of the marriage market. These women occupied a privileged position, in that their homes remained physically stable, removed from the sites of battle. With their men at war, they often suffered profound emotional losses—but with the vast Northern publishing apparatus suddenly at their disposal, they also had the opportunity to express unspoken injustices at the heart of domestic hierarchies.

As the war progressed, many logistical issues that had seemed abstract to middle-class Northern women in the antebellum era became alarmingly tangible. With husbands on the war front, wives’ inability to go to court, hold legal contracts, wield household funds, or inherit a husband’s property upon his death became serious impediments to the performance of their new duties. Although the war itself is conspicuously absent from such women’s novels until well into the Reconstruction period, its legacy on the home front appears with increasing prominence in the literature of professional women writers of the American North. In the political vacuum created by the women’s movement’s turn to abolition, a new form of intellectual discourse on the needs of the patriarchal family network and the women whose subordinate status undergirded it developed in literary circles: a discourse that, while it does not resemble that of political women in rhetoric or terminology, has profound implications regarding the reality that American women
lived on the domestic front. These social upheavals of the war era represented a time of revelation as well as rupture.

The works of five women authors who rose to relative prominence via New York and Boston publications in the 1860s and early 1870s reveal the form this collective social revelation took. Lillie Devereux Blake, Elizabeth Stoddard, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps were not personal friends, but they moved in literary and intellectual circles that frequently overlapped. Phelps wrote publicly about her creative debt to Spofford,\(^\text{19}\) while Stoddard and Spofford were frequent contributors to the same literary periodicals, including *Harper's Monthly Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Blake and Stoddard also wrote for the same progressive New York publishing house, Rudd & Carleton, which printed a substantial body of proto-feminist literature over its short lifespan. Upon the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, Alcott, of course, would have been known to all of her contemporaries—but before that, when her earliest, most transgressive literary thrillers appeared,\(^\text{20}\) she already shared with Blake a period of working for the war effort (Blake as a journalist, Alcott as a nurse), and with Phelps a keen interest in Boston-area philanthropy. Such biographical intersections, however, pale before these authors’ collective fictional explorations of alternatives to the definitions of the conventional American family, American bride, American mother, and American matriarch that grew in a time when such roles were necessarily in flux.

It is not coincidental that this concentration of literary women interested in revising the terms of marriage and family appeared in and around New England; as a result of the war middle-class women like Blake or Stoddard were uniquely suited to expand their literary

\(^{19}\) Spofford and Phelps also corresponded personally via letters.

\(^{20}\) Published under the pen name A.M. Barnard.
horizons, not only because of their historical proximity to the proto-feminist movement, but also thanks to a convergence of felicitous circumstances in the publishing industry. Geography had long been a key component of what Leon Jackson calls “the business of letters”;\textsuperscript{21} New York and Boston were responsible, along with Philadelphia, for the majority of books published in the antebellum United States.\textsuperscript{22} (Blake and Stoddard moved from New England to New York to launch their literary careers; Spofford, Alcott, and Phelps remained in the Boston area.) Unlike other, less prolific “regional print centers” located elsewhere in the young nation, especially on the ever-expanding western frontier, New York and Boston were able to develop stable bonds between established publishing houses that granted these cities disproportionate access to the material resources they needed to retain control of the industry.\textsuperscript{23} The Civil War only exacerbated this preexisting advantage; no major battle took place north of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania—meaning that, while their male populations were certainly depleted by military enlistment, there was no physical impediment to the continuation of printing in the Northeast as there was across the more southerly Mid-Atlantic states and of course the embattled Confederacy. For women with the time and education to write fiction, professional authorship was a valid option for New Yorkers and Bostonians in need of additional income to contribute to families in which the husband or father was not independently wealthy. The same regional and educational backgrounds that gave them their literary connections also gave these women the


\textsuperscript{22} Meredith L. McGill, \textit{American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 4.
opportunity to glean specific insights into the social apparatus that, ironically, limited women’s agency even as they worked to keep patriarchal families and economies functional.

Their geographical and cultural proximity to the secure Northern publishing centers of New York and Boston enabled middle-class white women to publish during the war in large numbers. Their proximity to midcentury male luminaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and their circles, however, may have contributed to their long obscurity. In recent decades, scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Grace Farrell, Jennifer Putzi, and Madeleine Stern have begun to excavate such works of transgressive domestic fiction from the archive. However, the traditional categories available to describe nineteenth-century works of literature have made it difficult to integrate fiction by women like Stoddard or Spofford into the existing American canon. They resist ante- and postbellum designations like “romantic” and “realist,” and, although reviewers often nominally identify them as “regionalist” because of their New England settings, they do not resemble classic works of regionalism such as Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) from later in the century. As a result, despite the positive reviews or successful sales of the novels this study addresses, they have only recently become available to the modern reading public. (Blake’s early novels have yet to be printed since the nineteenth century.) Academic presses and digitization projects have been instrumental in reviving scholarly awareness of these women and the exciting social experiments with new forms of marriage, motherhood, and labor that they imagine for their heroines. However, as this study will

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24 In producing this study, I have been aided immensely by the number of novels and short works made available through the efforts of Rutgers University Press’s American Women Writers Series and CUNY’s Feminist Press, as well as by larger publishing enterprises such as Penguin Books. Despite the admirable efforts of such publishers to make works by all five of these women accessible to the public, it is worth noting that neither Blake’s *Southwold* (1859) and *Rockford* (1863) nor Spofford’s “The Strathsays” (1863) have been reprinted since the 1860s, and are available only via archival holdings and electronic scans.
demonstrate, much work remains in drawing connections between these various recovered authors and the creative print communities they formed during and after the Civil War.

This project presents for the first time the creative and intellectual connections that bind Blake, Stoddard, Spofford, Alcott, and Phelps not to male literary figureheads but to one another. Historically, their works have been read as responses to more famous male voices, most particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. I, however, contribute to the more recent scholarly movement to reintroduce them not as counterparts to canonical men but as members of a vibrant intellectual community of their own. To demonstrate the complexity of their developing visions of the American gender hierarchy, I posit a series of thematic categories that highlight their shared concerns about the new home front that emerged during and after the war: (1) courtship conventions on the marriage market, (2) hierarchies of influence within the household, (3) gendered lines of inheritance, (4) rhetorics of domestic slavery, and (5) women’s potential to act as wage-earners in the public sphere. These categories are doubly valuable, in that they both demonstrate the connections between members of this print community, and model potential sites of commonality with other women authors and social movements.

Because of their relative obscurity, it is worth taking the time to note the various personal and literary paths by which this particular intellectual community of women became a voice of social reinvention. Although she is best remembered in modern scholarship for the work—most particularly the 1874 suffrage novel, *Fettered for Life*—that she produced under the influence of Susan B. Anthony and the women’s rights movement during Reconstruction, it was not until over a decade after her entry into the world of literature that Lillie Devereux Umsted Blake

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25 Tellingly, this is the only one of Blake’s novels that is available in a modern print edition. See Lille Devereux Blake, *Fettered for Life; or Lord and Master*, ed. Grace Farrell (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1996).
(August 12, 1833–December 30, 1913) aligned herself with political activism. Her early work, including the novels *Southwold* (1859) and *Rockford* (1863), participated in a very different form of social critique that stemmed both from the growing sectarian conflict and from her own tempestuous coming of age as the young wife of a financially inept husband. No one was more qualified to write of the hazards of the marriage market than Lillie Devereux Blake; born in Raleigh, North Carolina, but raised from a young age in Stratford, Connecticut, the blithe New England belle began receiving proposals of marriage at the age of seventeen, and in fact entered into two engagements (later broken) before her marriage in 1855 to her first husband, Frank Umsted, under whose surname she published her war-era fiction. Her biographer, Grace Farrell, describes Blake’s strong Northern sentiments, especially on the importance of abolition, as the motive behind her rejection of her first betrothed, Henry King, a Georgia plantation owner. (As it happened, Blake’s anxieties about her ability to form a peaceful a union with a slaveholder turned out to be well-founded; King died fighting for the Confederate cause at Fredericksburg.) Although she was repeatedly accused of coquetry, Blake’s determination to find a suitable match before marrying reflects her awareness of the stakes of the marriage market that she must negotiate.

Unfortunately, her choice of Frank Umsted turned out to have consequences that she could not have anticipated. Lillie Devereux was indisputably an eligible prospective bride, despite her many flirtations. As Farrell explains, the vivacious young woman was also a wealthy heiress. Under the rule of the Common Law, “when Lillie married, almost all her money, which was the considerable fortune of between $50,000 and $100,000 that had been settled upon her by her paternal grandmother, became the property of her husband.” This was predictable; what was not was how “freely” her new husband disposed of her fortune “during their first two years
together,” when they moved about in the Midwest before returning to New York in 1856. The legal practice that Umsted had held in Philadelphia before his marriage lapsed; “with…the easy access to Lillie’s money to blunt ambition, he achieved limited success” even after he attempted to begin practicing again in the East. Perhaps defensive of his failure to manage the money he had acquired via his wife, when “she asked just how money matters stood, Frank would refuse to discuss the subject with her”; it was only well after the fact that she “learned that a large portion of her estate was lost in the financial panic of 1857.” Despite her love for her husband, it became impossible to deny that he was an unsuccessful provider.26

Perhaps aware of his failings, and their implications about his unworthiness to manage the fortune that it was his duty as the family patriarch to shepherd, Frank Umsted committed suicide on May 10, 1859, only a few months after the publication of Blake’s first novel, Southwold. Ironically, its early success appears to have given Blake herself hope that she would be able to support her husband and two daughters; the novel was reprinted twice after its initial appearance on February 5, 1859, and it received extensive attention from critics, including N.P. Willis. These brightening prospects, however, were not enough to save Blake from widowhood. Farrell describes the ominous circumstances under which the young mother now found herself in precisely the terms that would have seemed like domestic successes only months prior: “Lillie Devereux Umsted, author of two published stories, a poem, and a novel, was just twenty-five years old, the mother of a two-year-old child and a ten-month-old infant.” Divested of the resources she had brought to her marriage by the man who was supposed to have protected them,

Blake entered the war years torn by conflicting obligations to her family and to her now-essential literary career.\textsuperscript{27}

The onset of the Civil War exacerbated these conflicting loyalties. With the advent of the shots fired at Fort Sumter in April, 1861, Blake felt the need—which she shared with the more famous Louisa May Alcott—to offer her services on behalf of the Union. Unlike the unmarried Alcott, however, in order to pursue her patriotic inclinations, Blake first had to negotiate a place for her daughters among her extended family. Having accomplished this, in 1861, she traveled to Washington, where she was contracted to work as a journalist for two New York publications, the \textit{Evening Post} and the \textit{World}, producing articles and fiction regarding the war effort.\textsuperscript{28} It was during this period as well that she wrote her second long work of fiction, \textit{Rockford}, which appeared after a belabored three years of composition in 1863. This work, although it never once mentioned the reality of the war, nevertheless received fan mail from, among others, “an unnamed major in the Union Army,” who admired what Farrell describes as the work’s “attempt to deal once more with erotic passion within a cultural code…of sexual reticence.”\textsuperscript{29} To Blake, the social upheaval that had allowed her to pursue her career as a writer—and to once more enter the marriage market, where she received even more proposals than she had in the 1850s—also created the opportunity to draw attention to the uncomfortable social realities of failed patriarchal figures, the consequences of unanticipated bereavement, and the dangers of wifely dependency on capricious husbands that her own first marriage had brought to her attention.

Unlike Blake, Elizabeth Stoddard (May 6, 1823 – August 1, 1902) was no Southern

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 68-69.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 77.
transplant, but a native New Englander with strong ties to the Massachusetts coast thanks to her father’s work in shipbuilding. Nevertheless, Stoddard shares with Blake a domestic life built upon marriage and childbearing as well as literary ambitions. Born in the coastal town of Mattapoisett in 1823, Elizabeth Drew Barstow grew into a temperamental young woman beset by fierce passions. In keeping with this independent spirit and rejection of convention, Stoddard’s biographer James H. Matlack describes her courtship with “the handsome young poet” Richard Henry Stoddard, who would become her husband in 1852, in terms that diverged starkly from gendered romantic norms.\(^3^0\) If Blake struggled to make Frank Umsted share details of their financial situation that he considered inappropriate or even humiliating to himself, the future Mrs. Stoddard exercised what she described as an almost uncanny influence over her lover; according to Matlack, “[i]n July 1852 Elizabeth reported that Stoddard belonged to her, heart and soul and body, but ‘I am not his, my influence over him is incredible, to me painful.’” Stoddard did not believe her romantic attachment to her new husband denoted a need for subservience on her part: a trope that will recur in her stories of atypical heroines who demand unconventional marriages and household arrangements. Despite the rather unreliable nature of his wife’s “tempestuous” affections, however, Richard Henry Stoddard proved an asset to her writerly ambitions; although the kindest words that Matlack can find for his poetry are “airy and attenuated,” he indisputably “encouraged” his more talented wife’s “literary development.” As the 1850s progressed, both Stoddards, now relocated to New York City, were well underway in developing the circle of artists and intellectuals—including names like Bayard Taylor, George Henry Boker, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and Edmund Clarence Stedman—that would shape their

social and literary milieu throughout the coming decades.  

Unfortunately, her burgeoning social connections did not assist Stoddard in avoiding another commonality with Blake: “a life of urban poverty.” While Stoddard herself would not have had any illusions about the kind of material comforts that her future husband could provide her (their marriage was delayed by Richard Stoddard’s floundering efforts to amass enough money to start a household), their life in New York was depressingly “cramped, sparsely-furnished,” and sadly circumscribed by Mr. Stoddard’s “meagre income.” The family’s hopes for both partners to achieve financial success through their writing intensified in June, 1855 with the birth of their first son, Wilson (known as Willy). But motherhood was only part of Stoddard’s motivation for taking sides on political issues such as abolition (which she vocally supported) and women’s rights. Unlike Blake, who does not seem to have been involved in the women’s movement until after the war, Stoddard did join a Women’s Rights Convention in 1857, hoping to find solidarity with the group due to their shared interest in abolishing marital coverture and facilitating “the promotion of ‘individual rights’” for women bound in marital contracts. As her later novels of strained sisterhood and romantic competition would reaffirm, however, Stoddard found she could not identify with the brand of femininity she found among these women activists; “[s]he gibed at the odd dress and self-important conduct of many attenders,” and

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31 Ibid., 75-76.
32 Ibid., 48.
33 Ibid., 87. Richard Henry Stoddard’s means of acquiring even this “meagre income” is a telling representation of his social connections and their failure to translate into economic stability. His primary income derived from a job at the New York Custom House, for which none other than Nathaniel Hawthorne recommended him. (Herman Melville would take up the same position in 1866.) While Hawthorne’s intervention earned him the job, however, Richard Stoddard’s struggle to keep the post during political turnover, as well as the minimal profits to be made, required that he supplement this income with publications and editorial work in the literary realm.
proclaimed herself “‘ashamed to hear from women such wholesale laudation of women.’” Although their common anxiety about wives’ subordinate position in marriage might at first have appeared to constitute grounds for alliance, Stoddard’s vision of what it was that independent American women wanted from marriage did not resemble the unattractive and, to her eyes, unfeminine political posturing of those who had gathered under the leadership of Lucy Stone.34

Instead, the sectarian conflict itself proved to be a more effective creative catalyst for her alternative constructions of marriage and family. It was in May of 1860, less than a year before hostilities broke out at Fort Sumter, that Stoddard began work on her first novel, *The Morgesons*. When she sold the novel to Rudd & Carleton in 1861, the war was already underway. Ironically, considering the dramatic social shifts that it occasioned, some of which would have enabled women to take up roles and duties previously considered taboo in polite New York society, the Civil War’s immense presence became advocates’ favorite excuse for the failure of *The Morgesons* to achieve a popular readership, despite its “respectable sales.” “Patriotic songs and stories sold well but there was a diminished audience for serious fiction,” which made the 1862 publication of the novel an impolitic decision. Nevertheless, the Stoddards’ financial straits dictated that “Elizabeth could not wait until the end of the war before releasing her novel,” and its tepid success became one of several domestic casualties that she suffered from the home front.35 Nor was the novel’s overall financial disappointment—despite its critical success, as a product reviewed favorably by famous critics, including the aged Nathaniel Hawthorne—the most painful of the losses that Stoddard suffered during this period. About six months before *The Morgesons*’s release in the summer of 1862, her only living son, Willy, “died of scarlet fever,

34 Ibid., 155.

35 Ibid., 218.
which [his parents] had assumed to be merely a bad cold.” Prostrated by both surprise and grief, the couple found themselves facing loss from a wholly unexpected quarter. To complete this tragic trinity of events, “[i]n mid-October [1862] word came that her brother, Zaccheus Barstow, died while on active duty in Newburn [sic], North Carolina.” Their friends lavished sympathy upon them, and Stoddard continued to publish short stories, many of them concerning the war, but progress on her next novel, *Two Men*, was dramatically slowed by these personal nightmares; although she had begun work on this second novel as soon as she completed the first, it was not to appear in print until October of 1865, after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

This slower progress by reflects the implicit pressures of the war in Stoddard’s own life. Matlack considers *Two Men* to be superior to *The Morgesons* precisely because of its more overt response to the conflict: “Freed of autobiographical compulsion, Elizabeth learned what to leave out of her text in order to center down on the main action.” In this case, the “main action” has transformed from a fictionalized 1830s New England landscape in which domestic conflicts take place primarily behind closed doors into the plight of a new coastal family that is continually rocked by the intervention of outsiders. First is the would-be social radical Jason Auster, who marries into the conservative Parke clan. Then there is the Catholic infidel of a cousin who arrives on its doorstep in need of discipline and the purging of her Latin American religious proclivities. Finally there is the Lang family, a group of three mixed-race women fleeing an unnamed but painfully familiar violent conflict in the South, one of whom attracts the interest of

36 Ibid., 208.
37 Ibid., 292.
38 Ibid., 339.
the family’s only male heir. For Stoddard, allegorizing the war and modeling the breakdown of unjust or ineffective family hierarchies and social mores were essentially the same. As with her first novel, reviewers’ acknowledgement of her technical skill paled before the growing anxiety among readers and critics alike about the alien forms of family and feminine empowerment that she illustrated in her pages. Stoddard could not ignore these anxieties, and the limited sales that were their result. She published one more novel, *Temple House*, in 1867, but her urge to write her signature long tales of social upheaval and familial hostility seems to have faded with the war; she would never publish another.

One particularly interesting testament to her skill that Stoddard did receive in her literary heyday, in response to *The Morgesons*, compared her favorably to another promising woman author of the day, a “Miss Prescott.” Miss Prescott, better known today by her married name of Harriet Prescott Spofford (April 3, 1835 – August 14, 1921), had made a reputation for herself in the late 1850s and early 1860s as a writer of short fiction and poetry, primarily for *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, to which Stoddard was also a contributor. It made sense that Spofford would rely upon these distinctively Northern venues; like Stoddard, she was what her biographer Elizabeth K. Halbeisen calls “a Daughter of New England,” born in Calais, Maine and spending nearly her entire adult life in Newburyport, Massachusetts: a coastal town about thirty-five miles outside of Boston. Her ties to this region were old ones, and in many ways closely resemble those of Stoddard to the same area. The Prescott family, which achieved seven generations born in America with the arrival of Harriet and her siblings, had enjoyed relative wealth and comfort until the War of 1812 “ruined” the successful shipbuilding business of her grandfather, William Pepperell Prescott (the same work that employed Stoddard’s paternal

39 Ibid., 219.
family). Financial struggles ultimately caused the family to lose their home at Calais, and Spofford’s earliest literary efforts were, like Blake’s before her, the result of the precarious situation of the family finances. In defense of the speed at which Spofford produced her short works for “Boston story-papers,” Halbeisen asserts that her haphazard “style of composition” was necessary in order to produce the “quick returns” required to support “her parents, her three younger sisters, and her brother.”40 Paid as little as $2.50 per story, she had to generate material rapidly if she was to make ends meet.41

In her quest to strengthen her popular—and therefore financial—foundation as a writer, Spofford employed a technique most commonly associated with her predecessor Edgar Allan Poe: the production of thrilling, sensationalist plots infused with scintillating horror and gothic iconography.42 (This strategy would also serve Louisa May Alcott, and later her most famous fictional creation, Jo March of Little Women.) While this genre fiction was easy to produce, it did not help to place Spofford in the more lucrative, highbrow venues to which she aspired. It was not until 1858 that the “illiberal treatment” she received from the Boston publishers “induced her…to send ‘In a Cellar,’” which would make her name as an author of the strange and ominous, “to The Atlantic Monthly.”43 Her rise to fame, however, looked very different from Stoddard’s leap into a brash notoriety. Unlike Stoddard’s extravagant eagerness to take offense at

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41 Ibid., 49.

42 For a more complete exploration of the intersections between Spofford’s and Poe’s fiction, see Dorri Beam, “Harriet Prescott Spofford’s Philosophy of Composition,” in Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131-163.

43 Halbeisen, Harriet Prescott Spofford, 50.
slights to *The Morgesons*, “Harriet was most humble about her accomplishment,” preserving her decorous feminine modesty even in the face of desperate financial need; she maintained that “the one hundred and five dollars she received was too great a reward” for her efforts.\(^{44}\) Despite the flamboyant content of her work—“In a Cellar” is a cosmopolitan French mystery involving theft, intrigue, and diamonds—Spofford could not bring herself to court fame as did her many vain, self-confident heroines.

Yet these heroines became more and more popular in the years leading up to the Civil War. Her most enduring legacy, the novella *The Amber Gods*, appeared in the early months of 1860, hardly more than a year before the outbreak of hostilities, and was reprinted in Spofford’s collected works in 1863, at the height of the war years. This tale is a mysterious amalgamation of family history (her protagonist also has a seagoing grandfather whose exploits reach out from the past to curse subsequent generations), political commentary (the curse comes in the form of a vengeful slave girl), and romantic imagination—for Spofford in 1860 had no marital experience upon which to base her story of Yone Willoughby’s emotional and erotic attachment to her sometimes-lover Vaughn Rose. Indeed, for all contemporary reviewers’ eagerness to compare her to Stoddard, Spofford spent the war years in a very different position than did the bereaved, impoverished, and increasingly disillusioned author of *The Morgesons*. While Blake and Stoddard spent the war years embroiled in the parallel dramas of authorship and parenthood, Spofford remained in Newburyport, settled in an extended engagement with a “tall, handsome” young lawyer named Richard Spofford, who captivated her “with fine black eyes and a commanding physique,” along with his skills as “a fascinating talker” and “a charming

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 54.
companions.”\textsuperscript{45} Aside from her fiancé’s desirable attributes, however, Alfred Bendixen reluctantly acknowledges, “we know relatively little about Spofford’s life during the 1860s when she was regarded as one of the most promising writers in America.”\textsuperscript{46} Although she developed correspondences with many New England literary icons who wrote directly both about their own lives and their response to the reality of war (including names like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and James Russell Lowell), Spofford’s life and opinions during her most successful period as an author remain shrouded in comparative mystery, accessible most easily via her fictional visions of lost patriarchs, crumbling patrimonies, and hostility between women as they compete over their access to men.

For all her apparent misanthropy regarding marriage and women’s situation within it, however, the one thing that does seem obvious about Spofford’s life in 1865, when she at last married Richard Spofford, is the profound love and devotion she felt for her own husband. Despite her continued financial obligation to her parents and siblings, the new Mrs. Spofford’s marriage seemed, to use Halbeisen’s words, “in many ways…ideal.”\textsuperscript{47} While she never did bear living children, Spofford quickly made a second name for herself in Newburyport circles, this time as “[a]n excellent hostess and housekeeper” who “entertained often and royally,” with such success that she “was frequently held up to other lady authors as a model in this respect.”\textsuperscript{48} She seems to have taken great pleasure in her role as a domestic superintendent, and, at her husband’s encouragement, continued to produce fiction, as well as domestic treatises, until the end of the

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{46} Alfred Bendixen, introduction to \textit{The Amber Gods and Other Stories} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), xvi.

\textsuperscript{47} Halbeisen, \textit{Harriet Prescott Spofford}, 103.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 115.
century. But her marriage, like the end of the war, corresponds almost exactly with Spofford’s abrupt decline in popularity. Having flattered the work she wrote under deadline for over a decade, “critics became increasingly impatient with her failure to fulfill her promise as an unusually gifted writer”; the young Henry James led this charge as early as 1864 with his expressions of disappointment in her last novel of the decade, *Azarian: An Episode.* As the 1870s ushered realism into the spotlight, her fantastic and convoluted tales began to appear melodramatic and passé. The language of new domestic hierarchies and the desperate machinations that forged them, which had resonated so dramatically with readers of the early 1860s, now found itself drowned out in the politicized rhetoric of Reconstruction, which touted security in a supposed antebellum status quo that denied the very passions and vendettas with which Spofford dealt. She had not called herself a wartime author, much less a purveyor of the sentiments of war, yet with the war’s end, Spofford found herself slowly left behind.

As we have already seen, Spofford was by no means the only New England woman who felt inspired to write a new kind of domestic fiction in response to the social upheaval brought on by the war. But a look at the rather different means by which Louisa May Alcott (November 29, 1832 – March 6, 1888) articulates this common urge reveals that the road taken by Blake, Stoddard, and Spofford was certainly not an inevitable one. While Spofford, at least, did publish anonymously before her rise to fame with “In a Cellar,” none of the three authors aforementioned employed a pen name, whether masculine or feminine: if there was a name beneath the title of their works, it was their own. Alcott, in contrast, changed authorial personas repeatedly in the 1850s and 1860s. Her biographer Madeleine Stern identifies three pre-“Alcott” versions of Alcott, each with a unique name and writing style; in the early 1850s, as Flora

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49 Bendixen, introduction to *The Amber Gods* and Other Stories, xix.
Fairfield, she took “the first step toward professionalism,” adapting her “prose and verse” submissions to the standards of the *Saturday Evening Gazette* and other local outlets—a practice “Fairfield” continued throughout the rest of the decade. It is clear that Alcott, like Blake, Stoddard, and Spofford in turn, had mercenary as well as literary ambitions for her work; like the other members of this print community, she and her family were always in need of additional funds. In keeping with this need, in her next iteration, she was A.M. Barnard, a male writer of popular gothic thrillers, which she sold to sensationalist publications such as *The Flag of Our Union*. It was this venue that solicited her most famous “‘lurid’” story, the novella *Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power* (1866)—an ominous reinterpretation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* that is as shocking as anything Spofford penned in her gothic heyday. Finally, it was under the saccharine pseudonym Tribulation Periwinkle that she published what Stern considers her “first truly successful book,” *Hospital Sketches*, after a brief but life-altering stint as a nurse at Georgetown in 1863. It would be another five years before the appearance of *Little Women*, which would at last catapult the name Louisa May Alcott into national prominence as a beloved purveyor of girls’ domestic fiction.

Of course, the name Alcott (without the prefatory Louisa May) was by no means an obscure one in antebellum New England circles. As a daughter of the Transcendentalist champion of educational reform, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May was exposed from an early age both to the radical social ideas of Concord intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and to her father’s somewhat feeble brand of social idealism. As a child, one of

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her most formative experiences was the failed utopian community of Fruitlands, a small farm in Massachusetts that Bronson Alcott and several of his friends believed they could turn into a self-sustaining progressive commune—but from which they failed to yield crops, thanks to their very abstract ideas about what constituted shared worldly labor. The community failed in less than a year, and the young Alcotts were left to rely upon their mother, Abigail May, to carry them through the winter. Even decades later, Alcott remained profoundly affected by this knowledge of her father’s fallibility; in 1873, she relived the experience via her short work “Transcendental Wild Oats,” which tells the story of a thinly allegorized Alcott family and the trials and tribulations to which a selfish husband obsessed with a false utopia subjects them before abdicating the role of patriarch and handing it to his more qualified wife. Her convictions about wives’ ability to direct their marriages despite the interference of less effective husbands would recur throughout her fiction. In Alcott’s imagination, the “womanly” sphere of personal insight and selfless caretaking ultimately transformed from the counterpart of husbandly protection into an independently functioning road to a peaceful society. This is the new vision that she would fully articulate in her semiautobiographical 1873 novel Work: A Story of Experience.

Indeed, it is difficult not to see Alcott’s personal experiences infused in imaginative form throughout her fiction, whether under her own name or otherwise. Her time as a nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital went far toward giving her the confidence in women’s agency that would characterize her writing, both gothic and domestic, in the coming decades. Never married herself, Alcott presented marriage in her domestic fiction primarily as an opportunity to do what she did as a Civil War nurse: nurture those in need, “ministe[r] not only poultries but patience to her favorites,” and keep “midnight vigils” at the bedsides of the dying. In other words, she

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53 Ibid., 257.
believed in women’s capacity to enact the sacred rites of motherhood in communion with her fellow helpmeets, in this case the hospital’s nursing staff, rather than on behalf of a husband. It is only in her “blood and thunder” gothic dramas that marriage is divorced from the desire for motherhood, and here we see as well the breakdown of the womanly bonds that hold the March girls or Work’s Sterling women together in loving sisterhood. Although she was “forced” to leave her post at the hospital after only six weeks, “having succumbed to a severe case of what was called typhoid-pneumonia,” the lesson Alcott learned during this time seemed to confirm the earlier lesson she had learned from her mother at Fruitlands: without true feminine solidarity, there can be no true home.

While Alcott’s fiction undeniably offers transgressive alternative roles to women, however, her re-forming of the American family undergoes a telling transformation as Reconstruction progresses. Her “blood and thunder” persona, under which she produced short fiction until 1869, used gothic fiction to model the destructive moral and psychological consequences of limiting women’s agency in the domestic sphere. However, a new theme became increasingly prevalent in Alcott’s domestic fiction in the 1870s. This theme, best exemplified in Work, presages the insular, exclusively feminine community that Charlotte Perkins Gilman would invent in the early decades of the next century in Herland. Instead of modeling the road to a happy marriage and its romantic aftermath, Alcott creates a heroine,

54 Ibid., 258.

55 See both Behind a Mask (1866) and Pauline’s Passion and Punishment (1862) for examples of the ominous results of a woman’s decision to marry for material or physical gratification, and the complicity of potential husbands in these destructive charades. 

56 Stern, Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home, 257.

Christie Devon, who marries into a family of women whose devotion to one another actually renders her husband, a kind and handsome man, superfluous. His primary role in the partnership is to impregnate his wife, then die nobly in the Civil War so that his mother and sister can join her in raising their daughter in a family unencumbered by male social expectations. Despite Mr. Sterling’s genuinely good intentions, it is only in his absence that his wife has the opportunity to become a breadwinner and head of household, whose labor in the public realm gives her the personal fulfillment she craves. With the political push to return the nation to a “safe” status quo, the literary reimaginings of marriage and parenthood became less optimistic. Instead, the new generation of heroines shape insular societies that they know will not change the prevailing social norms, but will enable some individual women to escape them.

This new form of postbellum domestic fiction is not limited to Alcott; in fact, it achieved public recognition on a much greater scale than did Blake’s or Stoddard’s wartime literature. Thanks to *Little Women* and its sequels (the last of which appeared in 1886), Alcott’s name remains a fixture in domestic literature, but she is by no means the only practitioner of this new, pragmatically isolationist women’s fiction—nor is she the most political of its proponents. Unlike Alcott, whose overt interest in and support for the postbellum women’s rights movement was more sporadic, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (January 28, 1844 – January 28, 1911) represents an author more directly aligned with postbellum feminism: a figure who used literature to express her political convictions about the need for particular sorts of reform. Phelps’s interest in solidarity between communities of women—particularly the need for compassion and assistance to “fallen” women, so as to keep them from prostitution—developed alongside her first literary publication in 1860, when she was still in her teens. By 1863, on a genteel philanthropic mission of the sort that her conservative father would allow, she encountered the abused and
impoverished women of Abbot Hill, “a factory town not far from [her own home in] Andover.” Faced with these unfortunate women’s plight, she felt compelled to consider the ways in which their society, especially their ministers and other supposed male protectors, had failed them.58

Phelps’s revelation of the failure of patriarchal institutions was not representative of her family’s political leanings. Unlike Alcott, who was raised on the Transcendentalist creed of resisting problematic social mores, Phelps, as her biographer Lori Duin Kelly notes, “was the granddaughter and daughter of New England ministers—indeed, her father, Austin Phelps, was head of the very conservative Andover Seminary and Professor or Rhetoric there for many years.”59 She had not been trained in the art of critiquing religious or social establishments of any stripe, yet “the frustrations and difficulties” she so often “found in the married state” of the women she met through her charitable efforts made clear to her “the toll marriage could exact on a woman’s personal growth and happiness.”60 In common with her fellow Atlantic contributors Stoddard and Spofford, Phelps concluded that the current domestic framework in which marriage and motherhood occurred was creating the potential for socially sanctioned maltreatment. All that was left was to determine how best to correct this injustice.

For young Phelps, the product of a new generation of American women who came of age during and after, as opposed to before, the war, social activism seemed from the beginning the answer. Unlike Stoddard or Spofford, who wrote of self-contained homes subject to individual rule, Phelps saw broad political discourse on “a variety of women’s questions, including women and work, women and dress, women and money, and women and religion” as an effective road


59 Ibid., viii.

60 Ibid., vii.
to change within individual households. Economic and religious institutions might be the primary oppressors of women in her imagination, but transforming such institutions, she believed, would have an immediate salutary effect. Her personal understanding of women’s suffering and the broader suffering of a nation full of women, thanks to the Civil War, did not seem antithetical in the way that it had to her less politically oriented forebears. Kelly attributes the ease with which Phelps conflated the personal and the political to the personal losses she experienced before the war and the parallel sense of national loss that she witnessed once the hostilities broke out. She observes that “Phelps’ mother died when Elizabeth was only eight years old, and the loss, at such a young age…understandably stimulated [her] interest in death”—an interest that was soon shared by a bereaved nation of families who had lost fathers, husbands, sons, and innumerable more distant friends and relatives to the violence of the Civil War. It was this belief in the connection between her own personal experience with grief and that of the recently reunited States as a whole that led Phelps to publish her first and most popular novel, *The Gates Ajar*, in 1868 (the same year in which Alcott’s *Little Women* appeared). A wildly successful effort, *The Gates Ajar* offered a reassuring vision of Heaven to more than 80,000 American readers; it continued to appear in reprints, thanks to popular demand, throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Phelps’s preoccupation with finding meaning in personal loss, writ large and inclusive, proved to be precisely the kind of comfort that the reeling nation felt could assuage its collective desire to make sense of the larger losses, personal and ideological, that they had suffered in the past decade.

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61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 9.
However, although she continued to publish religiously infused Gates novels, as Reconstruction continued her writing became increasingly political in nature. A remarkably prolific writer, Phelps published nonfictional commentaries on women’s rights, often in the feminist magazine The Independent, alongside her fiction throughout the remainder of her life. This fiction came more and more to reflect the sentiments of her articles, dealing with activist issues, such as women’s rights in the workplace, that were also of increasing interest to Stanton and her allies. In 1871, for example, Phelps published The Silent Partner, a story derived from her early experiences at the factory town of Abbot Hill, which explores the possibility of women allying themselves across class lines to create more humane working conditions and domestic options that do not involve marriage. As with Alcott’s Work, which would appear in novel form two years later, the heroines of The Silent Partner, Perley Kelso and Sip Garth, find hope not in revolutionizing the relations between women and men, but instead in forging feminine partnerships that exclude men from positions of power. The flipped side of this trend would appear in Phelps’s post-Reconstruction novel, the cautionary Story of Avis, in 1877; despite her knowledge that marriage will fetter her potential as an artist, Avis Dobell yields to her love for Philip Ostrander and decides to take his assertion that he will be a different kind of husband, who will support her artistic career, at face value. Instead, Avis discovers as the years pass how thoroughly social norms have allowed Philip to deceive both his wife and himself; in the end, her only recourse is to create a closed micro-household of two with her daughter, tellingly named Wait, accepting that her capacity to paint the unspoken experience of women has been lost with her youth. In light of Avis’s situation, the exclusively female utopia that Charlotte Perkins

63 The final book in the series would appear in 1901. Kelly calculates that, in the end, Phelps published fifty-seven books, along with innumerable short stories and nonfiction articles—although nothing would have the same resonance after the collapse she underwent in her struggle to complete her masterpiece, The Story of Avis, which appeared in 1877.
Gilman would feel compelled to create in *Herland* (1915), which isolates women from hostile male intervention, appears to be a natural evolution.

Sadly, Phelps’s own future bore similarly bitter fruit. Although she, like Alcott, was unmarried at the time she published her most famous fictional efforts, she did not remain so. Scholars have long struggled to understand the momentous change she made to her life’s trajectory in 1886, when she married Herbert D. Ward, the son of her managing editor at *The Independent*. Ward, a new graduate of the theology program at Andover and aspiring author seventeen years younger than herself, was a husband ironically like the lesser men who clung to Phelps’s earlier heroines Perley Kelso and Avis Dobell. In a reversal of the support and assistance that Mr. Stoddard and Mr. Spofford offered their respective wives on the literary front, Phelps soon found herself floundering to “advance her husband’s literary ambitions,” a task made difficult by the fact that editors were invariably more interested in her own work. By 1890, Kelly proclaims, the marriage was “doomed”; when Phelps died in 1911, “Ward, who had been advised that his wife was dying, did not return home until three days after the funeral.”

All of the visions of the stresses and injustices of women’s place in marriage seemed confirmed by Phelps’s decades of separation from her young and jealous husband. Gifted women, postbellum literary logic increasingly suggested, were best served not by uniting with men but by avoiding their influence and forming alliances among themselves.

The Sites of Change: Using Literature to Map History

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65 Ibid., 17-18.
This isolationist sentiment was not, of course, universal. Although Cott notes that postbellum American women were much more likely to request a divorce or separation than their antebellum counterparts, they continued to marry and raise children in nuclear households throughout the Reconstruction period and afterward. But the pattern that appears in these Northeastern women’s fiction remains pronounced. The work that they produced during the war years and their immediate aftermath is disproportionately likely to offer a vision of family and romantic love that undermines seemingly “fundamental” aspects of the nineteenth-century’s idea of the female psyche. The first chapter of this study models the dramatic rhetorical shift that occurs with the advent of war by contrasting the despairing language of failed courtship in Blake’s 1859 novel *Southwold* to the successful revision of the tenets of the marriage contract that concludes Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* only three years later. Chapter 2 explores the next chronological step in the lives of married women, using Blake’s *Rockford* (1863) and Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* (1866) to demonstrate different iterations of the same transgressive message: that a woman may fulfill every requirement of wifely deportment to perfection, and yet not love her husband.

The following chapter turns from courtship and marriage to its intended result: the heir. It examines Stoddard’s *Two Men* (1865) and two short stories by Spofford to look more particularly at the advent of children, both biological and adopted, in their mothers’ lives, and the ways in which these mothers exploit their charges in order to solidify their own place within the family hierarchy. In keeping with this movement away from the theme of romance, Chapter 4 contrasts ante- and postbellum novels infused with the language of slavery, one by Spofford (*The Amber Gods*) and the other by Phelps (*The Story of Avis*), to demonstrate the changing uses of metaphors for slavery and the representation of racial “others” in the language of marriage and
family heritage before and after the war. Finally, the fifth chapter reimagines the connection between Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* and Alcott’s *Work*,66 in terms of their common use of the closed matriarchal utopia as an antidote to patriarchal exploitation. Such language marks the wane of this revisionist community and its imagined alternatives to traditional hierarchical dynamics between the sexes, whether in the marital, reproductive, or economic sphere.

This organization of chapters is designed to highlight two key points. First, pairing each author with a different counterpart in each new chapter (an authorial “braid,” if you will) demonstrates creative intersections within their small-scale literary movement as a whole. By placing these authors where I do, however, I do not intend to imply that these are the only places in the study where they could function informatively. While I have chosen, for example, to place Spofford’s *The Amber Gods* in conversation with Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* to model the intersection between abolitionist and proto-feminist discourse on marriage and representations of race, it would have been equally possible to label Spofford’s novella a pessimistic antebellum courtship narrative in the tradition of Blake’s *Southwold*. These organizational choices are in service of the second goal of this study: to address the means by which these women writers articulate fears and injustices inherent in their social positions for which terms and solutions had not necessarily been invented. *When* they were produced often seems as important as by whom in terms of the shape of these stories’ revisions to the ideological status quo. This 1860s “spike” in tales of women not just attempting to create but actually functioning within new domestic parameters corresponds directly with the war years, suggesting that women’s changed role on the home front had a direct impact upon the fictional families this print community produced. Not

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66 This is a more popular pair of texts for modern scholarly comparison. See Susan K. Harris, “Narrative Control and Thematic Radicalism in *Work* and *The Silent Partner*,” in *19th-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
for such heroines are the self-imposed exile of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne or the shameful death by bad blood that Oliver Wendell Holmes inflicts upon his Elsie Venner. From Stoddard’s Cassandra Morgeson (1862) to Alcott’s Jean Muir (1866), these fictional women develop innovative problem-solving strategies that enable them to achieve nontraditional domestic ends by original and often discomfiting means—ends and means that begin to narrow in scope after the war’s end.

While this timeline follows the literary developments of one particular literary movement, it also allows us to identify trends in such authors’ specific critiques of certain prevailing patriarchal laws and institutions. The first of these prevailing institutions, which informs Chapters 1 and 2, is the institution of marital coverture. According to social historian Joan Hoff, “the term coverture refers to the Common Law restriction that prevented married women from acting as their own agents at law or to have independent property rights because their legal ‘personalities’ were merged with and, therefore, subsumed by their husbands’ legal standing.” Due to the fact that the “the husbands had full membership in the judicial system, political community, and economic system,” they were by default assigned the role of representatives of their wives’ interests in the public realms to which women, especially the married feme covert, did not have access. Novels focused on issues of courtship and marriage—in this case Blake’s Southwold and Rockford, Stoddard’s The Morgesons, and Alcott’s Behind a Mask—routinely emphasize men’s inherent inability to represent fully the

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67 See Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850) and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861). It seems worth noting that the same publisher brought out the first editions of both these works.

needs of their wives or intendeds in the public realm, when their best interests are so often inherently opposed.

Chapter 3 explores a legal facet of women’s lives that directly stems from marriage: issues of guardianship and patrilineal inheritance. Hoff notes that the Common Law principle of female invisibility applies as well to issues of inheritance; “under Common Law, widows could not be heirs—that is, they could not be accorded the full property rights of their deceased husbands as heads of the households nor could they legally write wills.” The only access they might gain to these resources would be via the role of “executrixes of their husbands’ property” on behalf of their (usually male) children. Naturally, in an era in which the number of widows dramatically increased, this policy of eliminating mothers’ access to the material resources that would enable them to support the next generation seemed rather conspicuously problematic; Stoddard and Spofford in particular devote substantial space to modeling the destructive means by which such women were forced to combat this exclusion. As custodians rather than members of inherently patrilineal family trees, the women of Stoddard’s Two Men (1865) and Spofford’s “The Strathsays” (1863) and “Her Story” (1872) find alternate means of integrating themselves into the family bloodline. These methods often take the form of perverse “Cinderella” stories, with marginalized female wards subverting the efforts of their hostile matriarchs and taking control of the paternal bloodline through strategic marriages.

The quest to achieve agency within marriage takes another form in Chapter 4, which considers the intersection of abolitionist rhetoric with white women’s pursuit of self-ownership. This chapter places Spofford’s antebellum novella The Amber Gods (1860) alongside Phelps’s postbellum masterpiece, The Story of Avis (1877). The transition of the women’s movement to

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69 Ibid., 43.
primarily abolitionist activity during the war demonstrates the connection that most proto-feminists saw between their own personal cause and that of African-American slaves, especially slave women. Such women, they reasoned, were unable to live virtuous Christian lives because non-citizenship denied them access to the institution of marriage. Middle-class New England women’s pervasive use of this trope in fiction is further significant in that it suggests, especially in Spofford’s case, an awareness of the complicity of Northeastern merchants and consumers in the growth of slavery in America: an admission that would have been difficult for many self-congratulatory Northern abolitionists to make alongside their condemnation of the slaveholding South. Juxtaposing antebellum and post-Reconstruction treatments of this rhetoric enables the reader to measure the extent to which proto-feminist literature’s understanding of the intersection of the suffragist and abolitionist causes changed in the wake of the war.

The final chapter uses this study’s most overtly politicized texts, Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* (1871) and Alcott’s *Work* (1873), to address an increasingly prevalent concern of the postbellum women’s rights movement: the growing need for employment outside the home. As Siegel’s scholarship on the legislative movement away from “‘joint property rights’ in the marital partnership” reveals, “the overwhelming majority of wives, whether of middling or marginal means,” struggled with two painful legal realities.70 First, much of the work for which their domestic training prepared them—cooking, cleaning, sewing, and so forth—took place within the home for no compensation at all, and received only minimal remuneration even when performed for a third party. Second, whatever compensation a wife received for her work in the public sphere was actually the property of her husband, because of the laws of marital coverture that designated him the representative of the family in all matters outside of the home. Phelps’s

70 Siegel, “Home as Work,” 1085.
and Alcott’s mutual decision to model women *removing* themselves from the patriarchal family in order to engage in meaningful labor is symptomatic of the decline of the productive domestic transgressions that charged the fiction this print community produced during the war years.

While the postbellum suffragist movement professed itself—rightly—disappointed by the Republican administration’s lack of interest in enfranchising American women, the literary production that took place during the movement’s wartime hiatus represents a different kind of proto-feminism: one that would not reappear in literature (or politics) during the remainder of the nineteenth century. The Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women’s right to vote, would not be passed in the lifetime of Stanton or many of her contemporaries. However, the increased demand among Victorian American wives for divorces, remarriages, child custody, access to wages, and ownership of property demonstrates that individual women across the nation were attempting to shape for themselves new domestic hierarchies, despite the repeated failures of the suffrage movement on the political front. If literary realism did not pursue the creative legacy of families like those in Stoddard or Spofford’s fiction, the same cannot be said for the new generations of American women, who continually attempted to live according to new, apparently unwritten rules that often seemed alien and even dangerous to a governing body that still romanticized an anachronistic antebellum “home front.” In their representation of a kind of domestic “re-forming” process that was as much personal as political, this Civil War print community acted as an unacknowledged vanguard for a wave of gradual social change that could not be measured through votes or legislative reforms. Like its forgotten authoresses, this change was marginalized by circumstance, labeled aberrant or discomfiting by observers, but ultimately vindicated by modern scholarship that calls such transgressors “ahead of their time.”
A SACRED UNION: AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE MARRIAGE MARKET REMADE

It is no secret that nineteenth-century Americans understood domestic hierarchy as the essential building block upon which the New Republic stood. If, as Nancy F. Cott asserts, “marital governance and political governance” existed on “the same continuum,” then the logic of a system of paternal surveillance over dependent wives and children becomes clear.1 If domestic hierarchy undergirded the democratic Republic, institutionalized means of controlling dependent parties were essential to the preservation of the United States. At the end of the antebellum era, as America teetered on the brink of civil war, this preservation was no small matter. Unfortunately, the social institutions of paternal “protection,” including marital coverture and exclusively male suffrage, conflicted with the increasingly vocal proto-feminist movement of the 1840s and 1850s. The nation’s continuing conservative interpretation of the Common Law of marriage, Linda K. Kerber explains, was “based on the assumption that married women had neither independent minds nor independent power.”2 Because of their inherently vulnerable status, men reasoned, it was natural that wives’ actions and identities be “covered” by the protective mantle of patriarchal authority. The Civil War called into question the integrity of these supposedly stabilizing institutions, initiating among women writers new, radical

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explorations of the process by which women transitioned from daughters to wives in the patriarchal American household.

The history of the antebellum struggle between advocates of marital reform and the state has been well documented. Since the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, suffragist leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had mobilized in opposition to laws restricting divorce, financial dependence, and redress for spousal abuse. As a result of continued pressure from such activist groups, some small-scale legal alternations to the marriage state did occur before the war. For example, a flurry of Married Women Property Acts appeared, particularly in the Northern states of New York, Massachusetts, and Maine, in the 1840s and 1850s, which created exceptions to husbands’ access to their wives’ earnings. Reva B. Siegel, however, has convincingly illustrated the continued constraints which supposedly progressive “earnings statutes” and other economic “reforms” imposed upon the women they were meant to liberate, “under the guise of preserving” their feme sole autonomy. Such legislation “did not completely abolish the common law doctrine that made a husband owner of his wife’s labor; rather, the earnings statutes gave wives rights only in their labor outside the home, and continued to protect a husband’s rights to his wife’s services in the home”—where the vast majority of wives’ labor actually took place.³

This hierarchical dynamic, in which men supervised and guided their wives, suffered a blow with the advent of the Civil War. While Married Women Property Acts were designed to expand certain legal protections of the state to women as individuals, the war reversed this impulse in many of the historically progressive Northern states. With the dramatic redistribution of the male population to the battlefront, husbands and fathers could no longer be counted upon

to monitor the activities of their dependents. In light of this new domestic reality, a more conservative ideology reversed much of the legal reform that characterized the antebellum suffragist movement. Marriage, and the courtship process that preceded it, seemed to fall increasingly under the purview of state definitions of partnership. Like Cott, nineteenth-century American legislators recognized marriage as a unique form of contract in that its parameters are determined not by the parties themselves, but by the legal apparatus of the state. Marriage is a uniform rather than an adaptable contract; “the public sets the terms of marriage, says who can and cannot marry…[and] what obligations and rights the agreement allows.” As a result of the conservative backlash that placed such collectivist political rhetoric front and center in Northern domestic legislation, the late 1850s and early 1860s often represent a challenge to progressive historians interested in the growth of the women’s rights movement. It was not, after all, until the 1870s that suffragists re-mobilized to counteract the political and ideological losses their movement suffered during the war years.

While it has not received the attention paid to its political counterparts, proto-feminist fiction by women in this period offers important insights into the ways in which current and prospective wives imagined their place within the domestic hierarchy in a time when their roles were in an unprecedented state of flux. Literary fiction provided a valuable alternative platform for women concerned about the kind of lives future wives could expect to win for themselves on the marriage market. Margaret R. Higonnet describes such rewritings of the domestic order as a fundamental element of women’s civil war literature (whether the American Civil War or otherwise). The hallmarks of family hierarchy, she notes, are uniquely symptomatic of the problems faced by war-era families; “In order to describe a revolution, many historians and

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4 Cott, *Public Vows*, 2.
novelists draw on familial metaphors, above all that of the topsy-turvy marriage or the exchange of authority between husband and wife.\textsuperscript{5} By rewriting the terms of the courtship process, such early feminist Northern literature reveals in microcosm the new possibilities that the domestic instability of the 1860s inspired in the literary imagination.

Two women authors in particular, Lillie Devereux Blake and Elizabeth Stoddard, used their respective first novels to posit nontraditional forms of courtship and marriage that resist notions of gendered hierarchy and reimagine women’s roles in their partnerships with men. Juxtaposing Blake’s antebellum \textit{Southwold} (1859) with Stoddard’s \textit{The Morgesons} (1862) suggests how a mere three years alters such novels’ shared themes of patriarchal surveillance and women’s corresponding oppression on the marriage market. The connection between these two texts is grounded in the unique publication history that Blake and Stoddard share. Both were New England women who eventually migrated to New York City as a result of their marriages, and who struggled to balance the obligations of motherhood with their literary efforts; each saw early work published in \textit{Harper’s New Monthly Magazine}. When the time came to sell their respective first novels, the two shared another strategic choice: both \textit{Southwold} and \textit{The Morgesons} (as well as subsequent novels by both Blake and Stoddard) appeared via Rudd & Carleton, a small New York press that favored progressive literature, often by women or foreign writers. Like Blake and Stoddard, Rudd & Carleton seemed to have unique insight into the interests and anxieties of a reading public living in a rupturing nation; the short-lived publishing

\textsuperscript{5} Margaret R. Higonnet, “Civil Wars and Sexual Territories,” in \textit{Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation}, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 82.
enterprise experienced a literary boom from 1856 to 1865. With the end of the war, however, the press’s output dramatically declined, and Rudd & Carleton were soon out of business.  

Like the house that shepherded them into print, *Southwold* and *The Morgesons* experienced brief notoriety at the time of their respective appearances, followed by relative obscurity throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Philip Gura notes of *Southwold*, “the novel was widely noticed and reprinted twice within a month.”  

Despite its initial success, however, Blake’s first novel has yet to be reprinted since. Stoddard’s novel fared slightly better; although *The Morgesons* was only a modest financial success, it generated critical attention from celebrated literary figures, the most prominent of whom was Nathaniel Hawthorne, and went on to be reprinted later in the century. Thanks to recovery projects by Lawrence Buell, Sandra Zagarell, Jennifer Putzi, and others, Stoddard’s novels are now gaining prominence in the nineteenth-century American literary canon. Mapping the creative trajectory of the plight of women on the fictional marriage market from Blake to Stoddard suggests an additional value to such recovery projects: the insight they provide into a unique cultural and intellectual print community in American history.

As the threat of war loomed ever larger in the American imagination, the unavoidable reality of the relocation of the male population to the warfront triggered a change in many women’s understanding of their roles within the previously rigid hierarchical institution of the household. The Civil War necessarily raised the stakes of the marriage market, which was, of course, already of central importance to women, whose future lives would be shaped by

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proposals of marriage they received. Blake’s pessimism about her heroine’s ability to constructively alter her disadvantaged position on the marriage market reflects the potential for exploitation and ignominy that she sees built into the fabric of domestic patriarchy. Stoddard’s work reveals an intense awareness of the same threats that the socially sanctioned courtship process poses to young women that Blake describes in 1859. Her belief in such women’s ability to act as individual agents to change the hierarchical precepts of marriage, however, reflects the new de facto positions of wives and daughters as independent agents and representatives of their families during the war years. Although both authors set their stories of domestic upheaval in decades prior to the sectarian crisis, their evolving understanding of individual women’s ability to defy seemingly monolithic definitions of courtship and marriage in favor of more personally fulfilling models suggests the potential such novels have to illustrate the growth of a new kind of proto-feminist imagination, intimately tied to the experience of national rupture.

The Cage That Is Courtship: *Southwold* (1859)

In 1849, the sixteen-year-old Lillie Devereux—who would later become Lillie Devereux Umsted, and finally Lillie Devereux Blake—wrote a declaration of social warfare against her future male counterparts on the marriage market. “Women have been from time immemorial duped and deceived by men,” the young belle from Stratford, Connecticut, complained. The courtship process, she observed with dismay, was heavily weighted in favor of male suitors; while a man might toy with the affections of many women with impunity, his prospective brides were apt to be labeled coquettes for far lesser transgressions. In order for future husbands to learn the folly of the current status quo, she reasoned, their “hearts must be attached and then
trifled with.” The indignant ingénue, herself on the verge of marital eligibility, volunteered to lead this proto-feminist campaign, swearing to “give myself heart and soul to making men miserable; if they love me I will refuse them, no matter how much I may be interested.” Young Lillie, who would grow up to be the author of numerous fictional and nonfictional commentaries on women’s status in American society before, during, and after the Civil War, did not see this plan as coquetry; instead, she understood her role as that of a romantic heroine who advocates not for a Prince Charming but instead for her fellow sisters in gender-inflicted bondage: “I will live but to redress these terrible wrongs!”

The novel that Blake produced ten years later is everything that a reader of sixteen-year-old Lillie’s 1849 diary entry might imagine. We meet *Southwold*’s heroine, Medora Fielding, in a state of justifiable bitterness, about to be jilted by her mercenary lover in favor of a bland but wealthy heiress. The ill-use she undergoes at the hands of her fiancé serves as a resounding defense of the rights of its embattled heroine to “deceive” men even as it details the ominous consequences of such a declaration of war upon the opposite sex. Medora’s gentility and blameless intentions up to this point reinforce Blake’s narrative injunction to “blame her not too severely” for her newfound fury. With this socially charged intervention, *Southwold* models a recognizable response to the growing list of political setbacks inflicted upon the very active 1850s women’s rights movement: reform is too slow, legislation too late. Medora’s desire for additional agency on the marriage market is grounded not in self-indulgence, the narrator suggests, but in the need for self-preservation; in a society that measures a woman’s value as a

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prospective bride by her modesty and retirement, she has no way of communicating the unjust treatment she has undergone without being labeled indecent or even promiscuous.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite the flamboyant critiques of the marriage market that marked her teenaged years, Blake’s foray into novel writing was an earnest one, and Southwold’s appearance at the end of the decade no coincidence. Blake’s decision to publish fiction was a desperate attempt to support her two daughters—a quest that only became more urgent in the wake of the suicide of her first husband, Frank Umsted, in May of that year.\textsuperscript{11} His death left Blake the sole provider for her family, in a society designed to exclude women—especially married women—from the legal and economic realms. Her creation of Medora, a self-proclaimed temptress fueled by righteous fury at what social historian Joan Hoff labels a “legal status [that] was still stuck somewhere in the colonial period,” reflects Blake’s very personal awareness of the dangers implicit in relying upon patriarchal support to care for oneself or one’s family.\textsuperscript{12} Although marriage was marketed to women as a crucial means of gaining material stability in an increasingly unstable world, the growing demands, particularly among Northern women, for legal reforms to the institution of marital coverture demonstrate the impracticality of such ideals. What of drunk, violent, or otherwise profligate husbands, wondered Temperance advocates and other reform groups; what protection did the marriage contract offer virtuous wives against oppressive or even abusive patriarchs?

\textsuperscript{10} Devereux, quoted in Blake and Wallace, \textit{Champion of Women}, 24.

\textsuperscript{11} Grace Farrell, \textit{Lillie Devereux Blake: Retracting a Life Erased} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 5. It is worth noting that, at the time of her husband’s suicide, Southwold had already been in print for several months; even before the death of her husband, Blake had found herself in need of a means of generating additional income.

\textsuperscript{12} Hoff, “American Women and the Lingering Implications of Coverture,” 46.
Medora’s simultaneous need for and hostility to a union with an eligible patriarch reflects the conundrum Blake sees at the heart of the marriage state. Her attempts to use the courtship process to find a man who will give her financial security without demanding wifely subordination indicate her cognizance of the very limited “protections” that marriage offers her in exchange for her freedom. Because, unlike the institution of marriage, pre-marital courtship was not subject to legal interventions such as coverture, Medora’s decision to cultivate a romantic relationship in which she retains psychological control of her paramour before wedding herself to him makes sense. It is outside the legal bonds of marriage, Blake implies, that revision to the hierarchical gender dynamic may be possible. In the opening pages of the novel, the reader witnesses Medora’s first attempts to gain security through the marriage market, as she realizes that she has fallen victim to a man who manipulated familiar courtship rituals to make her love him despite his unworthiness. Once she realizes her first love will never marry her, Medora does just what Blake herself imagined as a girl: turn the tables on other eligible bachelors in pursuit of an advantageous marriage. Yet it becomes increasingly clear that this quest is no sport for Medora; if she cannot “sell” herself successfully on the marriage market, she will quite literally expire from lack of funds. Notwithstanding her friends’ ongoing confidence in the institutions of benevolent paternalism, Medora’s trust in male guardians has been repeatedly and justifiably shaken, first by her father, who failed to provide for her, and then by her first love, Walter Lascelles, who publicly cast her aside in favor of the wealthy Lucy Wentworth. Lurking behind her flamboyant vow to “live only to triumph” over her male opponents on the marriage market is a very legitimate fear of finding herself emotionally or materially dependent upon a false
protector, to whom she must nevertheless bind herself if she is to survive in a society that defines itself via its patriarchs.\footnote{Blake, \textit{Southwold}, 33.}

The marriage market is, everyone agrees, Medora’s only option; with no inheritance upon which to rely, marriage represents her only hope for financial and social stability. Despite her “almost masculine” intellect, Blake makes clear, Medora will never be allowed to use her extensive study of literature and religion in pursuit of a career, much less a career that would support both herself and her apathetic mother.\footnote{Ibid., 18.} This enforced dependence was a recurring theme in the complaints of the antebellum suffrage movement, and one that governing bodies were correspondingly unwilling to address, for fear of disrupting domestic “harmony.” In their rejection of the 1854 Woman’s Rights Petition, for example, the New York Select Committee declared, “The harmony of life, the real interest of both husband and wife, and of all dependent upon them, require [masculine leadership]. In obedience to that requirement and necessity, the husband is the head—the representative of the family.”\footnote{Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al, \textit{History of Woman Suffrage} (New York: Fowler and Wells, Publishers, 1881), I, 616-618.} Blake turns such rhetoric on its head by revealing that this precise logic—that women need a male “representative” in the public realm if they are to survive—in fact forces her heroine to flout the romantic and spiritual ideals of Christian monogamy. This anxiety continued to intensify as the war complicated traditional courtship dynamics. Louisa May Alcott’s first sensationalist “blood and thunder” story, “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (1862), emphasized in terms as ominous as Blake’s the dire consequences of eligible women’s mercenary “misuse” of the marriage market for unromantic
ends. Without a husband, Medora—indeed, any woman—has no access to the economic and political realms through which material security is achieved. Seen in this light, the marriage contract takes on an ominous cast; the best that a conservative reading public can hope for Medora is that she will find a truly virtuous husband who will honor the chivalrous spirit of hierarchical marriage without employing his social privileges to exploit or embarrass his wife.

Blake offers her readers just such a paragon of patriarchal good intentions in the form of Floyd Southwold, Junior, Medora’s second and most sincere suitor. From the moment he walks into Medora’s life, Floyd seems to be the antidote to Lascelles’s perfidy. With all the grace of a chivalric hero, this kind, handsome young gentleman wanders into the Wentworth-Lascelles wedding party, hoping for a glimpse of the “fair bridesmaids.” As any good hero would, he finds himself captivated by “one of the group of young friends who had been asked to attend,” a beautiful blonde woman “looking magnificently in a blue silk…matched to the clear azure of her eyes.” This woman, of course, is Medora, suffused in what he interprets as a wonderfully feminine “cal[m].” So impressed is Floyd by his vision of this gentle “heroine of his dreams” that he happily imagines himself “enslave[d]” to her by the domestic “chain” of marriage. Floyd’s fantasy of submission seems to suggest the possibility of a marriage that is satisfying to both parties. He wishes to be led by the wishes of a wife, and Medora wishes to retain her autonomy despite her transition to wifehood.

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17 Blake, *Southwold*, 45.

18 Ibid., 47.

19 Ibid., 48.
Yet the success of Floyd’s pursuit of Medora is predicated upon what the reader knows to be a fundamental disparity in their understandings of marital union. To Floyd, the ideal partner is literally a gentle woman, unencumbered by violent “passion[s]”—passions that are intrinsic to Medora’s being.\(^{20}\) Despite his protestations of manly servitude, Floyd, in the tradition of sentimental heroes like Susan B. Warner’s John Humphreys or Maria Cummins’s William Sullivan, is conservative in his understanding of a prospective wife’s role in their courtship and eventual marriage. He fantasizes about gaining in sacred union “a tiny gloved hand” that will lean upon his support and guidance. He dreams of being “spell-bound” by a paragon of domestic virtue, but he never intends to be so thoroughly enchanted that he cannot instruct and correct her smaller understanding as needed.\(^{21}\) As the “nephew, namesake, and adopted heir” of the wealthy bachelor Floyd Southwold, Senior,\(^{22}\) this “young Achilles” seems perfectly justified in his supposition that a union of this sort would be as agreeable to his intended bride as to himself.\(^{23}\) He has a comfortable home, a respected name, and his own devotion to offer Medora, after all. When he meets her for a second time at a friend’s summer estate on the Hudson River, Floyd naturally begins to court her in the approved paternalistic manner of elite antebellum men, with an emphasis on his willingness to act as a guide and helpmeet who will supervise and assist her in matters both moral and domestic.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 73.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 35.
Unfortunately, his eagerness to “adore” the object of his affection “as an angel” blinds him to Medora’s real situation.\textsuperscript{24} Had she the means of expressing her true emotional state at the Wentworth-Lascelles wedding without being ostracized by polite New York society, Floyd’s impression of his so-called “angel” would, of course, have been entirely different. At the wedding, Medora nearly makes herself sick impersonating the placid society belle who so appeals to her new suitor. This necessity for repressing her true self intensifies rather than abates as they continue their courtship. When she playfully suggests that they learn about each other via the “three questions, which, if honestly answered, will give the key to any character,” Medora discovers anew the demands that a respectable romantic union places on the subordinate party.\textsuperscript{25} After Floyd properly expresses his preference for “pure” flowers like the Water Lily, Christian literature like John Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}, and the democratic justice of ancient Greece, she knows that before this man she can never express her own individual sentiments. Were she to share the truth with him in return, “she would have been forced to reply, that the passionate poetry of Byron\textsuperscript{26} touched more than any other a responsive chord in her heart, and that in some wild moments she had sighed for the gay license of the dissolute court of Charles II.”\textsuperscript{27} The courtship that began as Medora’s act of “triumph” over a social system that punished her for embracing its tenets has now become a socially sanctioned punishment of its own. No matter how she “betwitch[es]” him, she is always under Floyd’s critical, if benevolent, supervision; it is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 74.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 80.
\item \textsuperscript{26} It is worth mentioning that Medora herself, in addition to identifying with the literary works of Byron, is in fact in all likelihood refers to one of his poetic creations; “Medora” appears in Byron’s poem “The Corsair” (1814). This original literary Medora also shares a name with Elizabeth Medora Leigh, Byron’s niece and probable illegitimate daughter.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Blake, \textit{Southwold}, 81.
\end{itemize}
always his literary interests, aesthetic values, and ideas of propriety that must be validated and appeased.28

When she realizes that Floyd’s tireless observation is joined by his Uncle Southwold’s active hostility to their union, Medora breaks off the engagement to try her fortune elsewhere, knowing that Floyd will not be able to support her without his uncle’s money. Unfortunately, this break for freedom seems to compound rather than alleviate her plight. Blake’s biographer Grace Farrell notes that, the longer Medora continues her quest for a husband, the less controlled her efforts appear: “Using her one option, the marriage market, to regain access to a world in which she is marginalized, Medora buys into the constructive system that she had sought to combat.”29 In other words, hemmed in by multiplying social fetters, her attempts to control her fate via a strategic marriage become less calculated and more genuinely frantic. This manic energy bordering on physical illness was a familiar gothic trope among wild, self-indulgent heroines, from Emily Brontë’s tempestuous Catherine Linton, née Earnshaw, of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), to Harriet Prescott Spofford’s grasping Giorgione Willoughby of *The Amber Gods* (1860). Blake’s choice to inflict such hysterical passion upon a woman who is attempting to retain decorous self-control, however, reveals the dangers of succumbing to genuine feeling on the scripted marriage market.

Spurred by the knowledge that Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles will be returning in mere months from their honeymoon abroad, Medora sets her sights on a wealthier but infinitely more repellant prospective husband. Claude Hamilton, a middle-aged tyrant in need of a suitable woman to “graciously…espouse,” has long admired Medora’s beauty, and now takes the opportunity of a

28 Ibid., 78.

winter in New York to pursue her more directly. Feeling quite generous, “he resolve[s], after a six months’ trial of Medora,” to do her the honor of allowing her to wed him—as long as nothing in her conduct during this time should cause him to think better of it. Knowing that her future security is dependent upon his judgment, Medora finds herself forced to abase herself before a man for whom she feels “unconquerable repugnance.” The same sense of oppression that tainted her relationship with Floyd now returns tenfold, shorn of its sentimental raiment, in the form of Hamilton’s unblinking surveillance. Like Floyd, Hamilton imagines matrimony throughout the metaphor of the “chain”—a telling commonality in light of their apparently very different feelings toward Medora. When she walks at his side, Medora knows herself to be “paraded for his benefit”; when she sits beside him at the opera, she imagines herself in the role of “the captive Zenobia.” As did the less frightening but equally intrusive Floyd, Hamilton understands Medora as an accessory to the morally and intellectually superior identity of her intended.

If Floyd and Hamilton are on the same paternalistic spectrum, however, they dispense their masculine prerogatives as guides and judges in very different doses. Medora’s captivity as the potential bride of Hamilton is dangerously close to literal. She goes where he says; she speaks when he addresses her. Because Hamilton considers unbroken supervision part of her “trial,” Medora must “constantly chaf[e] uneasily under the constant watch he kept upon her slightest action.” Painfully aware that he is scrutinizing her “to see if in all respects she fulfilled his views of what the future Mrs. Hamilton should be,” she works desperately to embody the

30 Blake, Southwold, 117.

31 Ibid., 228.

32 Ibid., 117.
empty vessel Hamilton wishes to “espouse.” Hamilton believes that his public status ought to “cover” hers entirely; her domestic accomplishments, far from being praiseworthy, are no more than his due. By escaping Floyd’s chains, Medora has entangled herself with a man whose idea of marital union resembles the political structure of a dictatorship. In a mockery of the supposedly “republican” model of the antebellum marriage relation, Blake describes Medora’s dread of marriage to Hamilton in feudal terms, calling her “sick at heart” at her vision of a future in which “she might one day have to call him Lord.”

Ironically, in her search for agency within the courtship process, Medora has exposed the monarchical properties of this “republican” union.

Such a monarchical dynamic, of course, went against all of the republican ideals of husbandly “representation” and “voluntary union based on consent” that Cott describes as undergirding both political and domestic rhetoric of the period. The union that Hamilton offers is the legal and economic contract that comprises American marriage at the time, shorn only of its traditional emotional trappings. It is no wonder, in light of such a contract, Blake implies, that the beneficiary seems so repellant to Medora. When Hamilton discovers, as he inevitably must, that his intended has been polluted by a former attachment to Lascelles, it looks at first as though she has made a fortunate escape. Disgusted by what he perceives as her corruption, Hamilton turns his attentions to a more pliable object, and Medora regroups by returning to Floyd, whose delusions of her affection for him remain undiminished. Reasoning that she ought to be able to charm Uncle Southwold into accepting her marriage to his nephew, she devotes herself to pleasing both men—a task complicated by their very different perceptions of her. While Floyd

33 Ibid., 119.

34 Ibid., 116.

35 Cott, Public Vows, 10.
remains oblivious to her disinterest, the canny old bachelor immediately grasps Medora’s position and takes delight in exploiting it. He leads drawing-room conversations into dangerous waters, goading her to reveal her pragmatic ideas about Christianity and women’s intellect so as to disgrace her in Floyd’s pious eyes. Over time, Medora comes to feel nearly as oppressed in the Southwold house as she did with Hamilton, regardless of the honorable intentions of her suitor.

By this time, despite her continued determination to exploit Floyd’s affection for her and thus win a secure place in his genteel family, it is clear that Medora is more victimized by than “triumphant” over the restrictive mores of the marriage market. In spite of Floyd’s eagerness to cloak his decorous corrections in the language of love, she recognizes his ingrained allegiance to the same patriarchal values and institutions that Lascelles, Hamilton, and even Uncle Southwold have used to deceive and control her. When a series of infelicitous circumstances lead Medora to become complicit in Uncle Southwold’s grisly, albeit accidental, death by locomotive, Floyd’s condemnation of his former beloved is every bit as complete as Hamilton’s before him. Far from enabling him to sympathize with the feelings of entrapment and vulnerability that his despotic uncle inspired in her, Floyd’s polarized ideals of womanhood dictate that, when he no longer can see Medora as the blameless “angel” he originally imagined, he must necessarily perceive her instead as the female incarnation of all that is corrupt and even demonic.  

From the moment her “strong white arms” restrain him from leaping onto the tracks after his uncle, he knows her only as a “murderess,” and “writhed” in disgust at her touch. Floyd’s training in the art of nineteenth-century chivalry has not prepared him to extend compassion to a woman who is damaged rather than uplifted by her treatment at the hands of his family; he is no more capable

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36 Blake, Southwold, 73.

37 Ibid., 195.
than the repulsive Hamilton of obeying Blake’s narrative injunction to “[b]lame her not too severely” for her many transgressions.\textsuperscript{38}

In the end, then, Blake’s heroine is left not to model an empowering alternative mode of romantic partnership but rather to illustrate the unjust consequences of rejecting the rigid mores of the courtship process. Unlike Spofford’s Yone Willoughby (less than a year in American literature’s future), who happily cast herself as the sadistic heroine of her family’s gothic drama, Medora never intended her courtship to descend into vulgar sensationalism. Despite her meticulously scripted conduct, however, the paternal surveillance culture that supposedly protects and supports aspiring wives from their own worst impulses now haunts her in a new and terrifying guise. In the wake of her great sin, she worries not about her conduct—as she did during her tentative engagements to Floyd and Hamilton—but about men’s fearsome ability to intuit and judge the flaws in her inner soul. Horrified at the depths to which her machinations have brought her, “[a] strange bewilderment crept over her brain,” transforming her from a cultured, articulate woman fighting for her future into an incoherent victim of her own self-loathing. Far from rendering her at long last the humble, pliable bride that Floyd has always imagined her to be, Medora’s new mistrust in herself wreaks physical as well as emotional damage from which she cannot recover. Her fanciful demons translate into a “wretched fever,” “appalling headaches,” and weakness in her limbs,\textsuperscript{39} all symptoms of her new conviction that she can no longer be trusted to govern her own conduct. In a more traditional novel of manners like Jane Austen’s \textit{Sense and Sensibility} (1811), such a humbling fever may facilitate (as in the case of Marianne Dashwood) a return of reason and decorum; Blake’s rewritten domestic model,

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 223.
however, offers no such convenient redemption. As her illness worsens, Medora obsesses over
the nightmarish possibility that she might reveal her jaded heart and crimes of insincerity in
hallucinatory ramblings. She knows too well the limits of men’s forbearance to entrust herself to
their care; even the minister whose duty is to advocate for her soul appears threatening rather
than supportive. Bereft of so much as the illusion of self-governance and all too cognizant of the
conditional nature of the support that men like Lascelles, Hamilton, and Floyd can offer, she sees
no way of being redeemed or indeed of functioning unredeemed in the antebellum society she
occupies. Her story ends not with a marriage but with a suicide.

In the hands of another author, Medora’s exploits might easily take on the appearance of
a straightforward cautionary tale, along the lines of Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791).
It was, after all, a well-known tenet of the marriage market that self-indulgence and
discontentment undermined women’s chances of securing a kind and reliable husband. But
Blake’s emphasis on the blithe complicity of a wide variety of men, including a selfish fortune-
hunter, a chivalric gentleman, a patriarchal tyrant, and a jealous bachelor, in Medora’s fall from
grace demands that the reader consider the larger institutional structures that inform her
increasingly limited choices. Blake models a series of destructive gendered hierarchies in order
to demonstrate the pervasive problems that an inflexible definition of partnership between the
sexes creates. The failures of such systems are especially conspicuous, she suggests, among
women whose many accomplishments ought to make them valuable members of the domestic
sphere. The culture of patriarchal surveillance, and the agency that such figures have to make
moral judgments on behalf of their entire demographic group, inhibits rather than initiates
healthy antebellum romantic relationships.
The social landscape of Elizabeth Stoddard’s Morgeson family would be familiar to enthusiasts of *Southwold*. Drawing upon Blake’s rhetoric of destructive hierarchical dynamics on the marriage market, Stoddard replicates *Southwold*’s critique of paternalistic surveillance of young women, only to use the second half of her novel to model a radical means of transcending it. Her heroine, Cassandra Morgeson, bears a striking physical resemblance to Medora Fielding. Like Medora, Cassandra adheres to a recognizable aesthetic ideal, characterized by “light, ripply [sic] hair” and dark blue eyes. Her physical and emotional transgressions of propriety, however, are more overt than her counterpart’s: Cassandra is far less decorous than Medora, especially in the early stages of the novel. She is on constant, unembarrassed display, whipped by sea winds as she walks along the Massachusetts shoreline or swept about town in a horse-drawn carriage. The eldest of two sisters in an old but rather dilapidated New England family beset by personal crises, Cassandra has little interest in the intricacies of social institutions, particularly the marriage market. Cassandra moves from one dysfunctional domestic setting to the next, *The Morgesons* rejects the notion of monolithic, institutionalized domestic standards under which Blake’s Medora labors. Instead, Stoddard presents a collection of insular, even claustrophobic households that resemble microcosmic fiefdoms, each of which functions according to the individual whims and wiles of its patriarch. Despite the relatively populous region, reviewers were more likely to compare the households of *The Morgesons* to Brontë’s

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While some of these domestic oases find themselves under the sway of despotic patriarchs, this model in the end offers Cassandra the opportunity to shape a marriage and a household for herself without reference to the broader social mores with which Medora and the antebellum women’s rights movement were forced to engage.

Unlike Southwold, which has languished in relative obscurity since its printings before the Civil War, The Morgesons created something of a stir upon its appearance in the summer of 1862—albeit within a rather small, highly intellectual circle. Although it failed to catch the public imagination, Rudd & Carleton’s printing of Stoddard’s first novel received highly distinguished critical attention throughout the remainder of the century. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that “it seemed to me as genuine and lifelike as anything that pen and ink can do. There are very few books of which I take the trouble to have any opinion at all, or of which I could retain any memory so long after reading them as I do of ‘The Morgesons.’” His son Julian followed suit in 1889, calling it the “strangest and most fascinating stor[y] of this generation”—one that, tellingly, “only a woman could have written.” Both Hawthornes appeared confused at the

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42 James H. Matlack, The Literary Career of Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard (PhD diss., Yale University, 1967), 218. Matlack calls her decision to allow Rudd & Carleton to publish the novel during the war years, when “there was a diminished audience for serious fiction,” a testament to her precarious financial circumstances (218).


novel’s poor reception among popular readers, and critics spent the next century attempting to account for its failure to achieve more public acclaim.

However, a look at the plot of Stoddard’s novel—which contemporary reviewers were unanimous in their reluctance to address specifically—reveals a more insidious challenge to the domestic status quo. Because the patriarchs of the various families in Cassandra’s growing social circles have such total power over their individual households, there is not a single set of moral or social codes that will guarantee the preservation of her virtue across household lines. Instead, she must repeatedly adapt her behavior and expectations to accommodate a host of men every bit as disparate as Lascelles, Floyd, and Hamilton of Southwold. Far from requiring punishment for this flexibility—the hallmark of sensationalist works like “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment,” which appeared in the same year—Cassandra survives her repeated transplantations specifically because she rejects the notions of standardized propriety that bind Medora. Over the course of her story, she engages in not one but two emotionally charged courtships, in which she reciprocates the romantic claims of two men who are both, by decorous nineteenth-century standards, utterly ineligible to seek her hand. Cassandra, far from sacrificing her own values to those of a single morally upright man—the social counterpart to the legal institution of marital coverture—uses her feminine allure to explore alternative models of romantic attachment.

Such a notion, of course, directly conflicts with the notion of the ever-constant “angel in the house” that rose to prominence in the antebellum era. Like Blake, who had suggested

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45 “The angel in the house of the nineteenth century was pious, pure, and submissive”: a symbol of the success of the so-called “separate spheres” in which women and men lived. This term appeared throughout the nineteenth century. According to Carolyn Johnson’s Sexual Power: Feminism and the Family in America (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), it was not until well into the twentieth century that “the ‘angel in the house’ gave way to more familiar modern figures like “the flapper, Rosie the Riveter, the feminine mystique, and then the superwoman mystique” (282).
through Medora the negative influence of benevolent paternalism on independent women, Stoddard uses a destructive courtship dynamic to model the problems that an overreliance on husbandly surveillance can create within the family structure. Rather than stopping here, however, she uses Cassandra’s many temptations not as the prologue to a tragic death but as opportunities for personal growth. Cassandra finds herself severely tested by the advent of her first swain, her cousin Charles Morgeson, whose hypnotic influence leads her toward a life of sin lived in his shadow. Charles’s tutelage in feminine decorum apes the hierarchical form of marital coverture while blatantly flouting its supposedly benevolent intentions. Their abortive courtship, in fact, both threatens her reputation and nearly kills her. Charles’s unhealthy influence over Cassandra models the potential dangers implicit in unregulated feminine submission to patriarchal authority, which men may easily exploit for self-serving purposes. Indeed, this man’s courtliness is a mask for other more dubious qualities: his business acumen comes down to greed; his protection is a means of despotic possession. Despite his symbolic adherence to the letter of propriety, Charles is, to use Susan K. Harris’s word, “irredeemable”; his economic status, gentlemanly manners, and respected position in the community are tools he uses to perpetrate what amounts to a socially sanctioned seduction of a young unmarried woman.46

Far from providing their daughter a defense against the wiles of her new guardian, Cassandra’s family is actively complicit in their daughter’s subjugation to the will of her cousin. Her parents, who have never heard of Charles Morgeson, despite their shared surname, are instantly delighted to entrust their daughter to the charming stranger. He arrives on the Morgeson doorstep one day claiming kinship with the clan, and impresses them with his elegant manners and self-made fortune. When he invites their temperamental eldest daughter to spend a year at

his house in Rosville, where she will attend a ladies’ academy and partake of the genteel
“advantages which Rosville affords in the way of society,” it seems a boon to the family.⁴⁷ It
does not occur to them that the rules governing the gender dynamics between well-bred men and
women might enable their new cousin to exploit his privileged position as protector of their
daughter. In fact, Charles Morgeson promises to provide lessons in decorum in abundance. His
magnificent taste in flowers and his “elegant…table appointments” are outstanding testaments to
his qualifications as a tutor of etiquette.⁴⁸ But these lessons take on a sinister cast under the eyes
of Charles’s wife, Alice.

The patriarchal hierarchy that is meant to surveille and protect its marriageable girls is
actually, Stoddard demonstrates, woefully unequipped to distinguish Charles’s opportunism from
his legitimate prerogatives as a caretaker of his young cousin. Although his neighbors are
determined to turn a blind eye, it is clear that Charles’s supervision is suspiciously similar to that
of Medora’s importunate suitors. Thanks to his undisputed standing within his own home, even
his status as a married man and father of several children does not seem to present an
impediment to his pursuit of his ward. The Rosville Morgesons are not unique in their belief that
their patriarch’s authority trumps broader institutionalized notions of proper conduct; despite
Charles’s obvious attentiveness to Cassandra, neither her family nor her Rosville friends and
neighbors see fit to interfere. Because “women were assumed to be more pliable and
impressionable than men by nature,” it is easy for Charles to justify the liberties he takes with
her; when Cassandra begins to alter her appearance and conduct to suit his expectations, it seems


in keeping with her role as his dependent and intellectual inferior.\textsuperscript{49} However, although such guidance is ostensibly in keeping with paternal surveillance, Charles’s pursuit of Cassandra defies the spirit of protectionism that undergirds the nineteenth-century concept of benevolent paternalism. His courtly conduct, ironically, is pleasing to his young quarry in much the same way as Medora Fielding’s was to the unfortunate Floyd Southwold: he excels at playing the part of her “Byronic” lover, while posing as her de facto father.\textsuperscript{50} His claims of familial affection are belied by his hypnotic “gray eyes” that “flash with pleasure, and light up his cold face with gleams of feeling” when they look upon his teenaged ward.\textsuperscript{51}

To complicate matters, Charles’s suspicious intimacies do precisely what her parents imagined a year in Rosville would; Cassandra finds herself transformed from a wayward, unfashionable country girl into a well-groomed, appropriately attired young woman. Charles is a subtle and effective teacher; when he “look[ed] at my hair with an expression that made me put my hand up to my head as if to hide it[,],” Cassandra reports, “I knew it was carelessly dressed.” Knowing her cousin’s preferences are the proper ones, she testifies, “I made a study that day of the girls’ heads at school, and from that time improved in my style of wearing it, and I brushed it with zeal every day afterward.”\textsuperscript{52} Far from beautifying herself as an act of vanity, Cassandra neatens her appearance so as to please and honor her benefactor, determined to reward his attentions. Aside from the fact that the already-espoused Charles is ineligible to form a romantic attachment to his young ward, their union appears to exemplify all of the standards of a

\textsuperscript{49} Cott, \textit{Public Vows}, 20.

\textsuperscript{50} Harris, \textit{19th-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies}, 163.

\textsuperscript{51} Stoddard, \textit{The Morgesons}, 62.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 75.
successful romantic courtship. Charles serves as a social guide and a refined corrective for the less experienced Cassandra, who struggled with self-control and womanly etiquette until his intervention.

The budding romance between Charles and Cassandra proves the inefficacy of current gendered standards to regulate outwardly decorous extramarital attachments. In one of his most blatant displays of romantic intent (under the complicit eyes of his wife, no less), Charles bequeaths upon Cassandra what can only be described as an engagement ring. So enthralled is Cassandra by the will of her protector that she does not consider the possible long-term consequences of Charles’s gesture, and sincerely declares herself “passionately fond” of the gift. The diamond, “which was like a star,” is so large and conspicuous that her dance partner at the next ball—to which the dutiful Alice has chaperoned her—observers that “it cost as much as the new horse,” confident that the same man is responsible for both extravagances. Alice’s humiliation is on display for the entire town, yet Charles’s status guarantees that it will never be redressed.

Cassandra trusts Charles absolutely to determine the extent of their contact, certain that his guidance transcends that of more impersonal institutional rules about feminine virtue or monogamy. She feels drawn to her cousin in just the manner that an unscrupulous man like Lascelles might have hoped; “I found that I was more elastic than before, and more susceptible to sudden impressions.” This susceptibility is accompanied by sensations of sexual awakening that can only bode ill given Charles’s marital status; “I was conscious of the ebb and flow of blood through my heart, felt it was it eddied up into my face, and touched my brain with its

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53 Ibid., 103.
54 Ibid., 105.
flame-colored wave. I loved life again.” While such “elasticity” has historically been considered eminently desirable in a wife, who should feel shaped and directed by her husband’s guiding influence, Stoddard suggests that this hierarchical aspect of courtship has dangerous implications. If such social regulations associated with the hierarchy of romance are designed to preserve a bride’s virginity, Charles has clearly managed to change the rules. Cassandra has become a cipher for his ideals and desires, acknowledging that, “I was strangely bound to him.”

Physical transgression to match their convoluted emotional union appears to be just over the horizon.

There seems to be no question among modern critics as to the result of this twisted courtship, had Charles Morgeson lived. Harris bluntly observes, “their affair would probably have been consummated.” Julia Stern agrees that “the narrator virtually trumpets her illicit longings for Charles.” Cassandra has found what she believes to be love, but it is at the expense of her personal agency: a problem that was appearing more and more frequently in Northern literature by women—hence the rise of defiant works like Alcott’s *Behind a Mask* (1866), in which a woman uses marriage to wrest control of a noble household from its patriarchs. Unlike the repentant Medora, Cassandra sees no reason to commit suicide in order to protect what is left of her virtue. Instead, her teetering reputation (and her virginity) is salvaged only by the timely

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55 Ibid., 77.

56 Ibid., 123.

57 Harris, *19th Century American Women’s Novels*, 155.

intervention of a runaway horse, which overturns their carriage and crushes her despotic lover, freeing her from his sway.

Stoddard’s interjection of a maddened carriage horse into Charles and Cassandra’s abortive union is far from coincidental. Bereft of the object of her “illicit longings” and convalescing under the hands of his not-so-oblivious wife, Cassandra slowly begins to see Charles’s power over her in a new light. “They said he must have made a violent effort to save you,” Alice tells her charge, confirming her husband’s already established character as a man capable of equally heroic and inappropriate romantic gestures.\(^{59}\) But Charles’s sacrifice leaves Cassandra in the bitter hands of his wife, who needs only the absence of her husband to feel justified in punishing the woman who supplanted her. She does what she considers her duty by Cassandra, feeding her the bare minimum she needs to survive, but no more than her duty (by the end of her recovery, the younger woman is nearly starving). Cassandra lives because of Charles’s obsession with her, but it quickly becomes apparent that the legacy he has left behind is not a happy one. Without his tyrannical “protection,” she is helpless at the hands of a community that, in collusion with her former lover, has let her dig her own social grave.

Although news of her specific exploits with Charles does not seem to have reached her hometown of Surrey, Massachusetts, the cuts running along her jaw from the carriage crash reveal that she has been involved in something untoward. Cassandra understands that night as a transformative one, explaining of her facial scars, “I got them in battle.”\(^{60}\) But the violence of the crash is matched, in her mind, by the violence of her disillusionment about her relationship with her cousin. Engaging with Charles’s subtle tyranny, she comes to realize, was in itself a form of


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 173.
combat: one in which he held arsenal of social and psychological weapons. When Blake’s Medora underwent the physical transformation from healthy ingénue to delirious madwoman, the marks of fever and weight loss clearly communicated her moral “fall”; in Stoddard’s novel, however, Cassandra’s conspicuous facial scars mark the beginning of her transformation from overwhelmed dependent to agent of her own destiny.

Now free of her compulsion to please Charles, Cassandra instead devotes herself to promoting the romantic cause of her more retiring younger sister, Veronica. When Veronica announces her intention to marry Ben Somers, a conservative friend of Cassandra’s from Rosville, her elder sister agrees to travel to the Somers estate at Belem to convince his family of degenerate bluebloods to accept the idiosyncratic Morgeson girl into their clan. Here, Cassandra comes face to face once against with the blatant refusal to control sensual and material urges that characterized Charles Morgeson. But at Belem, she quickly discovers, the vices that Charles and Alice worked so effectively to conceal are on constant display. In this new form of licentious household, parents and children express animosity for one another in front of their guest without compunction. Her future brother-in-law Ben (himself a closeted alcoholic) eagerly identifies for her the worst offender: his elder brother Desmond. To use Stern’s euphemistic phrase, Desmond engages in a form of “perverse consumption”—in blunt terms, flagrant alcoholism.61 Despite his handsome face and obvious intelligence, the heir to the Somers legacy is a quagmire of barefaced corruption. According to one neighbor of the clan, Desmond “is the wickedest of all” the various debauched Somers siblings:62 a brazen addict who steals the keys to his father’s liquor cabinet

61 Stern, “‘I Am Cruel Hungry,’” 121.

62 Stoddard, The Morgesons, 175.
and displays his proclivities through conspicuously “careless dress.”63 However, he does have one quality that gains him favor with the disillusioned Cassandra. Unlike Charles Morgeson, who concealed his dissolute desires behind a façade of propriety, Desmond is shamelessly honest about his addiction and his family’s hereditary weakness. He displays his sins to the world, openly acknowledging his unfitness for any role involving personal (much less patriarchal) responsibility.

This openness represents the beginning of a new kind of courtship, in which the traditional roles of master and dependent remain unfilled. Desmond’s unabashed enumeration of his flaws, unmitigated by genteel fripperies or social niceties, is the antidote, Cassandra realizes, to Charles’s cloying but ultimately false decorum; aware of his own limitations, Desmond will not attempt to police or brainwash her. Desmond’s features, rather than overwhelming Cassandra and obscuring his character, invite closer scrutiny. “The color of his eyes I could not determine,” she notes upon first glance, but a more protracted examination reveals a deluge of detail: “they were a deep violet, and the lids were fringed with long black lashes.”64 Unlike Charles, whose covert desires and expectations she was continually working to ascertain and fulfill, this new version of the American Byron engages in a form of refreshing honesty, both in his words and in his actions. Rather than presenting only the aspects of himself that are pleasing or socially acceptable to his guest, Desmond makes no false protestations of virtue, and so perpetrates no deceptions. He eschews the empty rituals of gendered hierarchy in favor of a simple presentation of his feelings and flaws.

63 Ibid., 181.
64 Ibid., 183.
Stoddard’s first suggestion, that a consummate gentleman like Charles Morgeson may be a force of destruction rather than security to young women, throws into sharp relief the radicalism of her second: that a man who rejects the gender hierarchy entirely may be a force of order rather than deviance. In Stoddard’s fictional world, when Cassandra realizes, “I was in love with Desmond,” it inspires in her virtues of patience and loyalty that undeniably make her a better prospective bride—albeit a bride with an independent streak that Charles would not have appreciated. Unlike her relationship with Charles, in which her mind became “elastic” to his will, she is able to retain all of her own values and desires and love Desmond at the same time. Rather than follow the prescribed forms of nineteenth-century courtship, which Charles has proven to be corruptible, they use their more egalitarian model to posit a new kind of courtship tailored to suit their individual needs.

In direct defiance of the publicly sanctioned model, in which the state “says who can and cannot marry…[and] what obligations and rights the agreement allows,” Stoddard’s new couple see no reason why they cannot create for themselves a marriage that adheres to standards they decide upon together. Cassandra is an equal author of this marriage contract, an autonomous force whose agency is not limited by her gender. The most radical element of this new romantic contract, however, is its embrace of domestic union. Far from throwing away the notion of a secure home in exchange for a tempestuous passion, Stoddard’s revolutionary heroine sees her future household with Desmond as an adaptable space capable of accommodating a new kind of romantic union without rejecting the notion of home itself. In a dramatic reversal of the rhetoric

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65 Ibid., 187.
66 Ibid., 77.
of domestic collapse that would supposedly occur were the gender hierarchy of the American household to be abandoned, Stoddard demonstrates that this new romance, with its rejection of decorum, euphemism, and paternalism, by no means rejects the tenets of love, constancy, and fidelity. Although she has until now been uninterested in household management, the new Cassandra begins to imagine her future with Desmond in domestic terms: “my soul had built itself a lordly pleasure-house; its domes and towers were firm and finished, glowing in the light.”68 The architecture of the future Morgeson-Somers home may be eclectic, but it brings out in its occupants’ desirable qualities that the genteel home of Charles and Alice Morgeson and the close-knit tribe of grasping Somerses never could. The road to this kind of controlled, sincere, and lasting partnership between men and women is not, Stoddard argues, the anachronistic adherence to empty social forms, but rather the movement beyond them. Instead of depicting herself as flushed and overcome, as she was when in thrall to Charles, Cassandra is now in perfect control of herself and her environment, the mistress of a “firm,” if unconventional, romantic edifice.

The men who continue to attempt to direct Cassandra’s actions after her atypical engagement now find themselves cast as obstacles to rather than advocates of the marriage plot. Ben condemns Cassandra and Desmond’s attachment on grounds of its indecorous rejection of the benevolent hierarchy that he sees as essential to all relations between the sexes. When one considers the effort Stoddard’s leading couple makes to transcend the limited purviews of their respective “spheres,” however, their new dynamic makes perfect sense. Unlike Charles, who offered his ward a ring that promises protection and fidelity (promises he could not possibly fulfill), Desmond gives Cassandra a watch to represent their engagement. No diamond

declaration of her possession by a new lover, “it was small and plain,” yet she is able to trust its message in a way she could never trust the false lure of Charles’s ring. With this gift, Desmond promises his future bride more than the empty rituals of a corrupt union, and she treasures his commitment: “there were a few words scratched inside the case, with the point of a knife, which I read every day.” In this hasty engraving, Desmond does not promise to marry Cassandra, but instead to leave her in New England while he embarks for Spain. He will not return until he has conquered his need for liquor and thus become worthy of a partnership with his beloved.

The two years they spend apart, far from weakening them or their commitment to one another, in fact forge both Cassandra and Desmond into confident, responsible individuals. While novels of manners such as Austen’s *Persuasion* (1817) or cautionary tales like Fanny Fern’s *Rose Clark* (1856) enumerate the dangers implicit in a woman’s physical separation from her intended, *The Morgesons* suggests that the opposite may be true. During the time her fiancé spends abroad, Cassandra becomes the head of the Morgeson household, commanding servants, allocating resources, and finally exiling her own perfidious father from the premises. Her patience is rewarded; to use Harris’s phrase, Desmond returns “a new kind of lover, one who respects the heroine’s self-sufficiency and insists on coming to her as an equal rather than a master.” In illustrating his quest for sobriety, Desmond uses the same battle metaphors that Cassandra employed to characterize her disillusionment with Charles. “You see what battles I must have had since I saw you,” he greets Cassandra back at the Morgeson house, with “his

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69 Ibid., 227.

70 Ibid., 227-228.

71 Mr. Morgeson secretly marries himself to Alice Morgeson, facilitating Alice’s vengeance against Cassandra for Charles’s infidelity.

72 Harris, *19th Century American Women’s Novels*, 166.
hair…quite gray” from his campaign against his family’s bitter legacy. Rather than fighting on behalf of his “right” to a domineering patriarchal persona, Desmond has gone into “battle” against his addiction in order to prove himself a veteran of the same internal conflict that Cassandra’s facial scars prove she has already undergone. “It took me so long to break my cursed habits,” he confesses, “I was afraid of myself, afraid to come; but I have tried myself to the utmost, and hope I am worthy of you.”73 The road to their egalitarian partnership is a long and at times convoluted one, but their separate struggles are richly rewarded.

The idea that preparation for marriage comes not from a series of courtship rituals—as in Floyd’s or Hamilton’s attentions to Medora—but instead from individual reflection and personal experience runs counter to the ideal of paternal hierarchy that undergirded the American home. By emphasizing the diverse range of contributions that a husband or wife can make to a partnership, rather than prescribing the roles they must occupy once united, however, Stoddard manages to bypass many of the same objectionable practices that destroyed Medora’s chances on the marriage market. Modern scholarship on The Morgesons has tended to privilege Cassandra and Charles’s abortive romance, dismissing her eventual marriage to Desmond as “conventional closure.”74 However, the shape of their union is anything but “conventional.” Charles’s dissolute intentions toward Cassandra represent a timeless threat invoked by American novelists since the eighteenth century, from Rowson’s Charlotte Temple to parallel 1860s works such as Blake’s Rockford (1863) or Alcott’s short story “A Whisper in the Dark” (1863). Desmond’s willingness to collaborate with his wife to create a new kind of marriage, on the other hand, is both radical and intensely productive. This new marriage, far from representing a return to the status quo

73 Stoddard, The Morgesons, 250.

74 Harris, 19th Century American Women’s Novels, 170.
after youthful adventures, reflects a sophisticated reimagining of the marriage contract and the
denial and privileges it bestows.

These rights and privileges do not conform to the gendered distribution inherent in
nineteenth-century Common Law. Married they are, but Cassandra and Desmond’s union does
not look like the sort of antebellum marriage that would be familiar to Stoddard’s readers.
Instead, the marriage that Stoddard posits for her leading couple radically redefines the legally
rigid marital contract, suggesting that it will function best when its terms are defined not by the
state but by the individual parties concerned. In this case, Cassandra expects Desmond to
overcome his alcoholism and he promises to comply; likewise, Desmond trusts Cassandra to wait
for his return, although neither of their families approve of the engagement. These are not
traditional prerequisites for nineteenth-century marriage; indeed, the dictates of coverture define
marriage as a static institution characterized by its inflexible distribution of power. Northeastern
Americans of the 1860s preferred to see marriage as a stabilizing agent working to reinforce the
interests of the beleaguered state. Stoddard, however, uses Cassandra and Desmond’s union to
argue that the limited definition of marriage provided by the state is part of the problem rather
than a solution. Such a complete rewriting of the marriage state was certainly unthinkable to
Blake’s Medora Fielding—and continued to confound many self-proclaimed feminist
rhetoricians throughout much of the twentieth century. Yet Stoddard’s willingness to revise
seemingly fundamental tenets of the marriage market—despite the monolithic power that even a
liberal author like Blake attributes to it—reflects the significance of this transitional period from
peace to wartime, and suggests the value of such domestic literature to a new understanding of
women’s place within American families of the 1860s.
THE MASQUES OF FALSE Matriarchs: WIVES AND BRIDES IN THE “HOUSE DIVIDED”

With the war underway, Lillie Devereaux Blake’s literary depictions of the marriage state—and rebellious women’s access thereto—developed apace. Nearly three years before the start of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, who had just been confirmed as the Republican candidate for President of the United States, famously declared before the Hall of Representatives in his native Springfield, Illinois, “[a] house divided against itself cannot stand.” He went on to explicate the political nature of his domestic metaphor: “this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free”; if slavery were not removed from the South, it would inevitably spread through the North, as recent legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Law clearly demonstrated. According to Lincoln, the American “house” (that is, the nation) was always attempting to unify itself under a single universal principle. The political “house” (the party) that controlled the government would decide whether that unifying principle would be bondage or freedom.¹

The would-be President’s use of the domestic “house” to describe the fate of the nation as a whole was no accident. A growing compilation of research by several generations of scholars, including Douglas Anderson, Nancy F. Cott, Lyde Cullen Sizer, and Holly Jackson, has exposed the profound connection that nineteenth-century Americans understood to exist between a stable nation, “able to withstand the kinds of stresses” that result from sectional conflict, and the rigid

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided Speech,” (Springfield, IL, June 16, 1858), Speeches and Writings, Abraham Lincoln Online, August 23, 2015.
adherence to codes of propriety within the confines of the domestic family.² By acting as the financial executor, legal representative, moral guide, and male role model within his household, the American patriarch would facilitate what Sizer calls the patriotic “rhetoric of unity”: the expression of cultural bonds that would supposedly keep both family and nation intact.³ The dissolution of these national bonds with the secession of the eleven Southern states from the Union necessitated military intervention (the Civil War) in order to maintain these national bonds. But the long-standing causal connection between a stable family and a stable nation meant that authors of “domestic” fiction also had the opportunity to use their work to expose the parallel hypocrisies and disunions of word and deed at the heart of the American family hierarchy.

Lillie Devereux Blake and Louisa May Alcott, like Elizabeth Stoddard, have direct biographical ties to the Union war effort. At first glance, these women appear to have little in common, outside of a common upbringing in New England. Blake (then known as Lillie Devereux Umsted) was the widowed mother of two daughters by the time the war broke out, and the author of one antebellum novel, Southwold, which appeared in 1859. Alcott was the unmarried daughter of radical Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, and a longtime publisher of short prose and poetry in local papers, who remained hidden behind pseudonyms such as Flora Fairfield (for domestic writing) and A.M. Barnard (for gothic thrillers).⁴ Although neither had yet reached the height of her literary fame during the war years, Alcott’s name became a


household staple in 1868, when *Little Women* began its rise to international renown. Despite their different literary positions Blake and Alcott shared anxiety about the intersection between women’s contributions to the war effort and the domestic hierarchies to which they would return when those contributions ended. Although the two would not have known it, their time working for the Union cause at Georgetown (Blake as a war correspondent for several New York papers, Alcott as a nurse) placed them in a position to view the war from very similar vantage points. One of the most significant events in Alcott’s brief time as a nurse was the Battle of Fredericksburg, which funneled Union wounded into Georgetown for medical care; Blake’s first fiancé, one Henry King, would die in that very battle.\(^5\)

Blake’s and Alcott’s Civil Wars do have in common one further element: anxiety about women’s rigidly defined place in the domestic hierarchy. This tension charged the literature they produced in its wake. For both authors, the problem of how an intelligent, capable woman could live within a family unit that was designed to subordinate her needs plagued the horror stories of genteel households gone awry that they felt compelled to write in 1863 and 1866, respectively. For Blake, this horror story was *Rockford, or Sunshine and Storm*, the novel she wrote in tandem with her journalistic efforts on the war front. Unlike *Southwold*, *Rockford* follows the courtship trajectory into the resulting states of marriage and motherhood. The life of her heroine, Claudia Rockford, is a painfully constricted one. As a young woman, the lovely heiress, finding herself unmarried and pregnant, accepts an offer of marriage from a cold but wealthy man, whose name will lend her unborn son legitimacy. Determined to save her child from the ignominy of bastardhood, Claudia passes little Vinton off as her husband’s heir. Her maternal love for this boy, and her intentions toward him, are obviously pure—yet Claudia herself is trapped in a marriage to a

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\(^5\) King, who owned a plantation in Georgia, fought on the side of the Confederacy.
suspicious husband who punishes her for crimes both real and imagined. Thanks to the paternalistic laws of coverture that grant Rockford ownership of both herself and her son, Claudia is helpless when the bitter man, determined to prove to himself that Vinton is his own, begins to promote the young man’s marriage to a girl whose father, years in the past, was the paramour of his wife. Rockford knows that this girl may well be Vinton’s half sister, yet he persists in his efforts to facilitate their marriage. Rockford Lawn is a “house divided” indeed—but one that has been forcibly unified by the sway of a man whose interest is anything but benevolent.

Domestic unity, Alcott agrees, is meaningless if coerced. Her salacious 1866 thriller, *Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power* approaches the consequences of false unity from a different perspective. Here, Alcott draws upon the English Common Law origins of marital coverture to posit a scenario in which an aristocratic British family finds itself infiltrated by a con woman. This aging former actress uses the fact of her legal nonentity as a divorcée to pass herself off as a virginal nineteen-year-old governess of noble stock. Jean Muir, the deceiver in question, exploits the hapless Coventry clan’s reliance upon superficial social indicators—language, etiquette, education, and appearance—to determine her value, and ends the novella married to their patriarch, the keeper of the family name and bloodline. Jean’s success as a mimic of supposedly inborn family traits unique to the upper classes demonstrates the same lesson as does Claudia’s doomed effort to save her son from a life of social exile, via a very different conclusion. While the Rockford “house” implodes as a result of the secrets its members have kept, the Coventry “house” survives divided—the very scenario that Lincoln himself could not imagine. Her new in-laws silently revile Jean for duping them, but they are bound to her by the masque of false unity in which they are all complicit. They will spend the rest of their lives
performing this masque for their community in order to survive unscathed by public judgment. In the end, the patriarchal family structure that is supposedly a vehicle to a life of virtue and integrity proves in both Blake’s and Alcott’s “house divided” literature to be a façade behind which lurk painful truths about their domestic realities.

Blood Relations and Revelations: Rockford, or Sunshine and Storm (1863)

The life of Lillie Devereux Blake was rife with divisions of its own. According to her biographer Grace Farrell, over the course of her life, Blake was a coquettish society belle, “a Washington-based Civil War journalist,” a women’s suffrage advocate, a wife (twice), and a mother. She was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, but raised in Stratford, Connecticut, and she continued to identify strongly with her New England roots despite her childhood connection to the South. In 1863, however, when her second novel Rockford appeared in print, Blake had yet to meet Susan B. Anthony and become enmeshed in the suffragist cause. Instead, the brand of proto-feminism she developed in her second novel explored a broader range of socially sanctioned injustices against the female sex. Rockford does not specifically address the realities that Blake would have witnessed during her time as a Georgetown war correspondent—work that covered such diverse topics as the activities of the Sanitary Committee, “balloon recognizance,” the treatment of Union prisoners of war in the South, and the fates of runaway slaves. However, the novel does explore the many attacks against individuals’ personal liberties that may take place not on plantations or in prison camps but instead go not only unnoticed but,

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7 Ibid., 86.
more ominously, actively sanctioned in genteel New York parlors and affluent Connecticut estates. This increased cognizance of the inefficacy of entrenched social structures reflects a broader trend in the transgressive domestic fiction that women writers generated in the period.

Blake’s second novel bears a certain thematic resemblance to her first; she populates Rockford with men and women who do not understand one another’s needs. As with Southwold, Blake tells the story of apparently decent men and women whose intentions toward one another are not always what they seem. The Rockford household, however, is distinct in that this family is in theory complete. Her own more recent experiences, both as a single parent and as a witness of human suffering at Georgetown, now offered Blake the tools to express a more nuanced, psychologically charged representation of the supposedly “complete” family unit. Her concern about women’s position within such families was by no means unfounded. The year before Rockford’s appearance saw the repeal of key elements of progressive New York legislation on women’s rights within marriage; the next year, American judges began a trend of “unanimously reject[ing] interspousal personal injury claims” that would last until 1913. The intention behind such legislative maneuvers was clear: women taking on new roles and responsibilities on the home front seemed to exclude husbands and fathers from their traditional place as heads of household. Lawmakers would need to reinforce wives’ subordinate status in order to keep what Jackson calls the “nuclear unit” from transforming into something new and unfamiliar that


represented the fruits of secession rather than union. Blake’s Rockford family embodies the nightmarish results of such efforts to maintain the hierarchical status quo within a divided home. Maintaining the appearance of domestic solidarity, she concludes, may actually exacerbate rather than heal underlying fractures in the “nuclear unit.”

Genuine solidarity, according to antebellum mores, was the natural result of what Cott calls “a voluntary [marital] union based on consent.” Steeped in the ideology of representative government, this issue of “consent” characterized the relationship between husband and wife as a micro-version of the dynamic between political representatives and their constituents. A private citizen could not expect to be allowed to change laws or negotiate treaties; instead, he had the right to decide (via his vote) which more qualified man would represent his interests in such matters. Marriage was, in the nineteenth century, a woman’s means of choosing her lifelong representative: “the common law turned the married pair legally into one person—the husband.” As a subset of her marriage partner, a wife could not expect to partake in duties and privileges reserved for her duly selected advocate: the man to whom she had chosen to “relinquis[h] her identity.”¹¹ For such a woman to act on her own behalf as a political, financial, or legal entity would be redundant; a benevolent agent was, according to the rationale of marital coverture, already addressing her needs.

Unfortunately for Thomas and Claudia Rockford, this system of “consent” and “representation” bears no resemblance to the reality of their marriage. The young Claudia Vinton had been in love with a deserving man, to whom she intended to be married, long before she met

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the possessive Thomas Rockford. Through a series of events that Mrs. Rockford later describes as a “black…deceit,” Mr. Rockford makes her believe that she has no choice but to marry him.\(^{12}\)

The circumstances of his deception are unclear, but Claudia’s intention to marry her lover, George Sandys, before Mr. Rockford’s intervention is obvious; when she reluctantly unites herself to Rockford, she is already pregnant with Sandys’s child. Were this tale to follow the model of *Southwold*, Claudia would die of remorse before she could step so far outside the bounds of propriety as to marry a man who is not the father of her son. But *Rockford* concerns itself, as *Southwold* does not, with the *aftermath* of such desperate decisions and the disturbing implications that such aftermaths have in supposedly benign domestic institutions. By so doing, Blake’s novel places itself at the forefront of a growing list of “flawed wife” tales by women, including Elizabeth Stoddard’s second novel, *Two Men* (1865) and Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Her Story” (1872). As a “fallen” woman who believes, even erroneously, that she cannot marry the father of her child, Claudia faces a paradox that social propriety does not prepare her to resolve. As an unwed pregnant woman, she is unqualified to unite herself in marriage to Mr. Rockford; as a mother, she is obliged to find a means of providing the best possible life for her as-yet unborn child.

Claudia’s union with Rockford is based on coercion rather than consent. Here, the head of household is not interested in representing his wife’s interests, because he knows how far they diverge from his own. Although he pretends with all his might that Vinton Rockford is his son, Mr. Rockford knows both that his wife was in love with Sandys when they married and that it required base manipulation on his part to bring about her marriage to himself. Obsessed with the unspoken knowledge that it was her love for Sandys that produced “their” son, Mr. Rockford

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\(^{12}\) Lillie Devereux Blake, *Rockford, or Sunshine and Storm* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1863), 300.
devotes himself not to promoting Mrs. Rockford’s happiness but to punishing his wife for the perfidy of which he dares not accuse her. (If he makes public her premarital affair, he will lose the son and heir that she has granted him and expose himself as a cuckold.) The absence of Claudia’s true consent overlays every interaction in the Rockford household, creating a double life within the family: the one they present to the world, in which Mr. and Mrs. Rockford are wealthy, contended landholders and the proud parents of a handsome, intelligent son, and the clandestine truth of their mutual hostility.

Mr. Rockford’s continuing failure to live up to his role as a benevolent patriarch forces his wife to act as an independent agent; she must protect herself and Vinton from abuse or exposure at the hands of their supposed advocate. This leads, predictably, to a profoundly divisive family dynamic, in which both partners attempt to preserve a façade of domestic stability while silently battling for control over the resources that Claudia brought to the marriage: namely, her money and her son. According to the tenets of marital coverture, “[t]he husband gained his wife’s property and earning power” upon their marriage, ostensibly so that he, as a financial and political representative, could manage it on her behalf. Mrs. Rockford, however, cannot trust her husband to use his resources on her behalf; unlike most women in her position, “her property had been settled upon herself” in such a way as to make her financially independent of her husband. Thus, Claudia has the relatively rare ability to present options to her son of which her husband may not approve. Determined to keep the bitter patriarch from exerting undue control over Vinton, “she had always insisted on paying his allowance from her own ample means,” enabling him to go to school in Boston, under the mentorship of George Sandys, despite Mr. Rockford’s disapproval. Claudia devotes herself to forging for Vinton an identity

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13 Cott, Public Vows, 12. See my Introduction for an overview of Blake’s own experiences as the wife of a man who mismanages her fortune.
divided from her husband—a fact of which Mr. Rockford is vividly aware. Vinton’s very name reminds his adoptive father that Claudia had found him unworthy of being “their” son’s namesake. Instead of bestowing his Christian name upon the boy, and thus highlighting her pride in having produced a male Rockford heir, as custom dictates she should, Mrs. Rockford “had given him simply her own surname,” parading her independence from her husband before the knowing eyes of their neighbors.14

Claudia, it is clear, has consented to be “covered” by her husband’s identity only under duress. She must use his name in order to protect herself and her son from social ostracism, but Blake makes it clear that, while neither party’s motive for marrying was pure, Mrs. Rockford has sacrificed her liberty and happiness out of love of her son, rather than from greed or selfishness. Her “consent” to honor and obey Mr. Rockford is not emotionally or spiritually elevating, nor does it confer upon her the sense of safety that marital coverture supposedly provided to defenseless women. Instead, the bonds tying her to Mr. Rockford force her into increasingly distasteful forms of rebellion. When her husband, determined to convince himself that Vinton truly is his biological son, actively begins to promote the young man’s marriage to George Sandys’s legitimate daughter Mabel, Claudia finds herself accused of “willful obstinacy” and unmaternal “folly” for objecting to the match. Her husband sneers at her consternation, sarcastically demanding to know why she might hold a “grudge” against the child of her former lover. When Mrs. Rockford attempts to remind him of her tireless labor as “an obedient wife through all these many years,” and the “right” it ought to bestow upon her “to be free from

14 Blake, Rockford, 36.
insult,” the man who promised her his guidance and protection “sullenly” reiterates his “hearty approbation” of Vinton and Mabel’s incestuous union.\textsuperscript{15}

Perhaps the best evidence of the truth of Blake’s critique of such communities’ complicity in such hypocritical façades is her reviewers’ urgent and repeated assertion of the novel’s wholesomeness. Many literary critics, like the nation at large, were understandably reluctant to let go of the version of domestic unity they had idealized for so long. Reviewers of this uneasy novel are unwilling to concede what Blake insists: that what Jackson calls the patriotic “familial rhetoric of nationalism” was not enough to justify household tyranny.\textsuperscript{16} The few critics who bothered to review \textit{Rockford} in 1863 thus tended to engage in an awkward form of patriotically charged literary gymnastics, determined to find a positive foundation for Blake’s flawed leading family. One review, published in \textit{The Knickerbocker Monthly}, proclaims the novel “a talented, entertaining story, full of social lights and shadows, the latter prevailing; but they are by no means so deep or disagreeable as those which characterize the class of works to which we have made reference [by Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon].”\textsuperscript{17} This critic works desperately to insert Blake’s novel into Sizer’s so-called “rhetoric of unity,”\textsuperscript{18} insisting that, “[a]s novels go, ‘Rockford’ is indeed healthy in tone.” Of Claudia Rockford’s psychologically abusive marriage and Vinton Rockford’s inadvertent move toward incest and disinheritance, the review has nothing to say. “[W]e prefer the quiet home-pictures in it to the less tranquil scenes—in other words, the sunshine to the storm,” it vaguely asserts, before hastily

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 155-156.

\textsuperscript{16} Jackson, \textit{American Blood}, 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Rev. of \textit{Rockford}, in “Notices and Publications,” \textit{The Knickerbocker Monthly; A National Magazine} 62, no. 3 (Sep. 1863), 276.

\textsuperscript{18} Sizer, \textit{The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War}, 5.
changing the subject. By emphasizing “the quiet home-pictures” rather than the secrets and anxieties festering beneath the Rockford family’s placid façade, this language of conformity participates in the same culture of form over substance that Blake uses the Rockfords to expose.\(^{19}\)

Indeed, nineteenth-century reviewers seem determined to praise *Rockford* specifically for the conservative attributes that it most clearly does not possess. In the words of *The New York Observer and Chronicle*, Blake’s novel is “characterized by great purity of sentiment and beauty of style. The moral tone of the book is unexceptionable and the interest of the story with the known ability of the writer will secure it a large circle of readers.”\(^{20}\) However, in light of its plot, the claim that Blake is concerned with exalted morals seems a peculiar one. Claudia Rockford’s dilemma is important specifically because there is no “moral” answer. If she reveals Vinton’s true paternity, he will be disinherited and she will have broken her family and destroyed the future of the son whose safety and happiness have been her primary responsibility for over twenty years. Conversely, if she remains silent, Vinton will commit a terrible sin and forever blight the family he will make with his young bride. Her consent to integrate her identity with Mr. Rockford’s, for all its seeming necessity, has created more problems for Claudia and her son than it has solved. This paradox stands in dramatic contrast to more conventional antebellum tales of unwed mothers. Although Fanny Fern’s *Rose Clark* (1856), for example, describes the sufferings of a young girl whose son is apparently the product of a “sham” marriage into which she was duped by a profligate rake, the novel ends by rewarding the eponymous heroine with the revelation that her marriage was in fact real. Her patience in the face of society’s condemnation

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\(^{19}\) Rev. of *Rockford*, in “Notices and Publications,” 276.

\(^{20}\) Rev. of *Rockford*, in “Literary,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* (Jul 9, 1863), 222.
demonstrates a moral character that deserves—and is given—a kind, handsome husband who has inconveniently suffered from amnesia since impregnating her. By creating in Claudia a sympathetic heroine who has nevertheless actually sinned, Blake overturns well-established moral as well as literary conventions, suggesting that Mrs. Rockford’s untenable situation is fueled as much by a complicit society as by her own poor choices.

Blake’s model of the silently fracturing Rockford household condemns not only Mr. Rockford but also the local Herford, Connecticut, community at large for their role in Vinton and Mabel’s poisoned romance. It is clear that the entire town is aware of the Rockfords’ domestic situation and Claudia’s powerlessness to change it. From the opening scene of the novel, in which Vinton accompanies his sobbing mother to George Sandys’s funeral, the narrator quickly reveals that the entire town has known the truth of Claudia’s true love and Vinton’s paternity from the beginning. As they knowingly watch Mrs. Rockford weep over her lover’s grave, however, not one so much as hints to Vinton that he should perhaps cease to gaze so adoringly at Sandys’s bereaved daughter. Even in light of the religious ceremony at hand, the possibility of what Jackson would call “familial vulnerability and blood pollution” is not enough to convince either Claudia or her silent allies to reveal the indecorous truth of Vinton’s paternity.21 To the shrewd locals at the gravesite, Vinton’s presence evokes the scandalous memory of Claudia’s affair with Sandys, but they say nothing, rigidly adhering to what Philip Gura calls the communal “veneer of respectability,” determined to preserve appearances despite the dangerous truths that fester beneath.22

21 Jackson, American Blood, 16.

Vinton’s illicit conception is not the only sin festering beneath the family’s complacent surface. In another telling religious tableau twenty years after Vinton’s birth, when the bulk of the novel takes place, the Rockfords sit before the eyes of the congregation in their family pew at church. Although they are all silent and polite, as befits the setting, a close look at the seemingly peaceful party reveals internal divisions that severely undermine the unified front they present to their fellow worshipers: “Mr. Rockford at the head of the seat with an aspect of stern decorum, that nevertheless suggested that he might be calculating the profits of the week in the pauses of the responses. Vinton next trying to be entirely attentive to the service, yet stealing every now and then a glance towards the pastor’s pew, where Mabel sat alone and closely veiled.” Finally, “[l]ast of all,” beyond her husband’s orphaned niece Edith and Edith’s future husband, sat “Mrs. Rockford, very handsome, very pale, very sad, going through the external forms of devotion mechanically, but wearing a look as if…her body was present while her spirit was far away in some remote region.” \(^{23}\) Placed as far as she can get from her husband, Claudia is obviously preoccupied with more worldly dilemmas, which, along with Vinton’s romantic preoccupation and Mr. Rockford’s financial reveries, reveal a family of individuals trapped in isolation and unable to communicate honestly with one another for fear of revealing their disunity to the world. Eager to facilitate this convenient fiction, the same neighbors who knowingly watched Mrs. Rockford sob over George Sandys’s grave at the opening of the novel sit complacently by as her son’s doomed romance progresses unimpeded before them.

As Vinton’s pursuit of Mabel intensifies, it becomes clear that Claudia’s supposedly complementary duties as wife and mother in fact directly conflict with one another. Yet she does not have the ability to protect her son from the stigma of illegitimacy outside the bonds of her

\(^{23}\) Blake, *Rockford*, 56.
unhappy marriage. Legally, a woman in 1863 was allowed only one form of domestic secession from a family: the sanctioned move from her father’s house to that of her husband. Blake’s illustration of Mrs. Rockford’s predicament reflects her knowledge of war-era legislatures’ increased interest in “keep[ing] the marriage bargain static” by meticulously crafting ongoing “refinements of the ground for divorce.” Although Cott notes that throughout the 1850s the demand for divorces from unhappy marital unions was steadily rising, the sundering of the marriage tie became in the 1860s symbolic of a failure of the republican ideal of a union “based on mutual consent” between parties, and lawmakers treated it with according hostility.24 (If the domestic home represented a microcosm of national unity, the advent of the Civil War clearly indicated the need for a rigid adherence to the established family hierarchy.) Enforcing the rules of decorum and fidelity would supposedly restore the sentiments that undergirded them. But for a woman in Claudia’s embattled position, Blake implies, there is no incentive to adhere in spirit as well as body to the tenets of patriarchal marriage.

Claudia’s lie about Vinton’s paternity, ironically, forges a family portrait that incorporates many symbols of domestic stability: a wife, a husband, a son and heir. Despite the fact that Mrs. Rockford scrupulously obeys her husband’s wishes regarding the state of their home and meticulously fulfills her duties as hostess, Mr. Rockford, although “somewhat awed by his stately wife,” is not once deluded into believing that this is the labor of love. Indeed, his awareness of the disparity between Claudia’s actions and what he knows to be her preferences exacerbates rather than soothes his desire to exact vengeance upon her.25 Drawing upon his wife’s true feelings becomes an act of spite, as he attempts to use his relationship with Vinton to

24 Cott, Public Vows, 52.

25 Blake, Rockford, 155.
prove his ability to control Claudia’s emotional state. In order to keep the neighbors from discovering Mr. Rockford’s jealousy and Mrs. Rockford’s indifference, all of their personal battles must be fought behind closed doors, through the medium of their son. These battles include but are not limited to: where Vinton will go to law school, who will be allowed to pay for Vinton to go to law school, which woman Vinton will marry, and whose money will make Vinton independent. Far from being sheltered from his parents’ interpersonal machinations, he is their judge and their mediator, a confidante and conspirator in their quest to appear at peace rather than at war. It is small wonder, considering this longstanding role, that Vinton’s ideas about romantic love should be so entirely useless as a template for interpreting his feelings toward Mabel Sandys.

Blake provides many signs that Vinton’s understanding of his union with Mabel is flawed. In particular, she makes clear throughout Vinton and Mabel’s courtship that they never feel physical passion for one another. Although their parallel upbringings and shared domestic values have made them remarkably comfortable together, their inability to see past one another’s flawless deportment and moral sentiments renders them blind to the many mysterious inconsistencies in their apparently blissful romance. Vinton recalls with some confusion that, during his first “desperate fancy” for a girl, in his youth, “I used to flush and tremble when I met her, and be half sick with hope and fear,” but with Mabel, “the sentiment is so pure and calm, it seems to unite that which I might have towards a sister with that which I should owe to a wife.”26 Unfortunately, it never occurs to him to take this observation literally; a façade of placid indifference is, after all, the most salutary connection he has ever witnessed between his own parents.

26 Ibid., 139.
Indeed, the complex and often contradictory notions of marriage and couple-hood that undergird the American family enable New York society to willfully misunderstand the bonds of “consanguinity” in precisely the same way as do the unknowing siblings themselves.\(^\text{27}\) Since the beginning of the novel, various relatives and friends have noticed the “unlike yet strangely harmonious sets of features” that the two young people share.\(^\text{28}\) As a friend of Vinton’s cousin Edith blithely comments, “there is a strong resemblance, in expression or features. They are not related are they?”\(^\text{29}\) Edith replies cheerfully in the negative and finds her own way of justifying the common facial features of her kinsman and his fiancée. As she tells Vinton, “you know the saying that married people always resemble each other after awhile; but you have anticipated that. There is certainly a likeness, subtle but quite perceptible, between you.” Secure in his false knowledge of his patrilineal heritage, Vinton accepts his cousin’s observation in the manner she intends: not as a warning but as a compliment. Rather pleased with the idea that their closeness is apparent in their faces, he replies to Edith merely, “you flatter me.”\(^\text{30}\) The rhetoric of domestic stability offers no apparatus for the revelation of unsanctioned domestic ties.

As a result of this selective social blindness, Vinton’s proposal of marriage to Mabel comes as a surprise to only one person: his mother. When Edith casually announces that Vinton has been pursuing Mabel for some time, Claudia initially does not believe it; “Strange as it may seem…she had never thought of the possibility of an attachment arising between Vinton and Mabel. She had looked upon them in such a totally different light.” But Vinton’s mother, despite

\[^{27}\text{Jackson, American Blood, 10.}\]

\[^{28}\text{Blake, Rockford, 97.}\]

\[^{29}\text{Ibid., 128.}\]

\[^{30}\text{Ibid., 139.}\]
her new awareness of the problem, does not know how to change Vinton’s perception of the situation without wreaking havoc. Like the many blind neighbors and willfully ignorant friends who surround her, Mrs. Rockford’s perception of reality has also been shaded by prevailing notions of domestic propriety; of course, with her knowledge of their shared parentage, her insight into what is “proper” for Vinton and Mabel is different from that of her peers. Watching her son playing host to his half-sister at their New York house, “[s]he was so glad, for reasons of her own, to see them together.” They are, after all, family; “She had been so secure in the absurdity, the impossibility of such an idea [as their marriage], that she was wholly unprepared for what might otherwise have seemed a very natural conclusion.”

The obvious inefficacy of the gendered social models of family upon which 1860s America relied only fuels Mrs. Rockford’s dilemma. Her duty to save Vinton from eternal damnation directly conflicts with the kind of parenting that she, as an American mother, is allowed to employ. As Colleen McDannell explains, antebellum “women saved souls through specific religious strategies. The most important of these strategies was the recognition of the individual character of the soul, especially the souls of children.” Their strength lay in persuasion rather than in harsh revelations or ultimatums. Thus, knowing Vinton’s moral and spiritual danger does not mean that Mrs. Rockford has a venue via which she can control her son’s behavior without condemning him. Vinton will hate himself if he knows that he is the illegitimate son of his fiancée’s father, and he will destroy his worldly position—the money and the surname that she lied to provide him—rather than rest on what he would see as false laurels.

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31 Ibid., 146.

Because she cannot reveal the truth of his paternity to Vinton, Mrs. Rockford is left no choice but to act as though, by marrying Mabel, her son would be breaking faith in his prior union with her. By defining Vinton’s prospective marriage as a form of rupture rather than unity, however, Claudia casts herself in the doubly problematic role of a selfish parent and a rival lover—a convoluted double identity that Stoddard would develop in the dynamic between Sarah Auster and her son Parke in *Two Men* two years later. As she contemplates the possibility of her son’s fall from grace, Mrs. Rockford realizes that only a vow of absolute fidelity to herself can overcome her worst nightmare: “the fear that [Vinton] only awaited her death as a release from his promise” to break his engagement with Mabel. As the sundered United States had already learned, however, absolute fidelity is no small order. Claudia does not want to divide her loyalties; she wants to advocate wholeheartedly for Vinton. This conundrum soon catapults her into the throes of a guilt-induced fever, and she knows “that when she was once at rest in the grave, he would then, when she could no longer interfere, consummate this detestable union.”

Blake reveals that Mrs. Rockford’s adherence to the sacred boundaries of the separate spheres actually forces her into the role of the catalyst for precisely the kind of domestic breakdown that conservative marriage legislation was intended to prevent. Unable to control Vinton through financial or legal means, Claudia must resort to attacking head on the very notion of integrating new members into the family via marriage.

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33 Claudia’s use of her maiden name as her son’s surname reflects a wider trend in war-era fiction by women. Elizabeth Stoddard’s second novel, *Two Men* (Rudd & Carleton, 1865), also features a mother who attempts to minimize the significance of her husband by naming her son for her own paternal family. Sarah Parke marries Jason Auster; their son, Parke Auster, is predictably enmeshed in the Parke, as opposed to the Auster, family legacy.

This task, of course, conflicts with her maternal role as the spiritual bedrock of the domestic apparatus. While a father’s duty was to prepare his son for the rigors of the public realm, a mother’s role within the Victorian family was to provide palliative emotional support to her children. In a simplistic world, Mrs. Rockford should be advocating for Vinton’s very proper desire to enter into the socially and religiously sanctioned institution of marriage, for which his Christian upbringing has prepared him. Yet to expose Vinton’s true paternity—thereby aborting all plans for his marriage to Mabel—would be to ruin him. To keep silent would be to blight his immortal soul. The seeds of this disaster were sown over twenty years before, when an unmarried woman expecting a child took the one action she could that would give her son the secure and privileged future that is his birthright. Mrs. Rockford’s fever, like Medora Fielding’s before her, reflects her physical and psychological conflict: a conflict that, like that of the fractured Union in which Blake wrote, does not have an easy solution. “I cannot repair the injury I have inflicted,” she explains to her attendant minister, who, seeing her distress, urges her to repent her sins and make amends. Far from having learned the rewards of revelation, the tortured woman is quick to inform the flummoxed Reverend Haughton of “how little comfort I can have in such a creed.” Her obligations as a mother and keeper of her son’s spiritual and psychological wellbeing make it impossible for her to participate in the rituals of confession and atonement. “I will not make the reparation in my power,” she declares in resignation, “I do not even repent.”

To repent the situation in which Vinton now unwittingly finds himself would be to repent his unsanctioned birth and his stolen legitimacy: the very foundations of his identity as a kind and admired young man who aspires to practice law. Her sins have, until now, seemed to bless her

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35 Ibid., 204.
son, albeit at her own expense. With the advent of Mabel, however, Claudia is forced to confront the precarious nature of the place she has carved for Vinton in polite society.

The only force capable of saving Vinton from his unknowing plunge into incest is Claudia’s urgent maternal intervention. Yet the same moral sensibilities that make her righteous in her efforts to sever her son’s engagement are also quickly driving her into the grave, where she will be unable to use her painful knowledge to keep Vinton in innocence. Unlike the cathartic death scenes that were popular in literature devoted to the plight of injured soldiers and their families, Claudia’s demise is laced with the same horrified impotence that characterized Medora’s much swifter decline. Although Mrs. Rockford, unlike her literary predecessor, survives for decades in an effort to mitigate the effects of her transgression against the Rockford patrimony, her own “fierce fever seemed to burn with [a] sustaining delirium” that performs precisely the same function as Medora’s last illness: compelling her to relive again and again the impossible circumstances she has had to negotiate. In order to do her socially prescribed duty as both a mother and a Rockford, she has, ironically, been forced divide the Rockford house. In the end, her fear for Vinton’s soul outweighs her fear of exposing his birthright, forcing her to set the “sad tale” to paper and damn Vinton to devastating knowledge rather than to inadvertent sin—but there is no relief in this act, such as Reverend Haughton promises.\footnote{Ibid., 295.} It is Vinton, not God, to whom she pleads on her deathbed, “try to forgive me!”\footnote{Ibid., 301.} It is he, she knows, not God, who will have to bear the devastating consequences of her confession.

Bereft of a mother and saddled with the nightmarish revelation of his true parentage, Vinton finds himself entirely unprepared to reconcile his new knowledge of his identity with the

\footnote{Ibid., 295.}

\footnote{Ibid., 301.}
life he has lived as a Rockford. At the blighted altar of Mr. and Mrs. Rockford, he has learned a
lesson that seems, by the social and religious standards of the day, to be a good one: that paternal
legitimacy is the first step toward personal virtue. Even before his disastrous courtship of Mabel,
he has considered “a stain on the birth” to be the most appalling of horrors: one that “would
tempt one into frantic rebellion against everything human or divine.”38 Because Vinton has
internalized the patrilineal values that define the nineteenth-century American family long before
learning that he has no right to partake in them, he has no defense against the crisis of identity
now at hand. He knows that his legitimacy, both as a Rockford and as a gentleman, is a fiction.
This fiction of family unity leads to a crisis in Vinton that transcends the personal; the disparity
between his lineage and his social position calls into question the foundational connection he has
assumed between fidelity and virtue.

This second revelation, while less sensational than the possibility of incest, is more
damning to the increasingly restrictive marital rhetoric of the 1860s. If, to use Farrell’s words,
Claudia’s dilemma “pierces through the façade of sentimental and patriarchal discourses on
‘home’ that promise women safety for the price of freedom,” Vinton’s discovery reveals the
divisive implications of this truth.39 Prostrated by the dual blows of his illegitimacy and his
engagement to his half sister, the young law student undergoes a rapid physical and mental
decline. Convinced of his own unfitness to participate in the society that has raised him, he
voluntarily sunders all the ties of family and friendship that his mother’s lie forged for him. He
dismisses twenty years of upstanding conduct and good intentions now that he has seen what the
many Herford locals conspired with his mother to keep hidden. His knowledge of its reliance on

38 Ibid., 100.

39 Farrell, Lillie Devereux Blake, 79.
appearances rather than truths, he reasons, unfit him for a life in the genteel society in which ignorance is not merely bliss but the foundation of all his interpersonal connections. In keeping with this traumatic iconography of lost Eden, Vinton’s attempt to flee the scene of his supposed crimes via a passage to Europe deposits him “into the jaws of death,” cast down by a shipwreck “with fire raging above and the waves yawning below”: the perfect expression of the hellish fate his mother feared for him.\(^{40}\)

Blake overlays the tragedy of Vinton’s death with the knowledge that his demise is the only means of protecting the domestic ideals of a nation beguiled by contracts and bloodlines. Despite the “many old friends [who] came to bid him adieu,” and the flock of remaining family members who accompany him to the very edge of the docks, Claudia’s son has learned a lesson that they did not know they were teaching: that familial devotion is only acceptable when sanctioned by specific domestic ties. When those ties must be concealed, as in the case of what he now recognizes as his brotherly love for Mabel, “others would not understand.” Their previous engagement means that any acknowledgment of their true connection could only injure them should he stay in New York, even if he remains nothing more than her “dearest and best friend.”\(^{41}\) And of course, the fact of their siblinghood means that Vinton cannot in good conscience allow his community or Mabel herself to believe that any romantic connection still exists between them. The only duty he believes he can perform for her or for his former community is self-destruction—which the storm over the Atlantic fortuitously grants him. The social network that Claudia Rockford fought to give her son is also responsible for destroying him.

\(^{40}\) Blake, *Rockford*, 308.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 307.
In another world, Blake implies, the discovery of his paternity could have gained Vinton a sister rather than lost him a wife—and, ultimately, a future. What Jackson calls “the rhetoric of consanguinity” that burgeoned in response to the military and social tumult of the decades surrounding the war era suggests that Vinton and Mabel were indeed genetically predisposed to care for one another, although not in the way that they at first imagined. Blood ties were the last remaining symbol of national as well as domestic solidarity, and anxiety about their maintenance flourished in both literary and political publications during the war years. However, thanks to the rigid connection between American ideas of “consanguinity” and patrilineal legitimacy, there is, Blake points out, no social apparatus available that will allow single adults of the opposite sex to forge healthy, non-romantic relationships. This dearth of alternative social models explains Vinton’s imagined love for his half-sister Mabel. Thanks to the assumption that “two spouses [were] one person legally,” the offspring of unsanctioned unions are effectively barred from forming sanctioned bonds within or outside their families. The great tragedy of Mrs. Rockford’s sacrifice is that the access it grants Vinton to a place in the legal domestic hierarchy is superficial at best. The integrity that makes Vinton admirable in genteel circles also renders him unable to take advantage of the status she engineered for him. To use Cott’s phrase, “having the apparatus” of marital coverture and its attendant domestic hierarchy “was less important than having the ideal” of it. In other words, it was by knowing that she was uniting herself to Mr. Rockford for pragmatic rather than emotional or spiritual reasons that Claudia condemned herself and Vinton to self-imposed exile and death. Her renunciation of her feme sole

42 Jackson, American Blood, 4.

43 Cott, Public Vows, 169.

44 Ibid., 104 (emphases added).
autonomy does indeed ensure her son a place in the upper echelons of New York society, but it also proves the limited capacity of this society to protect members whose individual needs conflict with its own.

Vinton’s brotherly affection for Mabel is not the only hint Blake offers of alternatives to and expansions upon the current hierarchical status quo that the Rockfords and their cohort have failed to imagine. While the central value of marriage in a patrilineal culture is the production of a legitimate male heir—a task at which her husband knows Claudia has failed—Mr. Rockford does not seem to fully grasp the seemingly obvious idea that by repudiating his wife he is also depriving himself of a son. According to the contractual language that pervaded the marriage state, identifying illegitimate children was one way of “weeding out the contracts that had been breached,” thus securing the line of patrilineal inheritance against usurpation and “discourag[ing] irregular sexual relations.” Yet Mr. Rockford never intended to “weed out” Vinton; his conviction that Claudia has “breached” their contract does not translate into a belief that her son should be delegitimized. Totally unprepared for the loss of his adopted son, “Mr. Rockford…sank under this last cruel blow, a prematurely old man.” He has learned too late that the masque of familial union he once used to mock and torment his wife is in fact inextricably connected to the fate of the son upon whom he has come to depend. “The strongest affections of his iron heart had twined themselves around this noble young man,” suggesting that, despite the “breach” of contract that has undergirded their marriage, Mr. Rockford would have embraced the opportunity to redefine family and heritage in a way that would have included rather than excluded Vinton. Despite the increasingly fervent advocacy of what Jackson calls the “nuclear


46 Blake, Rockford, 308, 304.
unit” that infused domestic policy during the war years, the fate of Blake’s leading family suggests the inadequacy of this system to do justice to the emotional as well as the contractual connections between members of American communities.47

A Family Under Siege: *Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power* (1866)

If *Rockford* demonstrated the vulnerability of women like Mrs. Rockford to the dictates of what Jackson would call marital “hegemony,” Louisa May Alcott addresses the danger that the institution of separate, unequal spheres poses from a very different perspective.48 In a reversal of the rhetoric of paternal exploitation that fuels the plot of Blake’s *Rockford*, Alcott’s 1866 novella *Behind a Mask* does not concern itself with the abuses that may be perpetrated by a tyrannical patriarch. Instead, *Behind a Mask* capitalizes upon the gothic archetype of the insidious seductress to posit the power that women rendered “invisible” by their *feme covert* status have to create false identities. A clever but false woman, according to this model, may render herself indistinguishable from her legitimate counterparts. Told from the perspective of the Coventrys, a painfully proper family of landed British aristocrats who adhere to tradition as if it is law, Alcott’s pseudonymously published novella illustrates the consequences that ensue when a seemingly impregnable conservative household relies too heavily upon class status as a means of proving their domestic solidarity. This tale draws upon *Jane Eyre*’s popular trope of what the pretentious Coventrys would interpret as a socially climbing governess, illustrating the

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48 Ibid., 18.
means by which a woman may use gendered social precepts to foil the defenses of the upper class “nuclear unit.”

Alcott reused versions of Charlotte Brontë’s celebrated rags-to-riches plot repeatedly in her so-called “blood and thunder” tales. Although *Behind a Mask* is the most famous of these, her short stories “A Whisper in the Dark” (1863) and “The Mysterious Key” (1867) explore the same potential of lone women to transgress the boundaries of bloodlines and caste that informs Brontë’s novel. Alcott’s tellingly named heroine, Jean Muir, presents herself as Jane Eyre figure: a penniless but virtuous maiden living by precepts of personal integrity. The reader soon discovers, however, that Jean is in fact the ultimate “confidence woman.” Unconcerned by her lowly birth and divorcée status, this devious heroine uses the skills she has developed as an actress (in France, no less) to impersonate her social betters, thus gaining entry into the homes and hearts of eligible bachelors who are wholly unequipped to uncover her true identity. In Alcott’s postbellum imagination, as in Reconstruction politics, the family represents a battleground upon which definitions of womanly virtue are forged. Social and legal convention defines a woman as a subset of her father or husband rather than as an individual whose employment history and financial activity are subject to public scrutiny. Thus, Jean is able to perpetrate a deception convincing enough to solicit proposals of marriage from all three of the hapless family’s eligible bachelors, forcing the Coventrys to recognize themselves as a “house divided” in their own right.

In light of such rhetoric, Alcott’s decision to place this “house” in the aristocratic Old World realm of Great Britain rather than the early Reconstruction-era America makes sense. One

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of the supposed differences between the monarchical system of British landed gentry and the capitalist republic of the United States was the republican sentiment of meritocracy that undergirded the American model. According to this rationale, a small collection of select families would never be guaranteed intergenerational control over the majority of the New Republic’s resources, because in this nation birth did not dictate success. Yet social commentaries from Lincoln’s “house divided” speech to Jackson’s twenty-first century study clearly demonstrate Americans’ eagerness to embrace the status conferred by elite bloodlines. To quote Jackson, beginning in the 1850s, “blood-borne status triumphed over Revolutionary ideals, and antipatriarchal republicanism was replaced by filial piety in American politics.” In other words, an elitist cultural backlash against Revolutionary republican rhetoric in America initiated a return to a set of domestic values that were both more monarchical and less egalitarian than those of the turn of the century. In this model, middle-class women found the hard-won rights they had earned since the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 being eroded by a gender hierarchy that reinforced supposedly patriotic notions of the sublimation of wives’ and daughter’s identities within those of their husbands and fathers.

This apparent conflict between Northern patriotism and female agency within the home fueled much of the transgressive domestic literature by radical women authors of the period. Although neither Blake nor Alcott uses this particular brand of gothic fiction to address the war directly, their respective labors on behalf of the Union army reflect the individual empowerment they derived from taking on roles outside of the family hierarchy. Thus, when Alcott’s Jean Muir makes a mockery of rigid domestic frameworks that are unable to accommodate change or identify transgressors, her actions criticize not merely the landed aristocracy who are her victims

but also the delusions of “blood-borne” security more broadly. The 1866 America in which she wrote, Alcott implies, required the same lesson that her scheming “Jane Eyre” teaches the pretentious Coventry bluebloods.

*Behind a Mask* rejects both the principle of bloodlines as gateways to family solidarity and more specifically the definition of domestic upheaval. Jean’s infiltration of the Coventry household is especially impressive because, to use Cott’s model, it leaves the appearance of the family’s genteel solidarity intact, while radically altering the true dynamics among its members. This new deceiver’s quest, indeed, is a more successful version of Claudia Rockford’s efforts to forge the trappings of domestic unity in a new form that will incorporate rather than exclude her. Alcott has confidence in her heroine’s ability to control the masculine response to her machinations: a confidence that reflects both her own bid for self-reliance as a nurse at Georgetown and the increasing expectation among Northern wives for agency on the home front more generally. In the beginning of 1866, leaders of the Northern proto-feminist movement remained convinced that they could ride the progressive reformist wave of emancipation to the ultimate goal of women’s suffrage. (Unfortunately, the inauguration of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act proved what Siegel calls the Reconstruction government’s determination to keep its emancipation rhetoric from bleeding into issues of gender equality. 52)

Stanton and Anthony shared confidence that women’s agency as de facto heads of household, volunteers for Union causes, and political activists in support of abolition had proven their worthiness to participate in the republican apparatus of the newly reunited nation.

Jean’s understanding of womanly agency focuses on a very different sphere than that of the women’s rights movement; her bid for power in the Coventry home assumes that her social

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52 Siegel, “‘The Rule of Love,’” 2203-04.
skills will outweigh her deficiencies of youth and virtue. Jean’s certainty in her own ability to create a place for herself as matriarch of the Coventry clan echoes this moment of political confidence, albeit in a very different context from that of Stanton and her followers. If Mrs. Rockford imagined the family hierarchy as malleable enough to accommodate herself and her illegitimate son as long as they bore the name of an acceptable patriarch, Jean’s vision of integrating herself into the Coventry dynasty is still more radical. Because the safeguards Jean’s society has put in place to identify bad intentions in women are based exclusively upon conduct, her mercenary aims are virtually undetectable. The more she caters to the domestic needs of the Coventrys, the more impossible it becomes for them to imagine her feminine graces concealing ill intent. As a governess, Miss Muir may not be the official matriarch of the household, but her duties overlap significantly with those of the antebellum “angel of the house”; Jean is responsible for the intellectual and emotional growth of the Coventry daughter, young Bella, as well as the amusement and edification of the entire household, thanks to her skills as a musician and storyteller. She inspires the Coventry brothers to greater diligence in the pursuit of their public duties and serves as a helpmeet to the feeble mistress of the house, taking on the role of hostess when it comes time to pour tea or lead in conversation. Yet the gothic language of invasion with which Alcott’s literary alter ego, A.M. Barnard, infuses the tale promises that these apparently innocuous gestures are not what they seem.

In Jean’s hands, the social graces that confirm a woman’s benevolence and unique capacity for spiritual and emotional service are gateways to a power every bit as despotic as Mr. Rockford’s. The deception she perpetrates in fact speaks to one of the central political anxieties of the Reconstruction era. For a government committed to “bolstering” patriarchal notions of “[t]raditional monogamy” that have been undermined by the loss of many heads of household
during the war years, the idea that women’s nurturing role within the domestic hierarchy might conceal discontent and even rage was positively nightmarish.\textsuperscript{53} Such anxieties shaped the broader literary arena in which Alcott presented her “blood and thunder” tales. Two years after \textit{Behind a Mask} appeared, George Ripley decried Stoddard’s equally jaded final novel, \textit{Temple House} (1867), calling the tempestuous Tempe Gates and her unconventional family embodiments of “the coarseness, wrongheadedness, and almost brutality, which [Stoddard] takes a fantastic pleasure in portraying.”\textsuperscript{54} Such hostility to the notion of discontented women made sense in terms of the postbellum push to return to the imagined antebellum status quo. Women’s willingness to sacrifice their own comfort for that of their husbands and children was, after all, integral to the continued function of the patriarchal family unit. Alcott’s work as Barnard demands that American readers reconsider the consequences of upholding notions of domestic union that deny married women legal identities of their own. Jean’s age, marital status, and sexual experience disqualify her from honest access to a family network like that of the Coventrys; this leaves her no choice but to use divisive rather than unifying techniques to enmesh herself in their literal and figurative “house.”

Alcott’s model of domestic disunion under the guise of harmony points to an important connection between the postbellum legislative agenda and the private sphere. Although the Thirteenth Amendment and subsequent enfranchisement of African-American men at first glance seemed to suggest a government eager to reform oppressive domestic institutions, a look at the Republican social platform of the mid-1860s reveals that national emancipation seems to have had the opposite effect. Following the surrender of Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant at

\textsuperscript{53} Cott, \textit{Public Vows}, 105.

Appomattox on April 9, 1865, the newly re-formed Union began the socially and legally fraught process of Reconstruction: an apparatus geared toward restoring an American domestic life that reflected hierarchical antebellum ideals of the home front.  

Northern lawmakers’ diverse efforts to limit grounds for divorce, keep wives within the home, and facilitate matrimony between unmarried freedmen and women reveals their adherence to an imagined moral baseline that they believed had been disrupted by the war. This baseline, such men were convinced, was in desperate need of restoration; as President Lincoln himself had declared in 1858, “a house divided against itself cannot stand”—and supposedly stable household hierarchies had shown themselves to be alarmingly malleable under the divisive influence of war and its aftermath.

Alcott herself was no stranger to the reality of unstable households. Her father, the radical Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, and her mother, his overworked wife Abigail May, certainly would have given her insight into the more dispiriting side of patriarchal marriage. Despite his passionate convictions about education reform and utopian communalism, Bronson Alcott remained chronically unemployed and often unable to provide for his family. When Alcott chronicled her father’s disastrous experiment with communal subsistence farming at Fruitlands in her 1873 short story “Transcendental Wild Oats,” redemption comes only in the form of his unappreciated wife, who defies social precept and takes up the mantle of head of household in order to save her children and their father from destitution. Unmarried herself, Alcott took advantage of her single status to advocate more directly on behalf of the Union cause than many

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55 Congress has been prepared for this moment since July 2, 1864, when the Republican majority released the Wade-Davis Bill. This document outlined the various sanctions that the Southern state governments and former Confederate soldiers would have to undergo before their states could once more apply for representation within the Senate and the House of Representatives. See “The Wade-Davis Bill,” Messages and Papers, Vol. vi (July 2, 1864), in Documentary History of Reconstruction, Vol. 1, ed. Walter L. Fleming (New York: Peter Smith, 1950).

56 Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided Speech.”
of her married contemporaries, taking up work as a nurse at Georgetown in 1862. Although ill health prevented her from holding the position long, Alcott found the experience transformative, reliving it via her successful autobiographical novel Hospital Sketches in 1863 and returning to it in later fictional efforts such as Work: A Story of Experience (1873). Her Hospital Sketches model of nurturing femininity was both familiar and unprecedented; while Alcott was confident that women were natural caregivers, her eagerness to exercise those skills outside of a traditional household setting suggests that she perceived the nuclear domestic framework as potentially hindering rather than helping such women’s development. Unlike Rockford, which discomfited many of its readers, Alcott’s war-era literary efforts seem to have integrated the critical and the patriotic to forge a formula for success. Far from objecting to the gender politics of a single woman on the warfront, readers applauded her unflinching depiction of wounded Northern soldiers “as unique, compelling characters,” rather than as idealized superhuman beings, while simultaneously embracing the more saccharine side of her narrator, Tribulation Periwinkle.

If Behind a Mask is less willing to validate patriotic ideals of womanhood, Alcott seems to have made up for this deficiency via its publication venue. The tale of Jean Muir appeared in serial form in the pages of two 1866 editions of The Flag of Our Union, a popular magazine that defensively claimed to publish “not one vulgar line or word.” Considering its sensationalist reputation, this venue seemed risky enough that Alcott used her Barnard persona in the byline,

57 In her capacity as nurse, Alcott cared for a number of soldiers wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Although she would not have known it, Lillie Devereux Blake’s first fiancé, Henry King, had fallen in that very battle, albeit on the Confederate side.


yet the story seems to have occasioned no anxiety from readers or reviewers. The novella, according to the editor, was “a story of peculiar power.” Confident of its marketability, he wrote to Alcott, “[I] have no doubt but my readers will be quite as much fascinated with it as I was myself while reading the Ms.” Mr. Elliott, as it turned out, was right; despite Mask being among what Stern calls “her bloodiest and most thunderous tales,” Alcott’s Coventry family, on whose ancestral estate the action of the story takes places, presents a reassuring façade of normality in its opening pages. The Coventrys are not a family of Rockford-eqsue extramarital affairs or inadvertent incest; certainly they bear no resemblance to the insidious Morgesons or dissipated Somerses that Stoddard described in The Morgesons (1862). The Coventrys are so pacifistic and conventional that they cannot be bothered to so much as disagree with one another, as a general rule. By suggesting that their unity is built on empty symbols rather than genuine bonds of mutual love and trust, Alcott presents an alternate interpretation of the symbolically perfect home.

Unlike Alcott, the Reconstruction government believed that adherence to traditional gendered power dynamics efforts would facilitate domestic stability. According to Jackson, “genealogical pride” was a side effect of such political sentiments; thus, a work like Behind a Mask naturally explored Old World ideals of pure bloodlines and paternal legitimacy that served as the root of even the most democratic concepts of family. This preoccupation with inherited family ties threw into sharp relief the problem that women posed to this vision of a secure American aristocracy. After all, nineteenth-century women also had access to “membership in a

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60 J.R. Elliott, quoted in Madeleine Stern, Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home, 80.

61 Stern, introduction to Behind a Mask, xxii.
noble lineage” via another route: marriage.\textsuperscript{62} When well-bred women (the living counterparts of literary figures like Claudia Rockford) married into elite bloodlines, they served as vessels of patriarchy, built to pass the paternal torch on to their husbands’ sons. By enabling the “genealogical” transmission of patriarchal status from father to son, she maintained the smaller-scale domestic hierarchy that would undergird the broader national one. But wives’ connections to the masculine bloodlines into which they married would by definition be more tenuous; as Rockford clearly demonstrated, close “consanguinity” between marriage partners was cause for familial destruction rather than domestic security.\textsuperscript{62} Brides should by definition be outsiders in their husbands’ households. Instead, wives functioned as vessels for and custodians of paternal bloodlines to which they could not actually belong: they, like Jean the governess, prove their value to their new families via the feminine virtues of beauty and decorum.

As legal nonentities who are nevertheless responsible for nurturing the next generation and preserving its paternal family name, wives and governesses, ironically, share the potential to shape new identities that bear little resemblance to their origins. Because they take on the social and financial status of their husbands, women (unlike their male counterparts) have the potential to transform themselves by marrying “up”—a potential of which Jean is conspicuously aware. Clearly familiar with the cautionary tale of \textit{Jane Eyre}, in which an enterprising but penniless woman becomes beloved and indispensable to the household’s master, the Coventrys go out of their way to guard themselves against such incursions. Confronted with the unpleasant reality of the governess’s imminent arrival, Gerald Coventry, the family’s young patriarch, companionably tells his cousin Lucia, “I defy the Scotch witch to enchant me,” blithely assuming that he will

\textsuperscript{62} Jackson, \textit{American Blood}, 5.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 4.
have to counter the newcomer’s romantic wiles by putting her sharply in her place.64 Gerald is
certain that, despite whatever importunities he may have to endure, he is in no danger of falling
prey to Miss Muir’s presumable machinations; after all, he is already engaged to his cousin and
confident of his own and his family’s innate superiority to the impoverished Scotswoman who
must make her living by her labor.65 He will not lower himself by becoming familiar with her, no
matter what vulgar “charm” she displays.

Haunted by the specter of class mixing, Gerald’s family—his widowed mother, his
younger brother Ned, his sister Bella, and his cousin Lucia—communally gird themselves
against the incursion of Jean, disturbed at the idea of letting a lowborn stranger into their home,
even on less than equal footing. Anticipating the governess’s probable grasping nature, Gerald,
an aristocratically “languid young man” who is chronically “lounging on a couch,” conveniently
forgets to summon the carriage to collect his new employee from the train station.66 Although his
sister affectionately accuses him of being a “lazy fellow,” Gerald’s neglect is actually a strategic
first move in the masque of class solidarity he has prepared for their guest. By failing to provide
a carriage for Jean, Gerald both reminds her of her subordinate position within the household and
forces her into an act of impropriety: without the anticipated carriage, she must be late in her
arrival to the house. Only Ned, the ambitious second son who longs “to be doing something,”


65 Alcott’s decision to make Jean Muir a native of Scotland serves to reinforce her status as an outsider in the English Coventry household.

seems to think it may have been neglectful to leave the young woman to walk from the train station; the rest of the party agrees, “it is her place to come to [us].”

While Jean silently vows revenge against Gerald for the humiliation of her trek, her counter-performance is a work of social artistry. Soon after taking her place as Bella’s governess (and sprucing up her maidenly wig and false teeth), the apparently young ingénue (who is in fact more than thirty) engineers a revelation designed to turn the heads not just of the Coventry brothers, but also of their wealthy bachelor uncle, Sir John. Gerald and Sir John remain largely immune to Jean’s many charms until the day she “forgot herself,” revealing by a seeming slip of the tongue her matrilineal connection to the noble house of Howard. Sir John gushingly relates the circumstances of this miracle to his nephew: “Her mother was Lady Grace Howard, who ran away with a poor Scotch minister twenty years ago.” Although her “family cast her off,” he blithely explains, Lady Grace gave birth to “an orphan girl at some small French pension,” and that all but titled “orphan girl” was Jean. Significantly, the mere rumor of this august lineage is enough to confirm it in the Coventry imagination as fact; it occurs to neither man that a common woman might be able to ape the forms of gentility. The idea of Jean’s hidden grandeur explains to them much of her apparently pretentious behavior. Gerald, who has worried about Jean’s propensity to solicit and reject marriage proposals from men above her station, concludes that her true status “accounts for her rejection of Sydney and Ned: she knows she is their equal and will not snatch at the rank which is hers by right.” Like his uncle, Gerald “felt his interest in his sister’s governess much increased by” the revelation of Jean’s supposed maternal lineage. Both

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Ibid., 5.
men find themselves slowly drawn from admiration to adoration of what they perceive as her aristocratic graces. 68

This, of course, is precisely the reaction that Jean intended when she made her calculated slip of the tongue. A consummate chameleon, she understands that her position as a divorced woman in her thirties, despite its negative connotations, in fact uniquely qualifies her to reinvent herself without reference to her past. According to the tenets of coverture, the “husband was enlarged, so to speak, by marriage,” with the legal counterpart of the wife “giving up her own name and being called by his symbolized her relinquishing her identity.” Based on this definition, marriage in essence allows a woman to reinvent herself at will. 69 While a man will carry his surname—his father’s name—throughout his life, a woman’s name is constantly subject to perfectly legal and even expected change. Jean is clever enough to realize that if she makes a claim of nobility through the maternal line, it will be difficult for a suspicious Coventry to reveal her ruse; her name, after all, is not supposed to be Miss Howard. Only an illegitimate child would bear her mother’s name, and Jean is not claiming illegitimacy but nobility. Her unremarkable surname and lack of title do not preclude the potential for a matrilineal heritage such as the one she claims; names and titles are passed down paternal lines. Although she confesses to her correspondent Hortense, who knows the truth of Jean’s less than noble maternal lineage, “I never saw Lady H—d but once,” for the purposes of her charade even this minimal contact is superfluous. 70

68 Ibid., 47-48.
69 Cott, Public Vows, 11.
70 Alcott, Behind a Mask, 100.
Far from drawing upon proto-feminist rhetoric like that of Stanton or other advocates of marital reform, Jean seems perfectly content with her married (or once-married) status of legal non-identity, because it renders her unanswerable for her own past conduct. When she was bound by the laws of coverture to her dissolute husband the actor, he would have been at least symbolically responsible for her petty crimes, her debts, and her ill-gotten gains. By virtue of her “covered” status, no record will ever exist of her non-“Muir” financial or theatrical exploits. The constraints of marital coverture, far from restraining her duplicitous conduct, actually enable it. The genteel language of womanly propriety renders unbecoming any more “official” investigation into Jean’s past; Mrs. Coventry declares her friend Lady Sydney’s recommendation to be all she needs to confirm Jean’s identity; “I left everything to her judgment.”

High society’s “judgment” of young women of marriageable age consists primarily of an analysis of their appearance and behavior; because marriage is comprised of a man who grants his identity to a woman, the only other important information from a political perspective is her family connections. Because these are easily obfuscated in the maternal line, Jean is able to present herself as essentially her own antithesis: a young, virginal noblewoman of flawless poise and breeding, beset merely by material circumstance.

Thus, instead of presenting certificates, credentials, or assets, all Jean has to do to represent herself to the Coventry men as a prospective bride is behave as if she belongs in their sphere. To demand certification of genteel femininity would be to defeat its point. Jean knows that, in order to undermine the Coventry family union, all she needs to do is give them what they want. After only a few weeks, Judith Fetterley notes, “people are beginning to quarrel over who

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71 Ibid., 4.
gets to use her services.”\(^{72}\) This disruption at first appears to be a boon to the household. Jean, they discover, turns the Coventrys into better versions of themselves. Mrs. Coventry, an inveterate hypochondriac, begins to leave her room to listen to the governess’s stories; empty-headed Bella becomes fluent in French. The two sons become enamored of her apparent modesty and lovely singing voice. Although none of Jean’s undeniable skills—narrative, linguistic, or musical—are actually proof of a genteel family heritage, the Coventrys are unequipped to make this distinction. By denying their vulnerability to a woman like Jean, they do not merely allow her to infiltrate their ranks but practically beg her to do so.

Although a woman of Jean’s many accomplishments as a nurturer is supposed to facilitate greater family unity, it becomes increasingly clear that the interests of individual members do not always serve the wellbeing of the family as a whole. Far from acting as a stabilizing agent, Jean’s support of and advocacy for individual Coventrys renders them correspondingly hostile toward one another. In one of the most telling tableaus of the novella, the jealous Ned attacks his beloved elder brother “[i]n a paroxysm of blind wrath,” convinced that Gerald harbors malevolent designs against the woman whom he has come to love. Fuelled by years of unspoken resentment, never before expressed, “he caught up a large pruning knife left there by the gardener, and would have dealt his brother a fatal blow had he not warded it off with his arm”—an act so shameful that Ned immediately removes himself to London in disgrace.\(^{73}\) The younger brother’s loss is, however, the elder’s gain: emboldened by his increased access to Jean’s motivational presence, the apathetic Gerald discovers for the first time an urge to take up his duties as landlord. As he proudly informs his incredulous sister, “I am going to ride over the


\(^{73}\) Alcott, \textit{Behind a Mask}, 35.
whole estate, and attend to things as a master should; not leave it all to Bent, of whom I’ve heard many complaints, but have been too idle to inquire about them.” He will take an active, paternal role in promoting the wellbeing of his land and tenants, “endeavor[ing] to be all that my father was in his time.”

Gerald makes no secret of the fact that his new patriarchal impulses stem from a desire to become the kind of man that Lady Grace Howard’s daughter would find worthy of marriage. The more he observes her behavior, and the more she appears to succumb to his influence—“secretly” sobbing over a flower he gave her, confiding in him despite her “efforts” to be silent—the more compelling he finds her. His uncle, Sir John, is equally overcome by her apparent fondness for his portrait. Jean’s maidenly attempts to conceal her overwhelming attraction merely confirm to each man his own possession of her heart. But the reader understands, as the Coventry men do not, that Jean’s seeming subservience masks a devastating agency that belies all outward appearances: the very appearances that Gerald and Sir John have used to confirm her sincerity. By their own definition of family union—a financially and emotionally homogenous unit distinct from other social groups—the Coventrys have been conquered. Jean’s only challenge in the final chapters of the novella is to decide which offer of marriage to accept.

It is not until after her marriage to Sir John that the other Coventrys realize they have been invaded. When Ned discovers Jean’s uninhibited letters to her fellow con-woman Hortense, it undermines not only the family’s confidence in Jean but also, more importantly, their understanding of what constitutes a “house divided.” According to the patriarchal laws of marriage, Jean is now a Coventry; Sir John’s will has made it so, and any identity she had before

74 Ibid., 69.
becoming Lady Coventry is now dissolved. Yet Jean’s knowledge of the true men and women behind the Coventry façade of propriety forces her new family to reevaluate their domestic hierarchy in ways that disturb and even infuriate them. When Ned displays her correspondence with Hortense, Gerald and his family find that she has written unflinchingly of the many sins she has uncovered in her new family. Based on the prevailing logic that a good matriarch should use her benevolent social graces to mitigate any improprieties among her flock, Jean’s letters serve as a horrific exposé both of the Coventrys themselves and of her own ability to alter their domestic hierarchy to suit herself. By what right, her observations demand, should Gerald or Sir John require obeisance from her? In Jean’s estimation of the Coventrys, “their simple souls” are riddled with vice: “the young master” is beset by “indolence,” his cousin “detestable with her pride” and “coldness,” and they are all (with the exception of Ned) offensively “patronizin[g]” to the governess until she begins to work her wiles upon them.\(^75\) These are not, Jean reasons, men who are deserving of her respect or subservience.

Alcott does not merely reveal the rigid domestic hierarchy’s potential for corruption, however. Having demonstrated Jean’s ability to wrest power from the Coventry family, she goes on to strategically shape their collective revelation in terms of its perfect legality: a less than subtle nod to the problems inherent in the conservative backlash against female agency, especially in wives, that so alarmed authors like Alcott. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser’s reading of Alcott’s novella in particular emphasizes the judicial language with which the Coventrys attempt to condemn their vanquisher. In Keyser’s reading of the final scene, “Edward, on exposing Jean, claims that ‘her own letters convict her’, but the purpose they ultimately serve is that of

\(^75\) Ibid., 98.
convicting the Coventrys themselves.”  

This language of “conviction” points to the disparity between the family’s perception of Jean’s perfidy and the narrative’s point that her behavior is only at odds with the spirit of the law, not the letter. Enmeshed in the rhetoric of appearances, Elizabeth Schewe confirms, the Coventrys struggle to understand how it is that this hostile element was capable of “insinuating itself into the family” when the Coventrys know themselves to be agents of propriety rather than radical social discord.  

Unlike Claudia Rockford’s falsification of her son Vinton’s paternity, Jean’s transgression does not actually undermine the family patrimony. By presenting Vinton as the male heir to the Rockford name and fortune, his mother facilitated the legally binding transfer of money and property between two men under false pretenses. The laws of paternal inheritance impose the tangible strictures of the public realm upon murkier issues like Claudia’s. Jean’s situation, however, lacks a legal corollary via which to punish her sins in the private realm of the Coventry home. She has verbally provided false information regarding the identity of her mother, but her account of her father (the public, legally recognized source of her childhood identity) is accurate. She has engaged in conduct unbecoming of her social and economic status, but she has not falsified any official documents to that effect. She has professed sentiments she does not feel, but she has not failed in her task of educating young Bella Coventry—quite the opposite, she has performed her every duty to the letter. She has broken social contracts, but not legal ones. Her marriage to Sir John will not undermine the ability of their future son to inherit the Coventry mantle.

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How, then, are the Coventrys to understand themselves in relation to their new matriarch? Jean has managed to bind herself to this hapless family via a legally valid marriage contract, and she seems to see no reason why her past machinations should keep her from fulfilling that contract. Upon her unmasking (for which her new husband is conveniently absent), Jean assures Ned that her new union with Sir John and, by extension, the rest of the Coventrys, means that she will abide by their social rules in the future; she will embrace her role in the family hierarchy, be the mother of its heirs and the mistress of its halls, with as much success as if she had won the position by honest means. Although “I am not worthy to be this good man’s wife,” in socioeconomic or even moral terms, she asserts, “to you I will solemnly promise to devote my life to [Sir John’s] happiness. For his sake forgive me, and let there be peace between us.” With her safety and material comfort secured, Jean declares a radical new allegiance, which reconciles her past falsehood and present investment, to the family that has been forced to adopt her. Far from enabling her new in-laws to punish her, Jean’s new status as a Coventry feme covert protects her from the consequences of her deception. She is now an extension of Sir John, and as such any attack on her character would be tantamount to an attack on her husband’s name, and therefore the Coventry patrimony more generally.

The disillusioned Coventrys are trapped by what Jackson would call their own “genealogical pride.” Schewe describes the family’s decision to accept their new matriarch—in deed if not in spirit—as an act of collusion with a society built upon form rather than substance: “Rather than risk besmirching their own name in order to save future victims from similar deception…the Coventry family chooses to maintain a conspiracy of silence about what has

78 Alcott, *Behind a Mask*, 104.

befallen them." The “house divided” will look to outsiders just as authentic as the house united. The Coventrys, ironically, have developed a perfectly superficial domestic apparatus that will continue to present a masque of solidarity for their friends and neighbors, despite the dramatic change in their perception of their circumstances. When faced with a choice between repudiating a self-described interloper and admitting the inadequacy of their domestic model to diagnose confidence women, they retreat into the same realm that Jean and Claudia before her inhabited: that of performers. In order to save their name and bloodline from ignominy, they will follow the same code of silence that characterized Rockford’s Herford, Connecticut, community: they will choose the façade over the elusive reality of domestic harmony.

The implications of the Rockford and Coventry cover-ups are not flattering. Claudia cannot be the only woman who, in a desperate attempt to save her child from a life of social ostracism, wins him a family by false pretenses. If the Coventry decision to conceal Jean’s hostile takeover of their noble name is representative of their class values, how many other Jean Muirs may have bound their genetic material into august paternal bloodlines? Taken together, the Rockfords and the Coventrys reveal the many ways in which the disenfranchisement or marginalization of social outsiders (in this case, bastard sons and divorced women) actually undermines the very “nuclear unit[s]” that exclude them. Rockford Lawn will go to Edith and her husband: the first step in obscuring the history of the family from public memory. The Coventrys will live on, genteel names and titles intact, beset by the reality of their own blindness and petty sins. In both cases, the newest generations of Blake’s and Alcott’s leading families will be shaped not by security but by upheaval. By relying upon codes of wifely subservience and

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80 Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy,” 588.

81 Jackson, American Blood, 4.
paternal legitimacy that necessitate subterfuge on the part of would-be members, the supposedly ideal family participates in its own demise.
The growing American interest in “hereditary systems of power” that Holly Jackson identifies in the second half of the nineteenth century did not limit itself to matters of elitist social presentation. Based as they were upon patrilineal systems of both social power and material inheritance, family trees were particularly vulnerable in a ruptured nation with a dramatically declining male population. Without patriarchs and male heirs to succeed them, the institutions that controlled a family’s internal hierarchies could no longer serve as stabilizing cultural agents. The new, Civil War-era reality demanded that domestic households function without the benefit of their leading member. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson would later calculate, Massachusetts alone “had sent 113,835 men to the war.” Of those, 13,498 were “lost”—but even more were wounded, maimed, or otherwise incapacitated. This trend persisted throughout the Union; as Drew Gilpin Faust notes, “By the time of Gettysburg…the Union army alone reported 23,000 casualties, including 3,000 killed…. In some regiments, numbers of killed and wounded approached 90 percent. And by the spring of 1864 Grant’s losses in slightly more than a month approached 50,000.” In light of such extreme upheaval, it is hardly


3 Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 56.
surprising that the Northern family of the 1860s perceived the availability of its patriarch to act as a representative in the public realm and an arbiter of conduct in the private one to be severely undermined.

Unfortunately, the limited source material dealing with the new family structures that arose in light of this upheaval is also predictable. Wives and mothers who had once served primarily as helpmeets within the domestic sphere were now taking charge of it. They became de facto heads of household, struggling to manage the financial, material, and emotional needs of family members whose roles were no longer necessarily clear. In short, they were extraordinarily busy, learning a host of skills and taking on myriad duties for which they had not been prepared. The literary sphere of domestic literature, however, offers a compelling glimpse into the anxieties and ambitions of such women, and the future that they imagined for themselves and their daughters. While the publishing centers of New York and Boston brought out a host of novels by women during the Civil War and Reconstruction, two authors in particular stand out for their use of strange “Cinderella” plots, in which mothers and daughters compete over the family resources, both psychological and material.

These two women were Elizabeth Stoddard and Harriet Prescott Spofford, both celebrated authors of eerily gothic domestic fiction, who shared what amounted to a publishing frenzy from 1861 to 1865. Stoddard produced two of her three novels, *The Morgesons* (1862) and *Two Men* (1865), before 1866, along with numerous short stories. These stories often appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*: a venue that had regularly featured Spofford’s short fiction and poetry since 1859. In addition to these myriad popular works, Spofford also published her
own second novel, *Azarian: An Episode*, in 1864. Both women have a reputation for writing stories that were strange or unearthly; they took familiar tropes of the antebellum domestic novel—especially the beautiful heroine, her tight-knit family, and her suitors worthy and unworthy—and rewrote them as fierce antagonists on a claustrophobic social battlefield. A common element of such fiction was the increasing prominence of the mother-daughter (as opposed to girl and lover) bond. The new American daughter, Spofford and Stoddard, concluded, was not a naïve ingénue waiting to be catapulted into a princely marriage, but an ash-streaked Cinderella, bitter at her enslavement in her domineering mother’s house.

The story of Cinderella, the virtuous young woman who overcame the manifold abuses of her “haughty” stepfamily through her marriage, enjoyed many rebirths in the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic. Popularized at the end of the seventeenth century by Charles Perrault’s iconic tale, “Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper,” this archetypal “rags to riches” drama quickly became a popular trope among Victorian novelists exploring—and critiquing—the marriage market. Adaptations of the “Cinderella” daughter struggling to shape a home for herself in the shadow of a hostile mother figure proliferated during the antebellum era, of course, drawing as they often did upon the success of Charlotte Brontë’s British classic, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Civil War-era versions of the Cinderella myth, however, are unique even among

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nineteenth-century adaptions. Stoddard began this trend with her first novel, *The Morgesons* (1862), via the competition between Cassandra Morgeson and her guardian Alice for the affections of Alice’s husband Charles. Stoddard emphasizes the importance of what British Romanticist Jill Campbell might call “maternal transmission,” which explores intergenerational dynamics between women. Her second novel, *Two Men* (1865), explores the problem of competition between mothers and daughters even more specifically.⁶ Spofford shared Stoddard’s urge to articulate the connection between the reality of a marriage market with more goods than buyers and the changing domestic sphere in which mothers and daughters found themselves mutually besieged by one another’s presence. By examining two of her most overt explorations of these themes, “The Strathsays” (1863) and “Her Story” (1872), on either side of Stoddard’s second novel, literary historians have the opportunity to map the “Cinderella” tale’s changed stakes for American women over the course of the decade. The triumph of daughters over their oppressive mothers in “The Strathsays” and *Two Men* reflects the centrality of the war era to this new iteration of feminist imagination; by the time “Her Story” appeared, well into Reconstruction, the narrator—who would have married and had her “Cinderella” moment ten years earlier, in 1862—finds herself marginalized by the same forces that empowered Spofford and Stoddard’s earlier heroines.

Scholars of British literature of the nineteenth century have a term for the state of affairs in which a large population of women find themselves contending for marriage to a relatively

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small population of men: the “redundant woman.” The Victorian redundant woman was not a product of civil war; her plight, however, would have been familiar to a nation of Americans who were increasingly bereaved. Anna Fenton-Hathaway characterizes mid-century Britain’s “redundancy’ question” as an unbalanced equation of “supply-and-demand.” “Just two years before Charlotte Brontë published Vilette,” she reports, “the 1851 British Census reported that women in Great Britain outnumbered men by over 400,000—a statistical imbalance that seemed to doom the female remainder to spinsterhood.”7 Like their British counterparts, American women were eager to marry; the war exacerbated rather than undermined the desire for marital ties, among both men and women.8 Yet the numbers were not in their favor. Although it is difficult to calculate precisely how many women would have found themselves husbands without the intervention of the war, the statistics on married women who lost their husbands are informative. In October of 1863, with the military conflict nowhere near resolution, the Union’s Secretary of the Interior reported 12,392 successful new pension applications made by Northern war widows.9 By 1866, the number had reached 70,138.10

The new, dark “Cinderella” stories by women writers of the war era thus illustrate a very real counterpart to the timeless tale of three sisters, only one of whom can marry the prince.

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8 See J. David Hacker’s study on the increasing youth of men and women entering first marriages during the war years, “Economic, Demographic, and Anthropometric Correlates of First Marriage in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States,” Social Science History 32, no. 3 (2008): 307–345.


10 “Report of the Commissioner of Pensions,” in Report of the Secretary of the Interior (Department of the Interior, Oct. 25, 1866), 515. This number reflects the sum of army widows (68,957) and navy widows (1,181).
Beginning with Spofford’s “The Strathsays” in 1863, such works reveal a series of what Margaret R. Higonnet identifies as ongoing embryonic “civil wars” at the heart of the American household. The pressure women of the same household may feel to compete among themselves for status, she suggests, is symptomatic of broader anxieties about patrilineal social systems that far predate the current crisis.\textsuperscript{11} As a result of their tenuous place as custodians rather than members of their husbands’ bloodlines, wives and mothers in these women’s wartime domestic fiction are often unable to establish healthy bonds with their female dependents; their only hope of validation comes from entering the paternal family tree via marriage and the production of sons. According to this logic of scarcity, a wife’s status as matriarch in her husband’s family cannot be secure when she shares the household with other potential child-bearers. Spofford and Stoddard use their war-era fiction to explore both the dangers and the possibilities implicit in this system of intra-feminine competition. On the one hand, they agree, certain lucky “Cinderella” brides may defy the odds, ensnare their chosen princes, and gain control over powerful male bloodlines in the absence of their husbands. In order to secure her own triumph, however, each victorious wife and mother must first vanquish a household full of equally desperate “stepmothers” and “stepsisters” who find themselves rendered “redundant”—literally excluded from their patrilineal family trees by their lack of opportunity to give birth to legitimate sons. This militaristic language of triumph and victory, of course, bears little resemblance to Perrault’s carefully sanitized depiction of feminine “redundancy” on the marriage market. The home front, and the family trees that shape it, according to this new, transgressive Northern domestic literature, are cultural battlefields in their own right.

\textsuperscript{11} Margaret R. Higonnet, “Civil Wars and Sexual Territories,” in \textit{Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation}, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 81.
Spofford’s short story “The Strathsays” adapts Perrault’s tale of Cinderella to detail the horrific lengths to which a nineteenth-century mother may go in order to retain control over a family bloodline to which she can only claim authority via her absent husband. Over the course of the tale, which appeared in an 1863 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the lovely narrator, Alice Strathsay, starts out as the most beloved of her widowed mother’s four daughters, destined to marry the most eligible bachelor at their disposal. She soon finds herself transformed from a metaphorical princess to a disfigured disgrace to the family name, before finally forging herself into a fearsome new family matriarch—all within the span of twenty pages. Significantly, the family’s matchmaking mother, Mrs. Strathsay, seems to think that only one of her four daughters’ marriages has the potential to transform her family of women. In this, her understanding of the availability of eligible men on the marriage market reflects Spofford’s own contemporary climate. Despite its 1860 population of less than 1.3 million, by the end of 1863, one postbellum source estimates, 101,326 men from her home state of Massachusetts alone had left their usual social circles in favor of either the army or the naval service. While the prospect of enlistment did seem to trigger hasty marriages, especially among the young, such youthful husbands did not necessarily have homes in which to install their new brides; whether married, single, or widowed, a growing number of daughters could expect to remain part of their mothers’

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12 William Schouler, *A History of Massachusetts in the Civil War* (Boston: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1868), 2, 505-506. This figure, of course, does not include men who left for the warfront in non-military capacity, as doctors, chaplains, or other volunteers for the war effort.
households during the war years. Like these daughters, Alice and her sisters expect to live under the sway of their mother’s influence regardless of the quality of their suitors.

Much of the critical attention devoted to Spofford since her recovery, however, has not dealt with this story of the fractured relationship between mothers and daughters on the marriage market. After all, many of Spofford’s best-remembered stories do not rely on a hostile mother figure at all. Her iconic 1860 novella *The Amber Gods* features a protagonist whose motherless liberty allows her to descend into a pit of vanity and self-indulgence. Another 1860 publication, “Circumstance,” perhaps her most anthologized short story, rejects the mother-daughter trope entirely, telling instead the tale of a young wife caught alone in the New England wilderness by a fearsome beast. Yet, in recent years, Spofford’s Cinderella stories have begun to receive greater scholarly attention. Although it has yet to be reprinted since its original appearance in 1863, “The Strathsays” has recently returned to the critical conversation on Spofford via Jennifer Putzi’s “‘Burning into the Bone’: Romantic Love and the Marked Woman.”13 “Her Story” features in the Spofford collection brought out by the American Women Writers Series in 1989, as does “Miss Susan’s Love Affair” (1876), which tells the ironically reversed Cinderella story of a “shabby” but virtuous young girl, the object of whose desire chooses her more beautiful, vivacious companion over herself.14 The repetition and reshaping of such stories over time suggests that the problem of the divided family of women demanded the continued attention of both Spofford and her readership.

13 Jennifer Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone’: Romantic Love and the Marked Woman,” in *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 49-73. This chapter explores the physical records of their romances literally embedded in the Strathsay sisters’ skins in the form of burns and tattoos.

Mrs. Strathsay’s machinations on her daughter’s behalf reflect the urgent need for the exchange of women between households. Prior to the war, families used the marriage market as a vehicle by which young women were passed from fathers to husbands. Until her marriage, a woman was the legal and financial responsibility of her father; when she wedded, that responsibility was transferred to her husband, who effectively removed his new wife from her paternal family and integrated her into his own. Deprived of this system of transfer, the Strathsay family of women devolves into an obsessive competition over the deceased Mr. Strathsay’s bloodline, which remains unclaimed by a son or grandson. Mrs. Strathsay’s determination to engineer the perfect marriage for her most beautiful daughter suggests the hostility at the root of the supposedly unifying structure of the family tree. As Joan Hoff explains the prevailing system, “marriage was commonly an arranged, economic matter, with daughters passing from the economic control of parents to husbands.” While the purpose of this arrangement is the production of legitimate male heirs to said husbands’ property, this system takes on a sinister cast in the hands of what Putzi calls the Strathsay girls’ “ruthless matchmak[er]” of a mother. Her conflicting responsibilities to her daughters and to her husband’s patrimony force Mrs. Strathsay into the role of merciless saleswoman, plying her daughterly wares on the marriage market based on their “value”—in her eyes, their resemblance to their father.

Mrs. Strathsay’s anxiety about her new dual role as family matriarch would have been familiar to Spofford’s American readership. For women who grew up with the assumption that they would be integrated via marriage and motherhood into a household directed by a benevolent patriarch, the demographic shift initiated by the war was cause for considerable concern. J.

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16 Jennifer Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 64.
David Hacker translates the male exodus to the battlefield into unprecedented “economic, demographic and social costs” for the population of women and children on the home front. If his new calculations are correct, for example, “at least 37,000 more widows…and 90,000 more orphans,” in addition to the thousands already acknowledged by older data, found themselves without a male caretaker by the end of 1865.\(^\text{17}\) Households built around a paternal figurehead with access to the political and financial realms found themselves with wives and mothers acting as de facto leaders in place of their husbands. To these mothers fell the seemingly Herculean task of helping their daughters negotiate a marriage market beset by a disturbing paucity of available suitors.

The Scottish matriarch Mrs. Strathsay, like Jean Muir the “Scotch witch” of Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind a Mask*, models the dangers of embracing too fully the conservative system of domestic hierarchy inherited from England.\(^\text{18}\) Thanks to the Common Law framework of marital coverture, women’s primary role in marriage was to produce a male heir who, unlike his mother, would be eligible to inherit the patrimony of his father. For the widowed mothers of daughters, however, this legitimizing process was unavailable. Mrs. Strathsay demonstrates the destructive effect that this exclusion could have within the limits of the domestic sphere; she forwards her daughters’ interests on the marriage market not in order to grant them security or happiness, but in order to generate a Strathsay “son” to honor her deceased husband and validate her own place as the default head of her household. This quest, far from forging a sympathetic union between the Strathsays, creates a competitive dynamic between the mother, who resents her four girls


because “they are none of them a son,” and her daughters, only one of whom can produce the perfect “Strathsay” heir and become a custodian of the paternal bloodline in her own right.  

Fiercely jealous of her children, Mrs. Strathsay must nevertheless rely upon their childbearing capacity to retroactively insert herself into the Strathsay family tree and cement her own status as a contributor to her husband’s ongoing paternal heritage. As the de facto head of the fatherless household, she holds a position of unusual power—but her power seems by definition to require despotism in order to maintain itself.

Fully invested in the rhetoric of marital coverture that defines her as an extension of her husband, Mrs. Strathsay is determined to facilitate the transfer of Mr. Strathsay’s genetic heritage to a grandson who will embody her deceased idol. She sees both herself and her daughters as vessels for the male family line; it is her most profound desire that, once they are married, one of these daughters will give birth to a son who will “heir” her lost father as she, who produced only girls, has failed to do for her husband. It quickly becomes apparent that her greatest hope lies in the story’s narrator, Alice, the most beautiful of her four girls, who sees every time she looks “in the long dim mirror…that I was my father’s own daughter.” The lost Strathsay patriarch hovers about her features like a “ghost,” reflected in the skin and hair that is “my father’s own color.” It is this physical evidence of her paternal (rather than maternal) heritage that proves to Mrs. Strathsay, a member of the clan by marriage and not by blood, that this daughter is valuable to her enterprise. In other words, Alice is important to this de facto matriarch specifically

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20 Ibid., 103.

21 Ibid., 99.

22 Ibid., 102.
because she is alien to her, a manifestation of her father’s genetic heritage rather than her mother’s. Mrs. Strathsay’s policy of what Putzi calls “ruthless matchmaking” for her daughters is in service of a radical goal that a daughter who looks like her father is most likely to fulfill: the birth of a true Strathsay son through the maternal line.23

At the opening of Spofford’s story, Alice’s situation does not seem to resemble that of a more traditionally oppressed Cinderella (along the lines of Brontë’s Jane Eyre) at all. She is the biological child of her mother—a mother who, far from resenting Alice’s presence, “counted on” her to make “the last, the best, the noblest” marriage of all the Strathsay daughters: a marriage that would “light up her [mother’s] hearth” and at last bring into being the Strathsay heir of whom she has long dreamed.24 The man Mrs. Strathsay identifies as the perfect father for the next generation of her family, a wealthy, titled Scotsman of impeccable pedigree, has been Alice’s best friend since their childhood, and all parties are equally enthusiastic about the future match. The sinister side of Mrs. Strathsay’s urgency, however, reveals itself in terms directly tied to “the Common Law restriction that prevented married women from acting as their own agents at law or to have independent property rights.”25 Because of her maternal bloodline’s subordinate status, Mrs. Strathsay now finds herself awkwardly subordinating one aspect of her status to her own dependents. Unlike Perrault’s bitter stepmother, who is determined to prevent her most beautiful dependent from escaping her control via marriage, Mrs. Strathsay has invested herself

23 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 64.


in her most beautiful daughter’s marriage to the point where, “If Alice did not become the bride of Angus Ingestre, it would break Mrs. Strathsay’s heart.”

In Perrault’s original “Cinderella,” of course, the heroine’s ability to transform from an oppressed daughter to a privileged wife through the institution of marriage enables the story’s happy ending. Exploited and neglected by her stepmother and stepsisters, the cinder-girl’s transfer from their care into that of her prince literally turns her from a drudge into a princess. Mrs. Strathsay, on the other hand, thinks of marriage as an extension of Alice’s daughterly obligations to her current family. Far from hoping to escape their mother’s clutches, Alice and her sisters agree with her assessment. They see themselves as “fibers” of the communal “Strathsay heart”; because they are united by their mother’s vision of the family’s future, the “threads” of this shared core “never wore thin or parted,” regardless of their prospective marriages. As Putzi acknowledges, Alice “had no quarrel with the marriage Mrs. Strathsay had intended to arrange for her”—but this acquiescence is not the extent of her Strathsay proclivities. Part of Alice’s love for Angus is romantic, but another, more important part has to do with his understanding of the family that they are destined to create. Unlike the classic nineteenth-century patriarch, Angus does not intend to use their marriage to turn Alice into an Ingestre; he never indicates that she will learn the history of his family, nor does he seem interested in installing her in one of his ancestral homes. Instead, he (like her mother) emphasizes her unique ability to carry on the Strathsay bloodline of her father; “you are the only one of them all that heirs him,” he tells Alice, and she knows that he is the father her future son

26 Spofford, “The Strathsays,” 100.

27 Ibid., 101.

28 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 69.
needs in order to be a true Strathsay.\textsuperscript{29} This son will allow Alice to gain a form of womanly power unknown to the original Cinderella; as the mother of a Strathsay heir who is also the son of her husband, she will wield custodial power over not one but two paternal bloodlines, one of which she will inherit from her own overbearing mother.

Angus’s willingness to incorporate himself into his future wife’s family tree is a rare find—one that Spofford sees as the gateway to a new, more adaptable form of nineteenth-century family. In order to prove his independence from his own fathers, the average man could not afford to be seen participating in the effeminate world of “domestic womanhood,” yet Angus, as a titled heir to a wealthy estate and a highly regarded naval officer, has the freedom to transcend such limitations and see the value in the paternal heritage that Alice has to offer. Their future marriage is predicated on the traits that both Angus and Mrs. Strathsay admire in Alice: her beauty and its physical resemblance to her late father’s. These particular traits suggest the possibility of a new marriage market grounded in the value of patriarchy by (maternal) proxy. Alice and Angus’s informal engagement validates what Jackson would call Alice’s “membership in a noble lineage” and proves her a worthy vessel of the Strathsay patrimony, despite her status as a woman rather than a man.\textsuperscript{30}

Unfortunately, although it seems her aesthetic connection to her paternal heritage gives Alice unique power on the marriage market, Angus’s particular admiration of her Strathsay beauty also foreshadows the limits of her value. He distinguishes Alice from the other, less appealing prospective brides of Scotland and England, dismissing them as “only the ugly sisters…[while] here is the true Cinderella.” In other words, only as long as her resemblance to

\textsuperscript{29} Spofford, “The Strathsays,” 103.

\textsuperscript{30} Jackson, \textit{American Blood}, 5.
her father lasts can Alice play the part of a diamond in the rough, uniquely qualified to marry her prince. Their romance seems at an end when, in a fit of misguided chivalry, Angus inadvertently sets aflame Alice’s head and dress; as she narrates the tragic event, “it seemed that I was wrapt in fire!”

After a long convalescence, she returns to her schooling, but the scars inflicted on her by the fire now mar her once-flawless paternal complexion; she is now the charred cinder-girl rather than the maiden whose foot fits the coveted slipper.

Well versed, thanks to her mother’s tutelage, in the rules of the marriage market, Alice understands that her position has changed. She retires from the social life of her school and conceals her face whenever possible from the public; “I went near no moors, I looked no more out my window, I only sat on the stool by my bedside and kept my face hidden in the valances.” Certainly she can no longer marry Angus, and she shuns his company, remaining immured in her bedroom when he calls. The traits that made her worthy of a special marriage, a union unlike those of her sisters and friends, are gone; “my hair was still as dark and soft, my eyes as shining, my—But all to what use? Where had flown the old Strathsay red from my cheek, where that smooth polish of brow…?”

It was her father’s coloring, more than any more general feminine attributes, that made her stand out from her sisters as the most eligible Strathsay heiress; without them, the purpose that connected her to the Strathsay family enterprise has evaporated as surely as the “smooth polish” of her skin. When she hears that Angus may be pursuing her sister Effie, the newly demoted cinder-girl is sad, but not surprised. In Putzi’s words, “Alice’s [burned] body, which disrupts her tie to her father and is assumed to repulse potential suitors, is now without


32 Ibid.
function in the culture in which she lives.”

Her role as “the flower of the race,” who will bring the Strathsay bloodline back from its effeminate obscurity, is now a thing of the past.

What Alice does not at first understand, shut safely away at her English boarding school for the duration of her recovery, is that her lost potential as a marriageable future mother will also fundamentally alter her relationship with her own mother, the “ruthless matchmak[er].”

She returns to the Strathsays’ ancestral home eager to renew the bonds among the invisible “fibres of the Strathsay heart,” only to find that her ruined face excludes her from the feminine union of her mother and sisters as surely as it excludes her from the marriage market.

When Alice attempts to embrace the mother who holds the “fibers” of her daughter’s heart, “her shining blue eyes opened and filled with fire, her proud lips twisted themselves in pain, she struck her two hands together, crying out ‘My God! how horrible!’ and fainted.” Alice herself has acknowledged that her mother had “half the mind to hate” all of her daughters “because they were none of them a son,” but it has not occurred to her that her burned face might entirely sever the maternal bond that linked them.

Mrs. Strathsay, however, is painfully aware of the Civil War-era sentiment that “[d]omestic families” are “links in [a] larger chain, the building blocks of generational lineage.” If Alice cannot participate in the perpetuation of this “lineage,” then her

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33 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 66.


35 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 64.


37 Ibid., 105.

38 Ibid., 99.

39 Jackson, American Blood, 7.
value to her “domestic family” goes from significant to negligible—not simply in her mother’s eyes, but also in the eyes of the patrilineal society in which Spofford writes.

As Mrs. Strathsay’s unmaternal rejection of her former favorite indicates, the position of a “redundant” woman within her mother’s house was tenuous at best in Spofford’s 1863 reality. The contemporary laws of inheritance in Spofford’s day presupposed an intergenerational passage of property from father to son. As a result of this supposition, the increasingly conservatively interpreted Common Law that America had inherited from Britain did not allow for the transfer of property from a deceased man to his living wife; “under Common Law, widows could not be heirs—that is, they could not be accorded the full property rights of their deceased husbands as heads of households nor could they legally write wills.” Mothers, according to this system, were not meant to act as caregivers to adult children, especially daughters. In a concession to the possibility that a father might die before his son came of age, “[h]owever, [widows] could be named sole executors of their husband’s property”: a role that would end as soon as the true heir could legally take control. Thus, a widow’s highest calling as a de facto, if not an official, head of household, might be the temporary custodianship of her son’s assets—a calling she could not undertake should she bear only girls. Far from acting as an ally within the household, a grown daughter within her mother’s home could easily be perceived as an affront, or a failure.

From the moment she fails her own mother’s expectations, Alice becomes a “ghost” in her own family, much like the father whose features she once bore. As the former Strathsay princess explains her mother’s new goal for her cinder-child, “she had taught me to have a


strange shrinking from all careless eyes,” creating in her daughter a compulsive horror at the idea of being seen.\textsuperscript{42} Mrs. Strathsay strives to remove Alice from society entirely, wishing all evidence of her greatest disappointment eradicated. The idea that Alice may live an individually fulfilling life outside of the confines of marriage and motherhood does not occur to either of them. In deference of the needs of her family, who still need a sister to marry Angus and give birth to a Strathsay heir, Alice is not permitted to expose herself to the eyes of their guests (of whom Angus is one). Instead, she is banished to her widowed sister’s house to care for an unworthy, non-Strathsay nephew while her mother and sisters entertain eligible noblemen. She is now a Cinderella indeed—but one with no apparent inclination to go to the ball or dance with the “prince.”\textsuperscript{43}

Rather than resist her demotion, Alice internalizes her mother’s assessment of her value to the family and does her best to make herself invisible, both to the bitterly disappointed Mrs. Strathsay and to the wider social world to which Angus belongs. She considers her place to be in the proverbial ashes, earning her keep as a Strathsay by caring for her nephew and preparing beautiful dresses for her sisters. The kindest epithet that the Strathsay matriarch now has for her once-beloved daughter is “fright.” Far from defying her mother’s designation, Alice takes her critique seriously, and says that, from now on, “I’ll wear shadows,” remaining inconspicuous so as not to shame the family and ruin Effie’s chance at a union with Angus.\textsuperscript{44} She has gone from

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\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 113.
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\textsuperscript{43} This nephew, the son of the oldest Strathsay daughter, Margray, bears no resemblance to the deceased Mr. Strathsay and so is unqualified to be named the new Strathsay heir. In an obvious bid to rectify this flaw, Margray names the boy “Angus,” clearly hoping that this will make him more palatable in Mrs. Strathsay’s exacting eyes. As his dismissal to Alice’s care indicates, this gambit is a failure; Mrs. Strathsay has no interest in Margray’s son.
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\textsuperscript{44} Spofford, “The Strathsays,” 108.
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favored heiress to stranger in her own family, but the most conspicuous aspect of her new life seems to be how perfectly explicable both she and the other Strathsay women find her demotion. As Mary Strathsay (the second daughter) says to Margray (the first), “You know, girl, that our mother loved our father’s face in her, and counted the days ere seeing it once more; and having lost it, she is like one bewildered.” Of course Mrs. Strathsay is sickened by Alice’s face, Mary reasons; by allowing herself to be disfigured, Alice has struck a blow at the very heart of this family of women even as it struggles to recover from the loss of its patriarch. She has betrayed their common quest for a male Strathsay heir to carry their bloodline forward, and ruined Mrs. Strathsay’s best chance for a grandson who has her husband’s “deep-set, and large and dark and starry eyes” and “carmine [skin tones] just flushing beneath the olive of the cheek.” It is natural that their mother would want such a disappointment kept out of the way.

But, in this fraught domestic landscape, even erasure is not enough to compensate for the magnitude of Alice’s failure. Thanks to her disappointment, Mrs. Strathsay now considers her burned daughter an enemy—and eventually the cinder-girl begins to treat her as such. When, through what her mother considers an inexplicable twist of fate, Angus insists that he desires no one but Alice, their marriage empowers the new Mrs. Ingestre at the expense of the mother who all but disowned her for the sin of being too damaged to accomplish it. Alice’s union with the accommodating Angus does indeed resurrect the image of her father in the form of her son, but it also remakes her in the image of her mother: the new Strathsay matriarch and custodian of the bloodline. As Putzi expresses the situation, the new Strathsay-Ingestre baby “reallocate[s] the


46 Ibid., 99.

47 This insistence comes after a series of “Cinderella”-esque parties meant to facilitate Angus’s romance with Effie, at which he instead seeks out Alice in her silence and seclusion.
economic and emotional power of the Strathsay family,” placing the tyrannical authority Mrs. Strathsay once wielded over her daughters squarely in Alice’s hands. Yet, despite her experience as an outsider in her own home, Alice does not use her hard-won power to create a family that protects rather than undermines the relations between mothers and daughters. Instead, she takes over the Strathsay estate—“Angus rented his estates and came and lived with us”—and creates for herself a new version of the original paternally oriented matriarchy her mother forged.

Alice is not interested in transcending the intra-feminine hostility of the Strathsay household upon her marriage; rather, she actively ushers its legacy into a new generation, complete with a living patriarch who abdicates power in favor of his wife. Alice’s son, named for her father, naturally becomes an object of veneration among the various Strathsay women. He is the fulfillment of all of his grandmother’s wishes: “there’s a son in the house, a son of her own choosing”—but he is also, Spofford reveals, a vehicle by which Alice can control Mrs. Strathsay. As Alice describes her mother’s relationship with her new grandson, “I verily believe that she fancies him to be my father’s child.” The doting grandmother imagines her grandson to be her husband’s son, creating a paradoxically ideal and incestuous lineage for her daughter’s Strathsay heir. Her identity is inextricably linked to his: in Alice’s words, “none knew how she wished it, save by the warmth with which she hailed it,” despite how vocal she has been about her hopes for her daughter’s progeny. When Alice gives birth to her Strathsay son, she cements her own

48 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 73.


50 Ibid., 118.
position as the gatekeeper of her father’s bloodline, able to grant or withhold her mother’s access to the precious heir.

Thus, despite the unity with which the Strathsay women hailed the marriage of Alice and Angus, their Strathsay son serves to reinforce rather than mitigate the new intra-feminine domestic hierarchy over which Alice presides. “She’s aye softer than she was,” Alice concedes regarding her mother’s treatment of the baby, “she does not lay her moulding finger on him too heavily.” But Mrs. Strathsay’s gentleness is as much a result of fear as of compassion; Alice holds her son hostage to her mother’s good behavior, threatening that, if she feels the boy is mistreated, “we should have to win away to our home,” depriving the old woman of the boy she fantasizes is her child.51 Alice’s role as the Strathsay matriarch is, as Putzi says, dually “depend[ent] on renewing the patriarchal family and chastening the powerful matriarch” of the previous generation.52 Although Alice—rather ironically—concludes, “we have grown to be a glad and peaceful family at length,” that peace is predicated upon her victory over her mother on the domestic battlefield: a battlefield upon which her son is the primary weapon as well as the object of dispute.53 Mrs. Strathsay may stay within the family, but as a “step” mother, fundamentally outside of the charmed domestic circle of her daughter’s family, and always subject to Alice’s control. In the end, while Alice’s empowerment through matrilineal reproduction does represent a radical triumph of womanly agency in the face of an unaccommodating social hierarchy, it is also symptomatic of the difficulty involved in developing a more benevolent system that transcends such destructive systems of inheritance.

51 Ibid., 118.

52 Putzi, “‘Burning into the Bone,’” 73.

Unlike the decorous Spofford, who was known, despite her sensationalist plots, for her ladylike deportment, Elizabeth Stoddard’s ferocious fiction reflected an equal willingness to reject social convention in the real world. By 1865, when *Two Men*, appeared, Stoddard was already known in literary circles for her tempestuous heroines and their tense relationships with their parents. Cassandra Morgeson’s teenaged adventures began when her mother determined that her daughter must be exposed to the same domestic trials that she herself underwent as a girl. In her new novel, Stoddard expands upon Spofford’s model of intergenerational hostility between members of a matriarchal household, expanding upon the “wicked stepmother” trope of a jealous mother forced to take a young kinswoman into her home. Sarah Auster, née Parke, the bitter New England matriarch in question, is determined to render her new ward, the Catholic, half-Spanish Parke cousin Philippa Luce, a servant rather than a daughter of the house. Sarah reasons that if Philippa considers herself a drudge for rather than a member of the Parke clan, she will never claim her birthright of half the estate’s income, much less attempt to ingratiate herself with Sarah’s own son, tellingly named Parke. The plot of *Two Men* spans Philippa’s coming-of-age, modeling the increasingly mutual dependence between the hostile stepmother and her adoptive daughter. Philippa’s menial role within the Parke family, Stoddard suggests, represents a very real form of domestic exploitation, but Sarah’s and Philippa’s respective bids for power within the Parke household also represent the possibility of new forms of matrilineal custodianship and matriarchal influence that challenge the prevailing patriarchal structure of domestic hierarchy (as did Spofford’s Strathsay women before them).
In light of its content, it is hardly surprising that critical and popular audiences alike found Stoddard’s second novel, like her abrasive personality, to be an uncomfortable experience. The temperamental New England woman, with her poet husband (Richard Henry Stoddard) and coterie of New York City literati, was already a source of consternation to critics accustomed to self-effacing antebellum authoresses who downplayed both their books and their genius. In 1865, *Two Men* stood out as an object of anxiety. Stoddard was powerfully aware of the discomfort that her second novel, like her first one, evoked in its readers. As she wrote to William Dean Howells (one of the few tentatively positive reviewers) at the end of the year, “I have a reputation now—but it is one that makes everybody cock their heads to one side when I am mentioned.”

No one, she implied, seemed to understand where her twisted domestic drama belonged in the spectrum of American literature by women. Even Howells struggled to articulate exactly what he found compelling about Stoddard’s new tale of an antagonistic New England family. “It is at times an atmosphere in which only eldritch and unearthly things could breathe,” he mysteriously asserts in his review for *The Nation*. This suggestion that the Parkes are somehow unreal in their apparent cruelty and madness may, in fact, account for Howells’s willingness to defend the novel. The Parke miasma, in his eyes, is fantastical, the realm of the “unearthly,” and thus not a threat to the tangible post-war American families who might—but probably will not—pick it up.

Other reviewers were less inclined than Howells to find a supernatural language that would complement Stoddard’s tale of a family whose members both love and loathe one another.

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55 William Dean Howells, [Review of *Two Men*], *The Nation* (July 1865): 537-538.
The young Henry James baldly stated in an unpublished review that *Two Men* “was a long tedious record of incoherent dialogue between persons irresponsible in their sayings and doings even to the verge of insanity.”\(^5^6\) James was particularly repelled by the seeming futility of all the characters’ interactions; none of their behavior seemed intended to meet their desires or solve their problems. Instead, he fumed, Stoddard herself could not—or would not—narrate the logic behind young Philippa Luce’s obsessive desire to marry her oblivious cousin Parke, or Sarah Parke Auster’s matriarchal compulsion to oppress her ward while pandering to her son. The novel boiled down to a series of empty dialogues bereft of meaning and devoid of purpose. Even Stoddard’s faithful literary advocate and probable lover, Edmund Clarence Stedman, was forced to acknowledge in his preface to the second edition that, while “many will like it, others may not.”\(^5^7\) Without an obvious frame of literary or social reference to contextualize it, the failure of Stoddard’s second novel to garner a widespread readership, despite a series of reprints in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, seemed inevitable.

Thanks to the efforts of modern scholars, however, this lost context is beginning to resurface. Since the critical rediscovery of *The Morgesons* in the 1980s, academics have reopened Howells’s and Stedman’s tentative efforts to excavate the social concerns that spurred Stoddard to write *Two Men*. Jennifer Putzi, who edited the 2008 reprint—the first since the 1971 Johnson Reprint edition—understands the novel in terms of the seeming social deviance that it models. As she explains in her introduction, “Stoddard transgresses the boundaries of what was considered acceptable (especially for women writers) in nineteenth-century American fiction; her


second novel features unhappy marriages, complex female characters, semi-incestuous relationships, and miscegenation.”\textsuperscript{58} When we add to this list of painful literary revelations the reality of the Civil War—and the resulting dearth of functioning patriarchal figures on the 1860s home front in which Stoddard wrote and published—the Parke “transgressions” of word and deed that so alarmed James are not so inexplicable as he and so many of his fellow critics believed.

In a radical rejection of the popular notion of the transfer of wives’ allegiance from fathers to husbands at the time of their marriage, Sarah’s primary motive to enter into holy wedlock is the continuation of her own paternal bloodline, as opposed to that of her lackluster spouse, Jason Auster. As with Alice’s marriage in pursuit of a Strathsay son, Sarah’s continued desire to be a Parke rather than an Auster demands a form of marriage that defies patriarchal expectations, integrating Jason into her own house rather than allowing him to become the head of his own. Although the ferocious dramas of the Parke household are certainly extreme, they do represent the object of very real anxieties among contemporary Americans about the state of the domestic sphere. As a result of the rapidly changing shape of the family unit, Jackson observes, “many nineteenth-century Americans considered their own time to be a dangerously low point in the family and were already bemoaning the deterioration of traditional values.”\textsuperscript{59} This new potential for loss (both physical and ideological) complemented other preexisting anxieties about the decline in family values, which a range of contemporary critics, including

\textsuperscript{58} Jennifer Putzi, introduction to \textit{Two Men}, by Elizabeth Stoddard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), xv.

\textsuperscript{59} Jackson, \textit{American Blood}, 15.
Hiram Powers and Erastus Dow Palmer, explored as early as the 1840s. The telling clash of Sarah’s “traditional” maternal commitments to her son and her home with her decidedly transgressive rejection of the needs of her husband and ward would not have been lost upon Stoddard’s readers. How, she demanded, could antebellum domestic values explain a home in which the presence of a living, growing male heir—the next chronological step in the story that Alice Strathsay’s infant son began—facilitated hostility rather than solidarity among his future dependents?

That Parke Auster, rather than his mother or even his father, is the true authority in the Parke household becomes clear long before the boy comes of age. Gloring in the boy’s resemblance to her own grandfather, Squire Parke, Sarah raises Parke as a prince on his ancestral estate. The Cinderella trope is thus dually applicable to Two Men. Most obviously, Sarah oppresses her false child, Philippa, at the expense of her true one, condemning her as a “cockatrice” in the family nest and alienating her from the rest of the brood with humiliating chores and ill-fitting clothing. But Philippa also believes she is destined to overcome these abuses through a marriage to the man who had been presented as the patriarchal ideal since her childhood: her cousin Parke.

Yet Stoddard presents these romantic archetypes—true love and the bitter female obstacle to it—only to complicate them with less comfortable, if equally familiar, truths. The Parke family, we quickly discover, is uniquely qualified to model the plight of a household

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61 Elizabeth Stoddard, Two Men (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971), 53. The cockatrice, a hybrid product of a dragon or basilisk mated with a chicken, traditionally symbolizes a stolen or monstrous identity. Like an Ugly Duckling among his more pleasing companions, such a creature by definition does not belong.
abandoned to the care of a matriarchal custodian. The Parke inheritance is not merely material—the house, the grounds, the various heirlooms—but more importantly tied to certain compulsive behaviors. As local businessman John Davis warns Jason, who is on the verge of marrying Sarah, the Parke heiress, “There’s a streak in the family; one or two in every generation are all streak—which means that they go to the devil.” When a male Parke inherits this “streak,” he must be allowed to leave home immediately in search of adventure, unfettered by financial or paternal obligations—a thinly veiled reference to the mass exodus of fathers and sons in Stoddard’s own American Northeast. This, in turn, necessitates the presence of a female counterpart who will perform the awkward dual task of both remaining tied to the Parke estate and marrying outside of it, so as to produce a new heir, who will begin the cycle of nurture and abandonment afresh.

As the only daughter of her generation, it is Sarah Parke’s destiny to take on this role of custodial mother. While she remains immured in the decaying estate, her cousin Osmond Luce, who is heir to their grandfather’s seat as the Parke patriarch, takes up his own role in the cycle of paternal exodus that has reigned since the first Parke “knocked off his heel-tap on Plymouth Rock.” Far from being surprised at Osmond’s defection to South America, where he looks forward to military adventures, Squire Parke and Sarah understand it as part of an unpleasant but inevitable pattern: Osmond is “like his uncle, Sarah’s father, who had deserted home years ago” for parts unknown. Part of the Parke patrimony—the restless “streak” that appears once in every generation—is the right to strike for “freedom” without regard for the needs of those who must remain at home.

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62 Ibid., 4.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 8.
era—these roles are drawn sharply along gendered lines; only the men may partake in the Parke heritage of adventure and excess.

Stoddard suggests that this revised domestic model, like the Strathsay matriarchy, offers a unique set of opportunities as well as problems for its female members. In response to the chronic loss of their men, the Parkes have developed a system whereby maternal caretakers maintain the ancestral home on behalf of absent patriarchs. When Osmond departs for Venezuela, therefore, he comfortably determines that “he would transfer the duty” of caring for the “family myths” of the Parke estate “to Sarah, who believed in them.” This, after all, has historically been the function of the Parke women: to maintain the family influence in the town of Crest, to care for the house and grounds, and to raise a new generation of Parke children who are properly indoctrinated in the Parke way. Motherhood, then, grants Sarah unusual latitude in her treatment of her husband and children; her status as keeper of the “family myths” allows her to decide what roles the lesser Parkes may play relative to the heir. On the other hand, her power comes at a price; she must walk the fine line between renouncing and replicating the “myth” of exodus that carries the family from one generation to the next. This role is not a comfortable one: Lynn Mahoney titles it “the Imprisoning Power of Family Inheritance,” and reluctantly compliments Osmond and his fellow ex-patriarchs for escaping it. The labor of maintaining the illusion of family solidarity in the face of geographical distance falls upon the women who are “imprisoned” not merely within the estate itself but, more importantly, within their role as facilitators of their sons’ eventual flight. Their sons are their vehicles to power, but also the source of that power’s limits.

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65 Ibid., 8.

Sarah Parke Auster’s relationship with her son Parke exemplifies the fraught dynamic that emerges when mothers consciously raise their sons for exodus. She must resort to making Parke’s first name match that of their forefathers because, as a woman, Sarah has been forced to take on the surname of her husband. When “she recollected that there would be no more Parkes,” it instills in her an even more urgent need to shape her son in their image.  

Jason’s role as father is primarily to stay out of the way while she accomplishes this task; it is her maternal duty, as the only remaining bearer of the Parke bloodline still at home, to create via her son a resurrection of her own paternal lineage, rather than her husband’s. As Mahoney notes, Sarah’s “gender keeps her from enjoying the Parke heritage fully”—meaning that her best access to the family legacy she has been raised to value more than anything must come vicariously through her son.  

Unfortunately, the despotic control she wields in the name of the Parke mythos does not extend to her son’s conduct. Sarah’s primary duty in negotiating “the intricate relationship between family history and individualism” actually demands that she enable Parke’s tendencies to excess. Her role is desperately to “overindulge” her son in an effort to keep him—and with him her more complete access to their “heritage”—in the town of Crest as long as possible.  

But, as Elizabeth Young notes in her discussion of Civil War-era masculine responses to “female civility” as a means of control, “the possibilities of transgressive excess were almost endless,” and Parke embraces them all, forcing Sarah to become complicit in the worst of the Parke

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68 Mahoney, *Elizabeth Stoddard and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Culture*, 93.  
69 Ibid., 94.
vagaries. In even Parke’s most offensive wishes, “Sarah literally obeyed him.” But this slavish devotion, meant to render his home environment more palatable, actually necessitates his departure. Totally free of familial “restraint,” the newest Parke heir seduces and impregnates an octoroon girl, who ultimately dies in childbirth. His name blighted and social status undermined, Parke finds himself in the perfect position to decamp for Venezuela and its exciting civil war, leaving his cousin Philippa to watch over the “family myths” in her turn.

Although Parke’s civil war in South America is not the one tearing most American families apart in 1865, the problem that his flight creates for the family is certainly a familiar one. American women on the home front, like the Parke women, were familiar with the experience of waiting to lose their fathers and sons to war. The Civil War Trust estimates that “[m]ost of the Union soldiers were under 30,” while Hacker confirms that the average age for a man’s first marriage in 1860 was 27.8. Hacker goes on to conclude that “exposure to high levels of wartime stress increased the desirability of marriage to Civil War soldiers,” suggesting that during the war years there was an increased “likelihood that [men] would marry early.” In other words, a disproportionate number of would-be soldiers would already have wives (and possibly children) of their own at the time of their enlistment—wives and children who would, like Sarah and her brood, have to fend for themselves with their head of household away at war.

70 Elizabeth Young, _Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12.

71 Stoddard, _Two Men_, 191.

72 Ibid., 8.

73 Hacker, “Economic, Demographic, and Anthropometric Correlates of First Marriage in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States,” 312.

74 Ibid., 310.
For the Parkes, however, the patriarch’s need to go to war is not limited to a single generation, but is rather a precondition of the masculine experience, and his family has over the generations perfected a system for accommodating this absence. Unfortunately, deprived of the social and legal tools that patriarchs traditionally use to direct their dependents, the Parke matriarchs find themselves resorting to domestic tyranny and psychological abuse in their efforts to raise privileged Parke men alongside self-abnegating Parke women willing to toil in the ashes of their brothers’ splendor. The “cockatrice” daughter, a dedicated advocate of the family to which she only half belongs, represents the new, incarnation of the more familiar cinder-girl that the Civil War necessitated. Without Philippa to continue the cycle, there will be no more Parke legacy. Shawn Thomson emphasizes the crucial role of women in the promotion of Parke patrimony: “After Osmond runs off to South America, Sarah recognizes she cannot fill the void in the family left by the absence of the…only surviving male heir.” There is an obvious remedy to her situation, and Sarah takes it. In the absence of their men, Parke women, without becoming heads of family, must find a distinctly female system for facilitating male inheritance. In other words, Philippa—like Sarah before her—must marry a man who is willing to be an accessory to the Parke estate, rather than a patriarch in his own right.

The irony of Sarah and Philippa’s seemingly unusual position, of course, is that it actually resembles the awkward dual status of many women during the nineteenth century. They must fill the implicitly feminine role of mothers, while working to produce appropriately masculine sons whose duties and rights are the virtual opposite of their own. The Civil War, and

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75 Stoddard, *Two Men*, 53.

its dramatic renegotiation of household demographics, highlighted an already existing pattern in the American domestic apparatus: the rigidly hierarchical system of paternal governance was becoming increasingly unfeasible among families in which women were acting—or attempting to act—as heads of household. According to Higonnet, “civil war serves as an emblem and catalyst of change in the social prescription of sexual roles”; if families wished to continue to function, Stoddard implies, they would have to find alternate means of organizing themselves.\footnote{Higonnet, “Civil Wars and Sexual Territories,” 81.}

In 1865, the Parke family offered one such response to these unstable “social prescriptions,” repurposing apparently “redundant” female dependents to make them indispensable contributors to their paternal heritage. Sarah’s desperate possessiveness of the kinsman who has left her and the son who will soon do so leaves her with only one viable option for the continuance of the Parke legacy in Crest: her “speckled” “cockatrice” of a ward, Philippa Luce.\footnote{Stoddard, \textit{Two Men}, 54, 53.}

If ever there was a nineteenth-century heroine born to play the role of a marginalized Cinderella, routinely neglected by her own family, it is Philippa. She is the daughter of Sarah’s flighty cousin Osmond Luce and his late wife, an anonymous South American woman of dubious (that is to say, Catholic and possibly multiracial) lineage. Osmond, inconvenienced by the presence of a daughter on his international adventures, makes a brief pilgrimage to Crest so as to deposit the girl in Sarah’s care, requesting that she be trained in the art of Parke womanhood. Sarah, fiercely jealous of the “other woman” that Philippa’s presence represents, nevertheless correctly interprets Osmond’s appeal to turn Philippa into a silent custodian after her own image: “all the indulgences that she lacked at Philippa’s age, Philippa was to lack; she should be taught to be useful, not to enjoy herself after any fashion of her own. What had been
right for herself…must be right for Philippa, whether it suited or not.”79 Sarah, then, is especially qualified to enforce her ward’s “cinder-girl” status, because she was raised in this role herself. For all her indignation at Philippa’s presence, the younger woman’s arrival enables Sarah to create a system of inheritance whereby she molds her young “step”—daughter into a new guardian of the Parke trust, equally prepared to abase herself to the Parke heir or be abandoned by him.

For all her cruelty to Philippa resembles the vengeance of a wicked stepmother figure, however, Sarah’s treatment of her ward does serve to bind her to the one person in the house who seems interested in her fate: her cousin Parke. With the boy’s inevitable exodus looming as he ages, Sarah uses Philippa in a desperate gambit to keep her son at home. In an effort to instill in her the proper reverence for the Parke heritage, Sarah “confined [her ward] to a system as rigid as that of the penitentiary”—a system from which she is only allowed to deviate at Parke’s insistence. Philippa, then, must develop the same obsession with the production of Parke heirs that led her “step”—mother to marry Jason and produce Parke despite her lifelong preference for Osmond. From the moment she arrives in Crest, what few positive experiences Philippa has are built around the presence of her cousin; Sarah’s “one exception” to the restrictive routine she imposes on her ward is Philippa’s “liberty to associate with Parke, and share his pleasures as he saw fit.”80 It may be true, as Mahoney claims, that “Sarah is in many ways the villain of this novel,” but her cruelty is not arbitrary.81 Every time she “accuse[s Philippa] of carelessness and extravagance,” deprives her of suitable clothing, or calls her a “cockatrice,” Sarah reinforces her

79 Ibid., 43.

80 Ibid., 44.

81 Mahoney, *Elizabeth Stoddard and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Culture*, 93.
almost-daughter’s conviction that without Parke, the mitigating male presence in the household, her life would be one of literal and metaphorical labor among the ashes.  

By casting Philippa’s own “step”-brother as her potential Prince Charming, Sarah attempts to turn the intrusive presence of the younger woman into an asset rather than an impediment to her matriarchal duties. If the younger woman worships Parke, she may not wish leave the estate to marry, taking her half of the Parke patrimony with her. The problem, as Sarah sees it, is that her ward has delusions that she may someday care for the estate as Parke’s wife, rather than as his servant. Ironically, Philippa’s desire to escape Sarah’s influence by marrying Parke and Sarah’s antithetical desire to keep Philippa from the marriage market so she may serve Parke actually unite the two in their efforts to keep the Parke heir in the Parke house by whatever means necessary. As Stoddard’s narrator bluntly says of the Parke matriarch’s relationship with her ward, “Sarah hated her.” She hates the fact that Philippa is Osmond’s daughter but not her own, hates Philippa’s delusion that she is going to marry Parke, and most of all hates that, “from some strange necessity in her nature,” she needs to keep the girl at her side as a “familiar demon.”  

Without her hated “cockatrice” daughter, she knows, there can be no future for the Parkes. In keeping with this spirit of mutually fulfilling animosity, “Philippa felt toward [Sarah] a repulsion that acted as a charm”; no matter how abrasive her mockery and abuse, the ward believes absolutely in her false mother’s vision of the family’s future. Their shared dislike

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82 Stoddard, Two Men, 53.

83 Ibid., 45.

84 Ibid., 53.

85 Ibid., 134.
of one another seems to enhance, rather than inhibit, their common enthusiasm for the paternal Parke legacy.

Far from initiating the breakdown of the family estate, the emphatic dislike between “mother” and “daughter” leads to Philippa’s own embrace of the mantle of Parke matriarch. By feeding her an emotional diet of bitterness rather than nurture, Sarah successfully creates in Philippa a perfect replica of herself. When she complains about Philippa, one of her neighbors informs her, “I fancy you have described your model in spite of yourself; she is not one to be moved by a man’s love, nor his hate.”86 Indeed, it quickly becomes apparent that Philippa’s motive for marriage, like Sarah’s before her, grows increasingly less romantic as she gets older: more than to marry for love, she wants to stay in the Parke house and carry on the Parke traditions. If Parke himself cannot facilitate this, Philippa is willing to renounce him in favor of more enduring access to her patrimony. As she pragmatically informs a potential rival for Parke’s affections, “There are states and circumstances which justify us in the attempt we make to take into keeping the lives of men like Parke Auster.”87 Those reasons, however, are tied not to Parke himself but to the grand custodial calling he represents. When the scandal-ridden heir announces his intention to abandon the family estate in favor of skirmishes on the Venezuelan frontier, she realizes, much as Sarah realized of Osmond, “Away from Crest, he could not be to her what she had believed he would be.”88 What she needs, Philippa slowly comes to understand, is the same thing Sarah needed: a quiet, unobtrusive man who will allow her to continue managing the Parke estate rather than demanding that she leave it in favor of a new household.

86 Ibid., 127.
87 Ibid., 94.
88 Ibid., 254.
Fortunately, Sarah has provided her “cockatrice” daughter with this, as well. Upon her death, which occurs shortly before Parke’s departure for South America, the former Parke matriarch leaves a widowed husband who has already proven himself capable of siring a Parke son. Jason Auster is the perfect father for roving Parke heirs, because, unlike them, he is immune to the family wanderlust; he is the kind of surrogate patriarch who will enable a matrilineal transfer of power from maternal grandfather to grandson. Even more than Angus Ingestre, Jason is susceptible to matriarchal influence. Following in the footsteps of her wicked “step”-mother, Philippa exerts a bewitching influence that keeps Jason on the estate; “he swore silently that he would never go beyond the spot that contained her.”89 And, again like Sarah, she will presumably use Jason to create and care for the Parke sons with whom their uncles and cousins cannot be bothered until they come of age. Thus, instead of using her marriage to escape from the oppression of Crest, Philippa reverses the Cinderella trope of escape from domestic oppression through marriage. Instead, she uses marital union as a radical means of inheriting the mantle of the stepmother whose abuse forged her. Like the previous “Parke” matriarch, she understands that Jason’s crucial role as a custodial rather than patriarchal man of the house will enable the passing of the matriarchal torch and the continuance of the Parke legacy. Of Philippa’s relationship with Jason, Putzi wonders, “Is it not possible that living in Sarah’s house and married to Sarah’s husband…Philippa will simply become another Sarah?”90 By the end of the novel, the answer appears to be a resounding “yes.”

When she decides to remain with the Parke estate after Sarah’s death and Parke’s departure, Philippa explains to Jason that she has no romantic interest in him, but that, instead, “I

89 Ibid., 271.
90 Putzi, introduction to Two Men, xlivii.
succumb to tradition and custom because I love them.” A husband like Jason is part of the Parke women’s “tradition” of service to their fathers and brothers. Like Sarah before her, Philippa’s primary goal is to continue the Parke bloodline, thereby carving a place for herself in her absent father’s family tree. Marriage into a new family, far from representing a domestic ideal, would actively impede Philippa’s efforts to attain matriarchal Parke-hood. Rather than seeing the marriage market as a means of freeing herself from the role of servant in her own home, Stoddard’s heroine prefers to take control of her father’s neglected patrimony through the supposedly retiring role of wife and (presumably) future mother. Through Philippa’s revisionist understanding of a much-sought role that was increasingly unavailable to prospective brides in 1865, Stoddard suggests that, while often destructive, the passing of the matriarchal Parke torch also represents a perverse form of opportunity. In a world in which women could not guarantee themselves marriages into new homes, Sarah’s and Philippa’s roles as female agents of patriarchal heritage illustrate another means by which a legally dispossessed woman might render herself essential rather than “redundant” to her father’s family. It is a system that inevitably creates competition between mothers and daughters, but it also enables a mode of maternally transmitted inheritance that validates rather than dismisses their labor.

Cinderella’s Wicked Stepdaughter: “Her Story” (1872)

The North’s tense transition from war to reunification reminded women’s rights advocates of the substantial work still to be done. Nancy F. Cott describes the Reconstruction government’s take on female agency as one of confusion bordering on the defensive;

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91 Stoddard, Two Men, 231.
“Customary definitions of marriage presumed the domesticity and dependence of women, but the way they met the challenges of the war defied those definitions.”92 Literary women like Alcott and Lillie Devereux Blake had gone to the front themselves in pursuit of careers in the public realm. Spofford and Stoddard had sold numerous short stories and even novels during the wars years, appearing repeatedly in prominent print venues. All over the newly re-formed Union, wives, widows, spinsters, and daughters had taken on roles and responsibilities that rejected traditional antebellum models of separate spheres and domestic hierarchy. But the war, the nation’s leaders reasoned, had been a traumatic upheaval, not an invitation to dismantle longstanding social mores.93 Over the course of the Reconstruction era and even after its conclusion, the federal government continued to develop “uniform standards of control” that would enforce conservative notions of female dependence within the family structure.94 These “standards” were grounded in an assumption of “husbandly superiority” that conflicted with American women’s desire to act as independent agents, even within the institution of marriage.95 As a result, the malleable domestic roles that seemed increasingly desirable to women like those of the Strathsay and the Parke families found themselves being rapidly rewritten into more familiar morality narratives. In order to reflect the return of the more rigid domestic hierarchy, the shape of the postbellum Cinderella narrative had to change.


93 The institution of Jim Crow laws and other limitations on African-Americans’ agency as citizens would reflect the same sentiment.

94 Cott, Public Vows, 103. Such legislation covered a wide range of issues, including women’s access to interracial marriage, divorce, child custody, employment, property, and birth control, as well as husbands’ protection against charges of spousal abuse or neglect.

95 Ibid., 108.
Like both Two Men and “The Strathsays” before it, Spofford’s Reconstruction-era tale “Her Story” explores the efforts of a young woman determined to carve a place for herself within a family in which she at first appears redundant. This new ingénue, however, is no Cinderella, but what can only be called a wicked stepdaughter, at least in the eyes of her horrified new mother figure. It is this older woman, now married and the mother of two girls of her own, who embodies Spofford’s postwar take on the afterlife of the Cinderella bride. Like the burned Alice Strathsay of 1863, Spofford’s new narrator found herself marginalized on the marriage market by her two adoptive pseudo-sisters (really cousins), until the intervention of a handsome suitor who was willing to overlook her defects. “The Strathsays” and Two Men narrate the experience of oppressed daughters who are nevertheless determined to maintain ties to their father’s houses. “Her Story,” in contrast, explores the more traditional premise that a woman who marries enters wholeheartedly into the domestic sphere over which her husband presides. Spofford’s new “Cinderella” story explores the life of a former cinder-girl after she is married and supposedly secure within her new family. Spofford emphasizes the rags to riches history that the narrator’s marriage facilitates. As an anonymous woman who identifies herself only by her husband’s name, this woman perfectly embodies the subordinate wife who believes in the “superiority” of her chosen partner. When the self-effacing Mrs. Spencer describes her uncomfortable childhood as what Stoddard would call a “cockatrice” in the home of her two more favored cousins, she takes care to emphasize her great good fortune in marrying into a new family, where she feels valued and protected.96 “Her Story” inexorably draws Spofford’s postbellum audience into a more “uniform” future, in which the former cinder-girl has become not a despotic matriarch but a fully domesticated wife and mother—and, more recently, an inmate at a euphemistically named

96 Stoddard, Two Men, 53.
“Retreat” for madwomen. It is from this Retreat that she narrates the story of her fall from blushing bride to wicked guardian to cast-off wife: a fall that she attributes to the intervention of her own “unnatural” daughter, the beautiful interloper who invades her home and steals her husband away from her.97

Spofford’s decision to reverse the perspective of her new Cinderella story from daughter to mother reflects the dangers implicit in the polarized models of womanhood available in light of the conservative backlash of Reconstruction. When “Her Story” appeared in *Lippincott’s* in 1872, its pessimistic reworking of the hopeful tale of a marginalized woman garnering power and status through marriage had painfully obvious social implications. By the end of the war, many women whose roles in antebellum America had been limited to helpmeet and child-bearer had become accustomed to wielding unprecedented amounts of influence and autonomy. Spofford’s new tale of the fierce rivalry between her embattled narrator and that narrator’s adoptive daughter, known only as “Her,” explores the dangers that this aging Cinderella’s antiquated notions of marital hierarchy pose to both herself and her family. Her young, fiery ward is well-educated and self-sufficient; she represents a new generation born of conflict and social instability, whose strength rewrites her false mother’s subservience as weakness. It is no accident that Eva Gold and Thomas H. Fick call the tensions between matriarchs and their unmarried adult daughters in the wake of sectarian crisis “intra-gender warfare.”98 Suspecting that the alluring young woman will be a permanent fixture in their house, the narrator “dreaded”


the invasion of “Her,” understanding it as an “intrusion” upon her formerly exclusive union with her husband, Spencer.

Certain elements of Spofford’s postbellum Cinderella tale reflect that of “The Strathsays,” to be sure. As with Alice (and Stoddard’s Philippa), the anonymous “Her” does not seem interested in looking outside of her own limited social circle for a husband. Instead, she operates on the assumption that, despite her undeniable attractions, her path to power lies not with a charming stranger but with her current patriarch. Determined to cement her position in the household she now occupies, the ward’s attentions must turn not to a handsome outsider—such as Spencer was to his future bride a generation prior—but to the husband of her reluctant mother. This system of intergenerational exchange of men between women, which Stoddard modeled as relatively intuitive in Two Men (Sarah dies, Philippa takes up her marital mantle), wreaks havoc on the rigid household hierarchy of the Spencers. Spofford’s narrator guesses from the beginning that her new false daughter “would be a discord in our harmony”; she recognizes the threat “Her” poses to the system of values that led Spencer to marry her. Fearing for her own security, the narrator becomes obsessed with the danger that their lovely ward poses to her position in the house, foreseeing that the younger woman wishes to rewrite the family hierarchy to privilege qualities that she does not possess.99

What follows is a clash between two opposed versions of femininity. The new ingénue’s confidence in her right to conduct herself as Spencer’s partner rather than his dependent reflects the confusion of a conservative society in which members the old school of brides, like Mrs. Spencer, found themselves in conflict with daughters whose ideas about marriage and propriety were shaped by their knowledge of their own capacities as thinkers and workers. Spencer’s

choice of the narrator as a bride was in keeping with the legally sanctioned nineteenth-century premise that the husband, as the individual “representative” of the married couple, should be what Cott calls “the more knowledgeable and judicious one of the pair.” Spencer was a minister; his bride sang Protestant psalms with “a sort of exaltation.” He was a scholar of religion; she eagerly accepted his tutelage in the ancient Christian hymns. He was a leader and a moral guide to his congregation; she was “shy” and welcomed his direction. Herself a marginalized cousin in a family with two lovely daughters of its own, it seemed natural for this American Cinderella to “relinquish her identity” in favor of that of her authoritative, cultured rescuer. A hierarchical partnership with this charismatic newcomer would be her salvation from a life spent in the shadow of her kinswomen.

Yet the cosmopolitan “Her,” with her equestrian exploits, Continental education, and foreign language skills, provides a model of romantic partnership with which the “prim,” provincial narrator realizes she cannot compete. Mrs. Spencer has constructed her wifely appeal around learning from her husband, not teaching him; she supports him in his endeavors rather than evaluating or critiquing them. Now, she reports with frustration that the interfering ward has “interposed [an] unknown tongue between my husband and myself,” playing on her new “mother’s” rudimentary education to make her an outsider in their discourse on subjects ranging from theology to architecture. Instead of subordinating herself to Spencer’s

100 Cott, Public Vows, 17.
101 Spofford, “Her Story,” 151.
102 Cott, Public Vows, 11.
103 Spofford, “Her Story,” 151.
104 Ibid., 155.
knowledge and status as head of the household, the younger woman plays upon Spencer’s desire for intellectual stimulation, turning her Catholic education (a trait she shares with Stoddard’s Philippa) from a defect into an asset, a basis for debate and discussion in which his wife is not equipped to participate. Rather than restrict her discourse to familiar domestic topics, “she talked of a hundred mysteries and symbols,” all of them mysterious to the older woman. Like Philippa before her, Spencer’s ward clings to religious symbols associated with both foreignness and idolatry; this new Reconstruction-era temptress does not feel she needs to conform to a preexisting patriarchal (Protestant) ideal in order to gain acceptance in the home. In a matter of months, the narrator’s false daughter has convinced Spencer that the Catholic Church’s policy of priestly abstinence is a good one, and that, therefore, “his marriage was a mistake; that on his part at least it had been wrong.” Spencer’s invading ward has rewritten the gendered standards of romantic partnership, forcing the wife who was once an important, if subordinate, participant in their marital union into the role of an obsolete encumbrance to her husband’s true destiny as an intellectual aesthete assisted by a dazzling amanuensis.

To women like Alice or Mrs. Strathsay, who have devoted themselves to perpetuating the legacy of their chosen patriarch, even when he is not present to appreciate them, a woman like “Her,” who appears uninterested in marriage or childbearing, would represent a threat to the very foundation of their identities. In a nation still reeling from the reality of what Young calls “male

105 Ibid., 156.
106 This problem of the access “mainstream” Americans had to the lure of Catholicism appeared in novels with increasing frequency in the second half of the nineteenth century. From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun (1860) to Harold Frederic’s The Damnation of Theron Ware (1896), such literature obsessed over the sensual and aesthetic temptations posed by the Catholic Church.
107 Spofford, “Her Story,” 159.
absence,” most conspicuously in the form of the assassinated President Lincoln (1865) and the impeached President Johnson (1868), women were expected to cling as never before to the remaining paternal icons of stability—icons that, Spofford now suggests, are actually potential agents of discord in their own right. ¹⁰⁸ Spencer’s ward may be “a rotten windfall of the Romish Church,” whose corrupt faith “would be no stay in trouble, no shield in temptation,” but Spencer sees her in different terms: as a refreshing alternative to his usual, more pedestrian domestic routine. ¹⁰⁹ Like the women who learned new skills and developed new ideas as independent agents during the war, Spencer’s ward models an alternative version of womanhood that the current domestic hierarchy is not designed to accommodate. His wife must learn with painful slowness the lesson that Spencer’s “cockatrice” daughter has learned intuitively: in order to survive married life in the new America, one may need to transform oneself not once (through the act of marriage) but repeatedly. ¹¹⁰ Subordinate roles like wife or mother cannot, contrary to the narrator’s expectations, secure a girl a stable place within the patrilineal family hierarchy; as the ward’s machinations make clear, only the patriarch’s chimeric goodwill can make a woman truly invulnerable to displacement. The apparently irrational “prejudic[e]” this mother harbors against her wicked stepdaughter’s arrival in the household is, ironically, grounded in legitimate concerns. ¹¹¹ In an era plagued by a dearth of marriageable men and infused with a distrust of

¹⁰⁸ Young, Disarming the Nation, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Spofford, “Her Story,” 156.

¹¹⁰ Stoddard, Two Men, 53.

¹¹¹ Spofford, “Her Story,” 155-156.
what Carol Farley Kessler calls “homonocial” bonds between women, their competition for Spencer’s protection is all but preordained.\textsuperscript{112}

In order to form what Kessler might call a “heterosocial” household of her own with Spencer, his scheming adoptive daughter must become “the soul of domestic life,” providing for her patriarch an alternative to the peaceful comforts of her stepmother’s reign. Unsurprisingly, the “domestic life” she forges seems nefarious and spiritually bankrupt to Spencer’s conservative bride.\textsuperscript{113} Instead of devoting the evenings to the playing of hymns, this family’s false daughter “would dance with the children—witch-dances they were—with her round arms linked above her head, and her feet weaving the measure in and out.”\textsuperscript{114} Seen through the narrator’s disgusted eyes, the ward’s borderline pagan performance resembles nothing so much as Oliver Wendell Holmes’s lovely but vicious 1861 heroine Elsie Venner, whose mind was poisoned with rattlesnake venom in her mother’s womb.\textsuperscript{115} The influence of this venom, in Holmes’s novel, hypersexualizes the heroine, turning her into a beautiful but base monster, ruled entirely by animal impulses. In keeping with the historical intersection of female sexuality and moral depravity, Spencer’s ward uses sexual wiles to ensnare her chosen man, dismissing the traditional, nurturing domestic routine of her predecessor and embracing a bolder path to the “prince’s” good graces. “I saw him flush and start and quiver,” reports Spencer’s wife in horror as the younger woman laughingly lets down her magnificent hair in the firelight—far from being

\textsuperscript{112} Kessler, introduction to \textit{The Story of Avis}, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), xx.

\textsuperscript{113} Spofford, “Her Story,” 154.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 155.

\textsuperscript{115} Oliver Wendell Holmes, \textit{Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny} (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861).
reduced to the status of cinder-girl by her labors, “Her” is illuminated by them.\textsuperscript{116} Spencer, unlike Holmes’s Bernard Langdon,\textsuperscript{117} has neither the fortitude nor the inclination to reject the sensual delights of his ward in favor of his more prosaic wife and two biological daughters.

The system of marital coverture that had existed in America since before the formation of the United States, instituted by British Common Law, rationalized the exclusion of the wife from economic and political spheres on grounds that the husband would naturally act as her advocate in such settings. However, Spofford’s depiction of the battle between two generations of would-be Cinderella figures reveals the disturbing possibility that the patriarchal “prince” may be susceptible to the corruption of the very domestic ideals that his leadership theoretically undergirds. Spencer, the supposedly exemplary patriarch, upon whose shoulders rests the safety and stability of four dependents, does not seem to think that his dalliance with his ward is incompatible with his marriage vows.

As a result of his self-indulgent logic, the formerly devoted husband begins to consider what he sees as his wife’s unmaternal hostility toward “Her” a form of madness. And, as with the more famous husband figure in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), the fact of his monolithic power over his dependents creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: his impressionable wife, frantic at his betrayal, actually becomes mad. Her madness is not, however, the work of a day or a week. In an extended act of husbandly cowardice that takes place over many months, Spencer repeatedly uses his wife as a sounding board to rationalize his attraction

\textsuperscript{116} Spofford, “Her Story,” 158.

\textsuperscript{117} Holmes’s hero, like most virtuous male protagonists of the period written by male authors, ultimately has the ability to recognize the unwomanly, snakelike attributes embedded in Elsie’s character, despite her beauty and charm. Spofford’s departure from convention is not grounded in her depiction (via an admittedly unreliable narrator) of “Her” as beautiful yet corrupt, but in her suggestion that an apparently “good” man, a husband, father, and minister, might choose to use his power as a privileged patriarch to enable rather than undermine her reign.
to “Her.” His interest in “Her,” he defensively reasons, merely proves what “he had been thinking” for months now: that he should not have married the narrator at all. Since the lovely Catholic girl arrived in the house, he explains, he has come to believe that “a priest should have the Church only for his bride,” and that the “caresses” and “kisses” of his wife are in fact agents of corruption that he can only combat through the indulgence of his purely religious flirtation with “Her.”\(^{118}\) Far from acting as a stabilizing agent in a family of women who long for a benevolent patriarch, this head of household becomes an agent of discord in his own right, taking sides with his scheming almost-daughter against the mother of his biological children, and eventually committing his wife to a madhouse.

Were “Her Story” to end here, with the bitter stepmother’s incarceration, it might appear to illustrate a new, Reconstruction-era template for how a girl might successfully insinuate herself into an existing family. This model would then suggest a revised blueprint for the familiar Cinderella myth, in which the heroine triumphs over her stepmother not by escaping her house but by conquering its patriarch—the very trope that Stoddard developed in \textit{Two Men} seven years earlier. Yet in 1872, even the narrator’s incarceration does not end the end of the cycle of “intra-gender warfare.” Instead, after ten years behind bars, when a new woman arrives at the Retreat, “swarthy as a Malay, but [with] hair, that grows as rapidly as a fungus grows in the night…whiter than leprosy,” Spencer’s discarded wife decides, irrationally, that this must be her rival.\(^{119}\) Convinced that her cockatrice daughter has at last been punished for her sins, the

\(^{118}\) Spofford, “Her Story,” 159.

\(^{119}\) Gold and Fick, “A ‘masterpiece’ of the ‘educated eye,’” 512. Gold and Fick devote their article to arguing not only that Spofford’s narrator \textit{believes} this new madwoman to be “Her,” but further that this woman in fact \textit{is} Spencer’s ward. The latter conclusion requires that Mrs. Spencer be much saner than her narrative voice suggests, but the former claim that she clings to the notion of “Her” as a part of her new surroundings is well founded.
imprisoned Mrs. Spencer gleefully matches each of the new madwoman’s wretched physical
traits with the formerly glorious ones of her rival. Each divergence from the appearance her
lovely ward proves more clearly to the narrator that the “Malay” woman must be “Her.” In
addition to this broken woman’s fungal hair, “her eyebrows are so long and white that they veil
and blanch her dark dim eyes,” the older woman reports. What could this mean but that her ward
has at last been shorn of her mane of sleek dark hair and robbed of her hypnotic facial features?
Inspired by the rumor that the crippled inmate was “struck from her horse” by a “stone from a
falling spire,” she remembers that Spencer and his ward often went riding to the construction site
for “their” new church, further confirming her new companion’s identity.120 Against all evidence
to the contrary, Mrs. Spencer persists in her belief that the new, dark Cinderella who supplanted
her is now her sister in exile, brought to justice by the revitalized forces of domestic hierarchy.

According to Spofford’s Reconstruction version of the Cinderella myth, hostile mother
and daughter figures can no longer hope to use maternal alliances to control their fates. Spofford
gives no indication that “Her” has indeed succeeded in gaining a secure place for herself within
Spencer’s home; with only the unreliable narrator’s word for it, we cannot even be sure that this
was what the younger woman wanted in the first place. Far from representing the beginning of a
progressive new epoch in daughters’ relationships with their mothers, Alice’s defeat of Mrs.
Strathsay came to represent a radical act of individual agency, to be systematically repressed in
the postbellum version of their story. As a result of the paternally organized hierarchies that bind
them, postbellum mothers and daughters in domestic literature begin to look more and more like
the wicked stepmothers and grasping stepdaughters of fairy tales, bereft of the mitigating
promise of a stronger generation to come. Trapped by her inability to reconcile her own notion of

120 Spofford, “Her Story,” 166.
virtuous womanhood with that of a new generation, a full decade apart has not dulled Mrs. Spencer’s belief that her own “goodness” can only be defined in opposition to her ward’s “badness.” Just as Spencer’s licentious kinswoman confirmed her adoptive mother’s moral superiority by flaunting her seductive Catholic wiles, this new, subservient madwoman, who “follows me about like a dog,” confirms her maternal benevolence. Yet Spofford reveals that this so-called benevolence has become, in truth, an act of social violence. Each time she condescends to notice the pathetic husk of a woman she believes to be “Her,” the merciless narrator proves to herself that she has triumphed (medically and morally) over the younger, more exotic woman who must have displaced her.

In her babbling efforts to both defeat and patronize her fellow inmate, Mrs. Spencer attempts to engage in the same competitive yet ultimately productive rhetoric that charged Stoddard’s and Spofford’s “Cinderella” stories of the previous decade. Yet the cycle of maternal inheritance that charged this literature in the 1860s now no longer offers these women the productive opportunities for (albeit despotic) matriarchal control that characterized their predecessors. Neither Sarah Parke and Philippa Luce, nor Mrs. Strathsay and her “burned” daughter Alice, considered their mutual enmity an impediment to the bloodlines they built. Instead, the younger generation drew upon their mothers’ lessons of “ruthlessness” as avidly as they did the lessons of nurture, using their maternal tyranny to shape new families that revise the rhetoric of paternal dominion even as they cling to its symbolism. “Her Story,” however, shows the end of the cycle; neither Spofford’s narrator nor her ward show any sign of bearing the house of Spencer a son. The two Spencer daughters are years away from passing their father’s legacy on to their own children. Thanks to her absence, Mrs. Spencer will never have the opportunity to

121 Ibid., 166.
“lay her moulding finger” upon the next generation, as Alice watched her own mother do.\textsuperscript{122} As the nation recovers and new children are born to replace those lost in battle, the radically intra-domestic lines of female inheritance that peppered Stoddard’s and Spofford’s fiction fade apace, never to be revived in precisely the same form.

\textsuperscript{122} Spofford, “The Strathsays,” 118.
While Northern proto-feminists struggled to forge a unified vision of their roles relative to their own family members, other issues seemed less complex. For antebellum women’s rights activists, the connection between abolishing slavery and enfranchising women seemed obvious. According to Nancy F. Cott, when “proslavery spokesmen argued that God had ordained for slaves, as for wives, a position in the inevitable hierarchy of society, with particular rights and duties attached,” politically minded women’s rights advocates quickly repurposed this metaphor for their own ends.¹ Suffragists reasoned that wives’ legal nonentity resembled that of slaves, which proved the need for the reform, not only of slavery but of marriage as well. The nineteenth-century laws of marital coverture required that a wife “relinquis[h] her identity,” foregoing access to “legal avenues such as suitor contracts…[financial] assets, or…legal documents.”² As a result, she had little more claim to citizenship in the Republic than did a man or woman owned by the master of a Southern plantation.

In light of this reasoning, it seemed perfectly logical to many Northern suffragists that their cause be tied to that of disenfranchised African-American slaves. Cott goes on to explain that antebellum pro-slavery rhetoric commonly used the parallel roles of wife and slave to demonstrate the necessity of benevolent paternalism; “[b]oth women as a sex and blacks as a


² Ibid., 11.
race flourished best where they were guided and protected.” Unsuited to the fraught task of
governing themselves and their labor, white women and black chattel both relied upon the
wisdom and goodwill of their lords and masters. By presenting slaves as intrinsically dependent
entities, who needed the compassionate intervention of masters for nurture and direction,
conservative rhetoricians “remade slavery as a set of relationships intended to foster qualities
desirable in family members. Parental wisdom, protection, support, and discipline were expected
from masters and cheerful, childlike obedience from slaves.”3 Such an idealized domestic
hierarchy was also responsible for the protection and management of these masters’ wives and
daughters. While the experiences of a plantation worker in the Deep South and an upper-middle-
class housewife in New England might bear little physical resemblance to one another, the same
hierarchical rhetoric rationalized their respective lack of political or legal agency.4

The language of “fetters” and “bondage” to depict unhappily married women had long
been a staple of antebellum domestic literature. But the adaption of this iconography in women’s
literature of the Reconstruction era reveals a postbellum rift between proto-feminist and
abolitionist activists that is only partially explained by the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment
in 1865. Harriet Prescott Spofford, a celebrated purveyor of gothic and sensationalist short

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3 Ibid., 61.

4 See Caroline Healey Dall, Woman’s Rights Under the Law: In Three Lectures, Delivered in
Boston, January 1861 (Boston: Walker, Wise, and Company, 1861). An avid women’s rights
activist, Dall wrote scathingly in January of 1861 that wives, as legal nonentities, had “no redress
at common law,” should their husbands appropriate their rents or earnings, or even sell their
property, without spousal consent: language that reflects the abolitionist objections to a master’s
ability to sell his human “property” at will. Dall drives this connection home when she complains
that a wife is no more equipped to defend any “chattels” under her protection against patriarchal
mistreatment than she is to protect herself. Like slaves, wives were “steadily refused a trial by
[their] peers,” and had “no voice in the election of their judges.” While slaves and wives were
subject to the law of the land, Dall pointed out, they had no hand in shaping it, and were
therefore at the mercy of the same paternal forces that had brought the nation to the brink of war
(119, 121, 140).
fiction whose work fell out of favor during Reconstruction, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, a prolific postbellum author of highly political domestic novels, at first appear to occupy very different positions as representatives of proto-feminist sentiment. Spofford’s popular 1860 novella *The Amber Gods* tells the story of a vain New England heiress whose family fortune is built upon the international slave trade. Her antebellum world thrives on eroticized stereotypes of the foreign that would have been familiar from depictions of female slaves. Phelps, while she does repeatedly acknowledged her debt to *The Amber Gods*, lives in a different socio-literary climate. Racial uplift and feminist activism in the late 1870s, when her masterwork *The Story of Avis* (1877) appeared, now existed on entirely different social spectrums, at least in the political imagination. As Phelps works to tell her own story of a false “god” and the havoc he wrecks upon a beautiful New England woman over the course of the 1860s and 1870s, however, her creative alliance with Spofford’s vision of marital bondage becomes clear. Phelps continues to see value in the intersecting plights of wives and ex-slaves. This intersection permeates her heroine’s desire to paint a representation of the Egyptian Sphinx that encapsulates female (as opposed to “white” female) dignity in the face of oppression. It is the tragic nature of Avis Dobell’s failure to achieve her artistic triumph that reveals Phelps’s own vision of Spofford’s vengeful African “gods” in a New England home.

The years following the war saw a dramatic political rupture between activist activities on behalf of African-Americans and middle-class white women. In 1860, Spofford imagined her antebellum heroine Giorgione Willoughby trying and failing to draw upon the hypersexualized forces of pagan idolatry in order to win herself a husband. In the postbellum political arena, however, emancipation wrenched figures of foreign womanhood out of the white, middle-class home. To the rejuvenated suffrage movement of the 1870s, Congress’s refusal to entertain the
question of women’s suffrage alongside that of freedmen seemed a base betrayal. In the eyes of mainstream feminist leaders, it now seemed that emancipation had occurred at the expense of middle-class women’s interests. As a popular postwar author, notes Carol Farley Kessler, Phelps had the opportunity to ride the new wave of women’s rights rhetoric that “flourished during the 1870s,” apparently independent of the now-completed campaign for the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. Yet in 1877 Phelps still felt compelled to return via the image of the Sphinx to the problem of where African-American women fit into the future of marriage reform (or lack thereof). In order to represent what she sees as women’s unique history of silent struggle through the ages, Phelps’s *Avis* relies upon a symbol that is both African and pagan in origin.

The grotesque faces of Yone’s purloined African beads and Phelps’s repurposed Sphinx model their white, middle-class authors’ ongoing struggles to articulate the intersecting legacies of slavery and marital oppression. Despite their common project, however, Spofford and Phelps each have distinct ideas about the way in which African slavery manifests itself in the middle-class New England family. Spofford’s depiction of literal slaves alongside her antebellum characters is far more direct—and more sensationalist—than Phelps’s largely symbolic African presences in *The Story of Avis*. Rather than attempting to combine European racial features with supposedly African eroticism in her own person, as Yone does, Avis spends the war’s first “summer of battles” re-forging one of the great symbols out of Africa, in an attempt to inclusively illustrate the pan-racial bondage of women across history. Yet, in spite of her less direct attempt to capitalize on African iconography, Avis’s fate shares many elements with Yone’s: she, too, soon finds herself seduced by the lure of a false god, this time in the form of a golden-haired suitor returned wounded from the warfront to appeal to her womanly nurturing.

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instincts. For all the good intentions that Avis invests in her Sphinx, the socially sanctioned narrative of a hierarchical romance interferes with her quest represent the united history of women across the boundaries of time and culture.

The Slave Trader’s Legacy: *The Amber Gods* (1860)

Few New England authors could boast a tale of the marriage market as enmeshed in the region’s history with the slave trade as Spofford’s *The Amber Gods*. Yone Willoughby’s quest to wed herself to the aspiring artist Vaughn Rose groans with the collective weight of generations of self-congratulatory family myths of power and dominion, won at the expense of the fortunes that they garnered via the international traffic in slave laborers. This domestic legacy was not unfamiliar to its author. Like the Willoughbys, Spofford’s maternal family, the Prescotts, shared a myth of decayed gentility. Her grandfather, William Pepperell Prescott, was a man of means until “the exigencies of war” (in this case, the War of 1812) obliterated his “fortune as a shipbuilder”; the family finances continued to decline in the generations that followed, culminating in the loss of the Prescott estate in Calais, Maine, during his granddaughter’s childhood.⁶ Thanks to these dramatically changed circumstances, Spofford grew up vividly conscious of the power that ancestral legacy had to shape a family’s future. She used this knowledge to draw a causal link in *The Amber Gods* between the many New England fortunes made through shipping and mercantile trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the escalating tensions over slavery that had brought the nation to the brink of civil war.

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Although Northern abolitionists preferred not to recall their region’s historical participation in the slave trade, Yone’s fixation on the stories of her great-grandfather, the dashing captain of a slave-trading vessel, suggests the influence that such antecedents still have upon her family over a century later. Far from representing an anomaly in their New England locale, the fictional Willoughbys of the nineteenth century shared with many very real middle- and upper-middle-class families a connection to the slave trade via their ancestors’ mercantile professions. Despite the popular notion that slave trading was the province of Southern ports like Charleston or New Orleans, Rachael Chernos Lin notes that, “[f]rom early in the eighteenth century until the end of 1807, when the American branch of the Atlantic slave-trade was officially closed, Rhode Island slavers were responsible for at least half of all slaving voyages from mainland North America.” Yone’s great-grandfather in all likelihood participated in the vast international “triangle of trade” that bartered New England-manufactured rum to West Africans for “the purchase of African slaves,” selling their human bounty to plantations in the Caribbean in exchange for their crops of sugar and molasses, with which they would return to the American Northeast. These raw materials would then be used for the production of more rum, starting the cycle over from the beginning.7 On such exchanges, fortunes were made and lost.

For a readership increasingly inflamed by sectional tensions, the expansion of the legacy of slavery beyond the plantation economy of the South had profound ideological implications. The sway that such a legacy could have over the domestic imagination of a New England woman like Spofford’s heroine Yone was a sharp reminder of the ongoing complicity of middle-class American society in what David Brion Davis calls the same moral and sexual “degrad[ation]” of women—in both marriage and slavery—that women’s rights advocates decried as the most

offensive aspect of chattel slavery. The mechanics of female objectification undergirding the institutions of slavery and marriage speak to the challenges that Spofford sees in dealing productively with either issue within the sphere of proto-feminist political activism.

Unfortunately, Davis notes, “Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other champions of women’s rights” increasingly “showed themselves capable of racist, nativist, and elitist prejudices.” Although proto-feminist racism would not have seemed problematic to white suffragists who advocated for abolition, Spofford reveals that such middle-class social “prejudices” against African-American slaves are actually mutually destructive.

Because eighteenth-century entrepreneurs like Captain Willoughby often identified themselves as merchants rather than slave-traders, and rarely brought what Sidney W. Mintz calls their “human cargoes” back to their home ports, it was easy for nineteenth-century abolitionists to decry slavery as a uniquely Southern institution indicative of a morally bankrupt regional character. Spofford, however, collapses such boundaries when Yone describes the “Amber Witch”—in actuality, a young slave girl—that her great-grandfather brought home to act as a domestic laborer. Far from hiding his participation in human trafficking from his family and community, Captain Willoughby and his descendants take pride in what they see as the delightfully authentic African fury that the child brings with her across the Atlantic. Three

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9 Ibid., 15.


generations later, Yone nostalgically narrates the family tales of the slave girl’s snarled curses in her foreign tongue, her violent resistance to both kitchen work and cold weather, and especially her one possession: the “rosary” of small, grotesque faces carved in amber that the Willoughbys decide must constitute her “gods.”

The Amber Gods appeared over the course of two issues of The Atlantic Monthly in 1860: a moment in American history fraught with sectional anxiety, expressed in large part via responses to the ongoing institution of slavery in the South. Perhaps as a result of such tensions, contemporary responses to the novella avoid the issues of race and slavery that undergird its plot, focusing instead upon more benign elements, including the author’s impeccable pedigree; the Baltimore Sun opens its commentary on The Amber Gods with the statement, “Miss Harriet E. Prescott is the daughter of the great American historian, William H. Prescott, whose fame is as wide as the circle of civilization, and whose memory is cherished by his countrymen with a feeling of veneration accorded no other author, with the exception, perhaps, of Washington Irving.” In a similar vein, the Chicago Tribune falls back on a comfortable discussion of her “style,” citing her “wonderful mastery of the English language” and “great descriptive faculty,” rather than matters of content upon the novella’s reprinting in “The Amber Gods” and Other Stories in 1863. Like its author, The Amber Gods soon fell out of favor in the postbellum era. Indeed, since its “recovery,” modern scholars have pursued similar aesthetic lines of inquiry to

12 Ibid., 43.


uncover the importance of this popular prewar work of the late antebellum era. Alfred Bendixen and Dorri Beam, in particular, have both emphasized Spofford’s affinity with the gothic imagination of Edgar Allan Poe, noting the two authors’ common strength in the short story medium and commenting on their lush representations of female beauty.

In light of such commentary, it is unsurprising that Yone’s narrative opens in front of a mirror: a mirror that reflects back a young woman whom she describes as the “complete incarnation of light, full, bounteous, overflowing.”15 This is not, she assures us, the beauty of dim, mountainous New England climes, but the product of a tropical world “permeated utterly with a rare golden calm.”16 It was in the West Indies, she intimates, visiting the very plantations that her great-grandfather populated with slave laborers, that her uniquely indolent, “fiend[ish]” beauty first manifested itself.17 When Yone returns from her transformative sojourn in the tropics, her father proudly reintroduces her to her incredulous childhood friend Vaughn Rose as “my great West Indian magnolia, my Cleopatra in light colors.”18 Like his daughter, Mr. Willoughby believes the plantation soil that made the family’s fortune has also fed Yone’s inner voluptuous queen. Their proud identification of Yone as a “light” iteration of Egypt’s great feminine despot Cleopatra reveals the ongoing Willoughby pride in their heritage of racially structured decadence and dominion. The West Indies themselves seem to conspire to remake her; “when I reached the islands,” she reminisces, “my sight was as clear as my skin; all that tropical


16 Ibid., 39.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 48
luxuriance snatched me to itself at once, recognized me for kith and kin.”¹⁹ The divided plantation world of white property holders and African slave labor creates in Yone a new kind of white womanhood, infused with what she and her father define as a distinctly exotic allure.

Instead of representing a space geographically and financially separate from New England, then, Spofford presents the West Indies and Yone’s affinity for them as symptomatic of a much larger and more ominous cultural and familial complicity in human exploitation.²⁰ Ironically, Yone’s arrogant appropriation of what she considers the exotic physicality of plantation life reveals a connection that nineteenth-century New England propriety so eagerly dismissed between its antecedents and the slave trade. Her sins of vanity and selfishness are the fruits of the same system of oppression that undergirds her family’s pride and prosperity. She flourished in the West Indies, she explains, “because the air is a firmament of balm, and you grow in it like a flower in the sun; because the fierce heat and panting winds wake and kindle all latent color and fertilize every germ of delight that might sleep here forever.”²¹ In other words, its sensual decadence appeals to her vanity, and its tropical stasis allows her to recline in glorious indolence, without thought of either her domestic obligations or her dying mother. Yone’s willful blindness to the full reality of the environment that has so privileged her throws into sharp relief the same blindness among Spofford’s readers. Dana Luciano articulates the widely held

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

²⁰ As Mintz notes, unlike Great Britain, which ended slavery in its colonies, including the West Indies, in 1807, the newly formed United States remained unabashedly reliant upon slave labor at home (68). While 1807 represented the end of the international transportation of “human cargoes” to America, the internal practice of slavery within the United States fueled the Southern plantation economy just as it had fueled the sugar plantations in the West Indies for generations (Mintz 43). In 1860, the consequences of this continued reliance were becoming difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. With the outbreak of civil war looming, New Englanders like Spofford were, along with the beautiful yet repellant Yone, reaping the fruits of their forefathers’ greed.

nineteenth-century belief that “the gorgeous, excessive form of nature found in the tropics is severed from and opposed to the sentimental and moral functions.”\textsuperscript{22} Such representations of the “excess” inherent in tropical environs had long functioned as a justification of the enslavement of Africans men and women and their descendants, whose impulsive sensuality would naturally disqualify them from governing themselves. By creating in her blonde New England heroine a conspicuous affinity for these licentious climes, Spofford rejects such racial determinism, instead suggesting that it is Yone’s willingness to avail herself of the fruits of slave labor that has contaminated her.

Spofford’s decision to represent the rotten fruits of the slave trade in the form of a white woman of marriageable age is no accident. Her depiction of Yone’s physical flourishing and parallel moral decline reflects the profound cultural anxiety that fuelled the nineteenth-century preoccupation with gender hierarchy. As the nation teetered on the brink of chaos, readers and writers struggled to find scapegoats to account for the increasing sectional instability. Abolitionists were one such brand of scapegoat; amoral, unfeminine women were another. Growing antebellum social unrest translated remarkably well into a hostile rhetoric directed against the sins of frivolity, vanity, and avarice that were the supposed province of women. As with the so-called tropical races, Bruce Dorsey notes, “[l]uxury, effeminacy, and corruption became the feminine counterparts to the masculine triad of the Revolution—virtue, independence, and the public good.”\textsuperscript{23} Yone, as a prospective bride, is supposed to be a keeper of American morality: a guardian of republican masculinity. It is her duty to reject her womanly


impulse for self-gratification in her pursuit of virtue, for the sake of both her husband and her future sons. This prospective bride, however, celebrates her greed and vanity as a heritage passed down by her forefathers along with the republican legacy of the Revolution. Even more tellingly, it is these very qualities that Yone believes will allow her to harness the power of the Amber Witch’s pagan talismans in order to win herself a husband.

Despite her pride in her antecedents, Yone is painfully aware of the connection between the slow shrinking of the scope of her family’s fortunes and the loss of the slave trade that made her great-grandfather a rich man. Yet her own transformation from New England country girl to Cleopatran seductress, instead of disqualifying her from a marriage to the man of her choice, actually enables her pursuit of Rose and inspires his romantic attentions. Significantly, Yone does not perceive Rose as an antidote to her family’s depleted riches; instead, she sees marriage to this talented artist as a vehicle by which she may present her beauty on a wider stage. As “the last of the Willoughbys,” her tropically fed physical splendor represents a lost empire in the vivid bloom of “decay”; “and from such strong decay what blossom less gorgeous should spring?”

She knows herself to be a member of a “cruel race,” but that race is tangled in her imagination with the mythos of a lost chivalric age in which feudal dominion suggested power and glory rather than moral bankruptcy. Far from representing a blot on the family name, Captain Willoughby’s slave-trading exploits are the basis for his great-granddaughter’s favorite myth of origin: a myth that confers upon the Willoughbys of the nineteenth century the status of “decayed” nobility, and confers upon Yone in particular the persona of an vengeful princess.


25 Ibid., 45.
Yone’s obsession with the so-called “Amber Witch” of her ancestors’ day and the supernatural pagan minions she supposedly wielded to defy them reveals her reliance upon her family’s traffic in “human cargoes” to define her own supposedly unique form of empowering sensuality. Unlike the Southern plantation slaves of the antebellum era, Yone happily recounts, this “wil[d]” little girl was not an African-American, but an “island” slave, presumably imported from the West Indies in one of her master’s ships.\(^{26}\) This so-called Witch refused to act in keeping with her servile status, disrupting the household with “a Bedlam of outlandish sounds” and “cuddl[ing] up” in her mistress’s “best down beds” to avoid the Northern cold. In the time that elapsed between her arrival and Mrs. Willoughby’s demand for her removal, “[s]he had learned but two words [of the English language]—Willoughby, and the name of the town.”\(^{27}\) These words were anathema to the Amber Witch, who despised her masters and the domestic world they inhabited.

Although they determined that the girl herself was not conducive to their domestic felicity, the eighteenth-century Willoughbys did find one aspect of the Amber Witch’s disruptive behavior quite romantic. According to family legend, “if you left her stirring a mess in the kitchen, you met her, perhaps, perched in the china-closet and mumbling all manner of demoniacal prayers, twisting and writhing and screaming over the string of amber gods that she had brought with her and always wore.”\(^{28}\) These amber beads, meticulously carved in the image of various pagan gods and goddesses, captured the collective Willoughby imagination; such exotic treasures, they decided, were worthy adversaries for their civilized splendor. Three

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 44.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 43-44.
generations removed from the man who wrested girl and gods from their tropical home, Yone amuses herself with the conviction that the slave girl’s heathen curses are infused in the string of amber gods she carried with her from her homeland. The fear and hatred that this family of mighty overlords inspired in the little African girl was such that she called down her native gods to combat these new white ones. By cursing the Willoughbys, they reason, the Amber Witch elevated them to the status of deities. When a family friend casually remarks, “the Amber Witch founded your family,” it seems to Yone the most natural of compliments.29

The departure of the Amber Witch for resale across the Atlantic is indeed an appropriate symbol of the decline in the Willoughby fortunes. “In my great-grandmother’s home,” Yone explains, “the tradition of the Asian sprite with her string of amber gods was handed down like a legend”—a domestic legend equaled only by its dramatic seafaring sequel.30 The ship transporting the “wild” slave child sank in a gale off the coast of the Cape de Verdes; only one devilish little girl, “agile as a monkey,” escaped death by drowning, miraculously conjuring another ship to carry her away from the wreck. The nineteenth-century Willoughbys thrive on “many a wild picture of the Thing enchanting all her spirits from their beads about her, and calling and singing and whistling up the winds with them till storm rolled round the ship, and fierce fog and foam and drowning fell upon her capturers.”31 A “sprite,” a “monkey,” and a “Thing” in quick succession, the fleeing slave girl with her beads of vengeance becomes emblematic of the Willoughby heritage: they are her civilized antithesis, their own power proven by the supernatural forces she must leverage against them in order to make her escape.

29 Ibid., 56.

30 Although the Amber Witch is a slave of African origin, Yone occasionally refers to her as “Asian,” apparently as a means of describing her skin tone.

31 Ibid., 44.
In their enthusiastic dehumanization of the Amber Witch, Yone’s ancestors render the slave girl, in their own imagination at least, more than human: an elemental being whose identity is intertwined with the forces of wind and tide. For generations she remained a youthful demon child in the Willoughby mythos, and so she might easily have continued were it not for a remarkable discovery by a later-generation Willoughby traveling abroad in Florence. When Captain Willoughby’s grandson, the future father of Yone, stumbles upon a beautiful Italian woman praying in a Florentine chapel, two things immediately catch his eye: the rosary of amber beads in this lovely maiden’s hands and the “demure black slave so tiny and so old” at her shoulder. The combined appearance of amber beads and African servility renders the Amber Witch instantly recognizable to this man, who has presumably grown up on stories of her pagan powers. For the blithe new Willoughby patriarch, the rediscovery of the fragile old woman who once terrorized his grandmother’s house is a vindication of his power over his family’s most romanticized victim. The “Thing” that sank his grandfather’s ship is once again in his grasp, to be written once again into his family saga. Still better, this time her power and protection—the amber gods—are in the possession of a virtuous Italian maiden of marriageable age. Thanks to the institution of marital coverture, which transferred wives’ property and legal identity to their husbands, Mr. Willoughby is in the perfect position to gain a new kind of mastery over what Luciano calls “[t]he rioting monsters that haunt…the civilized.”

That Yone’s father wants to possess both his European bride and her African “property” is obvious. A generation later, Yone’s only disappointment is that the old woman could not be compelled to return with Mr. Willoughby and his new wife to New England upon

32 Ibid., 45.

their marriage. In her father’s day, the Willoughby mastery over the amber beads and their pagan bearer remained incomplete. The Amber Witch’s “only revenge” upon the marriage of her mistress, Yone theatrically reports, “was to take away the amber beads, which had long before been blessed by the pope for her young mistress,” refusing to allow either herself or her talismans to once more be borne across the ocean. In what Yone calls an appropriately outlandish display of witchcraft, the aged slave makes one further prophecy: “that neither should her charms ever cross the water,—that all their blessing would be changed to banning, and that bane would burn the bearer, should the salt-sea spray again dash round them.”

For a full generation, she clings to her treasures and her freedom in Italy; it is only upon Yone’s return from the West Indies that the “witch’s” curse has the chance to come to fruition. When the little old woman at last dies at her post in Florence, her new mistress, Yone’s aunt, acts on the Willoughbys’ behalf, inserting the “amber gods” into the family patrimony. She sends the formerly African “gods” across the Atlantic to the Willoughby heiress, enabling Yone to cast herself as the heroine in a second transatlantic drama: this time one in which she plays the white ingénue who harnesses the forces of darkness in her quest for beauty and adulation.

With the product of her family’s history of human trafficking at her fingertips, Yone determines that she, the “Cleopatra in light colors,” is destined to be the new wielder of the amber gods. She will master the slave woman’s curse and channel the wrath of the mysterious grinning beads for her own purposes. Yone imagines her future with Rose as a romantic melding of Western courtship conventions and eighteenth-century colonialist dominion. Ironically, she sees no conflict in her appropriation of African iconography in her pursuit of marriage: an institution from which physically “exotic” women are barred. Instead, Yone focuses on the

domestic challenge of wresting her chosen husband from the arms of his longtime love, her cousin Louise. Louise is the perfect reverse of the would-be mistress of the amber gods: a pious, soft-spoken young woman with strong nurturing instincts; her decorous conduct and Christian values make her a perfect candidate for Victorian wifehood. Aware of her own limitations as a purveyor of Christian morality, Yone takes up the amber gods, converted as they have been into a Catholic “rosary,” as her weapon of choice against her cousin’s more conventional brand of femininity. Although the Pope’s blessing has nominally Christianized the beads during their tenure with her mother in Italy, their original pagan exoticism renders them agents of sexual triumph rather than propriety in Yone’s eyes. Drawing on an unspoken host of ideas about the pagan eroticism of Africa that the Atlantic world had gleaned over the past centuries from the accounts slave traders and European missionaries, Yone determines that the rewritten Christianity of the amber gods, infused with her family’s history of financial and romantic triumph, will seduce the handsome and talented Rose away from her less flamboyant cousin and into a new union in which she will be both his wife and his muse, immortalized repeatedly upon his canvas. Later heroines like Elizabeth Stoddard’s octoroon beauty Charlotte Lang or Spofford’s own Continentally educated “Her,” after all, would attract the attention of their chosen men through similar foreign sensuality.

The power of whiteness and the power of sexual conquest that Yone so blithely conflates via her “light” Cleopatra persona are not, however, so comfortably united. (Stoddard’s Charlotte Lang, for example, died in childbirth, her exotic beauty no shield against her blue-blooded lover’s importunities.) Indeed, the women’s rights movement of the nineteenth century often

35 See Chapter 3, on Elizabeth Stoddard’s heroine Philippa Luce of Two Men and Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Her” of “Her Story” for further examples of the ominous shadow Catholicism was seen to cast over feminine virtue among New England women.
found common ground with the abolitionist cause specifically because of its objections to the
sexualization of slave women. Such activists considered the sexual exploitation of female slaves
analogous to the marriage contract that meant, in Davis’s words, “[t]hey could be legally beaten
by their husbands and were required at any moment to submit to their husbands’ sexual
demands.”36 White women’s participation in the world of sexual exchange was of course largely
inevitable; their fathers and brothers bartered them among themselves in exchange for “slave-
grown” commodities and the land that grew them.37 It was this process of barter that triggered
the rhetoric of liberty that gave common ground to proto-feminists and abolitionists. The power
of the moral high ground occupied by the “angel in the house” is only accessible as long as she
retains her distance from the sordid reality of human lust.

The place of the erotic in the domestic sphere, predictably, divides rather than unites
Yone and her prospective husband. Their visceral responses to amber reflect their conflicting
notions of the role of physicality in marriage. Yone loves the Amber Witch’s beads, calling their
resinous bodies a gateway to “the pristine world...a world of accentuated crises, that sloughed
off age after age, and rose fresh from each plunge.”38 In essence, amber represents to Yone a
history without consequences, in which raw physicality triumphs over the “accentuated crises” of
a given age. Such squabbles, whether in the form of war, poverty, or (as in the case of her
Willoughby heritage) slavery, give color and substance to the enduring reality of inexorable
material beauty. Aesthetic triumph, she reasons, precludes domestic or familial obligation. At
the thought of being asked to nurture the sick or needy, she opines, “illness is my very

37 Ibid., 11.
38 Spofford, The Amber Gods, 68.
antipodes…it disgusts and repels me. What sympathy can there be between my florid health, my rank redundant life, and any wasting disease of death?"\textsuperscript{39} Beauty, Yone’s believes, is the antidote to servitude. A blonde Cleopatra does not travel to the north to nurse her sick aunt; she sends a subordinate, such as her blandly brunette cousin Louise, to accomplish such mundane tasks. As a golden-haired heiress, she is exempt from the prosaic trials of domesticity; as a bearer of African sensuality, she considers herself outside of the bounds of social decorum.

While she is correct in assuming that Rose, too, feels strong aesthetic “sympathies,” however, a single encounter with the amber gods reveals that his preferences run to counter to the ones fuelling Yone’s “florid” fancies. When he sees amber, he sees a rupture in the Western narrative of progress: a dangerous relic from a dissolute past that rejects a civilized, linear understanding of time. Luciano sums up Rose’s domesticated worldview in precisely these terms; “‘History,’ for Rose, names an evolving chronicle of civilized accomplishments, directed, teleological, and triumphant.”\textsuperscript{40} The amber gods, in Rose’s eyes, open the door to debauched human impulses that belong in a bygone era unrelated to nineteenth-century civilization and prosperity. As he says of the resinous material, “when we hold it in our hands, we hold also that furious epoch where rioted all monsters and poisons,—where death fecundated and life destroyed,—where superabundance demanded such existences, no souls, but fiercest animal fire;—just for that I hate it.”\textsuperscript{41} Unknowingly, Rose here uses the same language of riotous decay—“fecundated,” “superabundance,” “animal”—to describe the alien world of amber that Yone identifies with her “rank redundant” self, foreshadowing his eventual disillusionment with

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{40} Luciano, “Geological Fantasies, Haunting Anachronies,” 273.

\textsuperscript{41} Spofford, \textit{The Amber Gods}, 56.
her brand of sensual self-indulgence even as he takes advantage of it. A world in which “amber”-toned people are denied their souls, and poison and monstrosity exist to serve men’s basest impulses, seems to Rose a horrific one, unrelated to the present world of wealth and privilege in which he and the Willoughbys live. He understands a society ruled by the unrestrained desire for possession as un-republican and immoral—yet his selective social myopia allows him to remain blind to his own complicity in the continued battle for human possession that is the marriage market.

If an emotionally fulfilling monogamous attachment validates a man’s “possession” of a wife through marriage, Rose’s eventual pursuit of Yone falls far from this “civilized” mark. Like Yone’s appropriation of the amber gods and the memory of their African wielder, his increased interest in romancing the beautiful Willoughby heiress reflects his own set of double standards: he wants an exotic Cleopatra who will dazzle upon his canvas, who is nevertheless a paragon of Christian propriety. Even without the baleful shadow of the Amber Witch’s curse, the heady scent of her amber beads in Yone’s hair reeks of licentiousness to him: a reminder of the conflict between his twin desires for personal virtue and physical possession. Seeing Rose’s disgust at the “acrid” scent of the amber on her, and the preference for Louise that seems to stem from it, Yone tries combining the erotic and the decorous in a different way.42 Garbed in “[a] cruel, savage dress, very like, but ineffably gorgeous,” she flaunts her sexuality without the displeasing sensory association of amber.43 Her throat wrapped in the staid “aqua marina” that belongs to her

42 Ibid., 55.
43 Ibid., 66.
cousin the “fair little Purita[n],” the Willoughby heiress adapts her self-presentation in order to better accommodate Rose’s specific double standards.\textsuperscript{44}

Yone’s romantic triumph demands that she reverse Rose’s moral and sensory distaste for her own quite evident exoticism. Unlike Lillie Devereux Blake’s Medora Fielding, who swore to use her “triumph” over men to avenge their betrayals of female victims, Yone imagines that, by hypersexualizing herself, she can gain psychological control over Rose.\textsuperscript{45} Drawing upon her notions of pagan curses and the legend of the Amber Witch, she embraces what she perceives as her West Indian heritage once again, and lends the amber gods, which she believes she has “bound in thrall,” to Louise.\textsuperscript{46} Although her cousin at first attempts to reject Yone’s offering, claiming, “I must pay too great a price for them,” she is eventually tempted by the lure of their magic.\textsuperscript{47} This temptation, Louise’s one moment of weakness, seals what her cousin believes to be her doom; “toying with the amber” woven into her hair, Louise snaps the cord binding the beads and creates a mess of “shattered fragments” that waft over her gallant.\textsuperscript{48} As Yone had predicted, the powers of sensory association are strong in artistic men; Rose “breathed the penetrating incense of each separate amulet, and I saw that from that hour, when every atom of his sensation was tense and vibrating, she would be associated with the loathed amber in his undefined consciousness.”\textsuperscript{49} Yone describes her triumph in the same supernatural language her

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{45} Lillie Devereux Blake, \textit{Southwold} (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1859), 33.

\textsuperscript{46} Spofford, \textit{The Amber Gods}, 65.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
family has long used to represent the power of the Amber Witch. Her narration of events resembles something out of the Arabian Nights: “I rubbed a little yellow smoke out of” the obliging pagan beads, she brags, and “a cloud…hung between him and the world, so that he saw only me.” In her arrogant appropriation of the slave girl’s power, she assumes that she can hold “the charm” of the beads in bondage in the same way as did their original, enslaved owner. It does not occur to her that, by using the beads as a weapon on the marriage market, she is reversing rather than augmenting the power her society grants her as a beautiful young blonde with reputable family connections.

Through Yone’s misconception about the kind of partnership she can forge with Rose via the Amber Witch’s gods, Spofford demonstrates the fundamental parallel not between mastership and marriage, but between femininity and enslavement. Yone believes that she can use her family’s ties to West Indian slave magic to dictate the terms of her union with Rose. Her marriage, she believes, will not be predicated on wifely submission, childbearing, or domestic labor but instead on what Dorri Beam calls “the classical archetype” of “woman [as] the material of art inseminated by male spirit.” (In this case, Rose’s desire to “inseminate” her will grant her power over him.) Unfortunately, there is another “classical archetype” of womanhood that expands upon the device of woman-as-art even as it trumps it. Davis calls this archetype “an ancient historical basis for this linkage between the oppression of women and human slavery.”

The roots of the intersection between the marriage market and chattel bondage far predate the international slave trade, but the plantation economy and the “triangle trade” that grew around it

50 Ibid., 79.

51 Dorri Beam, “Harriet Prescott Spofford’s Philosophy of Composition,” in Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131-163. 132
threw new light upon an age-old tradition. In Davis’s words, the expansion of prostitution among slave women and its influence upon the exchange of women among men through the marriage market meant that women became “the archetypal slaves, and as slavery became associated with supposedly inferior foreign women, this had a further degrading influence on all women.”

Physical allure is, as we have already seen, a double-edged sword on the marriage market. Spofford emphasizes that the marriage of Yone to Rose constitutes a form of bondage—complete with physical debilitation and moral condemnation—with painful clarity in the second, final installment of the novella. This conclusion to *The Amber Gods*, shorn of much of its narrator’s flamboyant, self-congratulatory prose, lays bare the error of its heroine’s assumptions about the power she may gain in marriage as a “Cleopatra in light colors.” Rather than understanding Yone as a divinity who, like amber, has unknown and potentially “sacred” ties to an amoral history before measured time, Rose uses his art to break his wife down into her


53 According to abolitionist rhetoric, particularly that which came from activists who also supported women’s suffrage, the parallel institutions of marital coverture and slavery revealed a flaw at the very heart of the Republic: a flaw tied directly to the ideals of personal agency and responsibility upon which it was founded. This political adaptation of the historical rhetoric of the growing correlation between female objectification and racial enslavement is a more targeted version of Davis’s broader transatlantic claim. As early as 1832, Deak Nabers notes, William Lloyd Garrison connected the national practice of slavery—the legal rejection of an entire population’s personhood—with the looming failure of the “Constitution and the Union” more broadly (1). This language of broken contract is particularly important to consider in light of parallel contracts of possession; slaveholders themselves were no less convinced of the parallel relationship between the “subordinate” positions of slave and wife. However, they saw the analogy not as a problem but as evidence of the broad reach of “benevolent” paternalism. Rather than worrying that patriarchal “dominion” inappropriately dehumanized the female party, Cott confirms, “they portrayed it as a benevolent practice in which the white master protected and spoke for” all of his dependents. Like their conservative counterparts in the North, they considered this “protection” an essential component of social harmony, “praising the domestic relations of dominion and subordination—master-servant, parent-child, and husband-wife—as one and...seeing the three types as indivisible” (Cott 60).

constituent parts by literally objectifying her in oils and a wooden frame. For all her extravagant representations of her physicality, Yone’s ideas about the consummation of her marriage and its connection to her value as an object of art are vague even upon the day of her wedding. What she discovers in its aftermath are the intersecting realities of female sexuality and exploitation that have long been familiar to the plantation slaves of the West Indies (and, for that matter, the American South). The Cleopatran mystery that was Yone, as it turns out, stales quite quickly when its mystery is replaced with the unfettered mastery that Rose gains over her through marriage. “He could paint me then,” she confesses, realizing for the first time the shame implicit in her exposure. Far from ruling her husband’s heart as a queen, Mrs. Rose finds herself “revealed and bare, all our histories written in me,” trapped on the wall where Rose “hung me up beside my ancestors.”55 Despite her self-congratulatory depictions of her hold over Rose, and the exotic beauty that enables it, ten years after her wedding Yone finds herself bedridden and forgotten while her husband once again pays court to her conservative cousin, who brings neither an Egyptian queen nor African gods into their decorous New England home.

In her fevered delirium,56 the would-be wielder of the amber gods begins to realize that the woman Rose wishes to turn into an objet d’art and the woman for whom he feels respect and affection cannot share the same body. Yone marketed herself to Rose based on the assumption that he would offer her love and fidelity in exchange for her physical bounty. Instead, it turns out that her alluring physicality actually devalues her, literally turning her from a person into a “Thing,” just like the Amber Witch. “There I hang,” she says of her new self, nailed in inanimate martyrdom to the wall. Her husband has created in her portrait-self a talisman every bit as

55 Ibid., 80.

56 A quality that Yone shares with Blake’s Medora.
powerful as the amber gods, but after a decade of loveless, childless marriage, Yone no longer considers herself a potential wielder of its exotic feminine allure. Her physical body remains, “my face [is] more lovely than health fashioned it,” but now she finds herself subordinated to the talisman, begging it to “let this troubled phantom go!” From a “rich” physical presence Yone has turned into an only semi-corporeal possession, literally as well as figuratively a product of her husband’s “civilized” imagination, which rejects the possibility that an overtly sexualized woman is truly eligible for wifehood.

The degrading nature of this objectification, although it takes Yone years to discover it, is in fact implicit in nineteenth-century marriage. Cott uses a thinly veiled sexual metaphor to describe the unequal distribution of personhood between marriage partners: “The husband was enlarged, so to speak, by marriage,” while the wife is shrunk down to size, to fit within his enveloping shadow. Unlike her own vision of the exotic history of “accentuated crises” entombed in amber, Rose’s vision of Yone’s status as a framed possession to be seen and evaluated by many men (not merely her husband) is validated by the social contract of marriage. The display Rose makes of his bride drains her of all her individuality, without granting her any of the personal or spiritual grace that the marriage state promises to Victorian wives. “[H]e gave my life to thee,” she confusedly tells her portrait; by defining Yone in terms of her physicality, she now understands, he wrested from her the possibility of ever supplanting

57 Ibid., 83.
58 Ibid., 80.
59 Ibid., 37.
60 Cott, Public Vows, 11.
Louise in his affections. Yone imagined that her aesthetic value to Rose would make him worship her, but in fact, by marrying him, she gives him the power to remake her.

As it turns out, the contract that Rose made with Yone, although nominally labeled marriage, was never about domestic partnership. “A brief madness makes my long misery,” he tells Louise of his choice to wed himself to the product of tropical decadence that is Yone. He is shameless in his repudiation of his vows, begging Louise to tell him she would marry him now, “if I were free,” only feet from Yone’s sickbed.62 Like the generations of “degrad[ed]” slave women whose “foreign” appearance redefined them as sexual rather than maternal beings, Yone now finds herself redefined not merely as a material commodity, but worse, as dead weight.63 Rose and Louise long for her death with a passion matched only by their feelings for one another. Held in check by his beloved’s “scor[n]” at the idea of pursuing their romance while his wife yet lives, Yone’s husband allows “the very atmosphere” of Louise’s propriety to compel his respect and adoration. Thus the de facto mistress of the amber gods finds herself doubly mocked: by her husband’s neglect and by the staid persona that his future wife uses to cement his regard.64

There is no doubt in the expiring woman’s mind that it is the dual curse of Rose’s painting and the Witch’s amber gods that has destroyed her. Frantic to prevent the triumph her death will grant her unfaithful husband and his mild-mannered love, Yone clings to the “illusions” of exotic power to which she has long claimed access via the Amber Witch’s talismans.65 Despite her horror at the enslaved woman locked in her husband’s frame, Yone is

62 Ibid., 81.


64 Spofford, The Amber Gods, 81.

65 Ibid., 79.
more obsessed than ever with the feverish splendor of her unloved body—after all, as a slave, her physicality is indeed the sum total of her value. She is certain that the gods continue to fuel her beauty, but she now sees their efforts as “vindictiv[e]” rather than subservient. So preoccupied is she with the manic task of narrating the rush of blood beneath her “transparent” skin and the shade of the “flush” along her cheeks—qualities in which Rose, closeted with Louise, no longer invests—that she loses track of the moment when her babbling spirit is unmoored from its fleshy shell. “I must have died at ten minutes past one,” she realizes retrospectively, when she finally notices the loss of “this thing I have become”: that is, her body.

Chaining the Postbellum Sphinx: *The Story of Avis* (1877)

Literary women continued to worry about the simultaneous exaltation and objectification of their bodies in the postwar years. But, with the long-term goal of abolition achieved, proto-feminists now perceived a new disparity between the interests of African-American women and their white counterparts. David Brion Davis, Gerda Lerner, Bonnie S. Anderson, Orlando Patterson, and a host of other modern scholars have compellingly emphasized the same point that Spofford so resoundingly made in *The Amber Gods*: that notions of commodification based on

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66 Ibid., 81.
67 Ibid., 79.
68 Ibid., 83.
race and notions of possession based on gender feed upon and facilitate one another. To the postbellum women’s rights movement, however, this connection seemed increasingly undesirable. The failure of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to advocate for women as well as men was a source of consternation for movement leaders like Stanton and Anthony. Unlike the institution of slavery, the problems of poverty and discrimination among newly minted freedmen and their female dependents did not engage the sympathy of a movement comprised primarily of middle- and upper-middle-class white women, whose reliance upon “racist,” “elitist” notions of social hierarchy continued to inform their agenda.

Alongside this central division between white women’s and African-Americans’ supposed interests came a host of other ideological fractures. Carol Farley Kessler uses her introduction to the American Women Writers Series edition of The Story of Avis to emphasize the absence of a single unifying proto-feminist principle during the time Phelps was creating her masterwork. Instead, the 1870s saw the rise of two separate women’s rights initiatives, the National Woman’s Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman’s Suffrage Association (AWSA). These movements disagreed about women’s fundamental rights and roles within the American family and nation as their antebellum counterparts did not; NWSA asserted a broader “feminist” claim for women’s equal inclusion in myriad aspects of American life, while AWSA focused on the importance of women’s suffrage. Although Phelps, unlike Spofford, used her nonfiction writing to actively pursue political as well as social gains for

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69 See Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation, eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Stewart (Yale Scholarship Online, 2013) for an excellent overview of such scholarship.


women, the postbellum Northeast offered an unprecedented dearth of “liberation” iconography that seemed to apply to all women.

In the wake of the Civil War, the partnership between the women’s rights movement and advocates of racial uplift—already complicated by issues of classism and ethnic stereotyping—began to conspicuously unravel. The “prejudices” that Davis describes among antebellum proto-feminists got in the way of the kind of alliance that the symbolism of human bondage had enabled between wives and slaves (especially slave women) before the war. The enfranchisement of African-American men changed the landscape of political reform. From abolition and the ensuing military crisis of the Civil War, Congress now transferred its energies to the ongoing task of Reconstruction. As a result of the upheaval that the death of husbands and sons wreaked on the home front, the gendered legislation of the postbellum era focused primarily on recovering a perceived antebellum ideal of domestic womanhood. Since the war reshaped women’s expectations for social and financial security through marriage, it seemed to many legislators that the home front was in need of rehabilitation. Women should be encouraged to reclaim their place within the home, unlike former slaves, who would now begin to make lives for themselves outside the plantations and farmsteads of their one-time masters.

Progressive advocates for marital reform, however, hailed The Story of Avis as a boon to their cause. In the words of Lucy Stone, who reviewed Phelps’s novel for The Woman’s Journal upon its release, “Miss Phelps raises the question more and more asked by women, whether marriage, in the case of a woman, is compatible with the pursuit of other strong ruling tastes.” Stone’s political investment in The Story of Avis was significant. A founding member of AWSA

in 1869, Stone set herself apart from more militant feminists like Stanton and Anthony via her focus on suffrage as opposed to more universal social equality. As the editor of AWSA’s dedicated publication, *The Woman’s Journal*, her interest was in “less radical” approaches to feminism, which would make “the women’s movement increasingly respectable.” Like Phelps, Stone had struggled with the problem of where non-white women fit in the largely white women’s rights movement’s call for reform on behalf of wives and daughters. While she was founding AWSA, Stone also “served on the executive committee of the American Equal Rights Association.” Yet she found herself accused of disloyalty to the women’s movement when she accepted the “gender-neutral language” of the Fifteenth Amendment that “would assure the vote only for black men.” By endorsing Phelps’s novel, Stone suggested her own continued anxiety about the reconciliation of women’s interests across racial lines.

The issue of unity among women gained increasing prominence in Reconstruction-era literature by women. Unlike the Morgeson, Rockford, Strathsay, or Parke women created in the war era, Phelps’s 1877 heroine does not see her optimal future in terms of forging a union—even

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74 It is important to note that, although wives in the 1870s were increasingly interested in working, whether within a domestic setting or in the professional realm, marital property laws steadfastly denied them the right to the fruits of their labor, creating a dissonance between their income and their material circumstances that some continued to identify with slavery. Reva B. Siegel explains the convoluted process required in 1871 by which a woman who wished to secure her own income must first develop a “bargaining position” with her husband. Only by holding her own domestic labor hostage could she “forg[e] an agreement with [him] to abandon outside employment...with half his earnings secured to her by contract” (“Home as Work” 1151). For wives who had what Stone called “strong ruling tastes” for activities not comprised of childrearing and housekeeping, *Avis* represented a painful but often unacknowledged reality. The heroine herself mournfully concludes the novel with the meagre “conviction that she might have painted better pictures—not worse—for loving [her husband] Philip and the children,” had circumstances been different (Phelps 244). But, as with so many other aspiring female artists, teachers, nurses, and authors of conservative postbellum America, circumstances seem inevitably against her.
an radical new kind of union—with a man. She resists the urge to marry her handsome suitor Philip Ostrander, despite her attraction to him, because she hopes to instead use her skills as an artist to forge a different kind of bond between communities of women. Less overtly sexualized than her antebellum counterpart, Avis does not use her own body as a tool on the marriage market. Rather than glorying in the indolence of a “light” Cleopatra, she studies for years in Italy in order to be able to forge her own visions on canvas—an activity conspicuous for its merging of the civilized and the cosmopolitan. She does not want to be translated into art by a worshipping husband; she wants to reshape perceptions of women to honor their legacy unrecognized suffering throughout history.

By attempting to access the “masculine” world of a public career, Avis places herself between two conflicting personas: that of the “artist” and that of the “woman.” As an artist, then, she is faced with two conflicting “gods.” As a marriageable woman, she is drawn to the romantic “god” who is her prospective husband—but it is the other to whom she truly wishes to devote herself. Upon her return to New England from Europe, Avis (now twenty-six) takes up the task of creating what she hopes will be her masterwork: “the great sphinx, restored.” This Egyptian relic, carved into a massive rock face in Giza, was in the postbellum era a popular icon of collective suffering. The Sphinx figure is most famous for her appearance as the “rhapsode bitch” of Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex, who terrorized Thebes until Oedipus solved her riddle, but postwar Northerners gave her an American twist. The Sphinx, with her winged lion’s body and woman’s head, had become a common Northern monument to the fallen soldiers of the Civil War. Among the most iconic representations of the Egyptian Revival period in the American

75 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 83.

Northeast was the Sphinx raised in 1872 by Dr. Jacob Bigelow. This monument graced the
Mount Auburn Cemetery of Cambridge, Massachusetts, situated conveniently close to Phelps’s
Boston home. Bigelow intended his Sphinx to serve as a memorial expressing “gratitude to the
soldiers who died” for the Union cause; like many of his contemporaries, he thus adapted his
sphinx to reflect middle-class American racial and gender values. According to Joy S. Giguere,
the new American Sphinx “[c]ombin[ed] an Anglo-American woman’s face, the body of a lion,
and decidedly American and Egyptian symbols,” so as to “embod[y] a racially fused population
in the postwar landscape.” In this “landscape,” the citizenry is unified by its white middle-class
values, including patriarchal notions of domestic hierarchy, regardless of racial or ethnic
designation, essentially “whitewashing” America’s post-Emancipation future.

Avis, however, wants to rehabilitate the Sphinx in what she sees as its original context: a
monument not to modern military triumph but instead to the silent witness and “forgotten hope”orne by the accumulated women of past ages. Her Sphinx is not sanitized or deracialized to
soothe the anxieties of a conservative public. Instead, Avis emphasizes the many wounds and
“mutilat[ions]” she has sustained over the centuries. This Sphinx is “dumb,” “solemn”:
incorruptible in her “especial anguish.” She speaks not to the military victory of one generation
but instead to the substance of years of sanctioned and thus unrecognized oppression. She is not
shaped by national pride or cultural privilege; she is scarred by “the quiver of the deer under the
teeth of the hound, the heart-throb of the pursued hare, the pathetic brow of a dying lioness.”

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77 Joy M. Giguere, “‘The Americanized Sphinx’”: Civil War Commemoration, Jacob Bigelow,
and the Sphinx at Mount Auburn Cemetery,” The Journal of the Civil War Era, vol. 3, no. 1,
March 2013, pp. 62-84. 62

78 Giguere, “‘The Americanized Sphinx,’” 62.

79 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 83.
Avis’s Sphinx suffers on behalf of the victims of masculine dominion, so often coded female. She stands witness to their unheralded defeats at the hands of history, but also to the dignity that they bring to their state. In short, Avis intends to create a monument to the collective female experience, centered upon the Sphinx’s witness of pan-feminine exploitation at the hands of man.\(^8^0\)

Such a monument, of course, conflicts with the postbellum turn to Bigelow’s Sphinx and other comparable works as celebrations of Northern supremacy, although Avis does not yet have access to this future reality. The Sphinx she imagines critiques notions of patriarchal hierarchy and the violent ruptures to which it leads; more problematically, however, it suggests that intra-feminine solidarity may offer a kind of collective catharsis to women that they cannot gain through approved channels like marriage. If Yone imagined marriage as a means of self-promotion, Avis suggests the opposite: that this institution interferes with more organic bonds. This rejection of wifehood as a solution to women’s concerns about loneliness or exploitation was not lost upon reviewers. One irate critic writing for the Philadelphia Inquirer declares Phelps’s novel the blackest of blasphemies against American domestic values: “the author has unmistakably shown it to be her opinion that [Avis] had done better to have remained single, a dangerous lesson to preach, and no less dangerous than untrue.”\(^8^1\) Masculine authority was predicated upon the rhetoric of the chivalric marriage. By whitening the Sphinx and giving her European facial features, men like Bigelow granted her access to a domestic ideal to which, as an African woman, she would have had only limited access. As Joan Hoff explains the prevailing

\(^8^0\) Ibid., 83.

nineteenth-century sentiment, “marriage for men was equated with good citizenship on the assumption that virtuous husbands made virtuous citizens.” Avis’s Sphinx, as a symbol of the bonds women may forge with one another independent of men, seems by this logic to be denying postbellum American men their chance to become “virtuous citizens” in the aftermath of national tragedy.

The collective patriarchal desire to validate men’s place within the home after the war emerged alongside what Kessler calls the American “devalu[ation] of homosociality” among women. Such bonds of friendship and domestic solidarity threatened the status of men like Philip Ostrander. In “a society that was coming to define gender roles more rigidly and narrowly,” any emotionally or intellectually fulfilling relationships that did not result in a traditional hierarchical marriage seemed hostile to the foundation of the recently repaired Union. Hence, the sanitized versions of the Sphinx that began to appear in the 1870s, shorn of Greek ferocity or Egyptian physicality. Avis’s determination to create an alternative version of this icon of “forgotten hope” reflects Phelps’s sense that marriage for postbellum women was no longer the malleable institution that it had been for the heroines of Stoddard and Spofford in the previous decade. Avis shares her author’s concern; she knows she cannot devote herself to both the cause of the Sphinx and the needs of a husband.

Avis’s sensitivity to the power of mythic symbols like the Sphinx is a double-edged sword. Before her return to New England, another more culturally sanctioned symbol of grace and heroism presents himself to her in a Parisian chapel: the handsome blond American whom

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83 Kessler, introduction to *The Story of Avis*, xxii.

84 Ibid., xxi.
she later learns is Philip Ostrander. According to the tenets of romantic literature and her own aesthetic training, it is almost inevitable that she find her “artist’s gaze” caught by his manly “face…set in a nimbus of bright hair.” The face that inspires her is no pockmarked Egyptian relic or grotesquerie in amber. Philip’s physiognomy, like that of Bigelow’s Sphinx, unites the romantic features of two ethnic groups, in this case “the Saxon and the Southern.” This melding is, from a romantic standpoint, formidable; his Nordic features complement his romantically long fair hair, worn “with either the carelessness or the affectation of a student.” Drawn to this melding of Viking past and American future, Avis “liked the shape of his head” and “the color and character of his eyes.” She sees in his hypnotic dark stare, dominated by “a large iridescent pupil…like a burning-glass,” a vision of masculine beauty that transcends the French church and modern city that are its frame. Loving Philip, she intuits, will lock her into a chivalric romantic framework in which the Sphinx she wishes to create has no place.

The similarities between Avis’s discovery of Philip Ostrander and Mr. Willoughby’s rediscovery of the Amber Witch and her pagan beads in Spofford’s earlier work are difficult to miss. Both discoveries, after all, take place in small, exotic Catholic chapels, surrounded by the accumulated centuries of European religious art, and both are spurred on by romantic feelings initiated at least in part by their setting. Mr. Willoughby knows instantly that his desire for the beautiful Italian maiden beneath the crucifix and his wish to recover the long-lost amber gods are linked, just as Avis intuitively grasps the allure of heroic masculinity that the young man with his Viking features seems to embody. Unfortunately, Avis’s sophisticated training in the art of romantic representation—inextricably tied as it is to notions of ethnic determinism—leads her into a misunderstanding of this elegant man’s character. As her mentor explains the strength of

her creative vision, “You give Mademoiselle a long-haired student. She gives you Thor, Odin, Balder. Mademoiselle idealizes.” 86 In other words, because she is so conversant with the physical symbolism of the canvas, Avis has a tendency to infuse simple material facts—long hair, large eyes, a golden complexion—with their supposed masculine counterparts: heroism, strength, and nobility. In Paris she tells herself she is using the handsome stranger’s appearance in pursuit of her own artistic vision (she makes a sketch). But in truth, “If the eye of that amber god across the Madeleine had caught an artist, it had held a woman.” 87 Although determined to remain unmarried so that she may embark on an artistic career that transcends what Kessler would call “heterosocial” bounds, Avis is nevertheless susceptible to Philip’s impression of heroic masculinity. 88

Philip, conversely, is eager to rewrite Avis’s transgressive story of the maiden artist into a familiar tale of star-crossed love. When he enlists as a doctor in the Union army, it seems the perfect means of enacting the heroism that his features promise. Yet the Civil War in which Philip finds himself embroiled—the same war that Bigelow’s Sphinx would commemorate—rejects the very premise of heroism. American readers on the home front were naturally horrified by the sheer vastness of the casualties involved in this enterprise: 22,180 at Second Manassas, 23,746 at Shiloh, and 22,717 at Antietam alone. However, the numbers Philip must confront are much more difficult to rationalize as a consequence of military victory. According to estimates by Provost Marshall General James Fry in 1866, disease actually accounted for more deaths among Northern soldiers than did combat. For example, New York—the state that supplied more

86 Ibid., 53.

87 Ibid., 39.

88 Kessler, introduction to The Story of Avis, xxii.
Union soldiers than any other—reported fewer than 20,000 enlistee deaths in battle but nearly 40,000 total losses by the end of the war. Soldiers, Phelps points out, were falling to the most prosaic of enemies: enemies that would have been familiar, ironically, on slave ships in the early antebellum years. Men on the battlefront suffered the effects of dirty water, close quarters, and limited supplies, to name but a few of the ailments that killed more effectively than Confederate artillery. Against these enemies, would-be leaders like Philip have no recourse.

Like Spofford’s Yone, Avis finds herself drawn to a masculine “type” that seems to represent life and feeling on a grander scale. If Yone imagined Rose to be an artist with the power to grant immortality, Avis—herself an artist—values Philip because he seems to offer her a gateway to a higher, sublime human experience. Despite all aesthetic evidence to the contrary, however, Philip is a force of apathy, not revolution. It was a common belief of the 1860s that, in John Stauffer’s words, “[w]ar clarified one’s masculine character.” If he were indeed the young Thor that Avis imagined in France, Phelps implies, the war would prove to be the making of Philip. Instead, Phelps undermines Philip at every turn, making him helpless in the face of deaths that are often as inglorious as they are tragic. Phelps’s understanding of the war, like Fry’s data, reveals a conflict fuelled by the ravages of dehydration, hunger, and illness taking root in otherwise healthy bodies: “[a]t the front, hale soldiers dropped from the ranks with sunstroke, and the wounded died of thirst upon the field. It was the summer of battles,—Fair Oaks, The Seven Days, Cedar Mountain, Bull Run, Harper’s Ferry, Antietam.” Philip’s medical efforts

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91 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 76.
have no particular effect on the potential for Northern triumph; of the battles listed above, only
the Seven Days represented a decisive victory for the Union. The supposed “god” is helpless in
the face of even the most generic of the crises that plague the camps, like “sunstroke” or “thirst.”
Although Avis does not know it, her “god” is an illusion, built upon years of chivalric mythos
and racial stereotype.

Left on the home front, Avis does not have access to the truth of this illusion. In keeping
with her own struggles to access the “masculine” sphere that would enable her to become a
professional artist, Avis worries that she is missing a transformative experience that would give
her art greater insight: in this case, the experience of battle. Reflecting on the alien reality of
military combat, she attributes to it all the ennobling masculine qualities that Phelps reveals to
the reader are false: “[w]as that what the work of women lacked?—high stimulant, rough virtues,
strong vices, all the great peril and power of exuberant, exposed life?”\(^92\) In her small studio,
physically and symbolically removed from the domestic activity of the main house, Avis devotes
herself to the radical task of constructing a vision of women’s collective experience in a world
where they are often forced into the role of bystanders—excluded from the “exuberant, exposed
life” that she believes Philip and his countrymen are living on the battlefield. Over the course of
that first “summer of battles,” she labors over her Sphinx, who will embody the accumulated
memories of centuries of embattled womanhood. This African symbol will, she imagines, reflect
a pan-feminine experience that will unite women across the race and class lines that her insular
Cambridge social circle has not allowed her to see.\(^93\)

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{93}\) Despite her good intentions, Avis does repeatedly fall victim to elitist prejudices (generally
against working class white women). When she at last does interact with the Boston poor, she is
horrified and ashamed at her own reaction to them.
Relegated to the home front, Avis finds it easier to imagine solidarity with icons of “foreign” womanhood (the Sphinx) than with the world of white, masculine privilege she sees embodied in Philip. Hemmed in by the humdrum domestic sphere around her, she paints her way to a further conclusion: that women, although they have not been deployed to the warfront, have both paid for and identified with this legacy of slavery in ways that their fathers and husbands historically have not. The image she constructs of Philip’s oppressive “journey” parallels the iconography of slavery that permeates her Sphinx. Although she does not know it, Avis imagines her Sphinx’s suffering in much the same way that Philip and his fellows experience the battlefield: she is crushed under “a low, unclouded Eastern sky,” wracked by “sand and sun” in an “infinite desert,” friendless and bereft of human contact, helplessly watching “what might be a camel perish of thirst.” Avis ties this image of senseless death-by-environment directly to the visceral imagery that would have been familiar to Spofford’s Captain Willoughby and others acquainted with the Middle Passage that brought African slaves to America. Her sphinx bears a “mutilated face,” scored by weather and by disillusionment with the world she sees around her. Her lips are “dumb,” her voice silenced. She watches “the forms and hues of life,” but is never invited to partake of them or to speak of what she has learned from centuries of mute witness.94

The more of herself she puts into the Sphinx, the more clearly Avis understands her commitment to representing women’s unspoken “war” in art to be antithetical to the domestic sphere in which she would act as a counterpart to Philip. Yet her training—both artistic and cultural—dictates to her the unique authority that her golden-haired Philip represents. Confused by her divided loyalty to her manly “god” and her Egyptian “goddess,” she allows a wounded

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Philip to “engag[e] her pity” when he returns from the battlefront.\textsuperscript{95} Although she continues to worry that devoting herself to a husband and devoting herself to her Sphinx are mutually exclusive activities, Philip categorically insists that, as his wife, “[y]ou should paint. I should be proud to have you paint,” and Avis is eager to believe him\textsuperscript{96}.

The longer Philip and Avis’s relationship continues, however, the clearer it becomes that Philip is far more gifted in psychological warfare against the opposite sex than he is in the public sphere of physical or intellectual labor. Cassandra Morgeson’s triumphant transformation of Desmond Somers from dissipated alcoholic to eligible husband is nowhere in evidence. As Kessler insightfully observes, Avis’s belief that marriage is a form of “civil war between women and men” is repeatedly confirmed by the slow erosion of her own artistic efforts in favor of supporting Philip’s meandering efforts to inspire admiration in his students.\textsuperscript{97} Still determined to believe the best of her intended, Avis worries, “[God] has set two natures in me, warring against each other.”\textsuperscript{98} She cannot reconcile her conviction of Philip’s elevated status with her own persistent impression that, by marrying Philip, she is somehow acting against the interests of the women for whom she meant to advocate via the Sphinx. Deborah Barker notes that, although Avis spends much time listening to Philip’s protestations of devotion, she does not have the opportunity to observe any of the other women to whom Philip has obligations; she “is so caught up in her idealized portrait of Philip Ostrander…that she does not see the signs of his lack of

\textsuperscript{95} Kessler, introduction to \textit{The Story of Avis}, xxiv.

\textsuperscript{96} Phelps, \textit{The Story of Avis}, 69.

\textsuperscript{97} Kessler, introduction to \textit{The Story of Avis}, xxiv.

\textsuperscript{98} Phelps, \textit{The Story of Avis}, 106.
Philip appreciates the idea of grandly devoting himself to a woman in the abstract, but he has not taken the trouble to visit his lonely mother in New Hampshire in years—an absence that becomes increasingly conspicuous to Avis after they are married. It is even longer before she discovers that, although he has given no “sign” of it, he was once engaged to a woman from his hometown, whom he later jilted on grounds of boredom.

Philip is insightful enough to realize that, once the marriage is accomplished, Avis will have little recourse but to accept these realities. It is not until after their marriage that the “signs” of such weakness become apparent. Her romantic “god,” naturally, resists Avis’s notion of courtship as a form of ongoing battle. He sees it as the road to domestic comfort and, although he will not admit it, conventionality. While Philip declares himself “proud” of his wife’s artistic talents, he cannot imagine a marriage in which her painting will take her away from securing his comfort. He is genuinely confused by the idea that if Avis is to work on the Sphinx in the morning, she will not also manage to stir the lumps out of his porridge before breakfast. When Avis attempts to explain her “warring” natures to him, he replies sternly that the metaphor is not apropos: “Marriage is not to be treated with such personal irreverence or rebellion, I think.” Instead, “[i]t is really the best plan Almighty God could contrive for us.” Philip, like Spofford’s Rose, believes that love is a vehicle that stabilizes rather than revises traditional gender hierarchy; “It is [God’s] will that men and women should love one another, and, loving, marry.”

By loving him, Philip assumes, Avis will be guided instinctively into the domestic

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100 Phelps, *The Story of Avis*, 106.
persona of his mother’s generation; she will derive her primary pleasure from investing herself in him.

Avis, however, does not imagine being a former painter, who is now married to a college professor. Her vision of a marriage in which she is as much an artist as a wife reveals her failure to comprehend the inherently rigid nature of the marital contract. Her confusion is understandable; as Cott notes, since the abolition of slavery, nearly every other contract available to postbellum Americans allowed the terms to be set by the parties themselves. In the case of marriage, the state defined the economic and legal terms of the union. Philip may promise that their marriage will be different and Avis may believe it, but in truth, Phelps worries, neither has the power to make such alterations to the definition marital union. Although postbellum activists like Stanton and Anthony aggressively campaigned not only for the vote but also, with some success, for reforms to other aspects of the marriage contract, including the rights to divorce, child custody, and individual wages, marriage remained a union between two inherently unequal parties.

If the favorite antebellum symbol of curtailed liberty was a shackle, proto-feminists like Phelps now used the wedding ring to symbolize women’s continued bondage. When Avis stands before her Sphinx, whose “eagle’s wings…are bound by the hands of unrelenting years,” she inevitably “glance[s] at the ring that fettered her finger,” seeing a form of bondage that has spanned the centuries and culminated in her own “war” against herself. This personal “war” scars the Sphinx’s “mighty face” as it does her own, demonstrating “what the ages have demanded” of the silent wives who bear uncomplaining witness to the masculine folly that

101 Cott, Public Vows, 61.

102 Phelps’s earlier novel, The Silent Partner (1871), uses its heroine’s engagement ring to the same effect.
“binds” them to the hearth. Avis the Anglo-American woman and the African Sphinx are both glorified slaves, but their bondage is not mitigated by what Spofford’s Rose might call “civilization” or “progress.” Despite the upheaval of war, both white and African-American women remain disenfranchised. They are enmeshed in an invisible war, which Avis has taken as a call not to arms but to art. Gazing at her creation, she feels herself prepared to do battle on this embattled woman’s behalf; “out of her deepening eye there sprang that magnificent light which so allured and commanded Philip Ostrander.” The same inner strength that gives Avis the ability to reintroduce American women to the Anglicized Sphinx to her original form also uniquely qualifies her in Philip’s eyes to bear the weight of his needs.

Unlike the antebellum critics who embraced The Amber Gods, postbellum reviewers of Avis were indignant at Phelps’s suggestion that, by cleaving to the status quo, middle-class husbands were in fact enslaving their wives. As one critic for Harper’s bitterly complained in 1878, “Philip Ostrander is exceptionally and unnaturally weak”—hardly representative of the true function of the benevolent patriarch.103 Worse, Philip’s weakness is not merely the physical result of his lung complaint, but more ominously tied to a proclivity for laziness. Like Alcott’s Gerald Coventry, Philip has a proclivity for thrusting the burden of his obligations, both professional and domestic, upon others. As Mr. Dobell informs his humiliated daughter, her husband “has shirked the drudgery of the class-room.”104 Bored by his undergraduates and unwilling to devote himself to serious research, “[h]e has dissipated himself in inconsequent ways. He has no more business to be giving popular lectures on physiology, or writing poetry for

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104 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 173.
the newspapers, than I have to set up a milliner’s shop on the college green,” yet he persists in parading about the university as if he has earned accolades rather than invited censure. Philip’s sophistication allows him to wage war against his duty to his family not honestly, by declared intention, but deviously, through clandestine apathy. As with his unwillingness to care for their son when he cries or eat his porridge with lumps so his wife can fulfill her artistic potential, “the trouble is an extraordinary lack of intellectual constancy.” Philip can believe intellectually that he owes something to his wife, his children, and his students, but his character is not strong enough to support such convictions in the face of his own personal inconvenience or discomfort.

Like a strange combination of Spofford’s Yone Willoughby and Alice Strathsay, Avis finds herself acting as a servant in her own home. Unlike such 1860s heroines, however, she cannot look forward to marriage or motherhood as a means of escape; they shape her imprisonment. By the time their two children are born, it is clear to both Avis and the reader that Philip Ostrander is a false god. He rationalizes his shabby treatment of his wife, particularly as she begins to discover the many untruths about his past that he has passively perpetrated, by insisting that what is convenient or comfortable for him, as the patriarch, has intrinsic moral value. Nor is Avis’s aberrant interest in painting responsible for this patriarchal failing; it far predates Philip’s interest in her. When his former fiancée Susan Wanamaker, who, after he jilted her, stumbled into a marriage to a violent, abusive husband, seeks out Avis for help, he tries to keep the two women apart on grounds that “[w]omen needed to be guarded against the accidents of their relations to each other as much as against graver indiscretions.” He applies the same

105 Ibid., 173-174.
106 Ibid., 174.
107 Ibid., 166.
feeble logic when he begins a less than discreet flirtation with their neighbor Barbara Allen. Avis’s duty as his wife is not to reform or repress him, he reasons, but to fulfill his needs as the family patriarch. If she fails in her duty to maintain their respective moral positions, he must naturally turn to someone who does. By pushing the rhetoric of marital hierarchy and wifely subservience to its furthest logical conclusion, Philip defies the very precepts of monogamy and family unity that the Reconstruction Congress so desperately tried to preserve by rejecting women’s demands for suffrage and legal agency.

Philip’s conspicuous infidelity reflects one consequences of the growing isolation of women within their homes. A hallmark of popular antebellum literature such as Susan Warner’s *A Wide, Wide World* (1850) or Maria Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854) was its claim that the nurture of older women was essential to the success of prospective brides on the marriage market. (The moral and religious tutelage of Alice Humphreys and Emily Graham enable these novels’ respective heroines Ellen Montgomery and Gertrude Flint to grow from rebellious girls into eligible wives.) The Reconstruction party line, however, asserted that such bonds were in fact counterproductive to a truly stable domestic union. As Kessler sums up the change, “[n]o longer were women’s connections with each other acceptable” in a society that was becoming dangerously interested in alternatives to or alterations of the marriage contract. In the 1870s, “women’s homosociality received increasingly less approval, and instead heterosociality was confidently expected to meet women’s relational needs.”

108 The increased desire of women’s reliance on one another to the exclusion of male partners, whether fathers or husbands, may be seen in Phelps’s 1871 novel *The Silent Partner*, as well as in Louisa May Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873). The new feminine micro-societies that women build in these novels is the subject of Chapter 5 of this study, “Helping Hands: Women’s Work and the Rise of the Postbellum Feminine Utopia.”

109 Kessler, introduction to *The Story of Avis*, xx.
reflects the growing anxiety that independent women like Avis will form alliances with wronged women like Susan Wanamaker. Like the antebellum abolitionist movement that united white women with their African-American counterparts, a systematic exchange of information between married women could easily exclude rather than rely upon men. If it is Philip and not Avis who is a slave to self-gratification, the promise of social stability via “heterosociality” becomes a false god in its own right.

Trapped in an empty contract with an absentee husband, Avis eventually finds herself for all intents and purposes a single mother. Relegated as she is to the lowly status that Davis associates with saleable foreign women, the former artist must turn her back on the Sphinx in order to care for her one surviving child. “It was before my marriage that I painted the sphinx,” she explains to a would-be patron.110 As a wife and mother, “my pictures come back upon my hands. Nobody wants them—now. They tell me that my style is gone. Goupil111 says I work as if I had a rheumatic hand—as if my fingers were stiff.”112 Depicting the fierce dignity of the Sphinx in her shackles once inspired a “magnificent light” in Avis; it called her to arms for battle in the name of the silent witness whose face is scarred by eons of waiting for her due.113 Now all Mrs. Ostrander has left is her daughter Wait: a small girl aptly named, as Kessler notes, for all that her mother has given up. Avis’s best hope in the end is not for herself, but for future generations of women, of whom Wait will be one. These women, the narrator implies, may learn

110 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 205.

111 Avis refers here to Adolphe Goupil (1806-1877?), whom Kessler identifies as “a nineteenth-century printer-publisher” (263). The British Museum further notes that Goupil not only produced his own art, but was also a reputable international art dealer based in Paris. It is presumably in this capacity that Avis knows him.

112 Phelps, The Story of Avis, 244.

113 Ibid., 120.
from the struggles of their mothers and create for themselves a new array of social and vocational opportunities that empower rather than undermine them.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the breakdown of liberal solidarity between abolitionist and proto-feminist discourses initiated a new anxiety in women’s rights organizations. The husband, Reconstruction legislators reasoned, should be the wife’s primary source of support and comfort. However, true to Phelps’s trope of intra-marital civil war, Philip becomes combative when he suspects that his conduct is hurting his wife, who has silently given up painting in favor of household management. Rather than attempting to remedy this situation by changing his own role within the household, he resents Avis for having allowed herself to become demoralized by his constant apathy and subtle abuse. Her own abuse makes her increasingly unable to advocate on behalf of others—including the African-American women with whom suffragists were once allied. The longer Avis remains crushed by her supporting role in the domestic hierarchy, the more impossible it becomes for her to alter her own situation or anyone else’s for the better.

Philip, like Spofford’s Reconstruction-era husband Spencer before him, considers his duty as an advocate for his wife to be contingent upon her ability to confirm his own flattering perception of himself. In a fit of pique at her unuttered disappointment in his pursuit of their neighbor, Barbara Allen, he removes himself to Europe, leaving Avis to raise their two small children by herself, and ultimately to bury their son Van alone when he succumbs to a fever. Significantly, Phelps suggests that this untenable domestic situation, far from being anomalous, is actually representative of a couple’s experience after several years in holy wedlock; “[p]erhaps most married people reach a point where, for the time being, they consider their union with each other to be the greatest mistake of their lives.”

The glorious world of pan-feminine solidarity

114 Ibid., 179.
stretching back to ancient Egypt is a thing of the past; the only “union” Avis has left is an voided contract with an absent husband.

It is only on the verge of death that Philip comes to acknowledge the extent of his wife’s sacrifice and understand that it was not inevitable but engineered by his own thoughtless adherence to antiquated notions of patriarchal privilege. “Once you might have done anything you would,” he admits to her as he lies dying the Southern jungle to which they have removed to accommodate his declining lungs.\(^{115}\) Lying breathless in a sweltering “waste” much like the one his wife imagined for him during “the summer of battles,” he acknowledges the extraordinary “future you had, Avis, when I came in your way! I don’t know how to make you believe—that I didn’t mean to blight it all.”\(^{116}\) Philip cannot conceive of the kind of marriage that Avis imagines, in which “she might have painted better pictures—not worse—for loving Philip and the children.”\(^{117}\) The best recompense that her one-time heroic ideal can make to his weary and broken wife is a confession of his own failure to give her the kind of marriage he promised: one in which he would be a new breed of husband, supportive of his wife rather than supported by her.

In the end, just as Spofford’s Yone found herself unable to wield the chimeric power of the amber gods, Avis realizes that she has put her faith in a false idol by choosing Philip over her Sphinx. Like her own mother, Avis is left with nothing but the hope that her daughter will find a way to avoid the fetters that kept her from offering her countrywomen a new vision of their collective experience. If Yone was forced to realize the objectification inherent in using her own

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 222.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 239, 76, 222.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 244.
body as a template for her “Cleopatra in light colors,” Avis learns the same lesson via a different medium. Her pockmarked and world-weary Sphinx will never grace public halls in the style of the “light,” Anglicized model on display in Mount Auburn Cemetery.\textsuperscript{118} Divested of her chains but still fettered by her physicality, Bigelow’s Sphinx and her ilk will act as the knew face of pseudo-“exotic” femininity in a post-emancipation America. In Phelps’s postwar Boston, the Northern military triumph has installed the blonde Cleopatra who so disgraced her slaveholding ancestors as the face of liberty, crushing the amber gods and the “riddle of ages” into dust.\textsuperscript{119}

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\textsuperscript{118} Spofford, \textit{The Amber Gods}, 48.

\textsuperscript{119} Phelps, \textit{The Story of Avis}, 83.
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HELPING HANDS: WOMEN’S WORK AND THE RISE OF THE POSTBELLUM FEMININE UTOPIA

As *The Story of Avis* clearly demonstrated, the decades following the conclusion of the Civil War were disappointing ones for the growing women’s rights movement in America. Despite their history as advocates for abolition and the Union cause, Northern proto-feminists of the postwar years found themselves and their legal and economic needs conspicuously absent from Reconstruction legislation. Leaders of the movement, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who had been confident that women’s suffrage would be guaranteed by either the Fourteenth or the Fifteenth Amendment, were alarmed to discover that the war seemed to have had the opposite effect. The nation faced radical social change on a number of fronts, including intersectional reunification, the enfranchisement of African-American men, and the growing shift in the Northern labor market to industry rather than agriculture, to name only a few. For communities reeling from the many transformations they had undergone in the previous decade, the resurgence of the patriarchal ideal of subservient, domestic women who would act as antidotes to the sordid public realm of their fathers, husbands, and sons was increasingly reassuring. If the 1850s represented a series of small triumphs for women in need of access to their wages, the right to petition for divorce, and the chance to fight for custody of their children, the late 1860s ushered into being a new, conservative era that resisted, and even reversed, such legal innovations in the name of public morality.
Ironically, this ideological pressure for postwar American women to return to being the “angel in the house” grew and flourished alongside the radical growth of the industrial labor market, which drew women out of the home and into the workforce. This new work venue, especially prevalent in New England, was well established before the war. Joy Kasson estimates that, “[i]n 1850, more than 59,000 Massachusetts women were employed in the cotton mills, while another 22,000 worked in shoe factories.” Women and girls who had previously expected to marry young or engage in more “domestic” employment such as sewing or childcare were entering a new public realm—the factory—that could not afford to exclude them. This, naturally, resulted in the new attention that women’s wages and their right to keep their earnings rather than cede them to their husbands received in the late antebellum era. Eventually, the dramatic influx of Irish and other European immigrants to Boston and New York began to transform “the labor force” “in New England mills…from native-born farm women to immigrant women,” but by this time the war was opening new and diverse opportunities for American women’s employment across the country.¹ The breakup of the Union and the dramatic dearth of male breadwinners and family patriarchs on the home front resulted in a masculine resistance to women’s desire to change the domestic status quo still more by working outside the confines of their own households. The wives and daughters of middle- and working-class New England men, however, remained collectively undisposed to return to their parlors in 1865, when the call for nurses and other female laborers on the warfront ceased.

Two such women who developed professional careers during the war were Louisa May Alcott—as a nurse at Georgetown as well as an author under various pseudonyms—and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: bestselling author of cathartic fiction in the wake of the war and

volunteer on behalf of “fallen” women in the Boston area. Although both women were famous for their fictional representations of women by the 1870s, Phelps and Alcott are often read alongside political rhetoric; this chapter suggests that their literature on women’s labor tellingly draws upon and revises the transgressive domestic fiction of Lillie Devereux Blake, Elizabeth Stoddard, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Alcott’s literary alter ego A.M. Barnard. These works model the changes in American women’s social and psychological landscapes initiated by the industrialized post-Reconstruction realities of the North. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), still decades in the future, was arguably the most famous literary representation of women’s utopian labor. In Gilman’s insular feminine society, women are freed from the claustrophobic influence of domineering men by a cataclysm that literally eliminated them from society. However, a growing contingent of women authors in the 1870s were preoccupied with the same vision of how women might use work not to glorify a traditional patriarchal family structure but instead to remove themselves from it.² Some of these literary women, most famously Alcott, considered their labor during the war years to be the most powerful and transformative time in their lives. Other, younger authors, such as Phelps, found themselves inspired to extol the importance of sisterhood in labor specifically because they had never been allowed to participate in it themselves on any significant scale.

The question of whether marital unions with men could truly offer women personal and collective fulfillment plagues both Phelps’s and Alcott’s novels of virtuous postwar heroines. These new protagonists repeatedly attempt to shape their lives through the connections they forge with other hardworking and charitably minded women. (Such an activity would never have

² Some other women authors invested in changing the definition of women’s work were Lillie Devereux Blake (newly politicized by her acquaintance with Susan B. Anthony), Kate Chopin, Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Constance Fenimore Woolson.
occurred to Sarah Parke or Alice Strathsay.) Most particularly, their “labor” novels, Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* (1871) and Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), demand that American readers reevaluate the antiquated domestic hierarchy that allows men so much more scope than women to shape the social and economic status quo, repeatedly rejecting radical 1860s models like those of Stoddard or Spofford that rely upon transforming the dynamic between men and women. The women of postwar America, this new literature suggests, may be better off relying on one another than upon postwar patriarchs, who generate war, strife, and alienating industrial labor that impoverishes and physically debilitates the very wives and mothers who must use it to support their families.

The new availability of paid labor (whether destructive or rewarding) for women was undeniably broadened, even cemented, by the advent of the Civil War. The first so-called “Cyclopedia” cataloging the sorts of work available to women appeared at the height of the conflict, in 1863. This “Cyclopedia,” authored by a Kentuckian turned New Yorker named Virginia Penny, emphasized the importance of women’s labor in a world of masculine violence, absence, and economic failure. According to Penny’s introduction to her *Employments of Women*, “[a]t no time in our country’s history have so many women been thrown upon their own exertions. A million of men are on the battlefield, and thousands of women, formerly dependent on them, have lost or may lose their only support.” Rather than seeing the war as an unmitigated tragedy, Penny, like Phelps and Alcott, sees hope for a new era in women’s labor, forged from national and social upheaval; “[s]ome of the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of soldiers, may take the vacancies created in business by their [men’s] absence—others must seek new
channels of labor.”

Such “mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters,” she implies, have the opportunity to form new communities of female laborers, united not by bonds of marriage or paternity, but by their shared role as “respectable and industrious” women who help and support one another in their times of need.4

As Penny’s “widely reviewed” and “positively” read “Cyclopedia” reveals, many American women of the war era and its aftermath5 attempted to imagine new family and community dynamics that rejected the notion of integrating their needs or expectations with those of fathers or prospective husbands. These, as Phelps’s and Alcott’s novels attest, were increasingly predicated on bonds of sisterhood and shared labor outside of the home rather than upon the older model of benevolent paternalism. Ultimately, both The Silent Partner and Work attempt to posit matriarchal communities that limit or even exclude masculine participation, illustrating repeatedly the grim lesson that Phelps, Alcott, and eventually Gilman agree they have learned: any society that includes men will devalue women’s work and women’s friendships. According to this postbellum social logic, marriage is no longer the safest route to a stable union for women—even maternal women who prioritize the birth and care of children. Yet, despite their eagerness to imagine communities free of patriarchal oppression, these authors struggle to

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4 Ibid., ix

articulate a viable alternative. If they are eager to cast off the yoke of martial hegemony, they are conversely unwilling to reject patriarchal ideals of chastity, legitimacy, and maternity.

This anxiety results in a radical divergence from Stoddard’s and Spofford’s models of matrilineal custodianship. Phelps’s and Alcott’s postbellum works deal in representations of insular, small-scale feminine utopias designed to defend against masculine or capitalist incursions. These new heroines do not believe they can alter the social impulses or economic structures of marital “hegemony.” Despite Stanton and Anthony’s confidence that the vote was only years away, this defensive literary imagining of what it would take to live in a world without the influence of restrictive patriarchal institutions reveals a truth that would become increasingly apparent as the decade progressed: the “reconstructed” America was far from prepared to allow women complete access to the public sphere upon which they increasingly relied. Northern women of the 1870s remained anxious about the limitations imposed upon them by domestic and legal hierarchies. The work of Phelps and Alcott during this period, however, reveals that their belief in women’s potential agency in marriage was substantially diminished since the days of Stoddard’s Cassandra Morgeson or Alcott’s own Jean Muir.7

The Hands That Bind: The Silent Partner (1871)

Like Alcott, Phelps was already an established literary success story by the 1870s, when she published The Silent Partner. Her debut novel, The Gates Ajar, appeared in 1866, two years before Alcott’s Little Women; it immediately charmed a grieving postbellum public eager to

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7 See Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.
embrace her tangible, benevolent vision of Heaven. Unlike other women writing about challenges on the home front in the wake of war, Phelps was not a member of a radical or even a progressive family; according to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “[s]he fell into a five-year illness after writing *The Silent Partner*” that scholars generally attribute to “a reaction to her father’s disapproval of her writing and his antifeminism.”8 Despite her conservative upbringing, Phelps’s “major concerns” as an author and an American woman seemed to align much more directly with those of political women like Stanton and Anthony than did the more psychologically charged works of her predecessors. Rather than exploring the potential for sexual expression or romantic vengeance, Phelps advocated for more pragmatic innovations in the legal realm: “the right of women to equal educational opportunity, to satisfying and decent-paid work, and to political equality in the ballot box.”9 Thanks to her conservative upbringing, however, the road she took to this ideology was very different from that of many of her politically minded peers. Instead of objecting to claims about women’s predisposition to nurture (which supposedly rendered them unfit for political representation or financial independence), Phelps’s heroines are likely to excel in the domestic arts, drawing such qualities with them into the public realm rather than attempting to escape their emotional fetters.

Phelps’s own experiences as a dispenser of charity among “fallen” women during her youth set the tone for the kind of intra-feminine unification that she images across class boundaries. (Her later heroine Avis Dobell would tentatively attempt to expand this model to include, at least symbolically, women of African descent.) Rather than seeing the two womanly


spheres of educated lady and downtrodden laborer as fundamentally separate, she uses the wealthy heroine of *The Silent Partner*, Perley Kelso, to emphasize the influence ladies can attain as patrons, tutors, and even financial advisors to their less fortunate counterparts in the factory districts. The plot of the novel follows Perley as she begins to invest her time and energy, as well as her money, in the family mills, coming to realize the strong emotional bonds that await her among “her” laborers—bonds that ultimately overshadow the shallower feelings she has for her deceased father or foppish fiancé. Phelps’s conspicuous exclusion of husbands from this new, benevolent society was not lost upon contemporary readers. As the *New York Times* noted in its resolutely negative 1871 review, *The Silent Partner* forces its audience to confront “the darkest picture of life that can be painted”: a life of poverty and corruption that victimizes good people and bad alike. Instead of immuring herself in the safety of her home, only emerging occasionally to proselytize in carefully controlled environs, Perley immerses herself in this squalid setting, eventually bringing its denizens into her mansion as well as traveling daily to their less “civilized” haunts. To the *Times* reviewer, “this extremely unsatisfactory and discouraging” defection from the traditional domestic trajectory of marriage and childbirth represents a fundamental flaw in Perley’s character and thus in the novel as a whole. ¹⁰ There is no familial or romantic reward, he complains, for Perley to look forward to in her bleak, childless existence, surrounded by examples of social deficiency and economic failure.

This *New York Times* review, far from imposing unprecedented ideological limitations on women’s role in the new nation, was in fact precisely in tune with the political leanings of the American North as a whole. The ongoing project of Reconstruction, fueled by Ulysses S. Grant’s election to the presidency in 1868, emphasized the rhetoric of the ruling Republican party’s

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return to glorious and, whenever possible, uncontroversial roots. This determination to avoid controversy, particularly in light of the revelations of ongoing social and legal injustices in the rapidly industrializing Northern states, “indicated…the path of Reconstruction,” which would be “one that reflected the Republican vision of a harmonious free labor world.”¹¹ As Heather Cox Richardson points out, this “vision” of the virtues of industrial labor by definition could “not offer a solution to economic consolidation or to below-subsistence wages.”¹² When Phelps, via Perley, suggested that the primary form of wage earning available to women fuels rather than ameliorates moral and literal “filth” in their lives, she challenged the central tenet of Republican nation-building: that everything—including women’s role within the home—can go back to the way it “was” before the sectarian crisis.

Phelps’s perception of a revolutionary woman who is nonetheless both genteel and maternal certainly appears more conservative than the fierce war-era heroines of authors like Stoddard. Yet Perley’s brand of proto-feminism is nonetheless a threat to patriarchal institutions—most centrally those of marriage and patrilineal inheritance of property—that are predicated upon women’s legally binding domestic alliances with men. Perley is highly eligible for such an alliance; when the novel opens, she is engaged to marry Maverick Hayle, the son and heir of her recently deceased father’s business partner. At age twenty-three, Perley is tranquilly prepared to devote herself to her “lazy lover,” whose ironical brand of witty indolence makes him “an occupation in himself.”¹³ Perley, Phelps intimates, “had indeed a weakness for an


¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Silent Partner* (The Feminist University Press: The City University of New York, 1983), 12. The “lazy” lover is a recurring deterrent to marriage in this
occupation,” and sees no better one available to her than verbal sparring with “her plighted husband.”

When the death of her father makes Perley a nominal “partner” in the New England textile mills of Hayle and Kelso, she does not see it as an opportunity to thrust herself into the public realm; indeed, as a daughter, Perley is remarkably unmoved by the advent of “a dead parent for whom propriety required her to mourn.” Her father’s business ventures and her own more limited role in the domestic realm have only very rarely intersected, and she finds her position as a wealthy single woman unchanged by his absence.

Her alliance with (male) factory barons such as her father and Maverick Hayle, Phelps implies, has given Perley a deceptive idea about her wealth, divorcing it from the concept of human labor, and crippling her womanly instinct to render charitable service to the less fortunate. Perley has aligned herself with a very successful class of industrial capitalists, who, according to Eric Foner, essentially ran the still-dominant Republican Party by 1870. Massachusetts, already a heavily industrialized state before the war, underwent a new wave of controversy in the beginning of the decade, thanks to the “first report” of the newly minted Bureau of Labor Statistics, which “painted a melancholy picture of long hours, low wages, and widespread child labor in the state factories.” Despite the obvious humanitarian problems with this burgeoning system of industrial capitalist exploitation, “[m]uch of the corruption of the Grant era involved

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15 Ibid., 15.

payments to public officials by businesses seeking state aid.”\textsuperscript{17} The state had learned the valuable lesson—the same lesson that states were learning across the victorious North—that this newly consolidated financial power had the capacity to breed unprecedented political success. Indeed, party loyalty had never been higher than in the years surrounding the publication of \textit{The Silent Partner}; in the 1872 presidential election, “Grant carried every state north of the Mason-Dixon line,” while “[i]n the Midwest more Democrats switched to Grant…than Republicans abandoned him.”\textsuperscript{18} The Republican Party, fueled by the fruits of industrial labor, had become a formidable conservative force.

In light of this political reality (of which Phelps, an educated Bostonian, could hardly help being aware), Perley’s ties to the capitalist patriarchy align her with a class of men who are politically and socially invested in limiting her ability to intervene compassionately in the system of industry that creates her own material security. It is no surprise, considering the circumstances, that Perley’s wealth has not heretofore made her charitable, or helped her to form bonds with other women. Although her elegant furnishings, scented carriage cushions, and fashionable clothing are bought with the proceeds of factory labor, she has only the vaguest notion of the existence of workers, whether male or female. A glimpse of an “undersized” young woman with “no gloves” and whose “lips were blue” floundering through a stormy evening intrigues her in a somewhat sociological manner; “[i]t must be a disagreeable thing,” she speculates, “this being out in the rain.”\textsuperscript{19} The woman in question, a mill hand named Sip Garth, sticks in her mind, however—not because Perley is conscious of having perpetrated any injustice

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 486.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 509.

\textsuperscript{19} Phelps, \textit{The Silent Partner}, 20. 28.
against her, but because she finds the plainspoken girl amusing. It occurs to Perley that there is a vast gulf between her experience and Sip’s, and that, when they speak, they are in some fundamental way failing to understand each other. Sip seems even more conscious of Perley’s limited potential for comprehension than the lady herself; the words “don’t you see” pepper their brief conversation in the rain, followed by the inevitable conclusion, “[n]o, you don’t. I do. But you’d ought to,—you’d ought to.”\(^{20}\) There is an intrinsic womanly duty to attempt communication, Sip implies, that Perley has, though a mistake of training or perception, been inadequately prepared to perform.

At the end of this first encounter, Perley retreats to the safe moral scaffolding of class, concluding of Sip, “She was coarse and hurt me.”\(^{21}\) However, when she meets Sip again outside of her father’s factory town of Five Falls, it is clear that she has considered the other woman’s position. Rather than refuse to “know” the lowly mill hand, as Sip had anticipated, Perley assures her that “I remember very well,” and expresses an interest in learning more about her life.\(^{22}\) The story that Sip tells is indeed a “dark picture of life,” to use the words of the novel’s *Times* reviewer.\(^{23}\) The child of an abusive, alcoholic father, she has spent her life attempting to earn enough money through factory work to support her deaf and dumb sister Catty—a task made nearly impossible by her father’s greed and cruelty. “He used to take my wages,” she explains to Perley. He would use the ill-gotten money to purchase spirits, and would come home “[d]runk as

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 25-30.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 46.

When he died in a mechanical accident in a Boston factory, it was a boon rather than a tragedy for the Garth sisters, enabling them as it did to flee the city and take up residence in Five Falls. One of the many attempted legal maneuvers of the 1850s and 1860s involved the guarantee of dependent women’s right to keep their wages; via Sip’s story, Phelps enumerates the dangers of forcing “good” women to rely upon the benevolence of indisputably “bad” men. Had Sip been given access to her wages, the family’s domestic scene would have been more secure; the girls would not have gone hungry, and Catty would have been safe from her father’s “beastly” alcohol-induced rages. Far from supporting the politically sanctioned philosophy of benevolent paternalism, Sip’s experience reveals the inadequacy of the domestic hierarchy to address the needs of a female population in which wage-earning work is not an inclination but a necessity.

It is no accident that Perley intervenes in the narrative a mere three weeks after Mr. Garth’s fortuitous if gruesome demise. As her understanding of Sip’s plight grows, the previously aloof Miss Kelso begins to take on roles in the struggling woman’s life that resemble the duties and commitments Republican rhetoricians attributed to benevolent patriarchs. Far from feeling that her womanly role as a domestic caregiver hampers her potential to help Sip, Perley reasons that she has a uniquely “maternal” capacity to protect and nurture these new dependents, rather than to merely profit from them. Martin Griffin has recently noted that the drive for profit via control over industrial labor sites created “a universe of new corporate entities that operated on a formerly unknown scale of size and value.” Successful factory barons could achieve the American dream of profit without elite bloodlines or family connections—seemingly the Republican ideal. But this “industrial power” had an ominously monarchical dark side: the

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financial tyranny of a single owner or team of owners now had the ability to alter the material, social, and spiritual circumstances of a significant working-class population in a monolithic manner that “seemed to…invalidate the notion of representative politics” in unflattering ways.\textsuperscript{25} Perley’s very personal brand of maternal patronage acts as an antidote to this capitalist-fueled oligarchy.

The new humanitarian bond she forms with Sip further serves as the root of a much larger project, one that transforms Perley from an apathetic future wife into an honorary sister. Over the coming months, she becomes close to Sip, visiting her home, caring for her sister, advising her regarding her career and finances, evaluating the rent, and above all providing Sip with opportunities to expand her intellectual horizons by exposing her to great art. She becomes a patron of sorts, bequeathing upon the less privileged girl a particularly evocative painting, and eventually providing a venue for her foray into public speaking. But these events do not occur in a vacuum. It quickly becomes apparent to Perley that her role as a “silent partner,” with “no possible obligation or responsibility” in the running of the mills, limits her ability to give the charitable aid and humane support that her maternal instincts demand she provide to her “dependents,” the factory hands.\textsuperscript{26} As she worriedly explains to Maverick Hayle and his father, “I thought I fell heir to all that, with the money. At least I thought I could if I wished to.”\textsuperscript{27} Perley is not interested in increasing the profits in the mills, or policing her share of the enterprise to be sure that she is not cheated. She hardly seems aware of the intrinsic connection

\textsuperscript{25} Martin Griffin, \textit{Ashes of the Mind: War and Memory in Northern Literature, 1865-1900} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 2. This version of pseudo-monarchical tyranny is an ironic reflection of Holly Jackson’s \textit{American Blood}: a commentary on the post-1850 American preoccupation with bloodlines.

\textsuperscript{26} Phelps, \textit{The Silent Partner}, 58.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
between her opulent lifestyle and the mills’ output. Instead, she considers herself bound to the workers by ties of womanly obligation. They live in substandard housing, and their children do not have access to educational opportunities. Perley wishes to be active in the mill finances not so as to improve its material circumstances but rather to superintend the reallocation of resources from profit-based to family-based objectives.

This, of course, runs directly counter to the financial well-being—indeed, the continued existence—as the Hayle men are quick to inform her. Maverick expresses good-natured mystification as to why his lovely, empty-headed fiancée is troubling herself to feel for the faceless poor at all, much less why she insists that her concerns ought to be made part of some sort of formal overhaul of mill policy. Perley attempts to explain to her intended the reasons behind her apparent departure from convention, reasoning that emotional bonds such as she has formed with the Garth sisters are new to her; “I’m not used, you know, Maverick, to feeling at all; it’s never been asked of me before.” Her supposedly romantic connection to Maverick pales before the loving obligation she now feels toward “my people.” In her new partnership, the ring upon her finger becomes a fetter rather than an honor—a sentiment that is compounded when Maverick vaguely informs her of “some technicality, about which he could not, at the moment, be precise, which, he believed, would make formal partnerships impossible in the case of husband and wife.”

The nineteenth-century marriage, according to Nancy F. Cott,

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28 Ibid., 39.

29 Ibid., 64.

30 Ibid., 62. This ring-as-fetter trope would appear again in Phelps’s 1877 novel, *The Story of Avis*. Phelps was not, however, the only author to explore this phenomenon. As Grace Farrell points out in her biography of Lillie Devereux Blake, “‘Fettered’ was a familiar code word for black slavery, a word that came to signify for antislavery feminists their own link with their sister slaves, and it also refers to marriage” (132). Referring specifically to Blake’s postbellum
was meant to develop the “reciprocal rights and responsibilities” that were respectively appropriate for women and men; by rendering the wife dependent upon her husband in financial and legal matters, society was theoretically bringing her nurturing, motherly instincts to the fore.\(^\text{31}\) Perley, however, defies this mode of categorization. Her engagement to Maverick actively impedes her maternally charged attempts to improve the living conditions of the degraded mill hands. In order to become a better “mother” to her many mill-“children,” Perley must, ironically, dispense with marriage—an institution that, in Phelps’s eyes, has become an alternative to maternal devotion rather than a facilitator of it.

Significantly, Perley comes to this conclusion via a rhetoric quite similar to that of “free contract,” a capitalist notion that contemporary proto-feminists, most notably Stanton, used to debunk traditional forms of legal restriction to married women’s rights. Reconstruction-era Republicans considered such a contract, in which parties entered into a “voluntary agreement dissolvable at will” in order to conduct business dealings, to be at the heart of the notion of free enterprise. Stanton famously turned this rhetoric back upon the party’s conservative notions of marriage and women’s work, contending that the “free contract…ideology…be extended to the family itself, with marriage recognized as” the same type of “voluntary agreement” formed between businessmen. This, she reasoned, would naturally lead to the equally revolutionary result of “married women enjoying an independent claim to their earnings.”\(^\text{32}\) While Perley has no intention of actually entering the labor market and accumulating “earnings” herself, the novel *Fettered for Life*, Farrell points out that “the novel’s subtitle ‘Lord and Master’ double[es] both meanings” of the term by highlighting “the theme of female constriction and imprisonment underscoring them” (132).

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\(^{32}\) Foner, *Reconstruction*, 473.
language she uses to sever her contract (engagement) with Maverick directly reflects the new rhetoric of business that she adopts in an effort to forward her humanitarian aims. “I gave you all I had to give,” she carefully explains to him, in unmistakably economic terms; “You used it up.”

Now, she is left with the impression that it is only the lesser, shallower part of her, “the part of me which gets tired, and has the blues…and has a toothache, and wants to be amused, and wants excitement…that loves you.”

The “real” Perley, the woman who has allied herself with Sip Garth and her community of dependents, knows that to love Maverick would be to subordinate herself to something vast and depersonalized: a political institution as well as a rather vapid young man.

In place of the marital union she expected to make, Perley forges a sisterly alliance with Sip Garth: an alliance that facilitates her transformation from fiancée to caregiver. As Perley becomes a symbolic “parent” and patron to Sip, she also becomes a force of nurture and guidance to the mill hands more generally. Unable to legally join herself in “partnership” (as opposed to marriage) with Maverick, she “weds” herself, instead, to the role of matriarch of her new society of the needy. But, although infused with the patronizing rhetoric of elitism, Perley’s new “union” with the mill hands is not, Phelps emphasizes, a one-way street. If her patronage of Sip is empowering and fulfilling to Perley, Sip herself also blossoms in their new “union,” becoming an enthusiast of high art, and eventually a spiritual leader in the community. In Thomson’s words, “[Novels like] The Silent Partner all depend upon mutually defining relationships between foregrounded, idealized version[s] of [the] white maternal benefactress

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33 Phelps, The Silent Partner, 161.

34 Ibid., 164.
and muted, marginalized female figures who require spiritual and maternal redemption.”

Perley, in other words, is no longer pouring her love and generosity into an empty patriarchal vessel (such as Maverick). Under her benign if elitist tutelage, the previously atheistic Sip slowly begins to awaken spiritually, becoming a “little preacher” who acts as a bridge between Perley’s philanthropic splendor and the intellectual degradation of the mill hands. If Perley is the motherly goddess of Five Falls, Sip becomes her foremost priestess and spokeswoman.

As a result of this dynamic, Perley’s humanitarian involvement with the mill hands results in a kind of “motherhood” that grants her much more power and influence over her adoptive “children” than would her role as a biological mother and wife in a more traditional domestic setting. Sip and her factory-sisters have been isolated not only from their homes by the long, draining work hours but from one another. Perley, genteelly unemployed and at leisure to accommodate their schedules with her sympathetic visits, functions as an aristocratic unifying force that brings lonely, tired, disillusioned women together—many for the first time. As Sip tells her benefactor after relating trials of a particularly draining day, “I only wanted some women-folks to cry to! I hadn’t anybody.”

Indeed, Perley’s maternal compassion and her financial security combine with her sublime womanly aesthetic to create a reassuring maternal persona that wins the devotion of both men and women alike. When the workers are angered or

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36 Phelps, The Silent Partner, 295.

37 Ibid., 190.

38 For an alternate version of this scene, see Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1854 novel, North and South. In this novel of the industrializing North of England, Gaskell’s heroine, Margaret Hale, faces a similar mob of indignant workers, in whom she has a humanitarian interest. Like her later American counterpart (Perley), Margaret subdues the mob; but Margaret’s progress on the road of nurturing patronage of the workers takes a very different turn than that of Phelps’s heroine,
frustrated by their capitalist overlords, it is “the young leddy” that they appeal to. When there is
grief or tragedy to face, it is she who is summoned. As Stephen Garrick, the most sympathetic of
the mill-owning partners, acknowledges to Perley, “The rest of us are good for little, without
your endorsement.”

And, despite the mill owners’ profit-based goals and disregard for the health and safety of
their hands, endorse them she does. For all her indignation at Maverick’s lax practices as a
landlord, and for all she worries about the mill’s blatant disregard for child labor laws, Perley is
rather feudal in her ideas about humanitarian change. When the mill hands decide to strike in
order to protest the lowering of their already substandard wages, Perley is not at the head of their
masses, or even at their side. She is with the Hayles and Stephen Garrick, discussing how to
disperse the mob. Although she would never use such blunt language, she seems to agree with
the senior Mr. Hayle that her devotees “are like a horse blind in one eye”; they do not know how
to act in their own best interest. Resolutely uninterested in the sordid financial logistics of living
in poverty, Perley does not want to reinstate the old wage, much less raise it; she wants someone
to “tell them why we must reduce their wages.” This is as close to a true dialogue as her good
breeding will allow her imagination to reach: an economic explanation from on high, benignly
worded in such a way that the lower orders will be prepared to accept it.

The increased demand for such economic explanations was becoming a problem for the
postbellum industrial North as a whole. Richardson sums up the issue in terms of financial

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40 Ibid., 247, 248.
disparity, in particular the increasingly unbridgeable wage gap; “Urban factories were employing larger numbers of operatives than ever before, and, increasingly, these ‘workers’ were destined to remain wage laborers for the rest of their life rather than to use their unskilled positions to accumulate and prosper”—meaning the “American Dream” that explains labor in terms of progress and the pursuit of profit applied to an ever-shrinking portion of the white male population. Many of these workers would reach old age without achieving material comfort or personal fulfillment. As this potential for capitalist industry to result in human degradation became more and more apparent, Richardson points out, “industrialists and bankers were starting to amass fortunes.”

Perley, for all her charitable matriarchal convictions, is a product of this resource-hoarding minority. She does not see that convincing the Hayle and Kelso workers to disperse and accept lower wages might make her complicit in the deplorable living conditions of their children. She merely sees a route by which she can preserve the semblance of goodwill that she has worked so hard to cultivate through social rather than economic channels.

Thus, when she answers the summons for “the young leddy” and goes to address the discontented Five Falls populace, her instinct is not to validate their concerns but instead to draw upon the emotional contract she has already formed with Sip and her friends in order to make the hands willing to act against their own interests. As Sip narrates the event, when Perley stood before the strikers, “There was a kind of a shame and a sense came to us, to see her standing so quiet in the rain,” disappointed in her adoptive children but not despairing of them. The men and women of the would-be mob find themselves beset “by a sudden tide of respectability” that renders their grievances secondary to their embarrassment at appearing indecorous before their

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41 Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, 45.

Like the ruling capitalists in the industrializing regions of the country more broadly, Phelps’s fictionalized factory barons are eager to find a socially acceptable means of repudiating the “[r]epeated strikes, agitation for an eight-hour work day, and the proliferation of workers’ organizations” that “directly attacked the deeply held Republican belief in an organic society.” Industrial capitalism had survived the war (and maybe even won it) and must be held up as a model to the rebellious South. Perley rejects a review of the disparity in wages and other quantitative measures of injustice in favor of an emotional approach that privileges fellow feeling over material need.

While the workers respond positively to her benevolent influence, Perley’s maternal efforts have an unfortunate tendency to perpetuate the capitalist system of exploitation more broadly, even as she works to ameliorate it in individual families. To Perley, the fact that these mill hands represent a still larger collective of national factory workers in similar straits does not represent a factor in the very localized social contracts she forges with the residents of Five Falls though her charitable visits and exhortations. “[W]hen [Mr. Garrick] told you that he must reduce your wages, you shouldn’t have sent for me,” she reprimands the disconsolate hands. She resents her exclusion from the mill as an active partner, but has absolutely internalized that reality. Although the impersonal capitalist force that Stephen Garrick represents has also marginalized her, Perley remains loyal to the symbolic power and justice he embodies. Rather than seeing him as an opportunist textile baron, she casts this self-made man in the same terms that would have characterized a wife’s ideal head of household in antebellum literature. He is the bearer of “honest truth” and “a friend to every soul of you,” deserving of fidelity even when it

43 Ibid., 251. This scene closely resembles that of a similar situation in Gaskell’s North and South.

44 Richardson, The Death of Reconstruction, 44.
seems counter to the interests of his subordinates.\textsuperscript{45} Despite her determination to offer something spiritually invigorating to the workers in her capacity as a silent partner, a dispenser of charity and benevolence, Perley still cannot imagine a world in which her “work” is not in service of a patriarchal principle.

The concept of domestic labor as “work” that is worthy of financial compensation was a growing source of controversy in the 1870s. Even advocates of the sexes’ separate spheres believed that there were situations in which women could perform acts of maternally charged charity outside the home without transgressing the limits of their feminine decorum. As a teenager, Phelps herself “joined a group of women who aimed to recue ‘fallen women’…[in] a factory town near Andover, Massachusetts.” Neither she nor her conservative family would have considered this charitable enterprise “work;” indeed, it would have been in the poorest of taste to ask for financial compensation for such “philanthropic” efforts. After the Civil War, however, Phelps—along with many other upper-middle-class dispensers of feminine charity—began to see the potential that the public realm had to facilitate emotional support for a broader population of American women. Indeed, her first novel, \textit{The Gates Ajar}, was meant to bridge this gap; its publication, she hoped, would “comfort these women,” who were not of her personal acquaintance, but who were bereaved and in need nonetheless.\textsuperscript{46} This sentiment, as Reva B. Siegel illustrates, soon translated into an unprecedented feminine outcry against “household labor…as ‘unpaid labor’”—a phrase that had appeared only once in the entire body of

\textsuperscript{45} Phelps, \textit{The Silent Partner}, 252.

\textsuperscript{46} Buhle and Howe, “Afterword,” 359.
antebellum proto-feminist rhetoric. By elevating charitable and domestic labors to the status of monetarily valued work, such activists hoped, they might begin to break down the increasingly well-policed divide between the public and private spheres, enabling women to receive both social respect and financial compensation for their efforts both within and outside of the home.

Perley, however, is in the unique position of not needing financial compensation for her charitable efforts among the Five Falls populace; she has more than enough money to support her project, thanks to the untiring (and undercompensated) labor of the hands. Although she is clearly aware of the importance of breaking down the barrier between industry and domesticity that has allowed Hayle and Kelso to exploit their workers in a state of comfortable oblivion, Perley is unable to let go of the system of gendered social hierarchy that undergirds their authority. Determined to create a utopian space in which the sordid realities of the public realm do not interfere with her charitable calling to educate and illuminate the lives of her dependents, Perley develops what, did it not encourage the attendance of working-class people, would likely be called a salon. Only two thirds of the way through the novel, she has already transformed her Five Falls mansion into what one of her upper-class visitors carefully refers to as “[y]our lovely, Quixotic, queer venture of a home.”

Here, mill workers who wish to open their minds to culture and ideas unavailable in the slums rub shoulders with society ladies who wish to broaden their own minds by meeting the “hands” who form the majority of the town’s population. This matriarchal utopia, over which Perley presides, strives to reverse the trend toward what Griffin calls the “‘legacy’ proletariat,” who are not granted “access to the presumed upward social

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mobility granted by an earlier economic and cultural model.” Far from stagnating in their role as anonymous, uneducated “hands,” Perley proudly tells her guests, “[w]e always manage to accomplish something.” Whether it is via “an essay on Burns [read by] a Scotchman out of the printing-rooms” or “some of our Dickens readings,” Perley’s people find themselves being “bettered” seemingly without any unpleasant or wearisome effort on their part.

Phelps thus posits Perley’s brand of “household” utopia as a means of correcting the very problem that has plagued Republican rhetoricians: the industrial model’s tendency to create a class that is supposedly incapable of self-improvement and isolated from the patriotic ideals of the nation as a whole. By exposing her flock to Burns and Dickens, she integrates her formerly insular community of mill workers into a broader, mainstream world of shared cultural experience that is not dependent upon their access to financial profit. By creating this space for intellectual development, however, Perley is walking a fine line, politically speaking. As Foner notes, capitalist “labor reformers” were particularly anxious to ensure that American industry “avoid the emergence of permanent class divisions,” which would, presumably, lead to unpleasantly monarchical implications of feudalism. Yet a mass influx of mill workers into the nation’s skilled trades and universities would fatally undermine the very industrial system that Northern Republicans were holding up as an example to the new post-slavery South. By creating a system of intellectual enrichment that is conspicuously local in scope (she does not provide tutelage in other trades, or offer loans to her “people” for travel in search of better work), Perley manages to create a class of mill hands who are both cultured and geographically static. Her

49 Griffin, *Ashes of the Mind*, 5.

50 Phelps, *The Silent Partner*, 228.

potential for radical reform is limited by the need for her to straddle the wavering political line between local philanthropy and class solidarity.

Unlike her carefully developed household of high culture, Perley’s more personal womanly union with Sip allows her to make substantial and politically inoffensive changes to the quality of the lives of the Five Falls hands. It is through her partnership with Sip—an anything but silent partnership—that she manages to initiate ongoing social and spiritual reform among the nearly irreclaimable populace of Five Falls. As she explains to Maverick and his new wife, “I was only among them at best; Sip is of them,” and so can use her lay sermons to bridge the gap between Perley’s world of high culture and the hands’ more material reality using the Christian rhetoric of shared sacrifice. Unlike Perley, who only speaks in a public capacity in the instance of the impending mill riot, Sip routinely chooses “a little court” in the streets of Five Falls for her “‘sermons,’” willing to sacrifice womanly propriety in favor of womanly guidance for her neighbors.52 Her message of patience rather than revolution in the face of injustice, however, complements and deepens Perley’s own. While Sip acknowledges the trials of being “up early…and down late, and…droved and slaved” while the mill owners rest comfortably in their ample houses, she remains loyal to the social contract of sisterhood she has formed with Perley, and reminds the hands that Christ would reply that he underwent the same sufferings, and never protested.53 Rather than reject their worldly discomforts and demand something better—the very rhetoric that is currently undermining Republican idealism—Sip aligns herself with Perley’s

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52 Phelps, *The Silent Partner*, 293.

53 Ibid., 297.
decorous, passive rhetoric of acceptance, promising divine rewards that will ultimately “unsnarl us all.”

Thus, it is via a hierarchical alliance with another woman, as opposed to a man, that Perley is able to consolidate social and emotional sway in her matriarchal utopia. Her union with Sip Garth serves as a compelling alternative to marriage; even the self-made Garrick, for all his admiration of Perley, is not a viable partner for her particular project. He, after all, is an active partner, and in the shadow of such a person, Perley has learned, she and her maternal, un lucrative impulses will always be silenced. She and Sip, on the other hand, mutually support one another in the gaining of a voice. This voice, according to Mari Jo Buhle and Florence Howe, represents one way in which women can achieve a limited form of autonomy in what is inevitably a patriarchal, capitalist society. “All women, rich and poor, were bound by a system of dependence on men,” they explain—but Perley and Sip use their partnership to avoid this form of dependence, each choosing to decline a worthy suitor in favor of the common bonds of service and spiritual satisfaction they have developed outside of the marriage market. Rather than fight the losing battle of reforming the institution of marriage, or the industrial capitalist economic model, they instead carve out a matriarchal micro-society within this untenable reality: a society built on socially rather than legally enforced rules that are more congenial to them.

This matriarchy is, for all its good intentions, something of a letdown in reformist terms. Neither Sip nor Perley show any intention of attempting to apply this micro-utopian model to a larger population beyond the borders of Five Falls. Although the workers may be familiar with Burns and Dickens, they will not use their new rhetorical skills to seek better employment or

54 Ibid., 299.

union rights. Despite her cognizance of the suffering that their labors for the upper classes bring to her flock, Perley retains the notion of what Susan Albertine calls “social housekeeping”: the idea that as a woman one is responsible exclusively for one’s own household. Rather than resenting the limitations imposed by such a role, she embraces it, expanding the definition of family to encompass economic as well as biological dependents, and thus “extending domestic duties into the public sphere.” Her efforts are sincere, but also abortive; unlike the ferocious heroines of the 1860s, she balks at the idea of defying conservative national institutions like marriage or capitalism, even on a small scale.

By upholding such conservative ideals about women’s sphere of influence, Phelps uses Perley and Sip to acknowledge tacitly what Stanton and Anthony decried more vocally in the same period: that the postbellum government was increasingly unwilling to imagine new domestic or public roles for women. This conservative backlash after the social instability of the war era and the ideological restructuring necessitated by emancipation did not, of course, translate into a contented populace. Despite the Republican rhetoric of what Richardson calls “the harmonious free labor world,” the political anxiety surrounding divorce, premarital sex, and other symbolic breakups of the nuclear family reveals that all what not as the Grant administration chose to imagine it. With the Nineteenth Amendment’s granting of women’s suffrage still decades in the future, women like Perley—and Phelps—often reject marriage as a route to what they perceive as a uniquely feminine form of personal empowerment through

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57 Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, 75.

58 At the time *The Silent Partner* appeared in 1871, Phelps was still unmarried. For a brief account of her eventual marriage to Herbert Dickinson Ward, see my Introduction.
partnership. Women, Perley and Sip decide, are women’s best allies, not fathers or husbands or political parties. They will create an insular world in which domestic skills and religious convictions are valued, without attempting the unrewarding task of changing the world beyond their borders.

Becoming a Sterling Woman: *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873)

Unlike Phelps, who grew up in a conservative household that resisted the notion of women writers and women workers alike, Louisa May Alcott’s family history boasted liberal ties to Transcendentalism, educational reform, and utopian experiments. As the daughter of the chronically unemployed but always vociferous Bronson Alcott, she spent her childhood surrounded by the very progressive trappings that Phelps’s more traditional household lacked: philosophical readings, gatherings of reformers, and even a would-be utopian summer at Fruitlands, her father’s abortive attempt to participate in a “perfect” society, free from capitalist greed and immoral consumerism. Bronson Alcott’s generation believed in utopia in a way that would have been impossible in his daughter’s disillusioned postbellum world. His was the era not only of the ill-starred Fruitlands, but also of longer-lived social experiments such as Brook Farm (in which Nathaniel Hawthorne was an investor and participant) and various Fourierist cooperatives on both sides of the Atlantic. Across the young nation, economic, religious, and sexual philosophies developed and grew into insular mini-communities designed to protect like-minded families and their social visions from the corrupting influences of mainstream America.

Although in her 1873 short story, “Transcendental Wild Oats,” Alcott herself scorned her father’s experiment at Fruitlands, satirizing the group’s hypocrisy and laughable inability to
labor on the collective’s farm, her own postbellum literature, in particular Work: A Story of Experience, is infused with its separatist philosophy. Like Phelps’s Perley Kelso, Work’s heroine, Christie Devon, goes through a series of life experiences that lead her to realize the value of forging bonds with other women (rather than exclusively with men, via marriage). Ultimately, this revelation leads Christie to form an isolated community in which her enthusiasm for “sisterhood” and right to labor for a wage are accepted rather than devalued by the wider patriarchal economic apparatus. Unlike Perley, however, Christie is not a representative of the capitalist elite, but a middle-class American who uses her independence at the age of twenty-one as an impetus to go out into the Boston environs and attempt to find work that will allow her to support herself as an independent woman.  

It is very much in keeping with postbellum political and economic rhetoric that Christie believes she ought to be able to achieve this goal. Virginia Penny’s optimistic guide to women’s labor, for example, had just been reprinted the year before Work began to be serialized. As Richardson points out, “The worker’s road to success was spelled out in popular success manuals, which promised economic prosperity to those who adhered to old-fashioned, free-labor values.”  

Resolutely anti-factory, Christie wants to do work within a domestic or feminine

59 While Phelps and Alcott are the most popular pair of Reconstruction-era women writing about the quest for feminine utopia through work, Lillie Devereux Blake became interested in the same issue in the 1870s. In a dramatic departure from Southwold (1859) and Rockford (1863), Fettered for Life (1874) tells the story of Laura Stanley, a woman whose quest to navigate the city and its many social groups in order to find happiness and security distinctly resembles that of Christie Devon. Rather than expressing the unrepentant ferocity of Medora Fielding or Claudia Rockford, Laura is a thoroughly domesticated heroine whose morality rather than her discontent proves the need for communities of like-minded women.

60 Richardson, The Death of Reconstruction, 35.

61 As Joy Kasson notes, “by mid-century, the labor force in New England mills had begun to shift from native-born farm women to immigrant workers,” a trend that would have transformed
sphere that will respect the conservative gender values of the day while also fulfilling her destiny as a hardworking American\textsuperscript{62} deserving of “economic prosperity.” In Christie’s philosophy of work, her gender and her labor should not be at odds; she will do work that is in keeping with her nurturing womanly nature, and that work will be appropriately financially compensated.\textsuperscript{63} Of course, it will come as no surprise to twenty-first century readers that Christie’s feminine labors—as a servant, actress, governess, and seamstress to name only the first few—are not feasible in the long term. Such work seems intended as a brief interlude to tide women over until they find a husband and marry into a home; the workforces Christie joins are not designed to facilitate rewarding emotional connections between the various women they employ.

Alcott’s critique of this alienating aspect of America’s domestic labor market does not seem to have alarmed, offended, or even particularly interested postbellum readers. It appears infused with “sunny cheerfulness,” reports Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, although it would not be receiving the “circulation” and “celebrity” that it is were it not written by the author of Little Women.\textsuperscript{64} An 1873 advertisement in the Baltimore Sun tepidly confirms: “This story will be welcomed with delight by every household. In it the common events of everyday life are

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the industrial workforce by the time Alcott’s Work began to appear in serialized form in 1872 (xiv).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} It is worth noting that Alcott’s Work is full of anti-Irish rhetoric. This is one of the primary ways by which Christie determines whether a particular job is appropriate for her; if it is a form of labor that routinely employs Irishwomen, she knows that it is not, to use Kasson’s phrase, “an unacceptable alternative” (xiv).

\textsuperscript{63} This network of virtuous women employed in the public sphere is conceptually new. Fanny Fern’s popular 1854 novel Ruth Hall, in contrast to Alcott’s Work, models the efforts of its titular heroine to support herself and her daughters without the support of a network of women. All of Ruth Hall’s friends and patrons in the urban Northeast are men.

given a pure grace and interest that are charming.” No mention of its political or gendered commentary; no mention even of Christie’s particular struggle to find a community of women who will consider her family rather than competition on the marriage market. The novel is merely “charming”—in other words, wholly inoffensive, and wholly unworthy of further comment.

Indeed, for all it is written after the Civil War, Alcott’s depiction of Christie’s options on the labor market seems oddly antiquated, leaning towards a reality more in keeping with preindustrial times than with the 1850s in which the story actually begins. Perhaps for this reason, modern scholars such as Susan K. Harris prefer to place their commentary on *Work* chronologically before Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* when comparing the two texts, although *Work* in fact appeared two years later. Phelps’s depiction of industrial labor does indeed seem much more “modern” than Alcott’s depiction of from-home seamstressing and childcare. Harris’s reading suggests, in keeping with this model, that *Work* is by far the more conservative of the two novels. “Despite its title, [Work] focuses less on expanding women’s professional opportunities, or redefining female nature,” in which guidebooks like Penny’s suggest women across America were increasingly interested, “than on expanding women’s opportunities for psychological and spiritual development” within the very social limits prescribed by antebellum patriarchal norms. For all her Transcendentalist rhetoric of “a new Declaration of


66 See Susan K Harris’s “Narrative Control and Thematic Radicalism in *Work* and *The Silent Partner,*” in *19th-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 173-196. Note that the title lists *Work* first, despite the fact that *The Silent Partner* appeared earlier, even taking into account *Work*’s serialization in 1872, a year after Phelps’s novel was printed.

67 Ibid., 175.
Independence”⁶⁸ for American women, “the jobs Christie performs…remain within the realm of traditional women’s work”⁶⁹ and certainly make no “feminist” argument for productive forays into the male professional realm.⁷⁰ When we evaluate Work in terms of the kind of labor in which Christie participates, then, we see a strange retrogression from Phelps’s The Silent Partner, in which, although class barriers are still securely in place, modern industrial technology is indisputably alive and well.

When we look at the kind of idealized, insular home-society Christie ultimately creates via her domestic labor, however, we see a logical expansion upon the sentiments that Perley Kelso and Sip Garth expressed two years prior. Like Sip, who “only wanted some women-folks to cry to,” Christie is constantly seeking work that will allow her to forge emotionally fulfilling connections with other women.⁷¹ Her first job, as a servant for a “cultivated” but declining family headed by a pompous old man, is bearable only because of her “devoted” friendship with Hepsey, the runaway slave who serves the family as a cook.⁷² Unlike her unappreciative employers,⁷³ Hepsey “loved her dearly,” and Christie is able to make herself indispensable to the

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⁶⁹ Harris, “Narrative Control and Thematic Radicalism,” 175.

⁷⁰ For Sarah Orne Jewett’s fictional depiction of an (albeit otherwise reassuringly feminine) aspiring woman doctor, America would have to wait until A Country Doctor in 1884. Henry James’s condescending representation of a woman with medical pretensions in The Bostonians followed closely on its heels in 1886.

⁷¹ Phelps, The Silent Partner, 190.

⁷² Alcott, Work, 24, 25.

⁷³ Although her fictional representation of the “Stuart” patriarch and his invalid sister is comparatively tolerant, Alcott’s original version of this chapter, published in 1865 as the autobiographical essay “How I Went Out to Service,” is acidic to the point of fury at the
older woman by teaching her to read, so that she may attempt to redeem her mother from slavery in the South.\textsuperscript{74} Her bond with Hepsey enables Christie to become part of what she imagines to be a greater sisterly network that serves justice and “motherly” compassion for the oppressed slave population; “Hepsey’s cause was hers,” and this cause lends substantially more meaning to her life than does her wage labor in the Stuart household.\textsuperscript{75} Unfortunately, Christie’s official “work” is not to assist Hepsey, but to serve the domestic needs of the apathetic Stuarts. When their womanly union of two is severed by Christie’s decision to quit the house rather than black her “master’s” boots, Alcott’s heroine eagerly identifies a potential replacement for Hepsey in the form of Lucy: a young, pretty woman living with her mother at Christie’s boarding house, who encourages her to join them in a new career as an actress.

In fact, Lucy is the primary lure for Christie in her move onto the stage. Uncertain at first of its morality, the presence of a polite, genteel girl like her new friend reassures her of its “respectable” nature.\textsuperscript{76} It is Lucy who “initiated her into the mysteries of the place,” serving as a guide and a companion who is always on hand to confirm that “her dress would not be ‘a shock to modesty.’”\textsuperscript{77} However, as time goes on and Christie becomes more successful, being cast repeatedly as the love interest opposite the actor for whom Lucy harbors romantic feelings, the other girl became “no longer her friend…a steady coldness took the place of the confidence and indignities she suffered in that household, which she claimed “lessened my respect for mankind immensely” (361). See Louisa May Alcott, “How I Went Out to Service,” in Alternative Alcott, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{74} Alcott, Work, 27.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 26-27.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 35.
affection which had once existed.” In short, “Lucy was jealous for Christie had passed her in the race”; as with her previous appointment, the primacy of wages and accolades over interpersonal connections destroys the sisterly union she sought to build. Lucy, for all her seeming goodwill, succumbs to the twin temptations of popular fame and masculine approbation, “growing selfish, frivolous, and vain.” Such a betrayal is far more poisonous to Christie than the loss of her wages or leading roles would have been, and she gradually comes to feel that she has gone “astray” without a true feminine “mother’s voice” to guide her. Spurred into action by a stage injury, which she sustains in saving Lucy from falling “mechanical contrivances” during a production, she leaves this new and seemingly glamorous life, still in search of the union of labor and love that she believes she can find in true feminine employment.

Over the next two years, Christie repeatedly learns this lesson of loss; the skills and qualities that the domestic labor market values in her continually take her away from the kind of social and spiritual bonds she hopes to form with her fellow workers. Significantly, it is in the least lucrative of her many labors that she discovers a girl who answers her increasingly desperate desire for “a bond so strong she could not break it.” While working as a seamstress—a job with low profits and little opportunity for advancement—Christie finds herself drawn to a “quiet, skilful [sic] creature” called Rachel, whose “mournful” mien suggests “some great sorrow, some deep experience” that has blighted her, and rendered her need for the ties of

78 Ibid., 40.
79 Ibid., 41.
80 Ibid., 43.
81 Ibid., 45.
feminine solidarity as strong as her own.\textsuperscript{82} Rachel, it transpires, is a “fallen” woman struggling to redeem herself in the face of society’s condemnation and her own self-loathing. Far from finding herself lowered by their association, however, Rachel’s need for her friendship transforms Christie from an anonymous automaton producing stitches into the object of “an almost passionate gratitude.”\textsuperscript{83} This gratitude, and her own reciprocal devotion, is precisely the connection that Christie has gone out into the world to discover. She “must,” Christie explains to her new friend, “love somebody,” and loving Rachel—like loving the runaway slave Hepsey at the Stuart house—elevates her emotionally and spiritually in a way that being loved by male suitors thus far has not.\textsuperscript{84}

In economic terms, however, Christie is entirely expendable to the dress shop where she works; in a nation whose “industrial production stood 75 percent above its 1865 level,” any competent woman might be found to replace her.\textsuperscript{85} In her new union with Rachel, however, Christie is essential. This is never more apparent than when Rachel’s past indiscretion becomes known to the shop. In light of this revelation, the shop’s proprietor, Mrs. King, decides to terminate Rachel’s employment. Now, at last, Christie has the opportunity to do something heroic for a friend who, unlike the perfidious Lucy, continues to love her regardless of her superior circumstances. By publicly declaring that “I don’t despise or desert you,” and pleading

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 104. Fanny Fern’s antebellum heroine Rose Clark, of the 1856 novel of the same name, helps to illustrate the newness of the kind of alliance Alcott was proposing via Christie. In \textit{Rose Clark}, while the heroine is accused of being an unwed mother and therefore a “fallen” woman, the truth turns out to be that she was married all along. Rachel, radically, is both a “fallen” woman and a genuine friend of Christie.

\textsuperscript{84} Alcott, \textit{Work}, 105.

\textsuperscript{85} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 461.
to her fellow seamstresses that they “please forgive and let poor Rachel stay here, safe among us,” she aligns herself with a powerful new ideological network of charitable women to whom she does not have immediate access in her more limited social world.\(^{86}\) This is, of course, the same impulse that led her to assist Hepsey in her efforts to purchase her mother; in this case, however, Christie’s participation in the support of a social outcast is much more direct. She does not merely send money to Rachel, as she did for Hepsey, but goes so far as to quit the shop in solidarity with the more unfortunate woman, proclaiming, “[c]ome, dear, we’ll go together,” when Mrs. King proves unyielding to her pleas on Rachel’s behalf.\(^ {87}\) To Christie, the labor she does in the dress shop and the monetary compensation she receives for it are incidental—mere vehicles to her true vocation as a sort of social healer and personal advocate.

In the heat of the moment, Christie believes that she and Rachel will leave the dress shop together and find new work as a team. The issue of material compensation does not take precedence; “I’ll do slop-work and starve, before I’ll stay with such a narrow-minded, cold-hearted woman,” Christie grandly informs her new friend.\(^ {88}\) Rather than tie her heroine to a man who will lift her out of the labor market—a circumstance that Phelps’s Perley avoids by being independently wealthy and that Sip avoids by allying herself with Perley—Alcott redefines the terms of labor so that “success” (the original title of the book) is defined not by money made but by good deeds done and emotional connections forged. In the words of Carolyn Maibor, “Work is concerned with trying both to celebrate the importance of work in a meaningful life, as well as


\(^{87}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{88}\) Ibid.
to exalt the role of caring for others—i.e. love—to the status of labor.” Christie rejects employers so easily because her “real” work has nothing to do with the “job” she has been hired to do, but instead stems from the personal alliances that she can form within the sphere of her workplace. Unlike the trapped, dissatisfied heroines who populate Alcott’s “blood and thunder” literature of the 1860s, Christie genuinely does believe that women are uniquely suited to a domestic sphere outside of the masculine public world of profit and progress. Far from attempting to escape this sphere she is eager to create a home with Rachel. Thanks to her “fallen” status, Rachel is no longer eligible to access this domestic world via marriage—but, thanks to inclusive women like Christie, she is eminently suited to become a loyal member of a sisterhood such as the one her champion craves.

Once again, however, the reality of economics thwarts Christie’s quest for domestic union. Rachel is now blacklisted in the Boston environs; she must travel farther afield to support herself, leaving Christie—newly unemployed herself thanks to her act of “sisterly affection”—behind. Although Rachel swears to come back as soon as she can, and declares “you have saved me, Christie, for you love me, you have faith in me,” Christie’s “social heart” is much wounded by her desertion; she exchanges letters with Rachel, and is happy when she finds work, but no amount of “from-home” sewing can buy her the full, bustling household she desires.

Increasingly depressed by her isolated circumstances at the tellingly named Mrs. Flint’s boarding house, Christie becomes morose and listless. The loss of her sisterly union with Rachel finally

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undermines her mental health so much that she is beset one night by “a troop of wild fancies, whirling through her brain,” luring her to leap into the frozen river below and end her loneliness.92 Despite the fact that her physical health is decent, she reflects, “[p]eople disappoint and worry me” such that she feels “worn out, and weak, and wicked.” As she confesses to the young woman who snatches her back from the brink of death, “I think I meant to take my life.”93

Thoughts of suicide are short-lived, however, when she discovers that her rescuer is none other than Rachel, come back to find her and “welcome” her into the new network of what Jean Fagan Yellin calls “unconventionally-organized homes” that she has discovered in her travels.94 These “unconventional” homes, like Christie’s relationship with Rachel, are unique in their dependence on a maternal system of authority. As Yellin points out, Christie’s salvation “at the water’s edge not by a romantic lover, but by a loving caring woman” reflects the kind of domestic apparatus that will heal her emotional wounds and offer her a new form of labor that combines her love of work with her love of community, rather than setting the two at odds. When Rachel deposits the distraught Christie at Mrs. Wilkins’s charitable doorstep, the older woman does not question Christie’s virtue, or offer her the loan of money to rid herself of an unknown guest. Instead, she immediately offers the girl what she calls “woman’s three best comforters,—kind words, a baby, and a cup of tea”—none of which require the masculine intervention of her passive husband Lisha—and integrates her into the family.95

92 Ibid., 124.

93 Ibid., 125.


95 Alcott, Work, 131.
Rachel and Mrs. Wilkins both instinctively understand what Christie has struggled throughout the first half of the novel to articulate for herself: that working communally in a secure domestic setting allows women to be simultaneously productive and emotionally fulfilled by one another’s sympathetic company. Finally, literally walled away from the flagrant consumerism of the streets of Boston and making no money whatsoever, Alcott’s heroine begins to take satisfaction in her labors. She devotes herself to the womanly task of childcare; according to Mrs. Wilkins, this is the best of all healing rituals for a lonely girl: “I’m jest goin’ to turn you in among them children to paster, so to speak.”96 Although the late 1850s (when she meets the Wilkinses) was an era of furious demands for reform from women laborers and dependent wives alike, Christie seems most content not to champion women who are forced to turn their wages over to their husbands or who lose custody of their children in scandalous divorces. Instead, she prefers to embrace the notion of a domestic realm entirely independent of the capitalist one that supplies its material wants. If modern critics deride Phelps for failing to represent Perley’s actual labor on behalf of the workers of Five Falls, a similar critique may be made of the men on the periphery of Alcott’s idealized households. For all Lisha Wilkins supposedly has a job and clearly supplies his wife with material resources for her growing brood of children, Alcott resolutely shows him at rest, relying on the domestic offices of Mrs. Wilkins for material comfort. Based solely on the information the novel offers, it would appear that the raw materials for food and furnishings in the Wilkins house come out of nowhere, so successfully is the safe domestic realm divided from the sordid public one.

Perhaps aware of the limitations of the Wilkins household as a model of the kind of domestic labor among women that she wants to promote, Alcott soon sends her heroine on to a

96 Ibid., 135.
new household, this time in the Massachusetts countryside, where she will recover her health while assisting in the household labors of the Sterling family: a widowed Quaker woman and her austere thirty-something son, who cultivates flowers. To the reader, this is a clear cue for romantic intervention: the aptly named David Sterling represents a matrimonial bridge for Christie into a family of her own. This new family is steeped in her favorite causes: abolition, charity, and Christian sentiment; neither David nor his mother labor for the sake of profit but for the sake of supporting their community in times of joy or grief (the province of their signature funeral wreath). David, unlike Christie’s previous, shallower suitors, is “[b]lunt and honest, domestic and kind; hard to get at, but true as steel once won.” Unlike Lisha Wilkins, who exists fundamentally outside of his wife and children’s loving domestic circle, David is willing to integrate himself into the home life of “his” women—a trait that he shares with 1860s patriarchs like Spofford’s Angus Ingestre and Stoddard’s Jason Auster. Unlike these other men’s marriage-minded female counterparts, however, Christie does not at first consider the possibility of using a man as a bridge into his family more broadly. In her initial labor with David in his greenhouse, she congratulates herself on this “chance to know men”—most particularly this man—“truly,” and not merely via the limited medium of courtship. When Rachel appears at the Sterling house, acknowledging her true name to be Letty Sterling and begging her long-lost mother and brother’s forgiveness for her “fall,” Christie’s two strongest emotional ties merge. Her engagement to David only comes after the advent of Rachel-Letty in their lives. Their future marriage is predicated upon a familial union between Christie and the entire Sterling family.

97 The leading men in “The Strathsays” (The Atlantic Monthly, Jan. 1863) and Two Men (Rudd & Carleton, 1865), respectively.

98 Alcott, Work, 207.
Her marriage to David is more than simply a validation of a romantic bond; their wedding legally integrates Christie into Mrs. Sterling and Letty’s family in a way that no declaration of womanly solidarity ever could. It is only via David that Christie may become a “Sterling” woman in the eyes of her community and the state of Massachusetts. Despite the formal centrality of her new husband, however, it is David’s mother, the gentle, retiring matriarch of the family, who “made the words [of] assurance and blessing” that confirm Christie as a member of the family, even before David proposes. It is her “motherly” relationship with Christie, rather than David’s feelings for her, that makes her a Sterling woman in the older woman’s eyes; “I believe and love and honor thee, my child,” she assures Christie; “My heart warmed to thee from the first: it has taken thee to itself now; and nothing can ever come between us, unless thee wills it.”

Mrs. Sterling’s words read almost like wedding vows themselves; they provoke a visceral response in Christie, who draws “strength” from her benediction long before she allows herself to “blush and smile and turn to [David] confidingly.” When David at last asks for Christie’s hand, he asks on behalf not only of himself but also of his entire family; “Mother wants you, Letty longs for you, and I have got and mean to keep you all my life,” he declares. And so their marriage is confirmed.

The stakes of depicting an ideal marriage in 1873 were unquestionably high. As Cott notes, “[t]raditional monogamy appeared to need bolstering after the Civil War.” The newly formed Freedman’s Bureau scrambled to “regularize” the moral nightmare of “multiple marriages among ex-slaves,” while bewailing “the spread of innovations on married women’s

99 Ibid., 233.

100 Ibid., 233, 273.

101 Ibid., 273.
property and divorce.”¹⁰² Marginalized religious rhetoricians of the late 1860s declared “the uneven and unwarranted expansion of divorce grounds” a national disaster. The fact that, statistically, most marriages remained intact—Cott estimates there were “not even two divorces per thousand marriage in 1870”—appeared insignificant in light of the ominously permissive social sentiments of “free love” of which divorce was symptomatic.¹⁰³ In response to this supposed laxity—a particular embarrassment for the North, which was supposed to represent the moral superiority of the Union cause—lawmakers rushed to impose “stabilizing” rules that they believed would preserve their conservative notions of what constituted healthy matrimony. As early as 1862, while the war was still young, the Morrill Bill appeared, criminalizing bigamy and threatening its practitioners with a five-year period of incarceration.¹⁰⁴ In a similar vein, the Comstock Laws attempted to staunch the expanding market for birth control (in which married couples were increasingly interested), “raising obscenity regulation to the federal level.”¹⁰⁵ Never had the political impulse to police the home been more grounded in legal rhetoric.

Christie’s marriage to the Sterling family is not, of course, precisely in keeping with the conservative spirit of these laws, despite its perfectly decorous adherence to form. Far from seeing David as the center of her new household, Christie is equally devoted to her beloved Letty and to her new mother-in-law. Alcott further emphasizes the ways in which their gender-appropriate virtues divide the young couple rather than unite their labors in times of crisis. The Civil War represents an opportunity to showcase Christie's uniquely maternal qualities while

¹⁰² Cott, *Public Vows*, 105.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 106.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 112.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 124.
separating her from her equally virtuous husband. Christie’s work outside of the home as a nurse expands the scope of her predilection for “social housekeeping,” to use Albertine’s depiction of Phelps’s Perley, beyond the limits of the actual house.106 “I shall enlist when you do,” Christie promises David, and so she does; when he enters the Union army, Christie goes to the warfront in a domestic capacity.107 The domestic skills she needs on the battlefront—“ma[king] gruel, plasters, and poultices” and using her “firm yet pitiful way” to support and care for her patients—reflect the work that had already endeared her to the Sterling women of Massachusetts.108 However, the partnership that Christie and David forged as fellow laborers on the domestic front is no longer possible when the couple goes to work outside of the home. The virtues that made Christie and David desirable to each other keep them working apart rather than laboring side by side during the war; Christie is not a soldier, and David is not a nurse. They are suited for their respective roles by their respective genders, and when they work to their true capacities they are necessarily separated from one another.

Much has been made in modern scholarship of the similarity between Christie’s fulfilling labor on the warfront and Alcott’s parallel experience. Elizabeth Young draws heavily on Alcott’s earlier work, the 1863 semiautobiographical Hospital Sketches, when characterizing the future author of Little Women, noting that, “[i]n 1862, at the age of thirty, Louisa May Alcott went to work as a nurse in a Union hospital in Georgetown. In so doing, she became part of a widespread social transformation occasioned by Civil War nursing. …Specifically, the nurse as a

106 Albertine, “Breaking the Silent Partnership,” 244.
107 Alcott, Work, 280.
108 Ibid., 282, 298.
maternal figure.” Alcott found herself transformed by her work at Georgetown, despite the illness that forced her to leave her post after a mere two months. Never married herself, Alcott found the possibilities afforded by her time as a nurse uniquely empowering, in that they allowed to her to participate in a more meaningful way in the classic works of womanly caregiving traditionally attributed to wives and mothers. To use the words she gives her heroine, Christie, “I’ve always wanted to live in stirring times, to have a part in great deeds, to sacrifice and suffer something for a principle or a person; and now I have my wish.” Although Christie keeps careful track of where David is stationed, and looks forward to the times when they can meet, her work is independent of her husband, and she seems content that this should be so. The national crisis meant that women who would usually act out their caregiving impulses in the isolation of their own homes could now employ their skills collectively on a much larger scale; to use Young’s phrase “the Civil War afforded women [opportunities] for rebellion,” even as it allowed them to confirm their essential femininity. Women’s “work” and the institution of “marriage,” then, appear in Alcott’s (and therefore Christie’s) world to best function independent of one another.

Of course, it is not Christie but her creator who must choose in the end between these two forms of personal fulfillment; Alcott “chooses” work and its corresponding community of women for her heroine over a happy marriage to David in which she would continue to play the role of helpmeet rather than breadwinner. To facilitate this “choice,” Alcott kills off Captain Sterling soon after he fulfills his final function: impregnating his wife with a daughter. As David

109 Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 70, 74.


111 Young, *Disarming the Nation*, 78.
prophetically informs her on his deathbed, “You will do my part” for Mrs. Sterling and Letty (and, though he does not know it, their unborn child), “and do it better than I could.” Thus, at the end of the war, Christie goes home to become a utopian matriarch in a domestic community comprised exclusively of women—and, with the birth of her daughter, she discovers that widowhood, far from destroying her place in the Sterling family, actually consolidates it. She does not remarry; instead, she inherits from David his position as the head of the family, creating what Alcott calls “that feminine household” of Sterling women. She does not, however, replicate the traditional patriarchal form of this role. Rather than emphasizing her control over family finances or ownership of property, Christie predicates her stewardship on the same values she uses to parent little Ruth: “sacredness,” “beauty,” and “high responsibilities.” These qualities directly reflect what Nina Silber calls the essentially womanly qualities that the postwar North used to promote “sectional healing”; as she notes, “women’s capacity for love and tenderness became an effective and reliable force…for moral rejuvenation.” Christie’s return to the Sterling family fold after the war allows for precisely this. If the family under David’s stewardship was divided by Letty’s abandonment and Mrs. Sterling’s loneliness, it flourishes under Christie’s reign.

While baby Ruth is the most conspicuous symbol of “that feminine household’s” emotional “rejuvenation,” it is by no means the extent of the Sterling family’s transformation under their new matriarch’s guidance. In addition to providing her unmarried in-laws with a daughter to nurture, Christie fulfills her old ideal of continuing to labor on behalf of her family of

112 Alcott, Work, 315.

113 Ibid., 321.

women by taking David’s “garden and green-house into her own hands.” Predictably, the character of the greenhouse and grounds changes somewhat under their new mistress’s stewardship—as Alcott implies that the domestic life of the American North would change for the better under such leadership. Instead of representing the purely material reality of profit, Christie’s greenhouses provide the Sterlings with the opportunity to support themselves, independent of the alienating capitalist labor market with which Christie (and Letty) struggled for so long. Symbolically, all of Christie’s labor is in service of her family, most especially her daughter; she works to put “[a] little sum away for Baby, safe from all risk,”—that is, not invested in the stock market or other capitalist ventures—“ready to draw from as each need came.” Her labor is inherently personalized, and so generates not only monetary profit in proportion with the material needs of her family, but also the emotional connection that she struggled to find in her earliest explorations of the female labor market. She works “from home” in order to maintain her home, and she does so with the expectation that she will receive in return, not expanding profits, but the continued support of her “mother,” “sister,” and daughter.

Alcott seems to have intended that her readership consider this new family model utopian—or, at the very least, pleasingly communitarian. To one mystified observer, Christie explains, “I see that [my mother] and Letty have two-thirds of all I make,” despite the fact that, as her interlocutor indignantly points out, “you do all the work.” The Sterling women are determined to live in a purely domestic world, in which individual profit is not distinguished from family property. “[W]e don’t make bargains,” Christie proclaims rather grandly; “we work for one another and share everything together.” This, ironically, is a successful version of the

115 Alcott, Work, 323.
116 Ibid., 325.
same experiment in communal living that Alcott’s Transcendentalist father, Bronson Alcott, failed to realize—albeit a success that would have seemed tepid to Jean Muir in 1866. Kasson illustrates the gendered aspects of the transformation from Fruitlands—which was plagued by “individual ambition, vanity, and pride”—to the Sterling micro-utopia of “nurturing and socially involved” women.\(^{117}\) The more she tried to succeed in the masculine world of profit and fame, Kasson points out, the more Christie found herself lonely and dissatisfied. The Sterling utopia is special because, unlike the pretentious, patriarch-headed “utopias” of the antebellum years, it works “to honor, rather than threaten, women’s culture and domestic values.”\(^ {118}\) If Perley Kelso believed that her maternal instincts were best expressed by nurturing the workers she inherited from her father and his mills, Christie takes this maternal inclination to a new level, attempting to erase the sordid reality of financial competition from her home entirely.

This dramatic movement inward, away from the public world and the greedy, selfish people who inhabit it, represents a change from the radical domestic fiction of even a few years prior. Unlike Jean Muir, who snarled in the face of fate and infiltrated a wealthy family to save herself from destitution, Christie has no intention of reforming the institutions of labor that have alienated and exploited her. She does not seem to think she has any potential to change the nature of the expanding postbellum industrial society at all; like Perley, whose scope of influence is limited to her own mills, Christie’s primary interest is in insulating her own dependents from the poisonous, dehumanizing influence of 1870s modernity. As late as 1868, Maibor notes, Alcott’s “little women” were still struggling to articulate a better means for women to productively ally themselves with men. By the time Work appeared, however, “Alcott cannot seem to envision...a

\(^{117}\) Kasson, introduction to Work, xxiii-xxiv.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., xxi.
space in which a woman pursues the call of her genius (unlike Jo), without living in an exclusively female society (unlike Christie).”

Retreat is the best option for women in an increasingly infelicitous world, in which women’s rights and women’s capacities outside of the home have fallen by the political wayside—in favor, Phelps and Alcott seem to agree, of the self-congratulatory capitalist pursuit of profit.

The trouble with both Perley’s house of charity and Christie’s Sterling home is that their very isolation will eventually render them unsustainable. Unlike the replicable systems of courtship or matrilineal inheritance that characterized the tempestuous domestic literature of wartime, Christie’s family of women is not designed to sustain itself. Because they depend upon a static dynamic between members—Perley as the benevolent matriarch, or Christie as the mother and breadwinner—such communities, like the Shakers of the antebellum era, are doomed to fail as one generation of leaders ages, without another to take its place. The convoluted circumstances that led Christie herself to become the biological mother of a daughter are certainly not ones that can be easily reproduced. The Sterling utopian home is the product of fortuitous accident as much as design, and is not, despite Christie’s hopes for similar homes to develop over time, likely to inspire emulation. Likewise, Phelps made clear via Perley’s revelation about the limitations attendant to marriage that her heroine will never produce a new daughter to nurture the mill hands. Like these beloved matriarchs, then, their dependents will stagnate in turn; for all their new accomplishments, there is no plan in place to finance the mill children’s public education; nor does Christie seem concerned about Ruth’s social situation on the marriage market when she reaches adulthood. These utopias are abortive solutions to a problem that, as the postbellum era progresses, seems increasingly impossible to remedy: the

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119 Maibor, Labor Pains, 122.
ideological pressure for women to abandon their prescribed roles in favor of those they adopted or imagined for themselves during the war. Phelps and Alcott, riding this conservative wave, agree that their heroines are deserving because of their charitable maternal impulses, but they do not see these qualities as compatible with the patriarchal institutions they were historically developed to serve. Even the best-intentioned men—the Stephen Garricks and David Sterlings of the industrializing nation—are superfluous to such women’s true vocation as domestic caregivers. There are no dashing yet sincere Desmond Somerses in this postbellum literature, who sweep new Cassandra Morgesons into romances that fundamentally revise the tenets of nineteenth-century marriage. There are no defiant Alice Strathsays who wrest power over the family dynasty from their restrictive mothers in the name of their future sons. The triumphs of Perley and Christie are smaller in scope, in keeping with the place their authors can imagine for them in postbellum New England.

The horror of this new domestic fiction, then, is its inability to imagine a constructive rather than destructive model of partnership between postbellum men and women. By deleting the pressures of patriarchy from their insular domestic equations, Phelps and Alcott achieve a space in which women can band together rather than find themselves pitted against one another by the marriage market or the pressures of employers. But in so doing their fiction loses much of the urgency that characterized the work of the 1860s. Hence, the New York Times’s assertion in 1871 that Phelps’s The Silent Partner is ultimately “forced and unnatural,” while Harper’s New Monthly Magazine complained of Work that “the first half of the story is without even the semblance of a plot.” These women do not feel “real” because their goal is to eschew the


121 As quoted by Kasson, introduction to Work, xxx.
world rather than to alter it. Far from representing an aberration in women’s literature, these attempts at isolationist utopias for women, either within American society or physically removed from it, grew to become even more conspicuous in the early twentieth century. (This movement culminated in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s controversial feminist utopian novel, *Herland.*) After a decade of urgent wartime literature that struggled to imagine women succeeding in—or at least revenging themselves upon—a world dominated by men, the 1870s saw the beginning of a new era, in which literary women attempted more and more frequently to posit alternatives for women that involved retirement from the world as a whole, and often dispensed with the idea of female sexuality entirely. The women who succeeded in these worlds were less likely to resemble the passionate ingénues of the previous decade. Instead, they tend to isolate themselves emotionally from men and unite themselves, instead, with a community of sisters. In the absence of full agency within existing social institutions, renunciation became the key to security for intellectual American women.
AFTERWORD: AFTERLIVES

In 1915, three strong, adventurous men entered a world that seemed to them nothing short of impossible. In the course of an exploratory expedition into a lost peninsula, they find themselves confronted by a population of startlingly beautiful women who declare their country entirely devoid of men. In this mysterious lost society, the explorers must field questions that undermine the very foundation of their masculinity, like “what is virgin?” and “[d]oes it apply to the male also?” Worse, in response to their carefully worded answers, they face dispiriting conclusions, along the lines of, “The father is not very useful.”\(^1\) The text in question was \textit{Herland}; the author was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an energetic and highly political feminist at the turn of the century. She imagined a selfstyled “new race,” which is built on the foundation of “Motherhood,” and relies on honorifics such as “New Women,” “Queen-Priestess-Mother,” and “Mother Goddess.”\(^2\) Having spent the last two thousand years reproducing without the assistance of men, these “ultra-women” have achieved what Louisa May Alcott’s Christie Sterling could only imagine in 1873: “they had had no wars. They had had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together; not by


\(^2\) Ibid., 83, 84, 86.
competition, but by united action.” The institutions of patriarchy that supposedly undergirded cultural cohesion are totally superfluous in this insular utopia.

It is easy to imagine Louisa May Alcott’s Christie Sterling seeking out such a community; it is more difficult to visualize A.M. Barnard’s Jean Muir doing the same. Gilman’s presentation of a feminine society protected from the vagaries of war is a telling one. An author’s lessening proximity to the Civil War seems to be a deciding factor in the willingness of her heroines to reject physical passion (the domain of Yone Willoughby and Cassandra Morgeson), social status (prized by Medora Fielding and Jean Muir), and stewardship over their sons (the sole interest of Claudia Rockford, Alice Strathsay, and Sarah Parke) in favor of a world built on the twin pillars of material and sexual abnegation. In the war years and their immediate aftermath, women like Blake, Stoddard, Alcott, and Spofford are able to imagine a malleable social landscape in which women are capable of literally re-forming the gender hierarchy. Cassandra enters into a marriage predicated upon the equality of her own status and that of her husband; Mrs. Rockford successfully raises a son to adulthood while protecting him from the knowledge of his illegitimacy; Jean Muir and Alice Strathsay use marriage to become fearsome matriarchs in their respective families rather than subservient helpmeets. These women pursue never-before-imagined amalgams of tradition and transgression, engaging directly with historically patriarchal institutions that they see as open to radical change.

3 Ibid., 84, 86.

As Reconstruction-era America entered the next decade, such authors fought to incorporate such creative agency into their new fictions. But the righteous fury that impelled Cassandra Morgeson or Jean Muir to change their fates seems spent in the 1870s. Spofford’s 1872 Cinderella bride, Mrs. Spencer, is content to await rescue from her madhouse, despite her belief that her stepdaughter has orchestrated her incarceration; Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Avis Dobell longs for an egalitarian marriage that will support her artistic gift rather than belittle it, but she sees no redress when her husband rejects this possibility. The desire for agency that characterized war-era heroines of such radical domestic fiction has not abated; it is the social landscape, rather, that has ossified. Images of fetters abound in the new feminist literature, from the engagement ring that weighs down Perley Kelso’s finger to the title of Blake’s highly political final novel, *Fettered for Life* (1874). Flinging off such social fetters in a dramatic bid for marital or financial freedom no longer seems feasible in such literature. Women like Phelps’s Perley and Avis have but two options, it seems: to remove themselves from the sphere of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood (Perley’s method), or to bear its depredations with as much silent dignity as they can muster (Avis’s doom). In light of these limited options, it is small wonder that Christie Sterling and her early twentieth-century fictional counterparts in *Herland* find it safest to eschew such institutions altogether.

The use of the Civil War as an organizing principle in a rapidly changing social landscape reveals the creative connections among a population of women writers who have not

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previously been defined as a print community. It also offers a means by which to map this unique brand of proto-feminist literature over the course of the 1860s and 1870s. Thanks to their status as “recovered” authors, the placement of these women’s domestic fiction within the larger body of nineteenth-century literature remains amorphous. The case of Spofford is illustrative.

Contemporary scholars ranging from Alfred Bendixen, to Dorri Beam, to Karen Jacobsen are eager to read Spofford as an heir of the gothic master Edgar Allan Poe, emphasizing her status as an unprecendented female heir to Poe’s literary style. Her early biographer Elizabeth K. Halbeisen, however, struggles when she tries to place Spofford relative to other women authors. Within only a few pages, Halbeisen manages to create and discard a series of potential print communities for her subject. According to her model, Spofford’s most famous “contemporar[y]” is the feminist critic Gail Hamilton, but Halbeisen seems to find the “surrounding generations” to which Spofford does not quite belong much more interesting. The broader Boston “coterie,” to which Halbeisen suggests Spofford belonged in a social rather than a literary capacity, includes more familiar names like Sarah Orne Jewett and Rose Terry Cooke. Social rather than literary connections are the only way that Halbeisen can tie Phelps to Spofford; “At Mrs. Moulton’s

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7 Although *Little Women* has never been out of print since its first appearance in 1868, Louisa May Alcott’s pseudonymous work is a more recent addition to the Alcott canon; Leona Rostenberg identified A.M. Barnard as an Alcott pen name in 1943.

8 Spofford and Stoddard, whose most successful works were directly tied to the war era, remain the only members of this print community who have not been the subject of a published biography. Readers interested in Spofford’s life must turn to Elizabeth K. Halbeisen’s 1935 dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania; the definitive commentary on the life of Stoddard remains James H. Matlack’s 1867 dissertation from Yale.

‘Fridays’ there was opportunity to meet many prominent in literary and intellectual Boston.” One of these more “prominent” citizens was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, along with Mary Wilkins Freeman and Helen Hunt. Halbeisen herself seems dissatisfied with such results. Based on this model, she must read Spofford alongside Jewett, Freeman, and other so-called “regionalists,” despite the fact that her late-nineteenth-century local fiction “completed the collapse of Mrs. Spofford’s literary position among the critics.” For all their eagerness to recover her, such models fail to find a context for Spofford that reflects “[t]he romantic fire with which as Harriet Prescott she had first been associated.”

Halbeisen was not alone in her consternation about identifying distinctly female print communities. The scholarly model of a literary heiress taking up the mantle of a more famous male counterpart from a previous generation (as in Spofford’s supposed apprenticeship to Poe) is by far the more popular of the two. Following the lead of her longtime advocate Edmund Clarence Stedman, generations of scholars have identified Stoddard as an heir to the literary monolith that is Nathaniel Hawthorne. Contemporary reviewers of Blake’s Rockford felt the need to cross the Atlantic in order to place her alongside sensationalist mystery writers Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon; she did not seem to belong with any American writers, male or female. Even Louisa May Alcott, the beloved author of the March sisters, finds herself placed alongside Hawthorne, Emerson, and her father’s other Transcendentalist affiliates with as much regularity as she appears in the sphere of self-proclaimed feminists like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Historically, it seems, much of the value critics ascribe to these women authors derives from the fact that they do not need to be read together: they fit individually within validated

10 Halbeisen, Harriet Prescott Spofford, 179, 185, 196, 192.

11 “NOTICES OF NEW PUBLICATIONS,” The Knickerbocker Monthly; A National Magazine (1863-1863); Sep 1863; 62 no. 3; American Periodicals, 276.
literary paradigms that boast familiar male figureheads. By contributing to American genres shaped by men like Poe, Hawthorne, or Emerson, such scholarship reasons, women authors transcend the limited sphere of “women’s writing” and participate in something larger and more exciting.

This study has striven to expand upon a growing body of literary criticism devoted to demonstrating the value of a different form of literary community. Twenty-first-century scholars such as Lyde Cullen Sizer, Deborah Barker, and Jennifer Putzi have been instrumental in modeling alternate forms of community that reflect the social and psychological concerns of middle-class American women. In Sizer’s case, the Civil War serves as the central organizing force, which she uses to draw connections between a series of Northern women in both the antebellum and postbellum eras—in her vision of Reconstruction America, for example, Alcott, Phelps, and Gail Hamilton form a creative triumvirate. Other scholars identify other distinctly feminine creative communities; Barker unites a host of American women, including Fanny Fern, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton as well as Phelps and Alcott, based on their shared interest in the literary representation of the visual. Jennifer Putzi revisits this growing focus on women’s physicality in her 2006 study, Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. It is here that Spofford’s short story “The Strathsays” is reintroduced to modern readers: Putzi draws a bridge between sentimental classics and the “romantic fire” of Spofford’s war-era work by pairing it with Maria

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Cummins’s famous antebellum novel *The Lamplighter* (1854). New forms of community among literary women are rapidly emerging on the scholarly horizon.

Such alternative models of womanly conduct received most attention from contemporary political and journalistic sources when they could be tied not to visions of family but to sexual license. While print communities like those identified by Sizer, Barker, Putzi, and myself reveal the nuances of Northern women’s visions of the place of romantic love in family hierarchy, more mainstream commentators took the opposite approach. This more polarized model of sexual degradation versus sexual purity goes a long way toward explaining the disappearance of texts like *Southwold* or *The Morgesons* from circulation in the postwar era, despite their initial success. Catherine Clinton’s work on “public women” of the war era draws heavily on social, military, and medical discourses on the “‘pox,’” “‘clap,’” and the means that might be employed to control the hostile class of women who inflicted such debilities upon men, especially soldiers. Women’s primary power, such language suggested, derived from sexual deviance, and should therefore be limited for her own good, as well as the good of the community. Particularly for Northern military forces occupying the South, eliding the distinction between prostitutes and impolite or disruptive women, defining both as “public” purveyors of “[s]exualized calamities,” proved an effective technique for silencing dissent from the female population. Commentaries throughout Clinton and Nina Silber’s collection of essays on gender and the Civil War confirm this aggressive return to the sexually defined and rigidly enforced

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13 Halbeisen, *Harriet Prescott Spofford*, 192. Two years later, Putzi would publish her edition of Stoddard’s *Two Men* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), forging another scholarly tie in her presentation of women authors.

14 Catherine Clinton, “‘Public Women’ and Sexual Politics During the American Civil War,” in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 62, 64.
sexual categorization of women.\textsuperscript{15} To distinguish between a disease-bearing harlot and a Cassandra Morgeson in light of such moralizing rhetoric would be to go against the very foundations of the patriarchal order that supposedly kept chaos at bay in the wake of the war.

My study presents the ensuing “frenzied campaign for social and sexual control” that characterized Reconstruction from a literary as opposed to a political perspective, but the forces that forged Sarah Parke and condemned Letty Sterling remain clearly recognizable.\textsuperscript{16} Nineteenth-century Americans relied on romantic attachments: they led to marriage, facilitated intergenerational inheritance, and undergirded the gender hierarchy. The revisions that women authors in this unique pocket of American history make to the framework of such attachments are a treasure trove for scholars of gender in the Civil War era. The interconnections this project reveals between five women writers who shared critical projects over time expands upon a growing tendency in literary historical studies to draw connections between social history and literary commentary. In particular, this study draws upon and adapts the focus of studies like Elizabeth Young’s \textit{Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War} (1999) or Alice Fahs’s \textit{The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865} (2001).\textsuperscript{17} By uniting such scholarly models with the rapidly expanding recovery projects devoted to American women writers, “The Home Front Revisited” offers not only a look at a long-lost


\textsuperscript{16} Clinton, “‘Public Women’ and Sexual Politics,” 73.

\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth Young, \textit{Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Alice Fahs, \textit{The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
version of proto-feminist thought, but also a bridge between two exciting new branches of American literary scholarship.

“The Home Front Revisited” presents a community that grew out of a period of unprecedented trauma, yet inspired visions of radical creative agency among a population of middle-class women. This study illustrates the value of reading relatively familiar texts alongside newer finds that reflect rapidly changing social realities for middle-class Northern women. By placing the heroines of such works on a timeline, we can see their development from antebellum firebrands, to the creative mavericks of the 1860s, to the browbeaten would-be feminists of the Reconstruction era. This development offers important insights into the role of the war in American women’s changing understanding of their capacities as breadwinners and heads of household—but it also presents a long-forgotten model of proto-feminism that was not in service of more traditional political ends like suffrage. Instead, these chapters reveal creative threads that connect the antebellum plight of embittered would-be brides with those of the ferocious matriarchs and erotically charged damsels created in the war era, and that further tie such heroines to postbellum counterparts with more obvious political interests.

This literary model of individual transformations at the level of the family rather than the broader, more inaccessible legal sphere indicate that the canonized women’s rights objectives of activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were by no means comprehensive or inevitable. The struggle to forge a vision of family and community that would support rather than undermine the agency of all its members is far from linear; the roads to such a future—in the nineteenth century as in the twenty-first—are as varied as the women who imagine them.


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